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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# Mapping the Experiences of a Vietnamese Refugee

## Part I: Oral History

*Instructions:* In this activity, you will gain a better understanding of one refugee’s experiences by mapping their migration. Your teacher will assign one oral history to you. As you read, fill out the graphic organizer below. **Note:** The oral histories contain first-hand accounts of war, violence, and fear of sexual violence.

Refugee’s Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### Refugee Experiences

Starting Point	Route of Migration	Final Destination
How do they describe their decision to leave Vietnam? What was fleeing like?	Describe the refugee’s migration route. List all countries, cities, and places on the route.	How do they describe their final resettlement location? Why did they end up there?

Resettlement in the United States	Memory of the War	Relationship with Today’s Vietnam
<p>Did anyone support or help the refugee on their journey or in the United States?</p> <p>How did the refugee adjust to life in the United States? Did they face challenges?</p>	Does the refugee share any memories of the war? How does the refugee think about the war years later?	How does the refugee think about Vietnam today?

**Additional Information**

What other important information from this oral history would you like to include on your map?

**Part II: Mapping the Migration**

*Instructions:* After filling out your organizer, you will begin mapping the refugee's migration. Use the box labeled "key" on the map to explain which parts of the story your different colors and symbols represent.

First, you should:

- Underline the names of the refugee's place of origin and other countries or places that they describe passing through. (If the locations are not already labeled on the map, label these locations. You may need to use other resources to identify places or regions mentioned in the narrative.)
- Draw a box around the label of the refugee's place of origin and shade it with one color or pattern. Fill in your key accordingly.
- Shade the label around the refugee's final destination in a second color or pattern. Fill in your key accordingly.
- Draw a line to show the approximate route traveled.

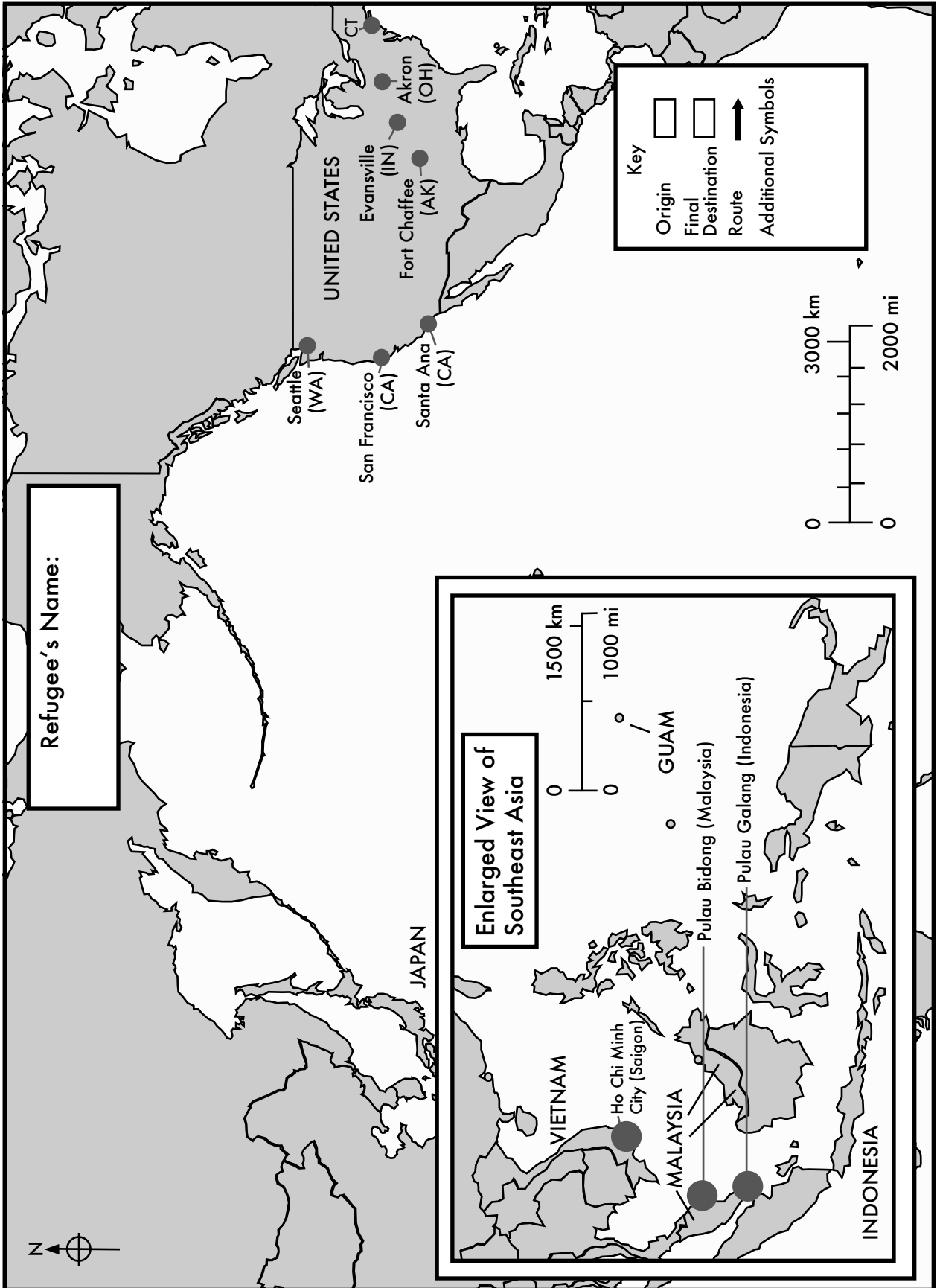
Then, choose at least two other aspects of the story to visually represent on your map, such as an experience or a challenge that the person faced and how they responded. How you represent each of these items on your map is up to you. Be creative!

