

## Domestic Violence in Lac Su's *I Love You Are for White People:* A Sociological Criticism Approach

By Quan Manh Ha

In the post-Vietnam War era, Vietnamese American non-fiction often focuses most specifically on themes or issues related to the Vietnam War, communist reeducation camps, the “boat people” experience, and adjustment to life in exile in the United States—all of which, understandably, portray the Vietnamese Americans as displaced anticommunist refugees, but which also help to rationalize the necessity of the resettlement of refugees in the United States. In 2009, within the cultural context of the period’s prevailing positive and negative stereotypes of Asian Americans, Lac Su, a new voice in Vietnamese American literature, published *I Love You Are for White People*, in which he narrates his traumatic childhood experiences under his Vietnamese austere father in the United States, who alternately runs the household either like an affectionate *pater familias* or an unrelenting tyrant. His father’s behavioral dichotomy in personality and manners confuses Su’s developing perception of familial love and parental sacrifice, on the one hand, and paternal child abuse and domestic violence, on the other. Su’s memoir can be considered a pioneer statement in addressing the problem of Asian American domestic tensions because, “[f]or various reasons, domestic violence within Asian communities tends to shy away from the view of the mainstream society” (Xu and Anderson 27). From the perspective of sociological criticism, Su’s memoir debunks the seemingly positive myth of Asian Americans as a model minority, substantiates certain negative stereotypes of Asian men, and challenges some of the classic Asian values that apparently have shaped the Asian American identity. Su’s memoir is a critique of structural inequalities, urban poverty, chronic unemployment, inaccessibility to a support network, and the intersection between class, gender, and race in the contexts of war and its aftermath.

Within U.S. culture, Asian American men often are cast as the embodiment of one of two types: the first is of the sexually impotent, effeminate, and submissive figure who often is implied in the model-

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minority myth; the second is of the hyper-masculine and aggressive figure who was utilized as a political tool to fuel such negative postcolonial fears as the “Yellow Peril” (Shek 380). In their coauthored book titled *Racial Formation in the United States*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant insightfully observe that “race is gendered and gender is racialized” (68), and Elaine Kim explains that biased racial or ethnic stereotypes reinforce “the white man’s virility and the white race’s superiority” (70). The narrator’s father, Pa, is a very complex figure whose analysis is not reducible to a single stereotype. In his fears of losing respect within the family, he reveals qualities of the emasculated individual who has lost his former cultural empowerment at least within a new cultural milieu in which he must attempt to flourish. To a greater extent, however, he manifests the qualities of the aggressive tyrant as he seeks to maintain a sense of empowerment within the displaced family. Lac’s negative experiences of Pa’s fears of emasculation in the unwelcoming society and of his compensating expression of masculinity in the family promote in Lac the development of a highly compromised sense of personal identity.

Sau-Ling C. Wong and Jeffrey J. Santa Ana observe that “gender roles and sexuality in Asian American literature cannot be understood apart from Asian American history,” and, in turn, they cannot be overlooked as they operate within Asian American literature (174). It is crucial to note that Asian American gender and sexuality are *not* inherent traits but are sociocultural constructs. It would be a lacuna, therefore, *not* to consider also the factors that shape Pa’s fragile sense of masculinity, such as his own experience of childhood mistreatment and abandonment in Vietnam, racial discrimination, poverty, alienation, and insurmountable challenges in his attempt to survive in the United States. Lac’s depiction of his parents’ relationship, and especially of Ma’s suffering at Pa’s hands, is an unfortunate record of poverty, frustration, and trauma deriving from life in exile. Unarguably, Pa’s violence results in part from his lack of personal control over the new milieu that restricts his choices under alienating living conditions. In contrast with the affectionate familial environment that Lac encounters among his Hispanic friends, Lac’s home life is a center of fear, abuse, violence, and trauma. Lac also sees Pa’s violence as potential in his own behavior, and at the conclusion of his memoir, Lac fears the possible perpetuation of the cycle of abuse as he, too, becomes a parent.

