

# **Confessions of a Vietnamese Refugee [Excerpt]**

Cindy Nguyen / Photograph courtesy Eric Kim

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Yesterday, my history professor ordered me to stay after class and then apologized to me.

“We are sorry for everything that we did. Vietnam was such a beautiful place with beautiful people.”

I shifted awkwardly, unsure if this was the beginning or the end of the conversation...

“You know, Vietnam was my home. I knew immediately on the first day my boots touched that red earth. I was just a little over 20, but I knew that Vietnam would change me forever.”

I glanced around the now empty room, my eyes tracing the peeling pale blue paint around the door. All of a sudden I felt eyes directed downwards at me and I became acutely aware of my small stature under his gaze. “I was just about your age probably. Where did you say your family was from?”

I never said anything, I thought to myself. Instead, I politely told him everything he wanted to hear.

My family is from Biên Hòa.

“Oh of course! I flew out of ‘Bin Wa’ airbase there many times.” Looks at me for some confirmation or...was it affirmation (?) of his Vietnamese pronunciation...

I nodded silently while he spoke. Sometimes I submitted those signals that said we were in a conversation by sprinkling in ‘hmm’ and ‘oh really?’ I was not sure which social cues and staged behavior a situation like this required. What did he want me to say? Did he want me to say anything? Did it matter what I said? Did it have to be me or any other representative of Nam would do?

Then suddenly he interrupted my looped performance of hmms and frowned lip wrinkling with another “We are sorry for everything we did in Nam.”

Before I could even take a breath and stop the words from escaping, spilling out from my lips, I mechanically muttered.

“It’s okay.”



*Scan the QR code to read Cindy's full piece.*

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Cindy Nguyen is a subversive artist-historian who works between film, poetry, and visual narrative. Her work defies dominant narratives and meditates on the subtle textures of translation and memory. Her current multimedia project, “Mẹ [Mom], Translated,” explores intergenerational language and love. Nguyen’s other major project includes MISS/MIS, a feminist exploration of all things deemed ‘mis-’ –wrong, dirty, defiant. Her art experiments on translation, categorical impulses, and misreading emerged from her Ph.D. at UC Berkeley on Vietnamese libraries, print culture, and reading. Her art has been published in transnational publications PANK Magazine, diaCRITICS, and Ajar Press, and her scholarly projects have been funded by Fulbright, Social Science Research Council, and the National Academy of Education/Spencer. With funding from the Brown Arts Initiative, she is currently working on a poetic documentary film on the language of Vietnamese refugee remembrance and history. She is currently a Chancellor’s Postdoctoral Fellow at University of California San Diego in the Literature Department and gives public talks on memory, translation, and creative arts.