

Immigrant Experiences: Trong Nguyen

Trong Nguyen emigrated to Chicago from Vietnam in 1976 as an adult.

I have always believed that if you just stay home and do nothing you are not a person whom others will respect. Since I came to Chicago in 1976, I've been involved in building the Vietnamese community. Of the twelve thousand Vietnamese who live in this city, more than half live in a fourteen-block area around the Argyle Street business strip...

Uptown is called the Ellis Island of Chicago. Some thirty language are spoken.... Besides the Vietnamese, there are a thousand Cambodians, two hundred Laotians, and some Hmong...American blacks, Appalachian whites...Mexicans, and some American Indians.

In 1975, when the refugees first began arriving, the area was a dumping ground for derelicts, mental patients, and everyone else the city didn't want.... Refugees were constantly robbed and beaten.... When my wife and I came to Chicago, our major concern was to feed our five small children. We had Vietnamese pride and did not want to take public aid. We wanted the American community and authorities to respect us.

In Uptown, we felt...thrust from one war zone to another.... At the height of tension, the city brought community associations, some refugee leaders...into a room to talk.... At the meeting, the community...realized that the refugees were good people, and an agreement was made...to coordinate with local residents.

Just trying to begin a new life here, we had so many difficulties. When I worked as a janitor at Water Tower Place, a coworker told me, "Trong, do you know that America is overpopulated? We have more than two hundred million people. We don't need you. Go back where you belong." I was shocked to hear people trying to chase us out....

When I came to Chicago, I cried a lot. In the factory where I worked, there weren't many

Americans. Most were Mexicans, some legal, but also many illegal.... They acted like, as we Vietnamese say, "Old ghosts bully new ghosts." ...Some Mexicans said, "You come here and take our jobs. Go back wherever you came from." I was very upset and cried. They said so many things. Then one day...I couldn't hold it in anymore. I told them in a very soft voice, "We are Vietnamese people. You don't have enough education to know where our country is. Vietnam is a small country, but we did not come to America to look for jobs. We're political refugees. We can't go back home." I didn't call them bad names or anything, but I said, "You are the ones who come here to make money to bring back to your country. We spend our money here." After that, they didn't bother us very much.

Argyle has become an international area.... There are...stores owned by Khmer, Lao, Chinese, Ethiopians, a Jewish kosher butcher, two Hispanic grocers, a black record shop, and an American bar. There are Japanese, Thai, Indian, and Mexican restaurants in the area. And a McDonald's....

In 1978...if I said, "Why don't you come Uptown to work with the refugees?" they would say, "No way, it's too dangerous." Now people enjoy... activities like the annual Argyle Street Festival or Lunar New Year Celebration. News people... emphasize[e] how the refugees revitalized Uptown. My children were very young when they came here, so their values have become much more American. I try to behave as an American too, but in my heart I am always Vietnamese. I dream one day that I can get back to Vietnam, I was born there, grew up there.... I still remember that, in the past, my father...worked for our people's freedom. What I am doing now is very different from what they did. We have freedom here, and sixty million people in Vietnam still do not have that. I still dream of somehow helping them to win their freedom.

Thomas Dublin, *Immigrant Voices: New Lives in America, 1773-2000*, (Urbana: IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 275-298.

Immigrant Experiences: Barbara T. Christian

Barbara T. Christian emigrated from the Virgin Islands in 1959 at age fifteen.

I left the Virgin Islands and came to the United States for a specific reason—to go to college. I had no intention at that time of remaining in the United States, although at fifteen I was not particularly concerned about whether I would return home. I had felt restricted on a small island and couldn't wait to know more about the wide world that I had read so much about in books....

My choosing to come to the United States was not surprising, because the Virgin Islands were an American possession. We were taught to see the United States as a great country; England as a dying one. In every way possible we Virgin Islanders were encouraged to view ourselves not as West Indians but as Americans....

Yet when I came to the United States, I found what I had known intellectually but hardly ever experienced: Black Americans were “aliens” in their own society. Of course I had experienced racism at home, especially the heavy emphasis placed on skin shade and hair texture; a reality that haunted my adolescence. At home, however, black people were in the majority and black culture held sway even if some considered it inferior. In contrast, upon arriving in the United States, I found that my place was not defined by the family I came from, my sex, appearance or ambition, but by my race. This was clear, from the almost nonexistent number of blacks at my college (most of whom were males brought there [Marquette University in Wisconsin] to play football and basketball)....

But because I was perceived by Americans not as an American but as a foreigner, I was seen as superior to native-born American blacks; an attitude I bitterly resented. In addition, there were even fewer West Indians than there were Afro-Americans on my campus—and all of them were male, oriented to

extremely practical upwardly-mobile occupations. As a result, I found myself drawn more and more towards African-Americans.

That tendency was strengthened even more by the rise of the Civil Rights Movement that was occurring during my college years. The father of my best friend at college was an ardent supporter of Martin Luther King. On my trips to her home in Tennessee I experienced Jim Crow...witnessed the way in which African-Americans were viewed as inferior. I also experienced the music and the literature they had created. As a student who was moving towards literature as a philosophical embodiment of a culture, I found in African-American literature what I had not found at home: a literature that had a tradition of struggle, which was flourishing and taken seriously, at least by Southern blacks....

Ironically, even as I experienced the restrictions of racism in the United States, as a young woman, I felt freer than I felt at home. The African-American women I met were more involved with social and political issues, saw themselves as independent rather than subsumed into their families and did not see marriage as their primary goal. By the time I went to graduate school, I already was well on the way to acquiring a sense of myself as an Afro-American.

By intellectually confronting the issues of race as a social phenomenon, Afro-American studies and other related areas of study, of necessity, will have to also confront issues of class and gender. In a such pursuit, my experience as a West Indian American woman may prove useful.

Delores Mortimer and Roy S. Bryce-Laporte, *Female Immigrants to the United States: Caribbean, Latin American, and African Experiences*, (Washington, D.C.: Research Institute on Immigration and Ethnic Studies, Smithsonian Institute, 1981), 172-176.