In the United States, Pa initially prides himself on his ability to work and provide for his family. However, when he falls ill and finds his masculine identity as breadwinner threatened, he must redefine himself by augmenting his binary other—his identity as a stern father at home. When Lac fails to live up to Pa’s academic expectations, the subsequent beatings that Lac suffers bolster Pa’s sense of familial authority much more than they stimulate Lac’s memory and performance. Both Pa and Ma openly comment upon how slow their son is, but Pa adds sardonically: “we know he got this from you. There’s no way my genes produced such a stupid child” (Su 64). Pa ascribes all of his children’s positive attributes to his assertive masculine influence, while ascribing all of their negative characteristics to Ma’s passive feminine influence. His condescending

attitude toward his wife is an index of his gender bias. Pa believes that intellectual superiority is an inherently biological “given” for males, an endowment bestowed by male genes. Later in the memoir, in a parental fight stemming from the ill-prepared rice that Ma has cooked, Lac sympathizes with Ma, which evokes Pa’s anger: he says to Lac, “You are just as stupid as your mother!” (Su 158). Pa uses his children as a platform upon which to redefine himself within the binary opposition of *dutiful breadwinner in the new society* versus *patriarchal tyrant in the traditional home*, which alienates him from his wife and isolates him from his children. His negative persona thus plays to the stereotype of the fractured and abusive Asian husband and father: he asserts his patriarchal authority and masculinity over his wife and children through fear-inciting violence. Pa’s physical and psychological mistreatment in his youth came from an uncle who, theoretically, was to have been his benefactor, and Pa was forced to become a hustler in order to survive. This personal history lies behind Pa’s subsequent approach to disciplining his own family, but it does not justify his severity. Pa is both a victim and a perpetuator of domestic violence, which complicates stereotyping him simply as a belligerent and pugnacious “wife beater,” as his behavior results from an intricate web of intersecting forces that define, but which do not excuse, Pa’s tyranny.

In their discussion of Asian American stereotypes, Mary Yu Danico and Franklin Ng observe that the U.S. media often portray Asian men as stoic and emotionless (121). Derek Kenji Iwamoto and William Minh Liu concur with this observation, adding that Asian men who are portrayed as manifesting high emotion sometimes are depicted as violent and abusive or even as “deviant sexual aggressors” (218). In the physical and psychological abuse of his own family members, Pa sadistically rebuffs his son’s youthful emotional needs. Pa is relentless in his refusal to express affection verbally, insisting that love is not to be expressed in a series of three meaningless words, *I love you*, but in actions that bring pride to the family. The title, *I Love Yous Are for White People*, is a reference to an upsetting and traumatizing confrontation that the father and the narrator have, resulting from Lac’s saying to Pa: “I love you.” When Lac visits a Latino friend at Christmas, he is astounded by the endless loving embraces, the casual exchange of compliments, and the “I love yous” expressed between the family members. He is deeply moved by the sentiment that is expressed, and he becomes certain that the strife between him and his father results from his own failure to say “I love you.” With refreshing hope, Lac goes home and assertively blurts out the three words to his father, to which Pa replies: “*Motherfuck!* What did you just say? Who the fuck do you think you are? [...] Are you trying to imitate those *white* people by telling me those fucking words? [...] Don’t you ever say those weak words to me ever again” (Su 150). Su’s judging of Pa’s behavior against American standards is problematic, however, because, as Aguilar-San Juan warns, “[t]heories about what happens to Asian ethnic groups if and when they leave their ‘ethnic enclaves’ for places that are presumably less ‘Asian’ and more ‘American’ drip with bias.” She also emphasizes that “Vietnamese America is Asian and therefore not white” (xvii-xviii). Nevertheless, Lac is caught between two very distinct cultural realms with

regard to the expression of affection: the one, in the society at large, that nurtures his desire for a kind and loving embrace, and the other, within his home, that deracinates that possibility. To Pa, language is gendered: he associates words of endearment with femininity, referring to them as “weak words” and “*pussy* words,” and to the person who utters them as a “fucking pussy” or a girlish boy, while he attributes actions promoting familial pride to masculinity (Su 150; 151). Pa wants his son to practice and exhibit masculinity through academic achievement and Confucian obedience, rather than through affectionate words.