For example, you may decide to:

- Mark significant events with symbols and add the new symbols to the key.
- Provide short written descriptions of significant events in their life.
- Add a "zoom-in box" to focus on a particular region or event that you wish to call attention to.
- Include drawings to explain their experiences in each new location.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# Map: A Vietnamese Refugee's Migration



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

dogs—and experience culture. We go on picnics with the family from the church, we do things with them. So overall it's a good experience. As far as Vietnamese tradition, it was more like my parents that they tried to hold onto it. And I remember every year the Vietnamese community—even though it's a small community at that time—would try to get together to celebrate the Vietnamese New Year, Tet. Or sometimes we just get together to eat Vietnamese food. So I think those are the traditions that my parents and the older people are trying to hold on to. But as a thirteen year old, it's quite difficult because you don't have a chance to grow up in Vietnam for very long. You didn't—because of the war—you didn't have a lot of experience with traditions. So when you came to the United States young, it's tough to hold onto these traditions except from what you see or observe your parents doing or your Vietnamese friends are doing....

When we first landed in the U.S., you know, culture shock aplenty, right?... You've never seen so many cars, you've never seen the streets so wide, you've never seen a moving escalator. Right?... Or an automatic door that swings open when you walk into a supermarket or something like that. Or even supermarkets were something very different, right? In Vietnam, the markets are out on the streets. You don't have sections where you store frozen stuff and you've never seen so much food in one place.... But here you walk into a supermarket—wow—it's different.... There might be racism, but they were very subtle. And at the time I probably didn't realize it until I got much older and I think about—"Oh, that's wasn't a good experience." But when I was young, I was very naïve or just don't have the experience, right? There might be racism against me, but they're the subtle things, they're not overt. So I never thought about it until I got much older...it's just the subtle things like people would stare at you in different ways. They don't respond to you when you ask questions or they just ignore you.

## Oral History #2: Dang Nguyen

**Biography:** Mr. Dang Nguyen was born in Da Nang, Vietnam in 1964 and moved to Saigon with his parents in 1965. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Nguyen's father was imprisoned in a re-education camp. This presented many challenges to Nguyen's family. In 1981, following his graduation from high school, Nguyen fled Vietnam with his younger sister by boat. Following a seven-month stay in the Pulau Bidong refugee camp in Malaysia, Nguyen was sponsored by his aunt and uncle living in Akron, Ohio, and received permission to resettle in the United States. A year later, in 1982, he moved to Santa Ana, California, where he pursued an education in computer engineering and started a new career.

### Timeline of Nguyen's Journey

1975: Saigon, South Vietnam

1981: The Open Ocean

1981: Pulau Bidong, Malaysia

1981: Akron, Ohio, United States

1982: Santa Ana, California, United States

### Excerpts of Oral History

Transcript, "Oral History of Dang Nguyen," interview conducted by Annie Nguyen, Vietnamese American Oral History Project, University of California Irvine, February 10, 2019. <<https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/81235/d8kv97/>>.

### Saigon, South Vietnam

My childhood at that time was, I would say, very well taken care of. All I had to do was focusing on studying. You know. I had people drove me to school and pick me up from school. And also we had nannies in the

house so the nannies would, you know, take care of us... [My] dad was in the military, on the opposite side of the communists. So after 1975, the communists took over Saigon and my dad had to report to the request from the new government. So from that time on, they took him and put him in the concentration camp [re-education camp]. And because of that, we did not have a father in the house for about 13 years....

