
From Saigon to Baton Rouge: East Baton Rouge Parish Library and Vietnamese Refugees, 1975-1985

Suzanne M. Stauffer

School of Library and Information Science
Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, LA, USA
stauffer@lsu.edu



Copyright © 2016 by Suzanne M. Stauffer. This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Abstract

In 1975, following the fall of Saigon (now Ho Chi Min City), a group of approximately 500 Vietnamese refugees were resettled in Baton Rouge, Louisiana under the auspices of the Catholic Refugee and Migration Services. The response of the East Baton Rouge Parish Library to the Vietnamese refugees was one of missed opportunities. The goal was to assist with assimilation and Americanization, and the attitude continues as one of unacknowledged whiteness views immigrants as Other and requires that they have accommodate themselves to the white American middle-class library, rather than accommodating the library to their needs. There is no evidence that the library made any attempt to determine the informational, educational, or recreational needs of the community in order to provide for them or to learn about the community. There is no evidence that the library provided any programs for the refugees nor does it offer reference services in Vietnamese. The library employs the antiquated “melting pot” metaphor that continues to privilege assimilation into the dominant culture, and is celebratory rather than critical or revolutionary multiculturalism.]

Keywords: Vietnamese, Public Libraries, Louisiana, Multiculturalism, Racism

Introduction

The history of the American public library’s role in the life of immigrants is one of promoting assimilation and cultural hegemony, of libraries as agents of authority and social control. Scholars who have addressed the issue have tended to focus on the early period of the development of public librarianship in the United States, beginning with the 19th century and ending in the mid-20th, a period of large-scale immigration. Dee Garrison (1979) famously characterized public librarians as “apostles” of white, American middle-class culture, and Michael Harris demonstrated that the American public library in the 19th century was promoted as a “panacea for most of the country’s social ills” including “the reckless and unAmerican ways of the waves of new immigrants sweeping into the country” (Harris 1999, 248). This construction was implicit in library and community leaders’ promotion of “good books” and the social, cultural, and moral benefits of reading such improving literature

(Stauffer 2007, 388). Plummer Alston Jones Jr. concluded that “for librarians [assimilation] meant simply a two-part process: instruction in the English language and preparation for citizenship” and was “the goal of library work with immigrants” (Jones 1999, 10). This was in accord with the expectations and met the needs of the majority of immigrants to the United States in the 19th century, who arrived from eastern and western Europe with the intent of establishing a new life as U.S. citizens. However, it becomes problematic in the mid-20th century when the migrants are actually refugees of color from countries outside of Western Europe, exiles who immigrated out of necessity rather than choice (Rutledge 1992, 8-11).

Current researchers have challenged scholars to examine the history of the public library utilizing critical racial discourse. They have demonstrated that, despite having adopted the rhetoric of diversity and multiculturalism, librarianship in the United States “lacks a critical perspective in regards to the issues of race and racism” (Honma 2005, 10). The model of service to immigrant communities librarians was “solidly based in the framework of European (white) ethnicity” (Omi and Winant 1994, 16) and resulted in “immigrant assimilation programs of public libraries” that played a “complicit role in perpetuating these same racial processes” (Honma 2005, 6).

The current professional discourse is one of “benign liberal multiculturalism that celebrates difference and promotes “cross-cultural understanding” empty of critical analyses of race and racism, that instead adopts a commodified diversity management more in line with capitalist market relations than emancipatory anti-racist struggles” (11). The call is “for a social and color consciousness in our field in order to account for racist and other oppressive practices and the experience of disenfranchised people” (Chu 1999, 1) and a “critical or revolutionary multiculturalism . . . that re-centers the importance of race, as well as other social axes of domination, in the analysis and practice within the field” (Honma 2005, 12). The history of East Baton Rouge Parish Library’s response to the influx of Vietnamese refugees after the fall of Saigon in 1975 demonstrates the ways in which these programs perpetuate whiteness in the library and also provide an example of the way in which “unacknowledged whiteness and celebratory multiculturalism . . . elide critical discourse on race and racial inequality” (Honma 2005, 14).