The Asian American community is complicit in projecting the stereotyped image of the model minority through its general avoidance of discussing domestic violence, because “[w]ithin communities of color, efforts to stem the politicization of domestic violence are often grounded in attempts to maintain the integrity of the community” (Crenshaw 361). By constructing a positive image for themselves, on a pedestal of societal exceptionalism, Asian Americans strengthen the pressure felt by members of their various communities who are abused and simply remain silent. Although Asian American crime rates and reported incidents of domestic violence, in proportion to population size, are significantly lower than those in other demographic groups, the question must be raised as to whether this is merely a result of the reluctance of the victims to report incidents of abuse, which could result *either* from a lack of understanding of the seriousness of domestic violence *or* from their ignorance of the legal system in the United States (Larsen, *et al.* 17). Regardless of which of these alternatives prevails, it is evident that issues pertaining to Asian American domestic violence and child abuse differ from those of other ethnic groups in the United States.

Susan Larsen, *et al.*, assert that, while the dominant culture in the U.S. considers any form of physical force that results in bruising to be an act of abuse, most Asian cultures hold that “child abuse is a foreign concept” and “[t]here is a general consensus among Asians that child abuse only exists when excessive physical torture is [inflicted] on a child and that physical discipline such as striking a child does not constitute child abuse” (16). Within the Vietnamese American community, Tuyen D. Nguyen and Gary Herr move beyond a mere comparison of norms within the larger culture, and they illustrate how Vietnamese immersion into American society seems to exacerbate domestic violence, due to the Vietnamese reaction to various American norms: “The Vietnamese consider it bad manners to express disagreement,” while Americans celebrate “a person’s personal rights and assertive nature” (105). In addition, as Kathleen Malley-Morrison and Denise A. Hines argue, Asian cultures emphasize that suffering “is seen as a path to maturity and a stronger[,] better character” (201), which is understood as a valid reason to tolerate domestic abuse. Lac states forthrightly that he does not “feel any smarter from the beatings,” and ironically that “Pa wants me to become a man,” even though Lac is only in the third grade (Su 63). Later in the memoir, Pa does take pride in his son when Lac demonstrates fearlessness and unflinching determination to oppose Pa’s punishment for lying. Lac affirms an element of masculine strength by being willing to “*feel the pain*”

and rejects a feminine passivity. Instead of punishing Lac, Pa only smirks, and Lac observes: “There is a pride in his knowing smile—a fleeting confession that he sees himself in me. An acknowledgment of the man I am becoming” (Su 195-96). Such is the cultural environment that Lac Su presents in his memoir as background for his own development into adulthood. The actions and reactions of both Pa and Lac are determined by internal needs and external circumstances.

A deeper analysis of Su’s memoir, therefore, forces readers to consider, perhaps even in themselves, where proper parenting and mentoring practices end and where sadistic behavior and trauma-inducing torture begin. Lac’s memoir records experiences that “transcend all ethnic, socio-economic, cultural and age boundaries” (Larsen, *et al.* 17). Tuyet-Lan Pho and Anne Mulvey observe that, within the highly-structured patriarchal Southeast Asian family, there exists an “underlying contradiction” between the attempt to respect traditional familial and gender roles and the “maintenance of a cooperative and harmonious family” (185). As a further complicating factor, many Asian cultures impose an imperative of familial privacy that enforces a strict dichotomy between public and private lives, in which family interactions remain strictly within the home, so that any hint of negative attention or disgrace deriving from the family might be avoided. Su’s memoir requires that readers *not* generalize their perception of Asian American domestic abuse. Nevertheless, it validates such stereotypes as the Confucian structure of the traditional Vietnamese family, harshness through strict parenting, and the absolute requirement to observe the rules of filial piety—all of which can manifest as abusive practices, if taken to an extreme.

