“TO COME TOGETHER AND CREATE A MOVEMENT”:
SOLIDARITY RHETORIC IN THE VIETNAMESE AMERICAN COALITION
(VAC)

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Haivan Viet Hoang, M.A.

*****

The Ohio State University

2004

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Beverly J. Moss, Adviser
Dr. Andrea A. Lunsford
Dr. Brenda J. Brueggemann
Dr. Amy Shuman

Approved by

Adviser
Department of English
ABSTRACT

If rhetoric, as Aristotle suggests, is a defensive art—an art based on opposition—can we imagine a rhetoric that is also about coming together, about building solidarity? Drawing from an ethnographic case study of the Vietnamese American Coalition (VAC), I explore a rhetoric that both reflects and achieves solidarity—a solidarity that is based on mutuality, respects difference, and builds alliances. A grassroots college student organization formed in 1993, VAC’s mission has been to foster political awareness and community activism among Vietnamese Americans, university students, and, generally, the local community. VAC students’ meetings, newsletters, and interview accounts reveal multivalent sources for coming together, ranging from involvement in an immediate interaction to a solidarity that revolves, more broadly, around public texts. By analyzing these students’ speech and writing, I call readers’ attention to several dimensions of a solidarity rhetoric: (1) invitations into a community, (2) identifications that forge new alliances, (3) memorial connections that write individuals and groups into larger sociohistorical contexts, and (4) public texts that perform and revise our relationships. The solidarity that emerges as central to VAC students’ rhetoric is critical not only to their community, but is moreover fundamental to the ways that we, as social beings, make our worlds cohere. In this sense, students’ rhetorics are instructive to the ways in which speakers and writers connect through rhetorical means.
To my parents, sisters, and brothers
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I cannot imagine writing this dissertation without the generous support of both individuals and institutions, and I therefore wish to thank all the folks who gave so graciously. My appreciation extends first to the students, alumni, and staff adviser of the Vietnamese American Coalition (VAC), who unvaryingly welcomed and shared their stories with me. Those involved in VAC have given me more hope for a Vietnamese American community that will keep coming together and creating a movement.

Beverly J. Moss, my dissertation adviser and also a leading literacy researcher, has always responded to my ideas with care and thoughtfulness, asked invaluable questions, and offered intellectual support—in every way, an impetus to move forward in my inquiry. I appreciate her, moreover, because she has become a respected friend with whom I have enjoyed many conversations over the years.

My conversations with my dissertation committee also echo resoundingly throughout these pages. Andrea A. Lunsford, my previous adviser and a continual mentor, joined new colleagues at Stanford early in my graduate studies, yet she has continued to introduce me to relevant scholarship, and, in her comments, magically makes clear what had previously been muddy. Brenda J. Brueggemann’s insights about literacy research have helped me see my own work with new eyes, her warm encouragement has been a refuge, and her nimble writing inspires me to play with my
Amy Shuman, too, has inspired me not only with her work on storytelling and entitlement, but also she has inspired me with her own storytelling. Her stories and the difficult questions that emerge have challenged me to think deeply about research practices, language, and ethnic heritage while also remaining grounded in what matters to the research participants.

I would also like to thank other faculty and fellow graduate students who have contributed to my studies at The Ohio State University: Jacqueline Jones Royster, for her sharp questions about rhetorical memory, race, and gender and her worthy interest in lived experience; Marcia Farr, for her stimulating seminar discussions about literacy studies and her belief that such work needs to influence everyday curricula; Gabriella Modan, for introducing me to how discourse analysis might enrich my analysis of VAC students’ public texts; and my fellow graduate students, for countless provocative seminar discussions.

At The Ohio State University, I have received several forms of support for which I am grateful. The Department of English granted me an Edward P.J. Corbett Research Award and a 2002 Summer Dissertation Fellowship, which together supported my fieldwork, and, more recently, the Graduate School honored me with a 2003-2004 Presidential Fellowship to complete my writing. I offer my great thanks to Debra Moddelmog, Susan Williams, and Kathleen Gagel in the Department of English Graduate Studies Office because I only received these awards by leaning on their expertise and encouragement. In addition to university support, I have also received intellectual support from the Conference on College Composition and Communication, particularly from those who form the Asian and Asian American Caucus (with special thanks to
Morris Young for sharing his manuscript with me), the Scholars for the Dream Network, and the Committee on Diversity.

Finally, my graduate studies have been that much more satisfying with the love of family and friends. I wish to thank my parents, sisters, and brothers for always supporting me in all areas of my life. I thank Cedric, too, for reading parts of this dissertation with me, for helping me appreciate this opportunity to study what I enjoy, and for generously encouraging me throughout my research.
# VITA

February 13, 1976  
Born in Los Angeles, California, USA

1996  
B.A., English, University of California at Berkeley

1999  
M.A., English, California State University at Hayward

Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of English, California State University at Hayward

1999-2000  
Dean’s Graduate Enrichment Fellowship, Graduate School, The Ohio State University

2000-2001  
Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of English, The Ohio State University

2001-2002  
Writing Center Consultant and Outreach Consultant, Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing, The Ohio State University

Summer 2002  
Summer Dissertation Fellowship, Department of English, The Ohio State University

2002-2003  
Writing Center Assistant Coordinator, Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing, The Ohio State University

2003-2004  
Presidential Fellowship, Graduate School, The Ohio State University
PUBLICATIONS


FIELD OF STUDY

Major Field: English

Specializations: Rhetoric and Composition Studies, Literacy Studies, Vietnamese American Studies
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| Page |
|---|---|
| Abstract | ii |
| Dedication | iii |
| Acknowledgments | iv |
| Vita | vii |
| List of Figures | xi |
| List of Transcription Conventions | xii |

## Introduction. Toward a Rhetoric of Solidarity

| Page |
|---|---|
| Beginnings of a Solidarity Rhetoric | 5 |
| Solidarity in U.S. Racial/Ethnic Minority Communities | 13 |
| The Vietnamese American Coalition (VAC): Coming Together and Creating a Movement | 21 |
| In Search of the Available Means | 37 |

## Chapter 1. Invitations to a Community

| Page |
|---|---|
| “A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric” | 48 |
| Invitations to the VAC Community | 54 |
| Issues of Entitlement: The Right to Invite | 64 |
| Challenges to Invitations | 77 |
| Achieving Community through “Letters of Encouragement” | 85 |
| Beyond the VAC Community | 92 |

## Chapter 2. Identifications beyond the VAC Community

| Page |
|---|---|
| Identification: From Division to Solidarity | 97 |
| Autonomy and Sociality | 102 |
| Authority: Playing Whose Game? | 109 |
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figures</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>An Invitational Cycle</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Son’s Textual Art, “I LOVE YOUR ACCENT”</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Son’s Textual Art, “I WANT A THICKER ACCENT”</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

. Period indicates final intonation, end of thought unit.

, Comma indicates thought unit will continue.

- Single hyphen indicates the beginning of a word, a false start on that word.

— Double hyphen indicates the beginning of a thought unit, a false start on that thought unit.

[utterance 1] [utterance 2] Overlapping bracketed utterances indicate speech overlap.

*italics* Italic indicates stress on word.

CAPS ALL CAPS indicate high volume.

: Colon after vowel indicates vowel elongation.

(word) Single parentheses indicate vocal noises.

((phrase)) Double parentheses indicate researcher comments.

((…)) Double parentheses surrounding ellipses indicate less than one intonational unit was omitted.

((lines omitted)) Double parentheses surrounding “lines omitted” indicate more than one intonational unit was omitted.

<?> Symbol indicates uncertain transcription.
INTRODUCTION

TOWARD A RHETORIC OF SOLIDARITY

I define solidarity in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders* 7

If rhetoric, as Aristotle suggests, is a defensive art—an art based on opposition—can we imagine a rhetoric that also “foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together”? Understanding how the “practice of solidarity” might be a *rhetorical* practice becomes especially pressing when we consider the many diasporic people in the United States who, in their day-to-day lives, work to build alliances across multiple generations that are variously raced, gendered, and classed. This ethnographic case study is my effort to explore such a solidarity rhetoric, one that is based on mutuality, respects differences, and builds alliances. More specifically, the following chapters draw from an ethnographic case study of the rhetorics, solidarity, and ethnic/racial identities practiced by one university student organization, the Vietnamese American Coalition (VAC).
Student members of the “coalition” were committed to building solidarity with fellow college students, younger and older Vietnamese generations, and the local ethnic enclave, and it was this commitment that cued me to the possibility that solidarity could be a primary rhetorical motive. When I asked one student in 2002 what he hoped fellow VAC students would work toward in the present and future, he was clear and definitive: “To come together and create a movement.” In spite of the diversity within the student organization, the VAC students I interviewed in 2002 all agreed that this was one of their primary aims. This statement, moreover, could have just as easily described VAC’s beginnings nine years earlier.

On February 11, 1993, two undergraduate students at the University of California, Irvine, co-founded the Vietnamese American Coalition. At the time, these students were writing for an Asian Pacific American student organization’s political news magazine, trying to, in co-founder James’ words, “get the word out, get people angry, and get people involved.” Envisioning new connections among Vietnamese American students and the local Vietnamese community, the two writers believed that their fellow Vietnamese American students needed not only to celebrate ethnic heritage but also to adopt an activist stance. VAC quickly became a grassroots college student organization, created by and for students committed to community activism—activism that reflected their positions as Vietnamese Americans, UC Irvine students, and people with deep allegiances to the local Vietnamese community. UC Irvine, after all, is located in Orange County, which houses the largest Vietnamese diaspora in the world. “We are a new organization at UC Irvine,” began the first issue of the VAC Newsletter, “seeking members with a strong desire to not only learn about the issues pertaining to Vietnamese
people, but to also play an active role in shaping the future of the Vietnamese American community.”

During Asian American Heritage Week that spring, the newly formed VAC joined other Asian American student activists to demand that the university administration fulfill earlier promises of a fully developed Asian American Studies program, as opposed to the nominal program then in place. “Asian American Studies NOW!,” student activists insisted. Students had grown increasingly frustrated with painfully scarce Asian American Studies course offerings and faculty. The VAC Newsletter reported that in addition to a hunger strike and other protests that week, “over 300 students, staff, and faculty as well as community members stormed the administration building, climbed five flights of stairs, and occupied the Chancellor’s Office and corridor for over three hours.” These students held the university accountable to a two-year-old promise to develop Ethnic Studies programs. The newsletter further explained,

In 1991, after several mass protests organized by the Ethnic Students Coalition Against Prejudicial Education (ESCAPE), the administration promised to meet ESCAPE’s demands, the most pressing of which was to establish ethnic studies programs. Today [in 1993], programs for African American Studies, Chicano/Latino Studies, and Native American Studies have been developed, while the Asian/Pacific American student population remains without a studies program of its own. Asian/Pacific American students constitute the largest ethnic group on the UCI campus with 43.4 percent of the undergraduate population, but their demands have not been met. Currently, only two courses dealing with Asian American issues are offered regularly at UCI. The demand for these two classes is so great that the waiting lists of students who want to enroll regularly exceed 400. In addition, the only faculty member who specifically researches Asian American issues has received offers from several other universities. Students believe that the administration has not made a concerted effort to hire and retain the qualified professors necessary to develop an Asian American Studies program.
Students’ demands for four new faculty positions and their desire to have a voice in Asian American Studies curricula may not have been met immediately, but these protests led to important talks among students and administration. The Asian American Studies Department at the University of California, Irvine, is now a highly regarded program with nine core and ten affiliated faculty, an undergraduate major and minor, and a graduate emphasis program (http://www.humanities.uci.edu/aas).

These students indeed came together and created a movement.

I call attention to the statement “To come together and create a movement” as this dissertation’s title not only because it characterizes VAC’s past, but also because this 2002 interview statement was made in reference to VAC’s present and future. The persistent recurrence of the goals of solidarity (to come together) and activism (to create a movement) should not necessarily be read as a critique that earlier cohorts failed to achieve a “movement,” but rather as a testament to the idea that “movement,” as a state of moving, never comes to fruition.

The students’ tenacity in working toward these goals, moreover, challenges rhetoricians to account for the demand for and effort toward solidarity. My imperative in this dissertation is to explore what VAC students can teach us about solidarity rhetoric. In the spring and summer of 2002, I became acquainted with VAC students, alumni, and the staff adviser, and through an ethnographic case study, I investigated the following research question: What rhetorical strategies did VAC students use to achieve solidarity? My inquiry thus begins in search of the available means of a rhetoric of solidarity.
Beginnings of a Solidarity Rhetoric

Solidarity was central to VAC students’ rhetoric, and my sense is that the centrality of solidarity is emblematic of Vietnamese American and other immigrant communities. When the Vietnam War ended in 1975, our positions were marked by diaspora, loss, and alienation, and as late as my fieldwork in 2002, the students of the Vietnamese American Coalition expressed a sense of loss resulting from intergenerational as well as interracial conflict. These students’ stories about why they joined VAC may have varied, but they were clear and unquestioning in their perception that U.S. Vietnamese and Vietnamese American communities have long been fragmented. As a Vietnamese American who also grew up in this southern California Vietnamese community—even if over one decade earlier—I identify with these students. Now a Vietnamese American rhetorician, I am convinced that rhetoric can and should enable the solidarity toward which Vietnamese American and other diasporas strive. I therefore begin by exploring the ways various language theorists have written about solidarity and language.