Background and Context

After the fall of Saigon in May 1975 and through 1977, approximately 150,000 Vietnamese escaped to the United States. The majority of those in the first wave were well-educated, relatively wealthy, had at least a working knowledge of English, and political connections in the U.S. government. Many were wives of American servicemen and members of extended Vietnamese families already living in the U.S., and a high percentage were Roman Catholic (Rutledge 1992, 3-5). They included health care and technical managerial and other professionals. A second wave began arriving in 1978 and continued into the 1980s. Most were Buddhist farmers, fishermen, or small town merchants and many were members of Vietnam’s ethnic minority groups (5-6, 47). By 1989, a total of 918,500 Vietnamese refugees were admitted to the U.S. (37). Approximately 15,300 refugees were re-located to Louisiana by 1989 (39), the majority to New Orleans

Between May 1975 and January 1976, 387 of these refugees were resettled in Baton Rouge under the auspices of the Catholic Community Services’ Vietnamese Resettlement Program (*Catholic Commentator*, January 9, 1976). Local Vietnam War veterans sponsored friends and others were sponsored by members of the local Cuban community, who had been

refugees themselves (*Catholic Commentator*, June 6, 1975). These included skilled and unskilled workers, “teachers, social workers, interpreters, pilots, mechanics, fishermen, farmers, clerks, customs officials, bus drivers, and several other occupations” (*Catholic Commentator*, May 30, 1975). It was reported that close to 75% spoke some English (*Catholic Commentator*, July 4, 1975). For those who were not proficient, courses were taught by volunteers at St. Anthony’s and other Catholic Churches in the parish, as the “sooner the Vietnamese learn English, the sooner they will be assimilated into our society” (*Catholic Commentator*, May 30, 1975), and the Program called for volunteers to “teach them our culture, our mode of dress, our customs, our American ways” (*Catholic Commentator*, October 24, 1975) and to “assimilate the refugees into the mainstream of American society” (*Catholic Commentator*, January 9, 1976). The Vietnamese Mutual Aid Society was founded in late 1975 “to assist refugees in adjusting to the American community and to promote mutual understanding between Vietnamese and their sponsors (*Catholic Commentator*, December 12, 1975). In August 1978, 585 Vietnamese refugees were living in Baton Rouge (*Catholic Commentator*, August 9, 1978).

By 1984, the number had increased to 1,800 (*Catholic Commentator*, July 25, 1984) and they founded the Vietnamese Community Association of Baton Rouge and Vicinity (*Catholic Commentator*, October 7, 1987). The Resettlement Program “found jobs for 90% of the refugees in Baton Rouge” and no more than 7% relied on public assistance (*Catholic Commentator*, July 25, 1984). According to the 2010 Census, 4,847 Vietnamese currently reside in East Baton Rouge Parish, representing 1.1% of the population. They constitute the second largest ethnic group in the Parish after African-Americans, who at 45% barely merit the term “minority.” It is a thriving and relatively integrated community, with numerous restaurants, grocery stores and other small businesses (Nash & Nguyen 1994, 44), and representatives in every profession. It supports both the Sts. Anthony of Padua and Le Van Phung Catholic Church and Tam Bao Buddhist temple. Although they have retained their native language (87% speak Vietnamese at home) and thus their Vietnamese identity (Nash & Nguyen 1994, 45), nearly 96% speak English as well. Unemployment hovers around 3%, and 62% of those aged 18-21 are attending college. In 2008, New Orleans’ attorney Anh “Joseph” Quang Cao became the first Vietnamese-American elected to Congress (<http://www.knowla.org/entry/1422/>).

As described in 1994, the community was “not a homogenous one. The two largest subgroups are the Catholic and the Buddhist communities” (Nash & Nguyen 1994, 43). The people were attempting to “recreate communities which first existed in Vietnam,” with the result that the “settlement patterns and community structure has not been . . . regional or village ties” (Nash & Nguyen 1994, 43; also Tomingas-Hatch 2009, Rutledge 1992). There was “no real intention of creating a new life so much as recreating an old one” (43), and assimilation had been “consciously resisted both at the familial and communal levels” (44). Religious ties also impacted the settlement pattern initially. Residences were “all approximately equidistant from St. Anthony’s, but [were] far apart from each other” (Lee 1990, 18) in north Baton Rouge. However, by 1990, “more and more Vietnamese people” were moving to the east in order to escape the crime in North Baton Rouge (21-22). The first exodus was in 1986, when a group of “approximately 30 Vietnamese families moved en mass to the residential area behind Florida East Plaza” (22) increasing the number of families to 50. The Plaza is a strip mall which included (and still includes) the largest Vietnamese grocery store (owned by Vietnamese ethnic Chinese), and several restaurants and other small businesses (21-22, 44-59).