This strong reliance on family hierarchy comes at the cost of the Vietnamese American child’s developing sense of self-worth within the general society, especially if familial harmony is prioritized to the detriment of individual sensitivities and aspirations. This Confucian-based sense of familial and cultural obligation, in conjunction with Lac’s fear of Pa’s unstable temper, forces Lac to keep even multiple instances of sexual abuse by Uncle Crazy a secret, even within his family. When Lac attempts to discuss Crazy’s pedophilic behavior with Ma and threatens to tell Pa, she replies, “You know what will happen if you tell your father? [...] He will get very angry—so angry that he might kill Crazy. Then the police will come and put your father in jail forever. You want that to happen?” (Su 77). On the one hand, Ma’s advice demonstrates her complicity with the notion of male privilege, in which the father represents discipline and authority while the mother represents “nurturance, sentiment, and affection” (Freeman 89). On the other hand, her advice results from institutional, cultural, and linguistic barriers, which prevent her from seeking legal assistance and public services to protect the rights of those abused. In fact, many Southeast-Asian American victims of domestic violence fear that reporting domestic violence would place their families in a worse situation, due to their greater fear of intervention by governmental authorities, deportation, and potential loss of immigration status (Pho and Mulvey 192-93). The victims tend to distrust law enforcement and social service agencies due to

previous negative experiences with governmental agencies in their home countries.

In an interview with National Public Radio, Su was asked about Ma's complicit role in the abuse inflicted by Pa, to which he replied, "She was usually behind the scenes, submissive, most likely brainwashed by my father too. She herself was very afraid of my father and, you know, rarely did she intervene and try to tell him otherwise" (Martin n.pag.). This exemplifies the way in which the traditional family patriarchy too-often "dictates how a woman is to act in both her public and private lives." A Vietnamese wife and mother is supposed to remain quietly submissive; were she to speak out "loudly and with assertion, she [would] be looked down on" (Nguyen and Herr 110). It is the prevailing silence, or the inability to share feelings or to express opinions, that makes young Lac "go to sleep hungry most nights [...] starved for affection," and prompts Lac's fear of Pa's unpredictable flights into uncontrolled anger that forces him to walk "on eggshells" throughout his childhood (Su 81). In his review of Su's memoir, Chung Leung correctly notes that *I Love Yous Are for White People* warns against assuming that the potentially positive values of striving for academic excellence and exercising filial piety in any way counterbalance the actual negative effects of abuse conditions (238-39). Thus, in Su's memoir, a complex interplay of abuse, shame, obligation, and duty is shown to operate in a distinctly private sphere, which permits the image of the model Asian American minority to be projected as a visible social image in the public sphere, while concealing an invisible reality that is its contrary—patriarchal tyranny—in the private sphere.

There is a strong correlation between Pa's domestic violence and Lac's identity crisis, as well as Lac's tendency to inflict violence upon his younger siblings and children. Psychologically, Asian American individuals appear to experience four stages in their developing racial identity: Conformity, Dissonance, Resistance/Emersion, and Integrative Awareness (Chung and Singh 240). During the Conformity stage, the individual embraces the cultural values practiced by the dominant group within the society at large, believing that they are more desirable than those practiced within the ethnic community. From the media and from interaction with friends, most of whom are not of Asian descent, Lac compares and contrasts the models of behavior he observes with the models he experiences at home. For instance, he longs for the day when Pa purchases a car and takes the whole family out, "just like the white people do on television" (Su 122)—which Lac understands as a symbol of familial harmony and happiness. Since his parents seldom offer him encouraging words or compliments, he feels both "elated and uncomfortable," for instance, when Pa once speaks "highly" of him, which, to Lac, registers as "unnatural" in his father's behavior (Su 122). Lac rejects Pa's belief that living within an Asian community guarantees security and safety: while Pa distrusts white people, "which to him means anyone who isn't Asian," Lac boldly states, "I don't see what's so great about living in a neighborhood full of Asians," because Asian people "remind me of the ugliness of my own [family]" (Su 82; 123). He further

adds, "I've always associated Vietnamese with the ugliness of my family and my embarrassment over my culture" (Su 139). Lac feels no ethnic or racial pride in being Asian; rather, he feels culturally and racially inferior to other ethnicities, despite Pa's constant warnings that white people are not trustworthy. This explains why Lac prefers to act outside his Asian ethnic enclave, socializing with other non-Asian peers and befriending them, most of whom are Latinos. He even attempts to dress and act like them in order to affirm his sense of belonging to American culture, which, as Natalie Fishcher observes, is accentuated in "[Su's] alternating use of 'they' and 'our' as he speaks, [making] it clear that it is a struggle for him to assimilate American values even though he identifies [by heritage] with Vietnamese culture" (n.pag.).