Few rhetoricians have pursued solidarity rhetoric even though several influential language theorists give us good reason to believe that solidarity is fundamental to rhetoric. Such theorists are perhaps more often cited for their attention to multivocality and the contingency of language. However, they also propose that multiple and competing voices are complemented by a coming together of those voices: solidarity. Mikhail Bakhtin, for instance, analyzes heteroglossia, or multivocality, as a feature of the novel, but he nevertheless asserts that there are always two forces at work on language: decentralizing, centrifugal forces and centralizing, centripetal forces (272). In this

5
Bakhtinian scheme where language is the site of competing forces, solidarity rhetoric is the effort toward cohesion, connection, and centrifugal unity. This effort has been recognized and variously named by several language scholars: centrifugal forces (Bakhtin), solidarity (Rorty; Tannen, *That’s Not What I Meant!*), involvement (Brandt, *Literacy as Involvement*; Tannen, *Talking Voices*), and identification and consubstantiality (Burke).

I have adapted the term “solidarity” from Richard Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* because he makes two major claims about language and solidarity that are assumed throughout my project. One, language is always historically and socially contingent, and, two, our “vocabularies,” or discourses, are based on this contingency. While such contingency is often cited in support of postmodern fragmentation, Rorty’s model of human solidarity enables the fragments to come together again. It is through the “imaginative identification with the details of others’ lives” (in novels and ethnographies, for example) that we make connections and build alliances (190). Solidarity, he explains, is rhetorically performed and “has to be constructed out of little pieces, rather than found already waiting, in the form of an ur-language which all of us recognize when we hear it” (94). This claim dismantles modernist premises that conceive of solidarity as pre-existent, as based on “something antecedently shared” (190). In other words, solidarity does not exist because of our shared humanity as rational animals, God’s creatures, or a nation’s citizens. If language is heteroglossic and contingent, then solidarity must be constructed and therefore requires rhetorical agency.

I am persuaded by Rorty’s argument, but as I follow his line of reasoning, I find that he returns to that belief in an a priori shared humanity against which he cautions us.
Rorty claims that solidarity should be based on our common struggle against pain, cruelty, and humiliation. Solidarity, he writes, “is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation—the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of ‘us’” (192). In effect, when Rorty defines solidarity according to a struggle against pain, cruelty, and humiliation, his argument returns to an assumption of universal humanity—a universalism that contradicts his overarching argument for social contingency. If solidarity is socially contingent, however, the common interests that bind us do not always appeal to this modernist understanding of humanity but are continually shifting according to the circumstances at hand. It is because of this universalist turn that Rorty leaves little room for difference, and I am not convinced by a solidarity rhetoric that sees difference as unimportant, something to be transcended. While Rorty might respond that contingency can account for difference, I contend that we need to *actively search out* contingent differences that mainstream histories typically gloss over. A solidarity rhetoric that can account for VAC’s commitment to community activism must wrestle with messy human differences through what he described earlier as the “imaginative identifications with the details of others’ lives” (190).

The practice of solidarity, indeed, is important to how we navigate messy differences. Rorty’s philosophy about solidarity and the contingency of language is therefore enriched by language studies that are grounded in lived experience, where this messiness occurs. Whether analyzing conversations, writing processes, or public and professional discourse, linguist Deborah Tannen, literacy scholar Deborah Brandt, and
rhetorician (and general humanist) Kenneth Burke each bring the discussion of solidarity from theory to practice. From Tannen, Brandt, and Burke, we learn that solidarity operates on several levels, ranging from the most local interaction between speaker and listener or reader and writer to the more far-reaching web of social relationships among agents, identities, and issues. At all levels, solidarity rhetoric is about making connections among rhetorical agents whose purpose may be to persuade their audiences and, sometimes more important, forge social relationships.

Tannen’s discussion of solidarity is about conversational “involvement.” Involvement, she explains, is a linguistic strategy to increase communicative interaction. In her analyses, she traces involvement to specific features of conversation: repetition, constructed dialogue, and interruption (Talking Voices). She thereby locates solidarity in both lived experience and in the features of language. Involvement, then, addresses one layer of solidarity rhetoric where solidarity rhetoric is about the coming together of interlocutors and the heightening of participation in an interaction.

Turning our attention from orality to literacy, Brandt finds that involvement is also a feature and an accomplishment of writing-reading processes. Sophisticated writers and readers understand that literacy is not about deciphering a text but about navigating the social relationships cued by a text. That is, “[l]earning to read is learning that you are being written to, and learning to write is learning that your words are being read” (Literacy as Involvement 5). Interestingly, both Tannen and Brandt converge in their claims that both oral and literate ability hinge on the interlocutors’ awareness that they are not simply conveying information but entering a social relationship. As Brandt tells us, “the engagement of two minds—writer’s and reader’s [or speaker’s and listener’s]—
becomes the whole point and basis of exchange” (101). If involvement is one dimension of solidarity, then solidarity is not just a social ideal as Rorty might suggest but a fundamental feature of orality and literacy.

Kenneth Burke’s notion of “identification” suggests a strategy for rhetorical agents to come together. Burke explains identification: When A identifies his interests with B, A and B identify with one another and thereby become “consubstantial” (Rhetoric 19). In effect, A and B achieve solidarity. The concepts of identification and consubstantiality (or solidarity) are made even more clear through illustration: “[I]dentification ranges from the politician who, addressing an audience of farmers, says, ‘I was a farm boy myself,’ through the mysteries of social status, to the mystic’s devout identification with the source of all being” (xiv). The universals to which we cling—rationality, religion, rejection of pain and cruelty—are rhetorical constructions that we use to identify with one another. In this sense, Burke pushes our discussion of solidarity beyond the interactional contexts that Tannen and Brandt address; identifications and the solidarity that result are based on shared interests or values that precede and even continue after the interaction itself. Solidarity rhetoric, in this sense, is about pulling together not only two people (speaker-listener, writer-reader), but also the body of identifications that are associated with one act, one person, or one community.

Finally, we should note that Burke contributes an important caution with his introduction of identification: he prevents us from conceiving of solidarity as a utopian ideal. Consider Burke’s elaboration on identification. He suggests, for instance, that a shepherd might care for and protect his sheep but might also be “identified” with preparing the sheep for slaughter and then market (27). In another classic example, he
explains how a scientist’s research might advance knowledge, but if his or her research is used for military purposes, then he or she is also identified with killing and imperialism.

This he illustrates through a dialogue between “Preen” and “Prone”:

Thus, when his friend, Preen, wrote of a meeting where like-minded colleagues would be present and would all be proclaiming their praise of science, Prone answered: “You fail to mention another colleague who is sure to be there too, unless you take care to rule him out. I mean John Q. Militarist-Imperialist.” Whereat, Preen: “This John Q. Militarist-Imperialist must be quite venerable by now. I seem to have heard of him back in Biblical times, before Roger B. Science was born. Doesn’t he get in everywhere, unless he is explicitly ruled out?” He does, thanks to the ways of identification… (26)

Burke’s amusing explanation of the identifications among science research and militarism/imperialism persists in today’s political climate. In 2003, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) awarded 101 Homeland Security Undergraduate Scholarships and Graduate Fellowships, offering this rationale for the funding: “DHS realizes that the country’s strong science and technology community provides a critical advantage in the development and implementation of counter-terrorist measures” (http://www.orau.gov/dhsed/). Under President George W. Bush’s administration, the government has identified undergraduate and graduate science and technology education with counter-terrorist military efforts. Identifications, in this case, reveal unsettling connections between education and militarism, even imperialism—replacing the more traditional identification of education with responsible citizenship.

But perhaps, for humanities scholars, Burke’s illustration of the identifications of university education resonates most:

[W]e are clearly in the region of rhetoric when considering the identifications whereby a specialized activity makes one a participant in some social or economic class. “Belonging” in this sense is rhetorical.
And, ironically, with much college education today in literature and the fine arts, the very stress upon the pure autonomy of such activities is a roundabout way of identification with a privileged class, as the doctrine may enroll the student stylistically under the banner of a privileged class, serving as a kind of social insignia promising preferment. (27-28)

The identifications of a liberal arts education with a privileged class require that I revise my statement that few rhetoricians and compositionists have attended to solidarity.

These illustrations of rhetorical identification and solidarity are familiar because solidarity, in fact, is at the core of composition studies’ controversial history. Solidarity underlies central questions about composition pedagogy: What should composition courses cover, and for what do composition teachers prepare students? The answers to these questions identify the practice of composition—and therefore, teachers and students—with university discourse, community-based discourse, civic responsibilities, personal expression, and so on, thereby creating and reinforcing the solidarity of particular communities (e.g., university, local, national, and even individual).

I discuss identification at some length for two important reasons: first, to make visible the ways in which we have discussed solidarity in our discipline and, second, to urge us against polarizing solidarity into a utopian “social hope,” on the one hand, or the source of all social problems, on the other. Like Burke, I am wary of the abuses of solidarity rhetoric—what Mohanty, in this chapter’s epigraph, calls the “enforced commonality of oppression”—but I also place hope in its possibilities. Tannen’s research merges these poles by explaining how solidarity and power are always mutually entailed (101, *That’s Not What I Meant!*). She defines power in terms of independence and control, and by contrast, she defines solidarity in terms of involvement and rapport. While Tannen proposes that one can often undercut the other—where one’s desire to
have power over contradicts one’s desire to have solidarity with—we might also consider how power and solidarity can be mutually supportive. In labor movements, for example, we see how the solidarity of a workers’ union can support workers’ power over their work conditions. The constant struggle between power and solidarity, independence and identification, now returns us full circle to Bakhtin’s decentralizing and centralizing forces of language.

In sum, we emerge with these points of departure for theorizing a solidarity rhetoric:

- Solidarity rhetoric enacts the centrifugal forces of language, both competing with and complementing centripetal forces.
- If language consists of multiple and competing forces, solidarity must be rhetorically performed, repeatedly; it is not a pre-existent reality.
- Solidarity rhetoric is characterized by “involvement” and “identification,” respectively a coming together of interlocutors and a coming together of a body of identifications (ideas, memories, people).
- Finally, such a rhetoric should be neither glorified nor demonized; like any rhetoric, solidarity rhetoric is performed within a particular situation for a particular purpose.

Gaining momentum from these language theorists who give me entry into solidarity rhetoric, I locate my interest in the practice of solidarity rhetoric in context. Situated rhetorical practices cue researchers to the ways that speakers and writers draw on strategies and commonplaces to achieve solidarity. In this study of the Vietnamese
American Coalition’s discourse, one commonplace is especially salient among the VAC students: ethnic and racial identity.

**Solidarity Rhetoric in U.S. Racial/Ethnic Minority Communities**

Since their activist beginnings, VAC students’ identities as ethnic/racial minorities have figured powerfully in their solidarity rhetoric. The solidarity that students formed among themselves and with other groups often pivoted from their constructions of shared ethnic heritage (as Vietnamese and as Asian) but also from their constructions of shared racial and national identities (as Asian American, as U.S. racial minorities, and as American). Involvement and identifications through ethnic heritage and racial identity provided a means for VAC students to connect with one another and with other groups. However, those same identifications with ethnic heritage and racial identity were also reasons why solidarity was sometimes rejected. As we delve into VAC’s discourse in later chapters, we will find that identifications can reveal divisions as much as they heighten connection. Because belonging to a racial/ethnic minority community in the U.S. makes the demand for both intra- and inter-group solidarity so pressing, let us now consider how ethnicity and race create an imperative for solidarity—and, yes, for a solidarity rhetoric.

In recent years, the concepts of ethnicity and race have become increasingly visible in rhetoric and composition scholarship thanks, in no small measure, to works like Keith Gilyard’s 1999 edited collection *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition* and Catherine Prendergast’s 1998 essay “Race: The Absent Presence in Composition Studies.” Meta Carstarphen’s contribution to Gilyard’s collection draws from the widely circulated
assertion that race is a social construction. Tracing the histories of the words “black” and “white” through Latin and early English languages, Carstarphen finds that the terms are used almost synonymously in early Anglo-Saxon languages which conceived of both as an absence of color. These terms then refer to people from particular geographical regions and finally identify people by color rather than by culture or geography. Figuring race as rhetorically constructed within historical and social contexts is fundamental to Gilyard’s argument.

Gilyard argues that in our push for multiculturalism and “multiracial tolerance,” we often presume that race is a given, an objective reality, and not the rhetorical construction that Carstarphen unfolds (47). Rather than reinscribe discourses of race and racism in our scholarship and our courses, we should “(de)construct race” because “[n]ot to do so in the contexts in which we work, is to confirm the prevailing discourse and to be implicated in the maintenance of an exploitative social order to the exact extent that said discourse promotes exploitation” (49). Even if race is a social construction, its effects as a governing cultural discourse are no less real. Invigorating our awareness that race is a rhetorical construction is necessary to academics’ struggles against racism.

Catherine Prendergast takes up Gilyard’s charge to make constructions of race visible and to thereby participate in an antiracist struggle. Prendergast claims that race has become an “absent presence” in composition studies “[f]or while it is often called upon as a category to delineate cultural groups that will be the focal subjects of research studies, the relationship of race to the composing process is seldom fully explored” (36). This claim challenges researchers of Asian American rhetorics, then, to clarify the connections between Asian American ethnic/racial identities and our rhetorics. Unlike
some ethnic groups that might propose a unique rhetorical system, Asian American rhetorics are defined not by a unique rhetoric—the category of “Asian American” invokes too many traditions to call up one rhetorical tradition—so much as these rhetorics are defined by Asian American people rhetorically responding to conditions created by perceptions of our racial identity. Prendergast goes on to explain that Asian Americans confront the added problem of having been neglected within our disciplinary scholarship:

We might observe, for example that Asian-American students don’t exist in composition studies—they are either ESL students or unnamed (white). The discrimination that Asian-Americans face (in some cases through their positioning as “model minority”) is culturally unintelligible within composition’s discursive space. The present challenge for compositionists is to develop theorizations of race that do not reinscribe people of color as either foreign or invisible, nor leave whiteness uninvestigated; only through such work can composition begin to counteract the denial of racism that is part of the classroom, the courts, and a shared colonial inheritance. (51)

In a compelling effort to make race, specifically the rhetorical construction of race, explicit in our discipline, Prendergast turns to critical race theorists who address not only the subject of racism but also issues of race and rhetoric. Reading Patricia Williams’ *Alchemy of Race and Rights* and Derrick Bell’s *And We Are Not Saved* and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, Prendergast makes the keen observation that these writers’ interests in “audience, genre, voice, and canonization” are rhetorical concerns. Through play with the rhetorical conventions of legal discourse, both Williams and Bell suggest that such conventions can in fact reinscribe discourses of racism.