In contrast to American culture, which focuses on the individual, Vietnamese culture is centered in the family and the community, and community associations and fraternal organizations “exist at every level of the community” and “produce newspapers and yearbooks addressed to and concerning the Vietnamese community” (45; also Tomingas-Hatch 2009; Vo 2012; Rutledge 1992, 54-57, 116-119). Members further express their ethnic identity through traditional clothing styles, cuisine, and marriage customs (Rutledge 1992, 129-132). In addition, “the communal aspect of the Vietnamese religious communities in Louisiana plays a large role in the maintenance of their language and their culture,” (Tomingas-Hatch 2009; also Vo 2012; Rutledge 1992, 60-62; Lee 1990, 27-43).

Response of East Baton Rouge Parish Library

According to the 1975 annual report (EBRPL, box 18), the East Baton Rouge Parish Library’s (EBRPL) nine branches served a population of an estimated 309,000 citizens. The library budget totalled \$1,029,478 and the collection included 315,466 volumes. Although the library had been struggling with budget cuts, which had forced the laying off of nearly 50 employees and the closing of the single bookmobile, it remained a vital community resource. Membership, circulation and reference services had all increased over the prior year. Nearly one-third of the citizens in the parish had a library card, 866,265 items were circulated, and 102,736 reference questions answered. Librarians offered pre-school story times, a summer reading program, hosted class visits and made visits to schools, made speeches to community organizations, and created book lists on many subjects. Free film programs and a concert series were both initiated at the library in 1975.

The only reference to the Vietnamese community that can be found in library records is a note in the September 1976 staff newsletter announcing that, “Melinda Cavanaugh, Young Adult Department” had compiled a “welcome booklet” for Vietnamese families, whose “background is so different that they do not understand the function or use of the public library” (EBRPL, box 4 fd. 28). The booklet would address eight topics : “1. A welcome and introduction to the library. 2. How to get a library card. 3. How to find library books by number. 4. A listing, with pictures, of cuts of beef and pork. 5. How to use food coupons. 6. The installation and cost of a telephone, the use of the directory and the yellow pages. 7. How to introduce people. 8. Appropriate dress for everyday life occasions.” Ms. Cavanaugh’s qualifications for creating the booklet are unknown, and there is no evidence that any member or organization of the Vietnamese community was consulted.

There is ample evidence that the administration adhered to the traditional American public library mission of meeting the needs of the community, as they defined it. The 1976 “Objectives of the System” included six long-range goals, one of which was “Identify and develop programs for special constituencies throughout the system area,” and ten short-range goals, one of which was “To initiate outreach programs that will serve the various special constituencies” (EBRPL, box 1 fd 25) Director John Richard further expanded on this theme in an address “Parish Library in the Next Decade,” given December 11 of the same year. He defined special constituencies as “persons with developmental, hearing, learning, mental, and physical and visual disabilities” (EBRPL, box 1 fd 25). He further pledged the library to “the formulation of policies that are anticipatory rather than reactive to the library information needs of persons, groups, organizations, businesses and governments.”

A new Materials Selection Policy and Collection Weeding Policy were instituted in May 1979. The Selection Policy included specific policy for the young adult and children's collections, but no mention of a foreign language collection (EBRPL box 1 fd 6). The Weeding Policy instructed that the 200s (Religion) should contain "something up-to-date on each religion represented by a church, synagogue, or other assembly in your community," addressed the retention of only grammar books and dictionaries in the 400s (Foreign Languages), and noted that "World War II, the Korean War, and the Indochina War" were very popular in the "Other 900s" (Geography and History).

An "Outreach Report" was submitted annually. Outreach appeared to consist of delivering large print books to hospital patients and the elderly in retirement communities (EBRPL box 4 fd 5) and the creation of reader's advisory lists of genre fiction for those groups (EBRPL box 4 fd 8). In 1978, the library was the recipient of the Louisiana Library Association's Modisette Award for Public Libraries for its creation of the Library Information Service (a telephone reference service), its 15 outreach programs in hospitals, nursing homes and managed care facilities, and its cooperative young adult and children's programs (EBRPL box 1 fd 2). There is no indication that the Library Information Service provided service in any language except English.