My mom at the time had to go to work and we could not afford a nanny to take care of three of us. Therefore, I had to do everything else to help my mom—taking care of my brother and sister. For example, I had to learn how to cook rice and some other basic food so then we can eat.... I went to school but I had to help my mom selling some other things that we made from home so that she can sell, so she can sell them at her workplace. So we can bring in some extra money, you know to feed all of us.

I think I was between 16 or 17 [when I left Vietnam]. Actually, I was in my senior year in high school.... Anything that we can get out of the country, going to other, better—you know any chance we have to go to a better country then. So the thought at that time was if we could escape out of Vietnam, and then we would be able to go to another country then we would be able to work and send the money back to Vietnam, to my family.... The reason for me was because my father was in the...[South Vietnamese] army...they [i.e., the post-1975 communist government] did not treat me and my family fair compared to you know any other normal people. So when they look at my family history, they would put me on the sidelines. They would not...give me a chance to get better things for myself or my family.

### **The Open Ocean**

The chance or how I left Vietnam was not a standard process or normal process. I had to escape. So I had to escape by boat, from the little boat to a bigger boat. From there we go out to the ocean. Yeah. Then we were picked up by an oil platform and they took us to an island in Malaysia. So we were on, we were five days. I think we were five days in the ocean and each day we had only a small cup of water, no food.... I was with my sister. Younger sister....

It was a small boat but we had around 100 people. And we were packed like sardines.... I have no idea [who navigated]. There was a person who, you know, owned the boat.... There was a person, I don't want to call that person captain, but a person who can navigate the boat.... [We were] greeted by people from the oil platform. I don't remember [what nationality].... But I think they do speak English.... Because [the oil workers] have a bigger boat, you know...we actually climbed up to their boat and they had to dump our boat in the ocean, after they got all of the people on board.

### **Pulau Bidong, Malaysia**

We stayed on an island called Pulau Bidong—and that is a refugee camp.... There were a lot of Vietnamese people, Vietnamese refugees.... Probably 10,000 or 20,000 people?... So we had to go to a place, then after we go that place, and then we go to that place.... Let's just say they have basic stuff. They have a bed. Bed meaning basic stuff, no mattresses. Just a platform, right you can sleep on, that you can lay on. And basic necessity stuff...bowls and chopsticks and forks and spoons....

I think I was there for seven months. So during that time, the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] people would call you up and ask you more about your situation so for my case, I was under 18...and they treated us like minor[s]. They asked me a lot more questions. Not just one time, multiple times. So I told them about my dad, about my family, and about my relatives in the US....

There was no school. So, you know because it was an isolated island, everything you did there was just the minimum stuff to keep you alive. Meaning even water, there's no running water. So every day, I had to go to a place [and] carry that clean water back to the place we stay. So that water, we use for drinking and cooking. But there was not that much for us to cook, so it was mainly for drinking....

Yeah, so I did not know at first, for a few months [if I would be admitted to the United States].... So then the UNHCR had to prepare. First they have to go through the paperwork, they have to go through the whole

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

process to make sure that my, that they verify the information and you have to go through the immigration process. So once that everything is set there, from there, they went to. So it was an isolated island, so they had to transport me to a city, which the name of the city is Sungai Besi.... I went to that [refugee processing] center and stayed there for one more month....

Yeah so we flew from...Malaysia.... We stopped by Japan for one night. And then from there we flew to Seattle[, Washington]. So that is the first point of entry in the U.S.... Now imagine how my sister and I were able to go through all of these things and get to destinations.... But when I get off the airplane, there was a Vietnamese person that helped me, because of the first entry point. So he had to translate and help to get the paperwork and all of that for me. After that, that person would put me back to another flight. To Ohio, the final destination to meet my aunt and my uncle.

### **Akron, Ohio, United States**

I saw snow. White snow...I don't know. But I think I saw snow there. So then the first month there, my aunt took me to the Social Service Office. Because I did not speak English at the time, I did not know English, so my aunt took me to the Social Service Office to apply for welfare.... We got food stamp [i.e., government food assistance]...and I recall I think we had some kind of Medicare [i.e., government healthcare], and that's it....

And now during the first few months there, because I did not know English and I had to go back to school. So I was a senior in high school in Vietnam. So at that time, I would be well positioned to go to college right? But because of my English...I could not go to college there or I could not go to high school there. So, for some reason, they put me in 9th grade, which is three grades lower than my current level, just because...I didn't know English....