Race may be an absent presence in rhetoric and composition studies, but race, I believe, is a persistent presence in U.S. rhetorical practices—sharply present among those
who are aware of the turbulent history of race in the U.S. and even more so among those
whose double consciousness cues that history daily. It is not just race as a theoretical
construction but also race as lived experience that makes race a rhetorical concern. Race
greets me regularly and at many turns. I can hardly imagine how I would unravel race
from my own rhetorics. Before I speak or write, others’ expectations and what I perceive
as others’ expectations of my racial identity—catalyzed by my name, my face, the
content of my rhetoric—create rhetorical exigency: How should I craft my voice? How
could I play with commonplaces? How could I reinscribe meaning into racial discourse?

With these questions, I begin to reframe our discipline’s inquiry into race and
rhetoric. The attention to race in rhetoric and composition studies often casts race in
terms of racism and necessary anti-racist stances—rightly so. Race, after all, finds its
history in an imperialist agenda that ranks human worth, and such racism, moreover, is
sometimes obscured in our discourse. My goal is to keep this anti-racist fight in my field
of vision, reading and writing alongside Gilyard and Prendergast, while also
considering the ways that race and racism have caused minority people to come together. In my
investigation of VAC students’ solidarity rhetoric, I focus less on how race and racism is
already constructed, and more on the ways that students as ethnic/racial minorities
perform their identities (ethnic/racial and otherwise) in response to such constructions. I
am convinced that this shift from examining ethnicity/race as constructed to examining
how minority people rhetorically respond to such constructions is necessary if we are to
attend to and value the rhetorical agency of minority people.

In an emerging body of work on Asian American rhetorics and literacies, scholars
are already inquiring into how ethnic/racial minorities rhetorically perform their identities
in relation to ethnic/racial constructions. As Prendergast notes, our disciplinary discourse about Asian American rhetorics is rather new. Nevertheless, we are at an exciting moment in our discipline when studies on Asian American rhetorics are starting to flourish thanks to researchers like Gail Weinstein-Shr, Terese Guinsatao Monberg, and Morris Young. Each contributes to our scholarship by examining the ways in which Asian Americans and Asians in the U.S. are not wholly determined by social constructions of race/ethnicity, citizenship, and literacy but instead reconstruct those constructions according to the purpose at hand.

In this vein, Gail Weinstein-Shr notes that the inquiry in literacy studies has shifted “from what literacy does to societies and individuals to what individuals and groups do with literacy to make it their own and make it serve their own purposes” (50). In her study of literacy in two Hmong communities in Philadelphia, Weinstein-Shr introduces three Hmong adults who each use literacy in ways that confirm or reshape their social relationships and even spiritual identifications. Chou Chang, a member of the Weston neighborhood, was a “literacy and culture broker” (59). Literate in Lao and English and also familiar with U.S. social institutions (e.g., Christian churches, social welfare offices), Chou became a community resource—a conduit between American and Hmong communities. In contrast, Pao Youa Lo, who resided in the Norton community, had failed an English course that Weinstein-Shr had taught years earlier and refused her offers for English tutoring. To her surprise, Weinstein-Shr soon learned that because Pao Youa was a powerhouse in his community and because he belonged to a dense interdependent clan network, he had little need for literacy in English and in fact was far more literate than he indicated in her class. Literate kin would contribute their literacy
skills during gatherings, and, at such gatherings, Pao Youa was highly regarded as a resource for Hmong history and current news. Lastly, Bao Xiong was a “culture teacher,” whose Hmong embroideries and cultural workshops enabled her to move fluidly between Weston and Norton (69).

I discuss Weinstein-Shr’s ethnography in some detail because I am interested in how each of these three individuals responds fluidly and actively to their various rhetorical situations. In these detailed portraits of three Philadelphia Hmong, there is a subtext about constructions of ethnic/racial identity. However, what is important is not how each person fits into the construction, but how each uses both literacy and constructions of ethnicity/race to his or her purpose. Weinstein-Shr’s analysis, particularly of Bao, illuminates the creative ways that speakers and writers can reconstruct race/ethnicity and thereby move into new communities and/or strengthen old ones.

Terese Guinsatao Monberg’s research of the Filipino American National Historical Society (FANHS) suggests that such creativity is often necessary in our postmodern fragmented societies. Revising what she sees as Aristotle’s assumption that audiences are relatively homogeneous, Monberg claims that audiences are in fact multiple and therefore require “rhetorics of hybridity” (1-5). Entering the FANHS social network and interviewing key leaders gives her a glimpse into such rhetorics of hybridity. FANHS was founded in 1982 out of a desire to rewrite negative representations of Philippine heritage and to create a body of “textual materials on the American experiences of Filipinos” (13). The “Bridge Generation,” or “Filipino Americans born on or before 1945,” occupied a unique position among Filipino Americans. Situated
between two generations, colonized migrant workers and newer immigrants, the Bridge Generation frequently had their Filipino and their American identities challenged. In response, members of the Bridge Generation created FANHS, locating themselves as a “bridge” to different audiences. They “relocat[ed] their ethos from a traditionally marginal position to one of central importance” (15). Creating a hybridized ethos that addressed multiple generations and racial/ethnic groups, members of the Bridge Generation used written texts and other forums (e.g., conferences) to redefine their social relationships.

Morris Young advocates such relocations. In his recent book *Minor Re/Visions: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship*, Young argues that literacy narratives are often narratives about race and citizenship. Literacy narratives often present the literacy myth that literacy helps minorities achieve citizenship. Young analyzes “minors” who grapple with the ways that literacy enables participation in public arenas but also hems these minors into dominant ways of speaking and writing. Examining Latino American and Asian American literacy narratives, he not only locates the ways in which “minors” write and rewrite themselves in the context of dominant narratives, but he also weaves his personal literacy narratives throughout the analysis. This personal thread affirms the fusion of personal and public and makes tangible what Young means by “minor revisions,” or the ways that minors challenge dominant understandings of literacy, race, and citizenship.

Through his analysis of literacy narratives, Young responds to Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd’s call for minority discourse scholars to engage in a *positive* production of theoretical work:
[A]n emergent theory of minority discourse must not be merely negative in its implications. Rather, the critique of the apparatus of universalist humanism entails a second theoretical task permitted by the recovery of excluded or marginalized practices. The positive theoretical work involves a critical-discursive articulation of alternative practices and values that are embedded in the often-damaged, -fragmentary, -hampered, -occluded works of minorities. (JanMohamed and Lloyd 8)

Positive alternative discourse practices emerge in Weinstein-Shr, Monberg, and Young’s research of Asian American rhetorics and literacies. In each study, Asian American speakers and writers draw from their double-consciousness—what has variously been called a mixed-blood, border, or mestiza awareness—to reconstruct their positions in relation to multiple audiences and to thereby make new social and ideological connections. My use of “double-consciousness” echoes W.E.B. DuBois, who has asserted that people of color are doubly aware of their self-perception, on the one hand, and others’ perception of them, on the other. Similarly, Malea Powell explains a “mixed-blood” consciousness as an in-between position where one is conscious of power structures, “I use mixed-blood as a figurative description for a person who ‘lives’ between cultures that are epistemologically contradictory and that experience asymmetrical power relations” (12).

It is through a mixed-blood consciousness of multiple and sometimes contradictory cultures that people feel the imperative to “bridge” communities and thereby build solidarity. Double-consciousness recognizes the fragments and division that are in tension with solidarity. As a result, ethnic/racial and other minority people face a special imperative to first locate our positions in relation to one another and next come together and build solidarity. VAC students’ ethnic and racial consciousness therefore becomes critical to their solidarity rhetoric. Students, in a recursive process,
identified with one another based on their shared ethnicity and race, but also used their newfound solidarity to revise those constructions of ethnicity and race. In the final sections of this chapter, I describe students’ movements toward solidarity through a brief review of VAC’s history before introducing the rhetorical strategies that will be discussed in the remaining chapters.

The Vietnamese American Coalition: Coming Together and Creating a Movement

In 1993, the creation of the Vietnamese American Coalition and students’ subsequent participation in the movement for an Asian American Studies program were indeed sites for coming together and creating a movement. According to my interview with VAC co-founder James in the summer of 2002, VAC’s inception occurred in a climate of Asian American activism. Students were hungry for an Asian American Studies program, and student activists’ goals seemed clear. Students, in the first issue of the VAC Newsletter, sharpened their intense desire for activism by articulating their mission:

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the Vietnamese American Coalition of UC Irvine is to promote active involvement and to voice issues pertaining to the Vietnamese American community, as well as addressing social and political concerns relevant to Vietnam.

Objectives

1. Campus/Organizational Objective
   a. Seek committed volunteers interested and concerned with the Vietnamese community.
   b. Raise awareness toward Vietnamese student issues.
   c. Be a representative voice of the Vietnamese student population.
d. Network with existing Vietnamese and Asian organizations, both at UCI and other campuses.
e. Develop leadership skills toward group and community participation.
f. Raise sufficient funds for VAC’s functional purposes.
g. Produce a monthly newsletter to address issues.

2. Community Objective
a. Form a bond between students and the general Vietnamese community.
b. Promote awareness of issues relevant to the Vietnamese community.
c. Handle problems that have arisen and implement programs to prevent ones that may arise in the future.
d. Communicate with community organizations.

3. Vietnam Objective
a. Act as a forum to promote awareness and exchange ideas concerning Vietnam.
b. Be active and responsive to potential issues relating to Vietnam by publicly addressing our collective opinions.
c. Develop relationships with community leaders and representatives.

The threefold purpose to participate in activism at the levels of university, “Community,” and “Vietnam” reveals students’ multiple consciousness. VAC students at this time embraced their responsibilities as students, as members of a Vietnamese American diaspora, and as people of Vietnamese heritage. Articulating an unflagging commitment to these communities signaled a desire to make their worlds cohere.

Why Solidarity?

For Vietnamese Americans, the desire for solidarity and activism can be traced to both a fragmented ethnic identity and a fragmented racial identity. First, like other diasporas, Vietnamese communities in the U.S. have experienced a sense of alienation and loss of ethnic heritage. VAC students’ parents and/or students themselves emigrated under the traumatic and dire circumstances of the Vietnam War. Upon first arriving in the U.S., many early Vietnamese refugees believed that the move was temporary and that
their homeland as they knew it would eventually be restored upon their return. Needless to say, Vietnam remained a communist nation. In the first wave of immigration following Saigon’s fall on April 30, 1975, 130,000 Vietnamese refugees came to the U.S. through four major refugee camps including Camp Pendleton in southern California (Zhou and Bankston 9). My own family immigrated through Camp Pendleton in 1975, immediately after the fall of Saigon, moving north to Los Angeles and then in 1986 moving just south of Los Angeles to the burgeoning Vietnamese community in Orange County. Between 1975 and 2000, the Vietnamese population in the U.S. swelled from 15,000 to over 1.1 million people (http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kbr01-16.pdf). More locally, VAC students in 2002 were part of a community of 150,000 Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans in Orange County—less than fifty miles northwest of Camp Pendleton (OCAPICA v).

As Vietnamese communities in the U.S. grew, a densely populated Vietnamese cultural and commercial center developed into the “community” with whom VAC students hoped to form close bonds. The growth of Little Saigon increasingly revealed a disjuncture between 1.5 and second generation Vietnamese Americans, on the one hand, and their first generation parents, on the other. Vietnamese American writer Andrew Lam captures this sentiment of loss in a story centered on April 30, the day that the Vietnamese American diaspora treats as a memorial but that Vietnam calls National Liberation Day:

“April 30, 1975?” said Bobby To, my 22-year-old cousin in San Francisco. “I don’t know that date. I don’t remember Vietnam at all.” April 29, 1992, is more meaningful to him, Bobby said. “It’s when the race riots broke out all over our country. To me it’s more realistic to worry about what’s going on over here than there.”
As 1.5 and second generation Vietnamese, VAC students recognized the fissures in their community and understandably began a movement toward solidarity in the U.S. While fighting for social justice, their movements were efforts to make connections among their parents’ Vietnamese heritage, their Vietnamese American experiences, and dominant American culture.

Not only did a fragmented ethnic heritage foster the desire to come together, but VAC students’ racial identities as Vietnamese Americans, part of the “yellow” race, also contributed to demands for solidarity and activism. For VAC students, racial identifications were specific to U.S. socio-political histories, where students identified with national and not transnational racial struggles. Like the character Bobby To in “Goodbye, Saigon, Finally,” many children of first generation Vietnamese identify as much with racial struggles in the U.S.—for instance, with the Los Angeles race riots resulting from the acquittal of four police officers who beat Rodney King—as with their parents’ allegiances to Vietnam. As racial minorities, Vietnamese American narratives are interwoven into the history of racial injustices in the U.S., specifically the “yellow peril” that depicts Asian Americans alternatively as a threat or as a model minority.