During the Dissonance stage, the individual experiences conflicts due to the contact between two cultures. As discussed earlier, after Lac's visit with the family of his Mexican friend Art for a Christmas party, Lac becomes aware of the way affection is expressed and communicated in Art's family and the absence of such expression in his own family. Lac's attempt to bring affectionate communication into his own family by saying "I love you" to Pa ignites Pa's hurtful response, which becomes a focal point in Lac's traumatic childhood, as the title of the memoir makes explicit.

During the Resistance/Emersion stage, the individual is drawn completely into Asian culture and rejects the dominant culture. Toward the end of *I Love Yous Are for White People*, Lac observes that most of his street-gang Vietnamese peers "love being Vietnamese but hate their families. I'm trying desperately to love both" (Su 199). This is a turning point in the development of Lac's sense of self, at which he begins to return to his cultural and ethnic roots. Informal gatherings that he calls *nhau*, in which participants eat, drink, and tell stories, help Lac gain new insights, and Lac seeks out such events in order to understand Vietnamese culture. His later decision to visit Vietnam derives from this seminal desire to return to his roots. In Vietnam, Lac admits, "*These are my people. I love my people. This is my homeland [...]*" (Su 240), and he does not hesitate to enjoy such ethnic delicacies as dog meat because he wants to make his parents proud: "*I'll show them I'm real Vietnamese, not just some second-rate Viet Kieu [Vietnamese expatriate]*" (Su 241). Lac submerges himself in Vietnamese culture to reaffirm his Vietnamese identity, and toward the end of the memoir, Lac is able to state, hopefully, "I feel loved by my father in his own way," realizing that "Pa is hiding his love from me" (Su 204, 229).

During the fourth stage, Integrative Awareness, one's self-concept becomes stable as one sees both strengths and weaknesses in each culture. Lac's dual identity as a Vietnamese American, his cultural attitudes, values, and actions develop throughout the memoir, and they end on a note of reconciliation, even though "[s]omewhere deep inside the pain will always remain" (Su 246). He concludes the memoir with his deepest understanding of Pa:

I love my father. I realize that I always have and always will. I understand what he was trying to teach me all those years. [...] I see now that he was building a bridge for me to cross—from boyhood to manhood. Pa was always working on this bridge, and it was in sight while I was growing up, though it was too far from being finished for me to appreciate. (Su 246)

This concluding passage in the memoir illustrates Lac's ultimate attempt to reconcile the opposing forces in his childhood experiences: the *pain* he has suffered and *wisdom* he has gained, as the former generated the latter.

The media tend perhaps too often to present stories of Vietnamese resettlement in the United States in the context of smooth transitions with harmonious, successful results. Their documentaries tend to emphasize academic and economic excellence. Chung Leung argues that the stereotype of Asian Americans as a model minority "does great injustice to refugees from Southeast Asian regions," and Su's memoir portrays the "experiences of impoverished Asian refugees" that belie the myth of the model minority (237-38). Many negative historical and cultural factors can be excused on the grounds of immigrant and refugee success in America; nevertheless, the model minority myth and the overly exacting parenting stereotype are but two of many smoke screens that permit a glossing-over of the deeper realities that Su exposes in his memoir. The stereotyping myths lead too often to dismissing such individual negative experiences as Su delineates. By challenging the model minority myth, Su admirably launches a strong frontal attack upon the acceptance of positive stereotypes to camouflage the warped activity of a figure such as Pa, who bases his tyranny through an unjustifiable abuse of Confucian obedience, which, ironically, also stands as the base for the myth of the model minority's supposed success.

