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A Letter to My Homeland

Vy Thuy Doan¹

“In Vietnamese, *nước* means water, country, and homeland. To ask where one is from is to ask “*Nước nào?*”



Fig. 1: Càn Giờ Mangrove Forest. Photo credit: Vy Thuy Doan

¹ Vy Thuy Doan, EnviroLab Asia’s Vietnam Research Fellow, graduated from Pomona College in 2018 majoring in Psychology and Public Policy Analysis. She returned to Vietnam in January 2018 as a participant in the EnviroLab Asia/Cion Trust Clinic Trip. A Vietnamese version of the article follows the English version.

I once planted a mango tree back when I was still living in Vietnam. Even though I was quite young, I took care of my tree very well by watering it daily. However, when my family immigrated to the United States in 2001 I quickly forgot about my mango tree. Upon my arrival in the United States, I felt as if I needed to give up parts of my culture to assimilate.



Fig. 2: A mango tree planted outside my home. Photo credit: Vy Thuy Doan

My family was one of the few Asian American households in the suburbs of Arizona. Everyone around me spoke English but no one knew where or what my country was—to them, my country was just a war. It was only at home where my family and I comfortably spoke Vietnamese. Outside, people often thought we were too “foreign” to be living here. Due to language barriers, I became my family’s cultural navigator since my English was more accepted. A few years later, I spoke English as well as anyone else in my school; but my improvements in English came at the cost of my Vietnamese. Although I could still eat Vietnamese foods and speak Vietnamese, with each passing day I felt as if I lost more and more of my cultural heritage.

That began to change in January 2018, when I was given an opportunity during my senior year in college to visit Vietnam through a program called EnviroLab Asia. I was stunned the moment I stepped off the plane. Saigon had changed so much within the span of a decade, yet my hometown in Đông Nai, a two hour trip east of Saigon, still remained unchanged. At the beginning of the trip, I worried that my Vietnamese was not good enough. People talked so quickly and there were so many new words or words I had forgotten how to use. I struggled with the question: “Was I not Vietnamese enough or was I too Americanized?” Yet, the more I shared my stories with my family and friends, the more my fluency improved and the more I realized that some things were never truly lost. Sometimes, living in the United States made me forget my roots. It was only when I returned to Vietnam that I started to remember once again what being Vietnamese meant. For instance, the community in my village pooled together their money to purchase and hang up Christmas lights around the neighborhood for the holiday season.

Although every community has its issues, Vietnamese people will still care for you at the end of the day as if you were a family member.

Even though I still do not know everything about my culture, I want to continue to learn as much as possible. For so long, I thought that my level of “Vietnamese-ness” was tied to my command of the language, but I later realized that it is more important to consider personal self-identification. Although I live far away from my homeland, I have found my own community and ties to my Vietnamese-ness through other Vietnamese-Americans. My roots may lie outside Vietnam itself but they live in spaces like the Vietnamese Student Association and my home in Arizona. Nowadays, Vietnamese people live all over the world. Due to our scattered existence, I like to use the term “diaspora” to sometimes describe my connection to Vietnam and to other Vietnamese individuals. “Diaspora” refers to the migration of a group of people, of the same national origin, from a settlement or ancestral land. I hope to continue growing in my identity like the mango tree I once planted and to always remember, “when you drink water, remember the source.” My hometown is still home to me and like the mango tree that grows, blooms, and gives fruit to the people, I will also grow and branch out.

Finding Home & Healing

In Vietnamese, *nước* means water, country, and homeland. To ask where one is from is to ask “*Nước nào?*”

When I speak Vietnamese, other Vietnamese people often do not know how to categorize me. My accent is not fully Central, Northern or Southern, but it is almost-always noticeably American. It ebbs and flows between different syllables and phrases, never knowing where or when or how to settle on the right words. When I first stepped foot onto Tân Sơn Nhất airport after more than a decade, I was strangely but happily surprised to be addressed in Vietnamese by the staff while obtaining my visa. Despite my attachment to my hyphenated identity as a Vietnamese-American, in that moment, I felt a sense of validation for simply being Vietnamese enough. I never thought I would be returning back to Vietnam to study its environmental issues and in studying them, also unravel more of my identity.