Negative representations of our heritage in both educational curricula and popular media have led to a disjuncture of self and public perception. Vietnamese American Studies scholar Linda Võ describes the thorny double consciousness that results:

In response to my ethnicity, I often hear some variation of “I served in Vietnam” or “Where’s the best pho restaurant in town?” or “I have this wonderful Vietnamese girl who does my nails.” I know that I am not the only one to hear these comments or questions, although I have had to learn not to take offense, especially when they come from strangers trying to initiate polite conversation. In my gracious moments, I think at least
Americans are not just associating us only with that war in which we were perceived as helpless peasants, barbaric warriors, or cheap prostitutes. But nowadays our ubiquitous soup joints have influenced culinary taste, and our interactions are amicable, even if it is only while we are servicing their beauty needs. Currently, with the U.S. and British invasion of Iraq, I hear the term “Vietnam War” in the media constantly; however, the reference is rarely about the Vietnamese or Vietnamese Americans. I am troubled by the parameters of these perceptions about us. (ix)

Attending a university with a majority Asian American population, VAC students grew more in control of their double consciousness. A majority minority campus, UC Irvine’s undergraduate population in Fall 2001 was 2% African American/Black, 47% Asian/Pacific Islander, 8% Chicano/Latino, 26% White/Caucasian, and less than 1% American Indian; 14% are not known. Seven percent of the students in Spring 2002 were Vietnamese. One student wrote in the newsletter:

But as I developed friendships with other Vietnamese students, I gradually began to feel more comfortable as a Vietnamese as well as an Asian….The most noticeable change was that my memories of Vietnam and of the journey to the United States were revived. When I had told stories of these memories to my Caucasian friends in high school, these stories were looked upon with curiosity; as if they had come from a strange and distant world. And so each time I spoke of these memories, they became more like someone else’s stories. I was growing distant to my roots.7

The writer concluded that her participation in VAC and other activist student groups enabled her to reject her self-Othering and to come to grips with her racial identity. Like Võ, VAC students were also “troubled by the parameters of these perceptions about us” and soon gathered the impetus for a movement toward solidarity.
A History of VAC’s Activism

The Early Years, 1993-1994

Since their beginnings in 1993, VAC’s movement toward solidarity has revealed complex and even competing ways of working toward solidarity. That solidarity took the form of student activism and coalition building with other student groups is not surprising. Student activists, in their 1993 movement for an Asian American Studies program at UC Irvine, stood on the shoulders of the 1960s student activists who changed the face of U.S. universities by demanding Ethnic Studies programs. William Wei, in his history of the Asian American social movements from the 1960s through the early 1990s, describes the initial push for universities to reflect Asian American students’ heritage. In 1968 and 1969, Asian American college students participated in the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) strikes at San Francisco State College and the University of California, Berkeley. According to Wei, “Their immediate goal was the establishment of autonomous Ethnic Studies programs for the racial minority groups in the TWLF, programs in which the students would control both the faculty and the curriculum. It was an educational goal rooted in cultural nationalism” (15).

The introduction of the movement for Ethnic Studies programs catalyzed the use of coalition building forces, and as a result, such activism did not end in the 1960s but has echoed throughout U.S. universities for decades. Students at UC Irvine in 1993 wanted an education that reflected the cultural memories of the majority Asian American student population, and because so many years had passed since the 1960s social movements, the fight for Asian American studies felt particularly urgent and compelling. At a state university in California, students felt that it was unfair that universities like
Berkeley, UCLA, and San Francisco State had Asian American Studies programs and Vietnamese language courses while UC Irvine, which neighbored Little Saigon, still had not fully developed such curricula.

The 1993 movement for an Asian American Studies program set a precedent for VAC’s movements to come. Since 1990, students had also been petitioning for Vietnamese language courses. The petition garnered a support letter from a City Councilman of Westminster, also the first Vietnamese councilperson in the United States. On May 10, 1993, Councilman Tony Lam wrote this to the Chancellor at UC Irvine: “I understand that the university is planning to establish an Asian-American studies program. As I see it, this program needs to reflect Orange County by having a strong Vietnamese component.” This component, Lam argued, would need to include history, culture, and language courses. As the Chancellor replied, such curricular development would take time, but University Extension, the continuing education arm of the university, would soon begin developing a Vietnamese Studies curriculum. On February 11, 1994, the front page headline of The Orange County Register’s “Metro Section” read “Breaking a Language Barrier” with the subheading, “EDUCATION: O.C. [Orange County] universities add courses in Vietnamese as children of immigrant families try to stay connected with their elders.” Vietnamese language courses were offered by University Extension that summer and by UC Irvine’s main campus in 2000.

In order to discuss and plan such campus-wide activism, VAC students early on developed two forums to exchange ideas and to set plans in motion: meetings and newsletters. VAC developed a Cabinet which was initially made up of a Chair and Vice-Chair but later expanded to include specific Program Directors, a Newsletter Editor, a
Freshman Representative, and a Board of Advisors (including alumni and community members); the librarian for the university Southeast Asian Studies Archive, Anne, served as their staff adviser. Each week, two meetings were held: Cabinet meetings and general member meetings. Both James, one of VAC’s co-founders, and Bryan, the 2001-2002 VAC Chair, described the Cabinet as having a facilitating role. In practice, officers and general members alike jointly raised issues, voiced opinions, and made decisions. This forum has been one of the most consistent features of VAC since it was founded.

In addition to meetings, newsletters also became a forum for students to address issues pertaining to the university, the local Vietnamese community, and Vietnam. The VAC Newsletter seemed like a logical next step for VAC’s two co-founders who had been writing for another student organization’s Asian Pacific American news magazine. With Anne as their adviser, VAC was fortunate to have their newsletter and other literature documented in the Southeast Asian Studies Archive. Reviewing the archival documents closely, I found that year-to-year changes in the topics of newsletter articles corresponded to the changing politicization in VAC that alumni and 2002 students reported. Newsletters therefore documented the history of VAC’s events and students’ concerns.

In the first years, the newsletter often began with an introduction to the organization, the front matter being informative for new and returning students. A narrative of VAC’s beginnings and its “Statement of Purpose,” for instance, grace the front page of the first issue. Reviewing the first two volumes of newsletters, readers find articles addressing a variety of local political issues: the struggle for an Asian American Studies program; a Vietnamese American Student Conference held at UCLA; and an announcement for a conference on AIDS. We also find topics that broaden VAC’s civic
and political identifications: an article condemning the incident of hate crime against Loc Minh Truong in Laguna Beach; a letter to a City Councilperson and Congressperson critiquing their proposal to deport immigrants convicted of gang-related crimes; position pieces on religious freedom in Vietnam and Clinton’s lifting the trade embargo; reflections on gender; film reviews and critiques; and more. These newsletters became a forum for students’ reflections on all three elements of their commitment: university, community, and Vietnam.

As newsletters and VAC’s early activism suggest, the first years of VAC’s history showed expectations for political activism and what became challenges to the university to respond to Vietnamese American students’ needs. Additionally, students also began to build early relationships with community organizations. In 1993, they started to work with a well-established Vietnamese nonprofit organization, tutoring recent Amerasian immigrants from Vietnam. In recounting how he co-founded VAC, James wove the making of their student organization into a larger fabric of Asian American activism on campus:

James: So in the winter of 1993. That’s when we started. And at the same time, it was— I think it was a time where a lot of students were beginning to get involved in a lot of Asian American issues on campus.

From the start, VAC activism was focused on revising UC Irvine’s curricula to reflect Asian American heritage. Students set as their goals changing university praxis and starting up connections with local community leaders and organizations.
The Middle Years, 1994-1997

In the next academic years, 1994 through 1997, VAC students continued on the same political trajectory, and it was not long before they both extended their political activism but also adopted new interests. Alison, an alumna from this period, remarked on VAC’s seeming lack of direction in those years. As both James and the 2001-2002 Chair Bryan commented, the goals seemed more difficult to locate as the years went on. Still, VAC students managed to turn their attention beyond university walls to issues of representation of and treatment of Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans.

In 1995, students critiqued the representations of Vietnamese men and women in Miss Saigon, specifically arguing against Vietnamese women’s continual roles as prostitutes and helpless victims in films, dramas, and other fiction. The protest initiated an explicit critique of historical representations of Vietnamese, more generally Asian, women—a critique echoed in newsletter articles that celebrated International Women’s Day, narrated personal experiences with sexism among Vietnamese Americans, negotiated American and Vietnamese ideals of womanhood, and critiqued popular war films like Heaven and Earth.

In addition to this awareness of ethnic gender representations, students turned their attention to local, national, and transnational sites. During this period, another student humanitarian group committed to refugee detainees was in the process of folding. Alison, a leader in this student group, explained that she and others had given their support to Vietnamese refugees who were being detained in the Whitehead Detention Camp in Hong Kong—petitioning on their behalf and also writing caring letters to them. The refugee camp shut down in the mid-90s after the refugees forced repatriation, and the
student humanitarian group also dismantled. During this period of transition, Alison became involved in VAC. Not surprisingly, her field of vision extended beyond the university. In 1996, Alison and other VAC students boycotted Nike products and protested in front of a nearby Niketown store, making known their unwillingness to tolerate Nike’s abuse of Southeast Asian labor. A local paper reports on VAC and other activists:

Outraged by reports that female workers who make the sports shoes in Vietnam are being exploited, the students are organizing a demonstration at Nike Town at Triangle Square on Saturday afternoon. Protesters are calling for a boycott, and they are organizing a letter-writing campaign, not just to Nike founder Phil Knight (the sixth-richest man in America, according to CBS News), but also to the U.S. Congress. (http://www.saigon.com/~nike/news/Oc1.html)

In terms of local community involvement, students continued to build connections with Vietnamese and Vietnamese American community members. This period saw the birth of the Vietnamese American Mentorship Program (VAMP); Shadow Day, an annual one-day event where college students host high school students in a day in the life of an undergraduate; the annual “Little Saigon Clean-up,” where students and other volunteers clear litter from the streets; and an increased effort to get to know active community members.

As the scope of VAC’s activism widened, the newsletter experienced a different shift, from local civic and national political issues to more personal writing and program announcements. With the two co-founders having graduated, a new cohort of students began contributing articles to the VAC Newsletter. Newsletters continued to feature occasional political articles (e.g., on immigration legislation) and informative program announcements, but writers turned to articles on such topics as reflections on gender and
gender representation, personal narratives about being a Vietnamese American student, and film reviews. The 1995-1996 issues, in particular, reflect the most marked shift as the title changes from issue to issue, each named after a popular Vietnamese dish (e.g., The Chả Giò and Bánh Bột Lộc). These issues, moreover, devoted the most attention to expressivist forms through fiction and poetry, a logo contest, and personal messages.

VAC’s ongoing activism and the newsletter thus indicate a potential shift in or broadening of interests, critiqued by several members and alumni as a lack of direction. The challenge for VAC students, which became more of a challenge in the coming years, was to clarify VAC’s goals: to return to VAC’s original vision of political grassroots activism; to embrace students’ attraction to cultural and social events by merging with another Vietnamese student organization with these interests; or to redefine VAC’s changing or diversifying aims.

Recent Years, 1997-2002

In the years before I first became acquainted with VAC students in 2002, they continued to confront this challenge even as they maintained the activities and events that had been established in previous years. The newsletter production was reduced from once per two months to quarterly and, by 2001, was not produced as emailing became more common. Students often emailed short announcements of upcoming events and forwarded messages about political issues to a list of current members, potentially interested students, and some alumni. Students solidified and began new informal partnerships with other student groups; during Spring Quarter 2002 alone, when high school mentorship funding was threatened, VAC identified their interests with Japanese
American, Asian Pacific American, Latino/Chicano, and African American student groups. In Burke’s terms, A identified their interests with B, C, D, and E.

Furthermore, the continuation of longstanding activities like meetings, the high school mentorship program, Shadow Day, the Little Saigon Clean-up, and the end-of-the-year banquets attest to VAC’s firm place in the university as a student organization, but these programs also indicate that VAC had grown institutionalized, where students’ responsibilities to sustain long-standing programs may have prevented them from initiating new programs. VAC’s difficulties in returning to grassroots activism were in part a bittersweet consequence of having achieved institutional status. With a small number of students (who had full course loads, part-time jobs, extracurricular commitments, and family obligations) orchestrating these events, new initiatives seemed more difficult to come by.

Still, in the last five years, student activism occurred unpredictably although its documentation is limited because the newsletter was not being produced. Later cohorts of students were able to benefit from the curricular initiatives taken in 1993 and thereby learned about histories of Asian American activism. Many students in the spring of 2002 had taken or were then taking courses addressing Asian American history or other issues. Two students that quarter, Duc and Bryan, wrote research essays on Asian American movements—respectively, on women of color in women’s movements and on the growth of Ethnic Studies curricula in universities. Such coursework prepared students to place their activism in a historical context. In terms of the grassroots organizing characteristic of VAC’s early years, according to VAC’s staff advisor Anne, Duc received his fifteen minutes of fame on CNN and MSNBC during a protest in Little Saigon. Duc led fellow
VAC and other Asian American activists in a protest against Senator John McCain for McCain’s unapologetic use of the racial epithet “gook” during his 2002 presidential campaign. In Spring Quarter 2002, Duc led a protest against the university for removing free-speech kiosks, and the Cabinet challenged their undergraduate student government’s curtailment of high school mentorship funding.

Interestingly, in these later more institutionalized years, although VAC sometimes received criticism for its flagging political action, I interpret their movement as changing in nature. Early movements toward solidarity and activism had been predicated on models of U.S. social movements, that is, coalition building for a political purpose that often challenged institutions and individuals in power. Students identified with one another through such political issues, which touched on race/ethnicity, gender, civil rights, and labor. In VAC’s more recent history, however, student activism seemed to emerge more out of individual initiative and sometimes showed more play with rhetorical conventions. This shift to personal writing and individual initiative seems related, at least in part, to several members’ interests in expressivist creative writing and individuals’ rights to voice their political views. Both the individual initiative and rhetorical play, I believe, required a great amount of energy and creativity.