Acceptance of unexamined generalizations on minority experience in the United States comes at a great cost: it promotes an ideologically skewed social colorblindness that trivializes individual ethnic experience and hinders substantive discourse on race and ethnicity, which, in turn, creates the danger of viewing any discussion as irrelevant. Lac Su's memoir enters forcefully into a discourse on domestic abuse in Asian American communities in general and on such abuses in Vietnamese American communities in particular, which heretofore have lain concealed beneath the veneer of the model minority myth. Su's experience concurs with Joyce L. Lum's assessment: one is easily deceived into believing that there is little violence within an Asian American family due to the public insistence upon Asian "strong values on interpersonal harmony" (505). *I Love You Are for White People* provides a critical understanding of the possible effects of casual discrimination, generational strife in Asian American households, and perhaps most importantly, the need to consider varieties of experience and identity within the Vietnamese American community.



### Pedagogical Issues and Suggestions

Most students respond positively to Lac Su's memoir, due to the book's heart-breaking themes and captivating narrative style. Providing students an opportunity to analyze the model minority myth will help them replace cliché understandings with deeper insights into the Asian American experience. In the memoir, Pa is frustrated when other Vietnamese Americans are intent upon becoming successful doctors, engineers, and dentists, while his son remains an academic underachiever. Lac endures the sadistic pressure of Pa to compensate for Pa's own failings, especially as Lac is the eldest son in the family. Asking students about their own general knowledge of Asian American families and of Asian American friends in comparison with the narrator's experiences effectively demonstrates that public and private views of ethnic communities might be very much at odds.

Student responses to Pa's tiger parenting techniques can lead to discussion of related issues: children in the United States have legally-protected rights, and most American parents do not use severe corporal punishment and humiliation as forms of discipline. It is important to note, with reference to these matters, that Su and his family did not enjoy these legal rights and cultural restraints: they came to the United States as indigent refugees; they live a poverty-stricken life in exile; they have little understanding of the U.S. legal system, and they must struggle to survive. Pa's abusive parenting is by no means acceptable. It lies behind Lac's traumatic memories and fears of perpetrating similar abuse upon his own family. Lac's traumatic childhood experiences and his family's life conditions reveal deep complexities in the intersection between culture, race, gender, war, poverty, and memory in some Asian American families. The instructor might want to ask students to compare Pa's Vietnamese parenting style to Amy Chua's Chinese parenting style in her highly controversial book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011), in which she defines a *tiger mother* positively as a strict but loving disciplinarian. However, students must be aware of the differences in the socio-economic status between the two families: while Chua's mixed-race daughters, under the extreme tutelage and non-abusive upbringing of their highly educated mother, are encouraged to pursue their passions, provided with a nurturing home environment, and endowed with the strong belief that they will be successful achievers, Lac, however, does not enjoy the advantages that Chua's daughters do, linguistically, economically, and domestically. In Su's memoir, tiger-parenting techniques are masculine, while in Chua's book, they are androgynous, because Chua exhibits both "strength and power" to incite "fear and respect" (2), and patience and compassion in her commitment to molding her daughters into intellectual and artistic prodigies who can preserve the family heritage. In his memoir, Su does not refer to Pa specifically as a *tiger father*, but in an interview with CNN, he says that his life's accomplishments seem "superficial" and that he finds himself "very broken up inside due to the discipline and the *tiger* techniques that my father has bestowed upon me" ("CNN"; my emphasis). Here, Su associates the word *tiger* with Pa's parenting style. It should be noted that the high expectations by parents of a child's

academic excellence are not uncommon, nor are they culturally, racially, or ethnically specific. Nevertheless, a particularly abusive and authoritarian parenting style, characterized by threats of punishments and the shaming of children, is too-often stereotypically ascribed to cultural practices within Asian and Asian American families. It is proffered, either positively or negatively, as a reason for the model performance of Asian students in academic disciplines, which can stymie their development of innate abilities and talents, as in the case of Su.