I did not know what my life was ahead of me. I did not know anything at all.... First, when I first came to the US it was a culture shock for me. And as a teenager, without my parents here...I never left my family. So I did not know what to do. I was lost. The only thing that I knew immediately [was] that I had to...somehow earn some money and send back to Vietnam to my mom, so she can take care of my brother and my father in the concentration camps [re-education camps]....

*[In 1982, Nguyen moved to Southern California, where he eventually earned an engineering degree and started a family.]*

### **Santa Ana, California, United States**

Yeah so after that I think maybe like 12 years later [ca. 1994], my dad and my brother also escaped from Vietnam. So then I sponsored them to stay with us, of course. So during that whole time, after I came to the U.S., I apply to bring them over here, in the U.S. But then my father and my brother did not know when they were able to go to the U.S., so they could not wait longer. So they escaped from Vietnam and when they went to Thailand or Philippines, I sponsored them. So they wrote me letters so I sponsored them here in the U.S. So I think within a year, they came to the U.S. And my mom went through what they call ODP, Orderly Departure Program, [which was set up by the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees to keep Vietnamese refugees in Vietnam while they applied for resettlement in another country]. So my mom went directly from Vietnam to the U.S. But she stopped...at Thailand before....

[In terms of culture shock], first was the language. Second was the social behavior. Language was very difficult. I never thought I had to [use a second language]. I studied French before but...switching to English was hard.... I remember when we were in Ohio, my sister and I, every night, we went to the library.... And...we had a little Vietnamese dictionary. So we had to translate from Vietnamese to English. Literally word by word. So that was the language.... And I was not good with language at all. Even now. And then social behavior meaning.... For example, the way that you talk, the way that you eat, the way that you, you know...treat others. It's completely different, here in the U.S.... I did not want to be looked at, you know, and people think that I act



differently.... I think I recall one incident...in Ohio, I was bullied just because I did not know what other people were saying in English. So the students just laugh at you because I did not understand what they were saying.

[When] I came to California, there were not that many Vietnamese compared to now. So in terms of traditions, the thing that we had to do was the New Years [i.e., the Tet holiday]. So that is what I wanted to continue to keep. Second is...the remembrance of ancestors. And also, the next thing is that for me at least the way that you treat other people, in terms of, I always wanted to continue to be polite to other people. And every time I talk to the elderly, I continue to treat them with respect because that is part of the Vietnamese culture and that is the part that I was brought up, or that I was taught....

### Oral History #3: Tu Ngoc Tran

**Biography:** Mrs. Tu Ngoc Tran was born in Saigon in 1954. After completing high school in 1972, Tran worked at a textile factory for several years before deciding to flee the country. In 1980, Tran was forced to leave her parents and younger sisters behind as she attempted an escape by sea. After a frightening week on the open ocean, Tran arrived in Indonesia, where she spent nearly a year living in two different refugee camps. In 1981, Tran received permission to resettle in San Francisco. Following a few months spent reunited with her brother and older sister, Tran took work at a Connecticut paper factory with a friend she met during her time in the refugee camps. After about a year of work at the paper factory, she moved back to California to work as a seamstress in a textile company. Tran retired from her position as a supervisor for that same company in 2008.

#### Timeline of Tran’s Journey

- 1975: Saigon, South Vietnam
- 1980: The Open Ocean
- 1980: Pulau Galang, Indonesia
- 1981: San Francisco, California, United States
- 1982: Connecticut, United States
- 1983: Santa Ana, California, United States

**Content warning:** In this source, a refugee describes their fear of sexual violence while escaping from Vietnam.

#### Excerpts of Oral History

Transcript, “Oral History of Tu Ngoc Tran,” interview conducted by Hanh Truong, Vietnamese American Oral History Project, University of California Irvine, February 8, 2019. <<https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/81235/d8vc3m/>>.

#### Saigon, South Vietnam

My parents...had 7 kids—5 girls and 2 boy.... Yeah, and...we had a little grocery store, but I like to work in the factory.... I learned a lot of stuff, like sewing clothing and doing a lot of stuff but I don’t remember. I’m too old now. I mean a long time ago.... I like to live a calm life, a normal life.

[After the communist victory over South Vietnam in 1975], oh my God, the life going down and down and down. They called it the ‘*cong nhan lam chu*’—so the worker to be a owner. So, if you are owner, you work you don’t get paid (*laughs*). That means you work for free. How can you support yourself? How can you support the family? How can you eat? What do you eat? Nothing.... So everybody planned to get a new life. There were a lot of boat people [i.e., refugees who fled Vietnam on boats]. The first boat people, they went to Australia. They got