Take, for instance, two threads that show the face of VAC’s community activism change. First, alumni and students began working from within institutions. James argued that we need to make a place for Vietnamese American history and issues in K-12 curricula. After graduating from UC Irvine in 1994, James persisted in activism, first earning a masters degree in public policy from Harvard; then co-founding the Orange County Asian Pacific Islander Community Alliance (OCAPICA), a nonprofit
organization with an operating budget of over a million dollars; and, at the time of our conversation in 2002, working for a foundation as a grantmaker.

Concerned with what youth learn about Vietnamese Americans, James and an OCAPICA project team created a Vietnamese American social science and humanities curriculum, meant to be integrated into mainstream high school coursework. In an article about how this curriculum came about, James and two fellow team members wrote,

The study of Vietnamese Americans, in particular, is limited to the study of the Vietnam War in U.S. history classes. There is a lack of historical awareness about Vietnamese Americans within U.S. society, other than broad media images of the “natives” of the Vietnam War. Familiar cultural stereotypes and gender representations include sadistic Viet Cong soldiers, helpless villagers, and desperate prostitutes. Since 1975, Hollywood films and videos have run the gamut of Vietnam War storylines. After an initial silence in the years immediately following the war, we saw plotlines about the returning soldier and his confrontations with the family, with the nation, and with himself. Later, we saw films about adopted Vietnamese immigrant children learning their ABCs and becoming “model minorities,” and storylines that concluded with reparations for Agent Orange disasters and post-traumatic stress syndrome. Our youth, seeing these one-dimensional images and hearing only bits of their parents’ experiences, need a better understanding of the historical and political contexts of the war, of the emigration of Vietnamese from their homeland, and of the formation of new Vietnamese communities in the United States and elsewhere. (Beevi, Lam, and Matsuda 167)

This absence of Vietnamese American history from youth education became a catalyst for the OCAPICA curriculum, which includes the following sections: a historical overview, timelines, maps and demographics, lesson plans, primary sources, a glossary, a bibliography, other resources, and a list of project committee members. With the press release of the curriculum in April 2002 and its pilot implementation into one local high school district, the curriculum’s authors point to schools as a potential resource for reviving Vietnamese American collective memories. Two VAC students, Duc and Bryan,
interned at OCAPICA, both wanting to reclaim Vietnamese American cultural memories and both perceiving the public school system as one avenue.

Also working to change institutions from within institutions, VAC alumna Alison, after graduating from UC Irvine in 1999, spent her spare time working with the Union of Vietnamese Student Associations. The Vietnamese Student Association (VSA) is a student organization at many universities across the nation. VSA students celebrate culture through performances and organize social events for fellow VSA members. As part of the Union of VSAs, Alison helps to organize annual Tết, or Vietnamese Lunar New Year, community celebrations in Little Saigon, located in Westminster, California.

Second, another set of individually initiated events reveals increasing play with rhetorical conventions, play that heightened involvement from audiences and performed solidarity. In June 2002, two VAC students and a friend performed “Speak American Damn It!” in a student produced performance art show. The performance played with Vietnamese and “American” languages to suggest a performative understanding of “American”; that is, we construct America through our everyday actions. Earlier that year, also in the fine arts corner of campus, VAC student Son posted flyers around campus that stated “I LOVE YOUR ACCENT” and “I WANT A THICKER ACCENT,” making a commentary on the rhetorical and aesthetic effects of accents. Both Mai and Duc’s performance art and Son’s textual art played with what we typically understand to be activism, an argument with premises often taking the form of protests, petitions, or formal speeches. These forms, however, change the nature of movements because they draw from solidarity as identification as well as solidarity as involvement. In other words, they ask the audience to not only “identify” with the artists’ interests but also to
become actively “involved” at the level of interaction, asking questions and offering viewpoints.

When I last spent time with VAC students in the summer of 2002, VAC’s future was unpredictable: full of possibilities but also full of challenges to define and act on a vision that students deemed meaningful. Students had hopes—in some cases, competing hopes—for more members, more political activism, more leadership from Cabinet to make that activism happen, and more leadership from the general membership. In these hopes, there remained a sense that the movements toward solidarity and activism that occurred in the past, as varied as they were, would likely take even more new shapes in the future.8

In Search of the Available Means

“The practice of solidarity,” Chandra Talpade Mohanty tells us, “foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together” (7). This study sketches one community of people, VAC college students, in order to foreground the practice of solidarity. Following students through their archived documents, weekly meetings, and public texts, I wish to demonstrate the hard work that solidarity entails, and even though I write specifically about VAC students, I venture that the desire for and consequent moves toward solidarity are characteristic of any people’s rhetoric, regardless of race or ethnicity. Therefore, as I engage the specific demands for and moves toward solidarity in the Vietnamese American Coalition, I invite readers to consider parallel demands for and moves toward solidarity present in communities that surround us.
The following chapters are based on an ethnographic case study of the Vietnamese American Coalition, which I conducted over the spring and summer of 2002. My initial purpose was to elucidate what this student organization was working toward and how rhetoric facilitated that effort. In learning about VAC and that year’s cohort, I quickly identified solidarity as a persistent theme and, consequently, refined my research question about VAC student rhetoric:

- What do we mean when we say using language achieves solidarity, and what are the rhetorical strategies VAC students used to achieve solidarity?

To explore these primary questions, I also asked secondary questions:

- What were the major forums for speaking and writing?
- What expectations did students have with regard to solidarity, and how did those expectations affect their interactions?
- How did contextual features (e.g., social structures, genre conventions) impact efforts toward solidarity?

Since my first encounter with VAC students in April 2002, both Cabinet officers and general members invited me into their intimate social network and remained open to my questions during the next several months.

In the spring quarter, I was an active participant and observer of weekly general meetings, Cabinet meetings, and social events. I participated in VAC’s mentorship program in which I mentored two high school students, and I also attended a variety of events: post-meeting dinners in Little Saigon; a weekend picnic for mentors and mentees; a student government meeting; a trip to see the movie Y Tú Mamá También; a showing of
the documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*; the OCAPICA curriculum press release; an OCAPICA hate crime discussion; a Culture Night performance; and the VAC end-of-the-year banquet. To complement participant observation, I researched archival documents housed in the University’s Southeast Asian Studies archive and conducted interviews that extended through the summer of 2002. Archival documents included most issues of the *VAC Newsletter*, the VAC constitution, brochures, flyers, correspondence regarding Vietnamese language courses at local colleges, and more. Lastly, I interviewed twelve 2001-2002 students, two alumni, and VAC’s staff adviser (also the head librarian of the archive).

This study consists of six chapters. In this introduction, I have considered how solidarity is fundamental to rhetoric and proposed that the Vietnamese American Coalition students’ rhetoric offers us an inroad to exploring the rhetorical practice of building solidarity. The remaining chapters launch us into students’ speech and writing, moving from VAC-centered community spaces, such as meetings and newsletters, to discourse set in more public settings. While each chapter focuses on a single rhetorical strategy of a solidarity rhetoric, these strategies are not distinct but weave together throughout students’ speech and writing.

Chapter 1, “Invitations to a Community,” recognizes that this project would not have been possible without students’ unwavering invitation to this researcher and others wanting to learn about and join their community. This chapter examines VAC meetings and newsletters, naming invitation as one rhetorical strategy that students used to come together—first at the level of interaction but also, more broadly, at the level of community. I extend Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin’s proposal for an invitational
rhetoric, which relies on openness and cooperation, by taking into account three issues that bear on invitations: entitlement, community boundaries, and agency on those boundaries. The VAC students who invited others to engage in their worlds not only assumed an entitlement to their community, but in the inviting, affirmed and also extended the community.

Chapter 2, “Identifications beyond the VAC Community,” shifts from the constitution of the VAC community to the VAC community’s identifications with those outside of the community. Students’ identifications with different ethnic and racial groups, student organizations, and political contingents were critical to their activism. Such identifications, according to Kenneth Burke, are moreover fundamental to rhetoric. In this chapter, I examine a series of identifications that bear on the students’ relationships with other ethnic/racial minority people, VAC’s position on “limits on marriage” legislation, students’ relationship with university administration, and finally, coalition building among ethnic/racial minority student organizations. These cases reveal rhetorical savvy on the part of students, who base their premises and evidence on university administration’s documents, the undergraduate student government constitution, and other authorized sources. However, these cases also reveal that such knowledge of conventions does not guarantee identification. Rather, effective identification and resulting solidarity require an assumption of trust and an ethics of cooperation by all parties.

Chapter 3, “Rhetorical Memory as Cultural Memory,” extends our discussion of solidarity from a social axis to a historical one. Because, as writers Barbara Tran, Monique Truong, and Luu Truong Khoi note, Vietnamese American memories are “only
sometimes our own,” the use of cultural memory is critical both to creating a shared cultural memory, a source for identification. The valuing of copious memories in classical rhetoric, moreover, enables the kind of pluralism toward which VAC students strived. Through a close analysis of Duc’s account of a protest against Senator John McCain’s utterance of the racial slur “gook,” I extend rhetorical memory’s definition to account for memory’s social function and thereby suggest one more strategy of solidarity rhetoric.

The rhetorical strategies of invitation, identification beyond the community, and cultural memory culminate in the texts analyzed in Chapter 4, “Re-Visionary Public Texts.” In this chapter, I analyze public rhetorics from three different genres and social arenas: a Vietnamese American curriculum, published by OCAPICA and meant to be integrated into high school language arts and social studies curricula; a VAC student-authored Culture Night performance, an annual Vietnamese Student Association celebration of Vietnamese heritage and Vietnamese American experiences; and several works of performance and textual art. Each of these public rhetorics tests the bounds of what is meant by solidarity and activism by experimenting with rhetorical conventions. Together, these public texts do not only revise constructions of Vietnamese American identity and ground solidarity in these new constructions, but also they revise our beliefs about what it means to be American.

Finally, my conclusion addresses this study’s implications for rhetorical theory, practice, and pedagogy. First, my hope is that this study on Vietnamese Americans contributes to what I see as an emerging field, Asian American rhetorical and literacy studies. Research in this field has been long in coming and will make a major
contribution to how Asian Americans locate and relocate ourselves in relation to multiple audiences. Second, with regard to pedagogy, solidarity rhetoric introduces a revised rhetorical motive, calling for students and teachers to attend carefully to how writing calls for active audience involvement and also to how writers identify themselves in relation to audiences and ideas. These implications for pedagogy and rhetorical practice are critical because in writing about a solidarity rhetoric that was, I am also proposing a solidarity rhetoric that could be.
Notes to Introduction

1 The disciplinary convention among rhetoricians is to protect anonymity in community-based research. I have therefore replaced the names of 2002 VAC students with pseudonyms. However, upon student participants’ urging, I decided to name the Vietnamese American Coalition (VAC), its location of the University of California at Irvine, and its ties to the local “Little Saigon” community in Orange County, California, for two reasons. First, when I informed students at a general meeting that I would protect individual and group anonymity, they suggested that I used VAC’s real name. The students participating in this study wanted readers to know that this college student organization existed and that VAC students both valued and worked toward community activism. Second, my sense is that the contextual information in this study makes it impossible for me to hide the institutions and geographic locations. Orange County houses the largest diaspora of Vietnamese in the world, and it is this dense population, culture, and ethnic consciousness that presses VAC to build alliances. During interviews with individuals, I reiterated the possibility of using pseudonyms, but each individual confirmed that I should use VAC’s real name. I also have made my contact information available should any participant change his or her mind prior to my publishing this study. Despite disciplinary convention, I strongly believe in my decision to abide by students’ wishes.

2 Although I use pseudonyms for all student participants, I have used the real names of two individuals, an alumnus and the staff adviser, with their permission. Because these individuals are both public figures trying to publicize their efforts, I wanted to aid their publicizing efforts. James, who co-founded VAC and is the former Associate Director of a nonprofit organization called the Orange County Asian Pacific Islander Community Alliance, was part of a committee that authored the first-ever Vietnamese American curriculum for middle and high school social studies (see Chapter 4). Anne, VAC’s staff advisor, is also the librarian at the Southeast Asian Studies Archive at the University of California at Irvine. She has been the main force behind the archive’s growing collection on the long neglected subject area of Southeast Asian Studies.


6 “First generation” refers to the first generation of immigrants living in a new country. The “second generation” is the first generation born in the new country; this generation includes children of the first generation. The “1.5 generation” refers to individuals born in a new country, who may have received some elementary education in their country of birth but have been socialized primarily in the country where they have resettled.
As I write this in 2004, almost all of the students I interviewed have graduated, most in the process of making decisions about careers and further schooling. Among the handful who keep in contact, one is working for a financial company and writing screenplays on the side, another is applying for law school, and two others are considering teaching careers. James, VAC’s co-founder, and several co-authors are preparing to release the second edition of a Vietnamese American curriculum for middle and high school social studies.
There is [a] current that says to be literate, one must be able to pull away from the demanding solidarity with the social world, to put deliberate space and time between oneself and others…. Rather, literacy learning requires intensifying—not subordinating—reliance on social involvement as a basis of interpretation in reading and writing. It requires heightening understanding of how human beings create reality together.

Deborah Brandt, *Literacy as Involvement* 1, 6

Invitational rhetoric offers an invitation to understanding—to enter another’s world to better understand an issue and the individual who holds a particular perspective on it.


To declare that solidarity is a rhetorical motive is to emphasize that social relationships, whether existing or potential, motivate discourse. My focus on social relationships, however, does not mean that text does not matter. Understanding a spoken or written text requires interpreting speaker-listener and writer-reader relationships. Linguist Deborah Tannen calls this interpretation of and engagement in the social interaction “involvement.” In Tannen’s analyses of conversations, involvement pushes beyond the idea that spoken communication is only about conveying and deciphering
textual meaning, beyond the objectivist question, “What does the text mean?” Rather, speakers and listeners must read a conversation as a social interaction in order to fully engage in that conversation, asking instead, “What is the speaker trying to tell me? What is her purpose?” Conversational fluency requires both interpreting involvement as a feature of speech and achieving involvement with others through speech (Talking Voices). In this sense, involvement is about creating solidarity at the level of a communicative interaction, moving in step with an audience when speaking and with a speaker when responding.