My rural hometown in the province of Đồng Nai, a two-hour drive east of Sài Gòn, remained virtually unchanged since I left at the age of five. The village was fondly referred to as “Bot Đỏ” to denote its rich red soil for cultivating crops including bananas, peppers, and cashews. After the 1950s, the once vacant landscape transformed into small plantations when a mass flow of people migrated from the Northern and Central regions of Vietnam. After the end of the war in 1975, Bot Đỏ was renamed as Lê Lợi (Vietnamese emperor). I would later discover that my family was never actually from the South but rather from the Northern and Central areas of Vietnam.



Fig. 3: Peppercorns grown in my uncle's plantation. Photo credit: Vy Thuy Doan.

In learning the history of Bot Đổ, I also began to understand the nuances of environmental issues at the individual level. Most of the residents in Bot Đổ are either farmers or vendors at the local market. Both depend on the land for their livelihood. Yet with the increasing migration of rural populations to urban centers, and commercialization of agricultural production, the outlook for these communities and occupations is steadily waning. Farmers like my uncle cultivate their crops on small patches of land and sell their raw produce for a scant VND 5 – VND 7 (\$0.20-\$0.30) per kilogram. He often cultivates the land by himself and must use harmful pesticides just to break even. Both his body and the land feel incredibly ill after each spraying. While sustainable agricultural practices, such as crop rotation, have received greater attention in Vietnam, the majority of small-scale, rural farmers like my uncle have little access to such information and few financial resources to actually put research into practice. Their limited mobility and power places them at the bottom of the produce ladder with little-to-no control over the market. Individualism is so often prized in Western cultures that the concept obscures the need for collective action, especially given the multi-faceted nature of environmental issues. At the end of the day, what counts as “sustainable” and for whose benefit is it?

When our EnviroLab Asia cohort visited the mangrove forests on the outskirts of Sài Gòn in Cần Giờ, I began to understand how local residents and governments can work together as a collective. At the end of the Vietnam War, the US military had used defoliants such as Agent Orange to destroy over three million hectares of mangroves. The mangroves had long been

protectors of biodiversity and local livelihoods. It would take decades to grow them back and an even longer of a time for local residents to recover from the defoliants' destructive genetic impacts. In 1978, a restoration project was started and locals began planting mangrove saplings. Ever since then, villagers such as Mr. Tuong, whom we met on our trip, act as guardians of the mangrove forests by patrolling and protecting them. He expressed that he would like to see the mangroves flourish once more, even if this does not happen in his own lifetime. Although the dioxins and the legacy of war still linger in the land and people, the mangroves represent a collective resiliency and environmental consciousness I had not been aware of in Vietnam. For so long, all I could ever focus on was the war. Returning to Vietnam made me realize that I could disrupt the dichotomy between remembrance and progress. I was so focused on reconstructing stories of the past that I forgot how to live in the present, to fully see Vietnam as a country that has also been on its own journey toward healing.



Fig. 4: Outside the home of Mr. Tuong in the Càn Giò mangrove forests. Photo credit: Vy Thuy Doan

The very interdisciplinary nature of EnviroLab fostered some of the most memorable and non-linear connections I've witnessed. From conversations about mangrove cultivation and conservation to discussions about the ethics of documentation, the Vietnam trip allowed me to understand and be okay with how identities and environments are constantly in flux. Hearing the stories from the Mr. Tuong as well as stories from my own family in Vietnam gave me a perspective on environmental justice that I had yet to fully explore in my own life. So often third world countries are viewed as deficient in contrast to first world countries yet in approaching environmental issues from such a deficit-based viewpoint, we often forget the strengths and resiliency of these countries. By listening to these stories and uplifting non-traditional forms of knowledge, we can begin to conduct research and generate collaborative solutions from an

assets-based approach. In my future endeavors I would like to emulate this practice of sustained, engaged, and reciprocal community based research.

Before boarding on my departure flight, I wavered in between the two visa processing lines labeled “Foreigner” and “Vietnam.” Logically, I knew I should be in the foreigners’ line yet I still hesitated, pondering the binary between what is considered “foreign.” Even after coming to better terms about my identity, there were still moments like this where I wondered what it means to be a part of the diaspora, to experience my cultural identity as fluidly as the oceans that separate me from it. Perhaps one of the most profound lessons I internalized throughout the EnviroLab trip was the freedom to explore the complexity and heterogeneity of the diaspora in time and place.