Because students should learn about the historical context of Su's memoir, it is necessary to contextualize Lac's personal trauma within the collective Vietnamese American trauma caused by the war, the "boat people" experience, and geographical and cultural displacement. To borrow Elizabeth Larsen's words, Su is able to "not only [trace] the writer's personal evolution, but also give the reader an insider's view into history" (n.pag.). Students need to know some of the history that helps to shape Vietnamese American literature. For example, following the Geneva Accords of 1954, Vietnam was divided along the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel into two separate nations. The Vietnam War escalated in the mid-1960s when the United States sent troops to South Vietnam to help its government fight against the communists from the north. The war ended on April 30, 1975, marking the collapse of the South Vietnamese government and the reunification of Vietnam under North Vietnamese communism. This war remains the most controversial war in both American and Vietnamese history, and it has a tremendous impact on both sides of the conflict, culturally and politically. Immediately after the takeover of South Vietnam, more than one million people in the former South Vietnam were ordered to report for reeducation—a political program that attempted to "reeducate" reactionaries for a new, socialist Vietnam. Those who had allied themselves with the former South Vietnamese government and/or the Americans during the war, politically and militarily, were incarcerated in reeducation camps up to twelve years, depending on their "crimes" committed against the people and the national resistance against the American imperialists. Between 1975 and the early 1980s, it is estimated that more than two million Vietnamese fled the country on small, crowded fishing boats to seek asylum elsewhere because of poverty, political and religious oppression, and violations of human rights prevalent in postwar Vietnam. These escapees are often referred to as the "boat people."

In *I Love Yous Are for White People*, the narrator's father was the "embodiment of capitalism" (Su 40) and an anti-communist commander during the war. Thus, after the communists' takeover of South Vietnam, he said to his wife, "There is no longer a place for us here. Vietnam belongs to the yellow star of the red Communist North" (Su 6), and he then decided to escape the country with his family. The opening of the memoir describes the perilous journey that his family and other boat people experienced at sea before they reached a refugee camp in Hong Kong. After Vietnamese refugees were granted asylum in the United States, most of them relocated in southern California, where the warm climate is similar to that of tropical Vietnam. During their initial years of

arrival, these refugees encountered several hardships, such as language barriers, cultural differences, ignorance of the U.S. legal system, nostalgia, alienation, poverty, and discrimination. The narrator's family, like most other refugees, lived in government housing and on food stamps while struggling financially and culturally to survive in a new land.

### Discussion Questions

1. Briefly discuss how you could approach this memoir from a feminist perspective. Some possible lines of inquiry to explore:

Do you think violence, domination, and control are central to the paradigm of masculinity presented within the memoir?

How do misogyny and the devaluation of characteristics associated with the construct of femininity function in comparison with the construct of masculinity in the memoir?

Is there a relationship between the violent "purging of the feminine" within Su's family and the rise of violence against the "feminine"?

2. How does the patriarchal model of the nuclear family differ across nationality, ethnicity, and/or class in the memoir?

3. Do you think Su's memoir ultimately questions patriarchal family authority, masculine violence, and traditional gender roles, or does it rationalize and justify all of the above? Both? Neither? Would you consider this text androcentric?

4. Lac Su's book begins with a forced removal from the homeland, and it ends with the creation of a (from the outside at least) stable home. In what ways does the sense of wandering contribute to the central tensions of the work? How does this diaspora affect the author's relationship with his father?

5. In what ways does the author's narration of adaptation to a new country alter the idea of communal identity? What relationships form the author's tie to his community, and do they grow stronger or weaker? How do they interact with his familial relationships?

6. On page 162, Lac notes, "To my parents a good son is educated, remains 'Asian,' and is reverent to his father's will." Yet he does not seem especially interested in education (in Alhambra), nor is he overly concerned about remaining Asian. Even after the Ratz beat up Veasna, Lac is reluctant to go home to face his father (193). Why is he so obsessed with his father?

7. Susan Sontag writes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*: "Remembering is an ethical act, has ethical values in and of itself ... [:] to make peace is to forget" (115). In what ways does Su's memoir illustrate an ethics of remembering? How does memory function within the narrative as well as the larger genre of memoir? Does it, as Sontag states, necessarily embody an ethics of sorts?

8. In *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Catherine Bell depicts ritualization as a strategy for the "construction of a limited and limiting power relationship

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[...] not a relationship in which one social group has absolute control over another, but one that simultaneously involves both consent and resistance, misunderstanding and appropriation" (8). Can this observation help us better understand the ritualized violence that permeates the memoir?

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