Involvement as solidarity is fundamental to orality as well as literacy. Literacy scholar Deborah Brandt’s research on writing-reading processes indicates that “expert” writing requires “intensifying” awareness of writer-reader relationships—that is, intensifying our “reliance on social involvement” (Literacy as Involvement 6). Practicing involvement, speakers and listeners or writers and readers recognize the social relationships cued by their communicative interaction and thereby engage in a joint production of meaning. Involvement strategies range from repetition, reported dialogue, and constructed imagery in conversation (Tannen) to metacommunicative cues in essays that orient readers to writers and writers to readers (Brandt).

When Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin introduce invitational rhetoric, they join Brandt and Tannen in locating involvement strategies. But not only do they locate invitation. They propose invitation. Whereas involvement asks us to gain a sense of social relationships and a sense of where we stand, invitations ask us to stand in new places. Foss and Griffin’s proposal for an invitational rhetoric, moreover, extends involvement beyond local interactional contexts (of composing processes and
conversations) to the larger context of “another’s world.” To invite and be invited is “to enter another’s world to better understand an issue and the individual who holds a particular perspective on it” (13).

This chapter explores invitations, the first of several solidarity strategies discussed in this dissertation, and the ways that they enabled a community to define and redefine itself. My study of the Vietnamese American Coalition, after all, was made possible by VAC students’ invitational rhetorics: The day after I emailed Bryan, the VAC Chair, to learn more about the student group in spring 2002, he returned my message with a phone call. He invited, Why don’t you come to our first spring meeting? It’s tomorrow night at seven. Do you know how to get there? When I met that year’s cohort at the first Spring Quarter 2002 general meeting, they were warm and welcoming. Unprompted, students volunteered to tell me more about their group and to answer my questions. VAC meetings and newsletters, I soon learned, were sites for coming together both in a textual sense (oral and written) and in a social, political, and cultural sense, and in these sites, students repeatedly invited one another into a Vietnamese American community that was being created again and again.

By examining invitations that were situated in VAC’s meetings and newsletters, I stress the value of invitational rhetoric and also explore several questions that situated invitational practice brings to mind: Who is entitled to invite or be invited? What do invitations say about communities and community boundaries? Toward what ends are invitations issued? Before turning to invitations as VAC students’ situated practice, let us consider Foss and Griffin’s “proposal for an invitational rhetoric.”
Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin’s invitational rhetoric is a breath of fresh air for rhetoricians who advocate cooperative rhetorics that respect difference. In their 1995 “Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric,” Foss and Griffin introduce vast possibilities for making space for and moving toward the positive alternative discourses that minority discourse theorists encourage. Growing out of a feminist respect for audience engagement that traditional rhetoric can sometimes neglect, “[i]nvitational rhetoric offers an invitation to understanding—to enter another’s world to better understand an issue and the individual who holds a particular perspective on it” (13).

Invitation is an alternative to the more traditional Aristotelian goal of persuasion, an alternative that accounts for multiplicity where persuasion has sometimes failed. Aristotelian rhetoric, Foss and Griffin suggest, places too heavy an emphasis on swaying and even transforming the audience’s perspective to the speaker’s perspective. In chorus with other feminist critiques of classical Western rhetoric, these theorists propose that the goal in Aristotelian rhetoric to “demonstrate superior knowledge, skills, and qualifications—in other words, authority” can be presumptuous and often breeds agonistic communication (3). The perception of persuasion as a thorny concept is certainly not new. Kenneth Burke cites the abuse of persuasive rhetoric as the “bluntest quest for advantage” (xiv). Michelle Ballif additionally traces such abuses to the Western rhetorical tradition, which perpetuates the idea of the overglorified speaker and the passive, victimized audience. Because this classical paradigm allows inequities, Foss and Griffin propose, “[T]he introduction of invitational rhetoric into the scope of rhetorical
theory challenges the presumption that has been granted to persuasion as the interactional goal in the rhetorical tradition” (15).

Invitations thus rest on an exchange where the speaker or writer welcomes the audience to enter her world. With an eye toward invitations that reveal the “subtlety, richness, and complexity” of an issue and of a fellow interlocutor, Foss and Griffin delineate two dimensions of invitation: (1) to offer perspectives and (2) to create external conditions that encourage audiences to offer their own perspective in turn. First, the speaker or writer offers her perspectives to encourage the audience to enter her world through, for example, discussions, presentations, essays, nonverbal cues, and resourcements. Most notably, resourcements—which reframe a message from a new (not necessarily opposing) perspective—enable an audience to introduce new connections. Second, to encourage the audience to engage with an offered perspective, the speaker or writer then fosters participation by creating external conditions of safety, value, absolute listening, and freedom.

Several rhetoricians have challenged and thereby enriched Foss and Griffin’s proposal for an invitational rhetoric. The primary critique of rhetorical models of cooperation and invitation originates with rhetoricians who disagree with feminist displeasure with persuasion and change. Foss and Griffin state, “Embedded in efforts to change others is a desire for control or domination, for the act of changing another establishes the power of the change agent over that other” (3). Mark Pollack et al, however, challenge that the sweeping critique of persuasion is essentialist and lacks grounding since the art of persuasive rhetoric does not inherently arise from a “desire for control or domination.” Classical rhetoric, after all, grew out of a desire for political
action and a belief in democracy; moreover, rhetorical acts must be examined within their situational and historical context rather than be critiqued wholesale. Persuasion may not cause a desire for power, yet the context of academic writing does showcase the competitive race for authority and power that Foss and Griffin describe. To be successful, writers of traditional academic essays must compete for the floor and assert authority based on an ethos of superior wisdom. Invitational rhetoric enables us to take measures against some writers and speakers’ “desire for control and domination” but, more importantly, enables us to take measures for cooperative engagement.

Rhetorician Richard Fulkerson also challenges Foss and Griffin’s proposal and, more generally, feminist critiques of persuasion. In “Transcending Our Conception of Argument in Light of Feminist Critiques,” he suggests that invitational rhetoric is ineffectual for sustained social reform: “Viewpoints are shared, exchanged, understood, and respected, but no action is taken. Whatever policies and procedures existed prior to the sharing are likely to continue, even sexist, patriarchal ones; at the most, an individual auditor might hear something he/she liked and choose to alter his/her own behavior” (206). Persuasive rhetoric, despite (or perhaps because of) its “quest for advantage,” potentially empowers the kind of deliberative change that benefits a democracy. To deny the role of power, Fulkerson argues, potentially introduces a paradigm of inaction.

Fulkerson introduces a valuable concern since both classical and feminist rhetoricians value the social action that rhetoric incites. Certainly, there are ineffectual invitations that maintain the status quo, but the same might be said of persuasion. Both invitations and arguments that are internally effective—the former cooperative and engaging in another’s world, the latter logically sound and appealing to audience
concerns—can sometimes result in little to no change. As with persuasion, invitations sometimes do not “work” because the speaker lacks adequate authority to enact change, which I address later in this chapter’s section on issues of entitlement. The question that we need to ask is whether invitational rhetoric is inherently ineffectual, and to this, I say no. The introduction of new paradigms and the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated ideas can sometimes generate transformative perspectives.

Foss and Griffin and other feminist rhetoricians, in fact, encourage the transformative perspectives to which Fulkerson alludes. They hold with both hands the cooperative spirit of communication and the desire for a social change that redresses injustices, and to pose these values against one another presents a false dilemma. Feminist rhetorician Trinh T. Minh-ha’s philosophy of “honoring multiplicity” supports the notion that these two rhetorical perspectives can co-exist, whether complementary or contradictory. Trinh’s strategy of honoring multiplicity is fundamental to feminist rhetorical principles: “With this option, rhetors maintain an openness to multiple meanings and acknowledge—and, in fact, feature—the complexity of perspectives inherent in representing and describing any phenomenon” (Foss, Foss, and Griffin 244-245). An attitude of openness respects alternative perspectives and sets forth a transformative paradigm. In order to honor multiple perspectives, rhetors can emulate Trinh’s strategies for honoring multiplicity: “prevention of closure” and “presentation of multiple views.” Adopting her philosophy, we can prevent closure by addressing invitational and persuasive rhetorics as in process and as sometimes co-existing in the same discourse event, which is often true in VAC discourse.
The philosophy of honoring multiplicity complements the feminist standpoint perspective that Kathleen J. Ryan and Elizabeth J. Natalle put forth in “Fusing Horizons: Standpoint Hermeneutics and Invitational Rhetoric.” These authors respond to Fulkerson’s challenge in a similar vein, offering that change frequently does occur in invitational rhetoric. That is, invitational rhetoric invokes understanding among speaker/writer and audience, and this new understanding yields a change in perspective. Ryan and Natalle continue their analysis of invitational rhetoric by disentangling what they see as an epistemological contradiction in Foss and Griffin’s proposal, specifically examining Foss and Griffin’s two beliefs that undergird the proposal for invitational rhetoric: individuals’ immanent value and self-determination. Ryan and Natalle claim that these principles suggest knowledge is derived only subjectively and that feminists who believe in immanent value and self-determination reject external sources of knowledge. Rather, invitational rhetoric requires a dialectic model of epistemology that breaks down an internal-external or subjective-objective binary: “If the goal of invitational rhetoric is engagement in dialogue through offering and a willingness to yield, yet the participants are communicating based on subjective position, then a fundamental contradiction is set up and the dialogue is compromised” (73).

An epistemology that is consistent with invitational rhetoric must posit the following: knowledge is constructed in the dialogue between subjects, not within or outside of subjects. Ryan and Natalle locate what they see as an appropriate epistemology by joining two lines of thought: hermeneutic fusing horizons and feminist standpoint theory. The authors draw on Gadamer to explain that communication involves historically situated interpretation and re-interpretation. Each subject’s situatedness
offers her a particular perspective, or horizon, and “[u]nderstanding is the fusion of horizons of the I and Thou” (80). Extending this epistemological belief in intersubjectivity, feminist standpoint theory also “explains a range of women’s oppression by exploring the links between (a) the situated knowledge…that results from a communicator’s gendered life experience and position(ality) in social relations… [and] (b) structural power differentials that exist between people as a result of patriarchy and positionality” (81). Standpoint theory thus suggests that an individual’s horizons and the fusion of horizons among people have a great deal to do with their relative subject positions.

Standpoint hermeneutics offers a significant point of departure to further examine invitational rhetoric by bringing us back to the question of social relationships and the subject positions of practitioners of invitational rhetorics. Where do inviters and invited stand, and how do our “horizons” alter the how and why of invitations? Certainly, most rhetoricians would support the positive implications of invitational rhetoric: to elicit audience understanding of and engagement with the speaker’s world; to encourage a cooperative spirit of communication; and to thereby “transform systems of domination and oppression” (16). However, the scholarship on invitational rhetoric that I have reviewed, one, explores theoretical possibilities more than practical standpoints and, two, stems from specific, unanalyzed subject positions: academic discourse communities of feminist and/or classical rhetoricians. Foss and Griffin’s proposal for an invitational rhetoric opens us to possibilities for rhetorical theory, but as we unravel the complexities of invitational rhetoric, we need to explore the many fused horizons, rhetorical situations, and historical contexts before us. We need discussions that go beyond theory into
practice, thereby bringing to the forefront the potential public relevance of multiple invitational rhetorics.

**Invitations to the VAC Community**

This section summarizes invitations that have occurred in the VAC community, providing points of departure for the next sections’ close readings of specific invitations. For students in the Vietnamese American Coalition, the promise of invitational rhetoric lies in its potential to engender solidarity in the immediate interactional context and also the larger sociohistorical context. Sharpening the concept of invitational rhetorics, in theory and practice, is pressing given that invitations bear so heavily on building solidarity in communities divided by ethnic and racial issues.

Consider an invitation from early in my fieldwork. When the second general meeting of the quarter ended, Bryan asked everyone present to his home for a late night dinner. Christine and Katie, two other Cabinet officers, arrived at Bryan’s shared apartment with grocery bags, and I helped them prepare vegetables and rice paper as more students trickled in. Twelve undergraduates, including Bryan’s roommates began heaping food on their plates to prepare the bò nhúng dám—a popular Vietnamese dish of beef prepared fondue-style, wrapped in rice paper with fresh herbs and pickled carrots. “Cứ tự nhiên,” Bryan invited. Or, “Make yourself at home.” I gladly joined and sank into the sofa with three students who offered a running commentary on the “BET (Black Entertainment Television) Music Awards.” Next to the sofa, Peter over soaked some rice paper, and in response to good-natured teasing and corrective instructions, he asked how in the world he would know how to prepare rice paper. Meanwhile, William, who sat at
the foot of the sofa within earshot of Bryan, jokingly challenged, “Bryan thinks he’s anh cao. Look at how he sits above us all and surrounds himself with women.” Shrugging off the label of anh cao (literally, signifying eldest brother but commonly connoting the person in charge), Bryan continued eating and watching the BET Music Awards.

“Cứ tự nhiên”—a literal invitation to the meal, the home, and the discourse community—is emblematic of the larger philosophy of Foss and Griffin’s proposal for an invitational rhetoric. Developing good will by “entering another’s world,” the inviter welcomed, the invited participated, and both shared the open space of meal, home, and community. The principles at work here, Foss and Griffin propose, are openness, understanding, and engagement that emerge from and further energize a spirit of respect and good will. Invitations, moreover, are perhaps often more explicit for those of us who are hyphenated Americans, those of us who reside in more than one community.