Quê Hương Của Tôi

Khi tôi vẫn sống ở Việt Nam, tôi trồng một cây xoài. Mặc dù tôi chỉ mới năm tuổi, nhưng tôi chăm sóc nó rất tốt bằng cách tưới nước hàng ngày. Tuy nhiên, khi tôi năm tuổi, gia đình của tôi di cư sang Mỹ. Tôi quên về cái cây xoài đó. Vì tôi sống ở Mỹ, nên tôi cảm thấy như tôi cần phải từ bỏ đi sản văn hoá của tôi.

Gia đình tôi là một trong số ít hộ gia đình châu Á trong khu phố ở Arizona. Tất cả mọi người nói tiếng Anh nhưng không ấy biệt nước tôi là gì. Chỉ ở nhà mà gia đình của tôi nói tiếng Việt. Ở nhà, chúng tôi không bị đánh giá là khác nhau. Ra ngoài, người Mỹ hay nghĩ chúng tôi là ngoại quốc. Tôi là người phiên dịch cho gia đình bởi vì họ không nói tiếng Anh rất tốt. Sau vài năm, tôi nói tiếng Anh như người Mỹ nhưng tôi hy sinh tiếng Việt của tôi. Mặc dù tôi vẫn ăn món ăn Việt và nói tiếng Việt, nhưng tôi thấy càng ngày qua, càng quên văn hóa của mình.

Sau 10 năm, tôi được trưng cho về Việt Nam thông qua một chương trình, EnviroLab Asia. Ngày đầu tiên tôi đi xuống máy bay, tôi đã choáng váng. Sài Gòn đã thay đổi quá nhiều nhưng quê của tôi trong Đông Nai là vẫn như ngày xưa. Lúc đầu, tôi lo lắng vì tiếng Việt của tôi không tốt lắm và mọi người nói chuyện rất nhanh. Tôi nghĩ, “tôi là người Việt hay người Mỹ?” Nhưng, tôi càng nơi chuyện với gia đình và bạn bè, tôi càng cải tiến. Vì tôi sống ở Mỹ quá lâu, tôi đã quên gốc của tôi. Khi nào tôi trở về Việt Nam, tôi mơ nhớ lại tư duy của người Việt là gì. Không những người Việt năng động mà còn rất thông minh. Ví dụ, cộng đồng trong làng tôi đã cùng nhau kiếm tiền mua và treo đèn Giáng sinh quanh khu phố vào mùa lễ. Mặc dù cộng đồng nao cung có chuyện, nhưng họ vẫn lo cho nhau như một gia đình.

Mặc dù, tôi không hiểu mọi thứ về văn hoá của tôi, nhưng tôi vẫn muốn học càng nhiều càng tốt. Tôi nghĩ thông thạo tiếng Việt là tốt, nhưng nó không xác định được danh tính của mình. Chủ đề quan trọng hơn là nhận dạng của chính chúng ta. Mặc dù tôi đang sống xa quê hương, nhưng tôi được tìm những người như tôi — người Mỹ gốc Việt. Gốc của tôi có thể nằm ngoài Việt Nam nhưng nó vẫn sống trong cuộc sống của tôi ở những nơi như Vietnamese Student Association và nhà tôi ở Arizona. Bây giờ, người Việt sống khắp mọi nơi. Tôi nghĩ đến từ này, “diaspora”, khi nơi di cư vì nó rộng bao gồm. “Diaspora” nơi đến sự di trú của một nhóm người, có cùng nguồn gốc dân tộc, khỏi vùng đất định cư hay vùng đất tổ tiên. Như cây xoài tôi trồng ngay xưa, tôi phải nhớ chăm sóc gia tài của tôi và nên nhớ khi “uống nước nhớ nguồn”. Quê hương vẫn lương

đồng hành cùng tôi và tiếp thêm năng lượng sống cũng như cây xoài đã lớn lên phà, ra hoa, gặt
trai và đem quả ngọt dâng cho mọi người.