The library also released reading lists on popular topics of current interest to ten different local English-language newspapers and magazines (EBRPL box 11). Topics included weight loss, fitness, health, home improvement, gardening, auto repair, sports, World War II, travel, investing, parenting, and divorce, with most topics repeated at least once and some annually. The topic of June 8, 1979 was "Foreign Cooking," and included cookbooks for the cuisines of France, Italy, China, Mexico, Scandinavia, Greece, Japan, the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Russia. The normalization of relations with China was recognized with a special list on April 30, 1979. Parish librarians presented patrons with a gift of Christmas recipes in the *Morning Advocate* of December 16, 1982, but did not include foods of any other holidays celebrated during that season.

In a February 27, 1984 National Library Week speech in Jackson, Mississippi, Richard opposed the idea of the public library charging a fee for service, stating, "During the 50s and 60s the American public library was often referred to as a white, middle-class institution . . . We've worked extremely hard to do away with that image" (EBRPL box 1 fd 2), although he did not specify how they had done it or what the new image was.

A particularly glaring oversight occurred in 1983 when the library hosted a 6-week NEH-sponsored reading and discussion series comparing the World War II and Vietnam experiences (box 17 fd 7). Discussion leaders were two LSU professors. Topics were presented solely from the perspective of Americans in the U.S. and American soldiers in Vietnam. The readings included books on both wars, nearly all from the white American perspective. Just one of four fictional works was set in Vietnam and included Vietnamese characters – David Halberstam's "One Very Hot Day" – and only one of the non-fiction works dealt with the impact of the war on the Vietnamese people – "When Heaven and Earth Changed Places," Le Ly Hayslip's memoir of her childhood in Vietnam and life as a refugee in the U.S.. A local Veterans of Foreign Wars post created a library exhibit which included medals, uniforms and memorabilia from both wars. The Vietnam portion included a soldier's tent with typical personal items and gear. Approximately 69 people attended all of the sessions; five of them were identified as "ethnic minorities," but none of the names (given or surname) were identifiably Vietnamese. There is no evidence that any members of the Baton

Rouge Vietnamese refugee community were invited to contribute to the exhibit or to the discussions, not even to the final session, “1975 and After: Lessons and Lesions of Vietnam.”

Summary and Analysis

While the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, an overwhelming lack of evidence is at least suggestive of an absence. The response of EBRPL to the Vietnamese refugees is a story of lost opportunities. It is a textbook example of the belief that assimilation is “*the* goal of library work with immigrants” and means “simply a two-part process: instruction in the English language and preparation for citizenship” (Jones 1999, 10). It is also an example of unacknowledged whiteness and benign celebratory multiculturalism that continues to view immigrants as Other until they have accommodated themselves to the white American middle-class library, rather than accommodating the library to their needs. It substitutes “color blindness,” a refusal to acknowledge the realities of race and racism, for a genuine multiculturalism that acknowledges, highlights, and celebrates ethnic and racial differences within the community. There is no evidence that the library made any attempt to determine the needs of the community in order to provide for them or to learn about the immigrant community. The actions which it did take were designed to incorporate the Vietnamese “into the rubric of mainstream (white) U.S. society” (Omi & Winant 1994, 16) and to correct their unAmerican ways. It established a dynamic whereby the library was hierarchically superior to and socially empowered to correct the Vietnamese of their “difference.”

It failed to recognize the communal nature of Vietnamese society and the centrality of the religious community to that society in Baton Rouge. Efforts were directed to the refugees as individuals rather than members of a group, and while the library enlisted the aid of the Resettlement Program in translating and distributing the welcome booklet, there is no record of them working directly with St Anthony’s Church or its religious leaders.

Although well-meaning, the “welcome booklet” was patronizing and condescending and appears to have been designed based on stereotypes of a “typical refugee,” rather than knowledge of the specific needs of this particular group. The language utilized in describing its purpose established the Vietnamese as Others who needed to be Americanized. It assumed that explaining the function and use of the public library would be adequate, despite the fact that the library had no Vietnamese-language materials and no Vietnamese-speaking staff. In its selection of topics, it implied that these people were unable to select appropriate foods to feed themselves, that they were all on public assistance, and that their traditional method of dress was inappropriate for everyday life occasions.

There is no evidence that the library provided any programs for the refugees. The calendars of events do not list any such programs, there are no press releases announcing them, no mention of them in newspaper articles, and they do not appear in any annual reports of activities.