Simple as this invitation may appear, “Cứ tự nhiên” unravels a string of complex relationships. From one perspective, Bryan’s uttering the invitation communicates (even achieves) his authority in this social network. From another, the invitation did not only say that I too belonged in this community but doubly conveyed that I stood just inside and just outside the margins of this community. The invitation to make myself at home signals that I was not already “home.” I did not help myself to a plate or sit at the table before being invited and so marked myself as an outsider. Yet Bryan suggested that I should belong through his direct invitation in Vietnamese, a language that we, to some extent shared, neither of us having native fluency of Vietnamese. Finally, we have two invitations that defy categories. William’s joking challenge could well be read as an invitation to Bryan to engage. Peter received both teasing at his lack of shared
knowledge and the good-natured correctives that turned teasing into rapport-building. In an interview, Peter, the only graduate student and the only VAC member raised in France, later told me that having friends in VAC was an educational experience for him; he had learned about all kinds of cultural phenomena from foods to infamous Vietnamese coffee shops.¹

Invitations make visible the invited’s blurred insider-outsider role. Day to day, I am reminded of these border positions, where borders shift and I tug my cultural identities more tightly. Invitations welcome us, but they also tell us—sometimes forcefully—where we stand in our communities. They tell us to stand in new places, many places, or no place at all. For this reason, Tannen’s understanding of involvement as both discursive and emotional is critical. She explains,

> My own sense of involvement is closer, I think, to that of [Wallace] Chafe: an internal, even emotional, connection individuals feel which bends them to other people as well as to places, things, activities, ideas, memories, and words. However, my sense of involvement also encompasses [John] Gumperz’s, as I see it as not a given but an achievement in conversational interaction. (12)

First, invitations as involvement are about making connections (emotional, psychological, spiritual). Second, those connections are a feature of discourse as much as they are achieved by discourse. Because many VAC students often slid between belonging and not belonging to Vietnamese, Vietnamese American, or American communities, such connections and the promise that they can be achieved are essential to students’ sense of social identity.
One VAC student, Duc, described the tenuous nature of membership in “the Vietnamese American community,” tenuous despite the immediate community of only 12 students:

Duc: Just because you’re Vietnamese American, or just because you identify as Vietnamese American, does not mean that you’re a part of the Vietnamese American community, whatever that means.
If you were working class, if you were non-heterosexual, if you were Vietnamese and another ethnicity or ethnicities, if you’re a Vietnamese American and something else, may not mean you are automatically a part of the community.

Duc’s statement speaks to norms that prevail even in communities of ethnic minorities. According to Duc, the Vietnamese American norm is not working class, not homosexual, and not mixed race, and therefore those who diverge from the norm must actively participate in the Vietnamese American community and change prevailing conceptions of normative identity. This insightful description of membership in a Vietnamese American community reveals the tricky balance between a community’s unity and its rich diversity. In other words, to make space for diversity but sustain unity, individuals need to act on their community and its boundaries.

The proposal for an invitational rhetoric is pivotal here because it puts forth a mechanism for acting on community boundaries, to extend or limit solidarity. In their proposal, Foss and Griffin advocate that invitations constitute a “mode of communication for women and other marginal groups to use in their efforts to transform systems of domination and oppression” (16). Because Vietnamese Americans and other ethnic
American minority communities face such pressures as loss, alienation, and separation, the ways that invitations help people connect are especially powerful.

But placing these instances of invitational practice alongside Foss and Griffin’s proposal for invitational rhetoric raises several fundamental questions, which I now address in VAC’s context: What makes invitations seem necessary? What do invitations look like, and where do they occur? Why do invitations matter?

Among VAC students, invitations were a regular occurrence, most visible to me at sites for coming together: meetings and newsletters. Coming together, however, does not always necessitate invitations. There is little need to invite fellow community members when a community is insular and fairly homogeneous. When experiences and activities are widely shared, community members already engage in the same events with one another and do not need to be invited. But VAC’s membership was varied in many ways: by academic majors, years at the university, career ambitions, age during immigration (if immigrated), personalities, social circles, and political leanings. Students’ majors alone, ranging from fine arts to the hard sciences, placed them in different courses, and even those sharing courses or majors held different class ranks and interests. Most telling is one student’s response when I asked him if there was anything he would like to add to my representation of the Vietnamese American community, a sentiment echoed in the majority of my interviews: “Diverse, a diverse portrayal.” The sheer diversity of VAC’s membership, both in terms of the varied overlapping social circles and the varied political and community interests, created a demand for invitations.

Not only did diversity in their small circle call for invitations, but also students’ literal “movement” during the course of the day made coming together a conscious effort.
Off-campus apartments with roommates or often with family spanned from twelve miles south of campus to over forty miles north of campus, and only one student lived in Irvine. In the local region, frequent thirty-minute hops on the freeway were considered a reasonable routine, and students commuted not just to school but to work and social gatherings with friends and family. So, while pairs or small groups of students held close friendships, they had to make a concerted effort to come together in social or community events, making cars and cell phones critical. To respect students’ privacy, I did not audiotape or write about cell phone conversations, but the six cell phone calls in the less than two hours of our first post-meeting dinner attest to the prevalence of cell phone use.

Meetings and newsletters, which circulated widely in the immediate social network, gave students regular forums to invite others or be invited to varying groups, events, and places. During the fieldwork in Spring Quarter 2002, the elected officers who made up the Cabinet met every Monday evening at seven o’clock. These officers, in 2001-2002, included Bryan, the Chair; Thao, the Vice Chair; Christine, the Vietnamese American Mentorship Program, or VAMP, Coordinator; and Katie, the Freshman Representative. At Cabinet meetings, the Cabinet planned community and social events as well as the agenda for the next day’s general meeting. Program planning included conversations regarding VAMP, in which Christine facilitated VAC students’ mentorship of local high school students; procedures for the following year’s election; the end-of-the-year banquet; and other community or social events. On Tuesday evenings, the Cabinet took their agenda to the general meetings, each of which seven to twelve VAC students attended that quarter; students informed me that upwards of thirty had attended meetings in previous years and many more students and alumni still received VAC’s periodic
email announcements. General meetings were held in a room reserved in the student union, where the Cabinet often facilitated educational “workshops” about Vietnamese American issues and “fun” social events that served to build camaraderie.

These were, in turn, supplemented by phone calls, face-to-face conversations, email messages, and the VAC Newsletter. The newsletter was published at least quarterly through 2000, but in the spring of 2002, no one had the time to manage the newsletter or submit written work. Still, newsletters, all current VAC students agreed, were valuable because students believed that they should have an outlet for expression and for sharing political concerns. Through archived newsletters that the staff advisor located for me, I found that students indeed expressed themselves on issues ranging from personal experience to political news in Vietnam or the U.S. Genres included informative and persuasive articles, editorials, short fiction, poetry, film reviews, and “letters” to the students or specific community members. Together, newsletters and meetings offered structured venues for communication in these VAC members’ demanding college student lives.

Most commonly, invitations happened when one or more students organized or learned about a community event, and they invited others to participate in that event. During Spring Quarter 2002, Cabinet members most often issued invitations to students—for instance, to be a mentor in VAMP, to attend a student government meeting for inquiring into maintaining mentorship funding, to run for a Cabinet position, to attend a local nonprofit’s Vietnamese American curriculum’s official press release, and to attend or sell tickets for the end-of-the-year banquet. Additionally, general members, often the politically aware Duc, would invite fellow students to lectures and protests and also invite
them to respond to university or government legislation. The general members who did not initiate were responsible for participating at least in the discussion and sometimes in the proposed event.

The diversity of VAC’s membership was mirrored by the diversity of VAC’s invitational forms. Consider these invitations: direct invitations to participate in an event or in the community (e.g., Bryan began a general meeting icebreaker, “We’ll start with Duc then, okay?”); challenges that use humor to invite a response (e.g., William challenged Bryan, “Bryan thinks he’s anh cao. Look at how he sits above us all and surrounds himself with women.”); personal testimonies that create a safe space for a testimony to be offered in turn (e.g., Duc explained this, “Sometimes, I express how I feel [ethnic identity] is important for myself. And hopefully, they would, you know, think about it, too, because I’m not going to be like, ‘Hey, you should be thinking this.’ I’m a little more sneaky than that.”); encouraging statements that affirm and thereby invite further action (e.g., a letter to the newsletter editor states, “Your organization’s first achievement was the publication of the VAC Newsletter. I encourage you to continue with it, and perhaps expanding [sic] more.”); proposals that invite social action or institutional reform (e.g., Duc invited at a general meeting, “There’ll be a free speech protest tomorrow….It’s like a crazy hectic process, but please be out there to kick this off.”); and textual art which through ambiguity invites interpretation (e.g., a flyer on campus with no identifying markers poses, “I WANT A THICKER ACCENT”).

That invitations ranged from imperatives of “please join us” to implicit challenges to deliberate ambiguity suggests that invitations are not defined so much by the structure of an utterance as the structure of the exchange. Foss and Griffin’s examples of
invitations corroborate that invitations can take many forms, including the academic genres of formal presentations, essays, and small group discussions. In Figure 1.1, on the following page, I summarize a common invitational exchange although not all invitations include all turns. Invitational sequences typically began with an inviter offering information and asking another party to participate in an event and community. If successful, the end of an invitation might mark the beginning of another involving the same or more people, spiraling into more invitations, participation, and ultimately solidarity—solidarity where agents jointly engage in the interaction and strengthen social relationships. Regardless of who initiates the invitation, the inviter, invited, and all other agents are responsible for its success.

As a result, more central to invitations are the what to which one is invited and why and how this is achieved. The what to which an audience is invited often motivates participants to keep the exchange going. For Foss and Griffin, interlocutors invite one another to the interaction and, more generally, to one another’s “world.” For students who may have felt disconnected from their community or who felt that their community was fragmented, the something to which they were invited was perhaps more immediate and, in this sense, more meaningful. Students invited one another to several “worlds”: the VAC, university, and local ethnic communities; the mentorship program; Cabinet positions; community and social events; political activism; and petitions for institutional reform. In the intersubjective spaces of these invitations, they also jointly worked toward several implicit aims: to affirm a group’s identity and social structure; to encourage an individual or subgroup’s membership; to support a fellow VAC student; to dialogue; to educate and learn; to rally for political activism; to propose social or institutional reform;
Inviter offers information.

Inviter asks for participation from invited.

Invited participates.

Invited asks for elaboration.

Inviter gives more information.

Invited invites further participation. *Invitational cycle begins again.*

Invited, inviter, or 3rd party interrupt invitational rhetoric.

Challenge of inappropriateness.

Apology and revision of challenged utterance.

*Invitational cycle begins again.*

Figure 1.1 Invitational Cycle
and to foster ethnic/racial and political diversity. Motivated by these goals, students also used invitations to achieve them.

This summary of VAC students’ invitations suggests that the relationships between inviter and invited and the social context that creates exigency for invitations are critical and as yet unacknowledged in invitational rhetoric. In Foss and Griffin’s treatment of invitational rhetoric as an effort to “enter another’s world,” we know very little about these worlds—both the worlds to which an audience is being invited and the shared world that is achieved in the inviting. For this reason, in the next sections, I work to elucidate these worlds by examining specific invitations. Close analyses reveal that invitations hinge on entitlement to invite and be invited, boundary crossings that mark the community to which others were invited, and the affirmation and consequent achievement of community. I turn first to the issue of entitlement.

**Issues of Entitlement: The Right to Invite**

In her study of urban adolescents’ fight stories, Amy Shuman introduces an important concept to language studies: entitlement. Building on Erving Goffman’s notions of listenership, she writes, “Entitlement is not only a matter of the storyteller’s right to tell but also concerns categories of listeners, especially unratiﬁed and ratiﬁed hearers” (24). If we have thus far learned that the invitational exchange and the intersubjective construction of meaning are more important than the structure of an invitational utterance, then entitlement must be considered. Entitlement raises compelling issues of social relationships, or who has the right to invite or be invited.
Sources of Entitlement: “Liberal Individualism” or Differential Authority

The introduction of entitlement into our inquiry asks us to reconsider the underpinnings of Foss and Griffin’s proposal. Their unquestioning faith in egalitarianism—a feminist or perhaps, more broadly, a liberal American belief—would suggest that we all have an equal right to invite and be invited. While certainly a worthy value for many cultures, egalitarianism, or what Marcia Farr in a 2003 graduate seminar called “liberal individualism,” still has its roots in specific cultures. It is so deeply creased into our ethos that we often find it difficult to comprehend how this unquestioned assumption of egalitarianism could be harmful. What I contend with here is not the value of equality but with the assumption that entitlement is (and perhaps should be) defined in the same way from community to community, culture to culture.

In fact, the assumption of equality and individual rights, what Foss and Griffin describe as self-determination and immanent value, marked one difference in worldviews among Asian American women and the mainstream Women’s Movement of the 1960s. William Wei, in *The Asian American Movement*, suggests that a dogmatic belief in liberal individualism was one reason why the Asian American Women’s Movement grew apart from the more mainstream movement. Many Asian American women apparently felt that the mainstream movement was irrelevant to them:

While the Asian American women’s movement certainly had roots in the women’s liberation movement, they are shallow ones. As a predominantly European American phenomenon grappling with the ‘feminine mystique,’ that is, the belief that a woman’s role should be that of a housewife-mother, and advocating employment outside the house as a solution to it, the women’s liberation movement initially seemed irrelevant to Asian American women whose self-image and self-esteem came from attachment to family….The tendency of European American feminists ‘to polarize the sexes, encourage narcissism and deprecate individual
obligations to others’ alienated Asian American women who identified closely with their ethnic community. (73)

Wei’s description of the parallel but distinct women’s movements implies that liberal individualism, which underpinned the fight for women to work outside the home, was a necessity for mainstream women. However, rather than focus on this economics-based liberal individualism, many Asian American women found that their “self-image and self-esteem came from attachment to family” and ethnic community, not only from themselves. Liberal individualism sometimes undermined the sense of responsibility that these women felt toward their families and communities. They wanted both familial connections and the empowerment that sometimes grows out of individualism.