Another function of the American public library is as an institution that provides for lifelong continuing self-education through its collections and services. However, the goal of collection development appeared to be to provide the library’s core constituency of white Americans with what they already knew and to reify their view of their community and world, rather than expand their knowledge of the unknown. Neither the Materials Selection Policy nor the Collection Weeding Policy mentioned Vietnam, the Vietnamese language, or the Vietnamese people and their culture as deserving of special attention.

The Vietnamese are not identified as a “special constituency” and, although the library director spoke of “anticipatory rather than reactive” responses, they appear to have benefitted from neither. Other than the “welcome booklet,” the library does not appear to have reacted to, let alone anticipated, the needs of this special constituency. It has never offered reference services in Vietnamese or published any reading lists or other information materials in that language. Currently, the catalog lists 166 individual titles with the heading “Vietnamese language materials” for a community of close to 5,000 people, which does not include any community newspapers or yearbooks. There is no Vietnamese branch and no Vietnamese collection in any of the branches; “Foreign Language” materials are all shelved together. The materials are concentrated in two branches – Greenwell Springs and the Main Library – although every branch has a few items. They are all relatively new items, with the oldest being published in 2000. There is one Vietnamese speaking-staff member, who works half-time at the Main Library. The Vietnamese Catholic Church and the Buddhist temple both celebrate Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, with dragon dances and other festivities (Tomingas-Hatch 2009; also Rutledge 1992, 136-138) and have celebrated the Moon Festival with similar activities (Vo 2012), but the library has not historically recognized either holiday. No book by a Vietnamese author or about the Vietnamese experience has yet been selected for the annual “One Community One Read” series.

Recent events suggest that the East Baton Rouge Parish Library has begun to recognize and fulfill its role as a unifier of the community, bringing together disparate community groups through its public lectures and other programs, offering a neutral ground in which individuals and groups could learn about, interact with, and come to understand and appreciate each other. However, the single annual Multi-Cultural Festival continues the tradition of “benign liberal multiculturalism that celebrates difference and promotes “cross-cultural understanding” empty of critical analyses of race and racism” (Honma 2005, 11). In promoting it, the library employs the antiquated “melting pot” metaphor that continues to privilege assimilation into the dominant culture, and is celebratory rather than critical or revolutionary multiculturalism. The only differences that are recognized are superficial, restricted to costume, dance, and food, while more substantive differences related to race and racism are ignored or even denied.

References

- Chu, Clara. 1999. "Transformative Information Services: Uprooting Race Politics." *Proceedings of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association Conference, 19th-22nd July, Las Vegas*, 1-8.
- East Baton Rouge Parish Library. Records. Baton Rouge Room. Main Library. Baton Rouge, Louisiana.
- Garrison, Dee. 1979. *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920*. Print Culture History in Modern America. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Harris, Michael H. 1986. "The Dialectic of Defeat: Antinomies in Research in Library and Information Science." *Library Trends* 34, 515-531.
- Harris, Michael H. 1999. *History of Libraries in the Western World*, 4th ed. Lanham: Scarecrow Press.
- Honma, Todd. 2005. "Tripping over the Color Line: the Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies." *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 1(2): 1-26. <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/4nj0w1mp>
- Jones, Plummer Alston, Jr. 1999. *Libraries, Immigrants, and the American Experience*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Lee, Emily Mei-Hwa. 1990. "Vietnamese Catholics: Making Places in Baton Rouge." Master's thesis, Louisiana State University.
- Nash, Jesse W. And Elizabeth Trinh Nguyen. 1994 "The Vietnamese in Louisiana: Resources and Records for Librarians." *LLA Bulletin*, 1 (Summer), 43-51.
- Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. 1994. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York: Routledge.
- Rutledge, Paul James. 1992. *The Vietnamese Experience in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Stauffer, Suzanne M. 2007. "In Their Own Image: The Public Library Collection as a Reflection of Its Donors." *Libraries & The Cultural Record* 42(4): 387-408
- Tomingas-Hatch, Emma. 2009. "Preserving Vietnamese Culture and Language in Southern Louisiana: Altars as Symbols of Identity." *Folklife in Louisiana: Louisiana's Living Traditions*. http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles_Essays/Vietnamesealtars.html
- Vo, Cecilia. 2012. "The Moon Festival and Other Vietnamese Traditions in Baton Rouge, Louisiana." *Folklife in Louisiana: Louisiana's Living Traditions*. http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles_Essays/lfmmoonfestival.html