Among Vietnamese Americans, assumptions of entitlement are based on the tension between community discourse conventions that value equality and those that value differential power. VAC students tread a precarious position between at least two different power structures: one based on the perceived U.S. value of unconditional equality (immanent value, self-determination) and one based on a conservatively traditional Vietnamese value of generational or U.S. institutional hierarchy. On the one hand, alumni, current Cabinet officers, and general members were adamant about their equality—regardless of years of experience or position in VAC. Several members pointed to the Cabinet titles of “Chair” and “Vice Chair” as examples of their effort to equalize relationships as much as possible. “President” rather than “Chair,” they asserted, would have indicated a stronger hierarchy; the function of a Chair is to be what VAC Chair Bryan called a “moderator” or “facilitator.” Students, furthermore, widely
attested to and expressed pride in each individual’s right to initiate discussions and express opinions; Bryan, in fact, cited his favorite motto of “carpe diem.”

On the other hand, those VAC students who grew up with Vietnamese spoken in their homes and communities perhaps have been influenced by the generation-based hierarchy governing the Vietnamese language. Nguyễn Đình Hòa, in his 1956 dissertation on respect and the Vietnamese language, explores *Verbal and Non-Verbal Patterns of Respect-Behavior in Vietnamese Society*. Vietnamese pronouns, for instance, indicate the speaker’s age-based and sometimes profession-based relationship to the listener, calling attention to hierarchical relationships based on generational and professional positionality. Although Hòa’s study dates back almost fifty years, the same pronouns are still typically used in Vietnamese spoken in the U.S. and in Vietnam.

VAC students’ invitations challenge easy understandings of equality and hierarchy, self-empowerment and familial- and community-based responsibility. At times drawing from liberal individualism and at times drawing from familial- and community-based hierarchies, these students reveal that equality and power differentials were almost always interwoven into invitational rhetoric. The difference between egalitarian and hierarchical structures is that entitlement stems either inherently from the self (every individual is entitled) or from the relative hierarchical position of the addressee (social status determines relative entitlement). To be rhetorically effective, students needed to read the governing discourse conventions regarding entitlement. If the inviter and invited did not have a shared understanding of their relative entitlement to invitations, then the act of invitation could flail or, worse yet, offend.
Power and Empowerment at a VAC General Meeting

The slippery position between varying power structures and the ways that contexts affect entitlement are most clearly highlighted in those discourse events involving more than one generation or differential power depending on leadership or general membership. VAC’s general meetings as discourse events illustrate these concepts of entitlement and power structures. With the general membership meeting every Tuesday evening, Cabinet members decided on general meeting agendas on Monday evenings. At one general meeting, the Cabinet introduced the mentorship program to interested mentees, who were local Vietnamese American high school students.

Early in Spring Quarter, VAC began a mentorship program for local high school students. In past years, the mentorship program lasted a full year, but the VAC cabinet decided to run the program only during Spring Quarter that year in order to refine it for the following years. As is the case in this meeting, the sequence of general meetings, specifically its beginnings and endings, would typically indicate differential power marked by the Chair’s leadership and entitlement to invite. Even if members had been chatting for fifteen minutes, the meeting usually did not officially start until Bryan indicated its start, and it often ended with his closing comments. The mentorship program meeting began, as planned by the Cabinet, with an icebreaker activity. This icebreaker served as a kind of invitation that meant to have mentors and mentees get to know each other.
Bryan: The meeting as always, ‘ll start with an icebreaker. Katie, you’re gonna lead the icebreaker….

Katie: Oh, okay, we’re doing two truths,

Christine: And a lie.

Katie: And a lie. So basically, say two good things, two real things about yourself, and one bad tr-, a lie. And then people have to decide like find out if it’s a lie or not, which one.

Bryan: Introduce yourself first.

Katie: All right, I’m Katie, one of the Mentorship Program coordinators. So yeah. ((to Bryan)) You start.

Christine: ((to Bryan)) You start.

Bryan: Fine. My name is Bryan.

While Katie, the Freshman Representative, was in charge of facilitating the icebreaker, Bryan, VAC’s Chair, initiated the invitation, and he directed Katie to introduce herself. His authority to direct the meeting perhaps came from his position as an older student who was also the Chair, the highest position in the VAC Cabinet. Katie, on the other hand, was a first-year student and only a Freshman Representative.

Interestingly, several times during the quarter, Bryan expressed to me and other VAC students that he did not want relatively more entitlement and, in fact, preferred no differential power. He wanted others, whether officers or general members, to take charge of VAC and its events. He had been involved in VAC for the past six years (first as a mentee and later as a college student) and occupied leadership positions for the past
three years, and he hoped others would assume leadership and entitlement to invite others both for the sake of the organization and for the sake of his own studies and well-being. Even though he felt tired from taking leadership roles for several years, he felt that if no one took these roles, VAC as a whole might suffer. His sense of responsibility to VAC and the Vietnamese American community outweighed his desire to focus more on himself, his studies, and his personal life. Despite his expressed interests in sharing or relinquishing entitlement, others sometimes re-ascribed him this greater relative entitlement out of habit. Here, Katie and Christine diverted the activity back to Bryan, asking him to start the icebreaker.

Bryan’s entitlement stemmed from his position as Chair, his knowledge of the mentorship program’s history, and, finally, his experience as both a mentor and a mentee. After two initial icebreakers, Bryan gave an overview of the mentorship program and the purpose of this meeting:

Bryan: So today’s kinda an info session for both sides, letting you guys know what’s going on and what’s some of the expectations that you as a mentor or mentee might have, and we’re going to go over some of those rules and regulations and stuff like that today. So, what we’re going to do, I’m going to talk about some of the background of this program before. We need to know what it’s all about, how it all got started. VAMP has been around for a while now. I don’t know how many years, but I was a mentee about six years, at least six years. I’m thinking it’s seven years old now.

In this overview, Bryan’s entitlement arises from a social hierarchy based on his knowledge and experience relative to the other VAC students and the high school
students. The “info session” suggests that knowledge of the program’s history offers entitlement to invite others, knowledge and entitlement that he gained during his past role as mentee. Six years after he received this knowledge, he passed on both the knowledge and entitlement to other mentors and mentees.

In addition to social context, Bryan’s entitlement also stems from the historical context of hierarchical traditions in university organizations as well as traditional Vietnamese culture, which typically values respect for and sometimes deference toward older generations and educated professionals. Bryan’s inviting the younger mentees into positions of leadership, “This is a VAC-sponsored event, but again, you guys make the program,” relies on culturally conservative power structures. In order to create equality and to empower someone else, a rhetor and his audience have to assume that he has power to offer.

This analysis of differential power in the general meetings, between leaders and members and between mentors and mentees, might suggest a reliance on firm hierarchical structures where entitlement derives from position within the hierarchy. However, these students also clearly believed that each individual had access to entitlement and had the right to empowerment à la liberal individualism. The talk during this meeting implies that every individual—whether older or younger, whether leader or general member—has access to the knowledge necessary to gain entitlement. Bryan carries the entitlement that comes from his relative position in VAC and his years of experience, but he also passes this on to the mentors and mentees.

Bryan: But the whole program’s about helping students out—both mentors and mentees. The program benefits both sides.
It’s not just the mentors, oh, telling the kids what to do, where to go, how things should be.
((lines omitted))
And again, this is our program, not anyone else’s.
This is a VAC-sponsored event, but again, you guys make the program.

He personifies the ways in which a mentee can become empowered and be the person who later offers entitlement.

This open access to entitlement is further illustrated in his discussion of the mentorship program’s purpose:

Bryan: You guys are going to get a chance to work with a college student mentor. You guys work together.
There are three components to this program: leadership development, career exploration, and college life experience.

The stress on leadership and taking charge illustrate the liberal individualism that VAC believed the younger generation of mentees should adopt. The Cabinet and the mentors supported Bryan’s statement that VAC wanted the mentees to take charge by asking mentees to propose possible mentorship program activities and events. For forty-five minutes, groups mixed with mentors and mentees jointly brainstorming ideas.

The valuing of equal entitlement and liberal individualism is consistent with the education that VAC students regularly encountered in their social science and humanities coursework as well as their extra-curricular activities. They have certainly grown up in an American culture—more specifically, a liberal university culture—that values liberal individualism and rhetorics of self-empowerment: *Carpe diem!* During the Spring
Quarter, college essay topics ranged from homosexual marriages to the Asian American Movement to the role of women in various ethnic social movements. The students’ belief in resistance and social action, their awareness of issues of race and empowerment, their comments against oppressive institutional authority all point to their discourse community’s identification with liberal individualism.

Intergenerational Tensions

My point here is not to evaluate either social structure where individuals respect differential power or where all have equal entitlement, but rather to appreciate the pull of each structure and their dynamic tug on discourse conventions. At the same time, this same tug can also cause some difficulties because not all are abiding by the same strict discourse conventions. The paradox of drawing from two seemingly contrasting social structures stems from the uneven acculturation of Vietnamese American students into Vietnamese and American traditions, and this, in turn, results in intergenerational ruptures.

In a study sponsored by the Southeast Asian Resource Center (SEARAC), Khatharya Um states

Parents who grew up in Southeast Asia have different values, perspectives, and expectations from their children who grew up, or were born, in the U.S. In Southeast Asia, obedience, filial piety, and deference to the larger collective of family and clan are moral virtues taught in school and reinforced in the home and community. (17)

For those conditioned in a liberal individualist ideology, where each person holds as much authority as the next, this power differential may seem unjust or difficult to understand. Younger generations must always pay deference to the older generations and
to the collective family. When interviewing a Midwestern Vietnamese man in 2001 about the local Vietnamese community, I was surprised by what seemed like paradoxical responses. The interviewee expressed a desire for local Vietnamese American college students to be more active in the larger Vietnamese community, yet he also criticized them for practicing culture in the “wrong” way. His simultaneous pulling of the young college students into the ethnic community and pushing them out can be explained by the hierarchical social structure. His invitation to the younger generation indicated his efforts toward solidarity. Moreover, critiquing the students was also a move toward solidarity because, in his critique, he exercised his authority to critique and thereby maintained a social structure to which they could be invited. Differential power caused the younger generation to rely on the older generation’s authority and the older generation to rely on the younger’s acknowledgement of the older’s authority. Mutual reliance facilitates one kind of solidarity.

Because of intergenerational ruptures and paradoxical social structures, many Southeast Asian parents lack the U.S. cultural knowledge needed to support and advocate for their children:

As [the 1990] census data indicate, an overwhelming number of first-generation refugee parents have little or no formal education, even in their native language. Others are challenged by their limited English proficiency (LEP), and by their limited understanding of the educational system in the U.S. As a result, many Southeast Asian parents can neither relate to the problems that their children face in school nor effectively advocate for them. (Um 2)

Parents’ lack of cultural knowledge about U.S. education and community resources may cause parents’ relative power to diminish, and Um suggests that this can sometimes result in dysfunction at home because parents feel inadequate to support their children.
Children, too, might feel that there is a lack of communication and support between generations. Based on a summit of Southeast Asian college students at the University of California Berkeley, Um found that many students cite intergenerational gaps as the major obstacle to ethnic group solidarity, reporting, “Summit participants pointed to the intergenerational gap as an added challenge to the cohesiveness of the Southeast Asian family institution, which has already been gravely undermined by war and displacement” (16). Christine, one of four members of VAC’s cabinet, commented on this challenge when describing her conversations with her parents about her participation in VAC:

Christine: It just seems that a lot of the things that we do, for example, the Little Saigon Clean-Up or Shadow Day or whatever, I tell my parents about it. But they just see it as an excuse to get out, to go out, when it’s not, you know. There’s a purpose to it, and they just don’t see it. And a lot of parents, like my mom, “Why do you always go to VAC meetings? What do you guys do? Why do you have to go every week?” And I tell her, and she’s like, “So?” And this is like— They don’t really understand. And I don’t know, that’s just how I feel. I can’t talk to my parents about anything, and I just want to make a bridge to them. “Look at me. Hello. I’m here talking to you.” And it seems like a lot of the grown-ups, they feel like they can never be wrong, they’re always right. Even when they’re wrong, they’re right just because we’re young or whatever. That’s just their traditional views, And it makes me kind of upset sometimes.
While Christine perceived her parents as believing they always have had the authority because they are older, Christine wanted to break down power hierarchies. In an informal conversation, Christine told me that she wanted to talk to her mother as she talked to her friends.

Discourse communities govern how members invite or accept invitations, who has the right to invite, and how invitations turn back around to affect the community. At the same time, conventions that govern who holds entitlement to invite are not fractured because of the displacement of Vietnamese Americans so much as they are elastic. The paradoxical symbiosis between differential power and egalitarian systems, where rhetors assume entitlement in order for others to be equally entitled, requires both younger and older Vietnamese American generations to find their footing. For VAC, despite miscommunications and other challenges that elasticity causes, both younger and older generations appeared to work consistently toward solidarity. The paradox described here is not unique to VAC’s community. Even in liberatory pedagogical models like Paulo Freire’s consciousness-raising, the teacher who invites the student to empowerment assumes the power to give and assumes the entitlement to invite. Deborah Tannen describes, “Power [over others] and solidarity are paradoxically related to each other; they are both mutually exclusive and mutually entailed” (102). In other words, we all assert power over others as we stumble toward solidarity, even a solidarity that advocates equally empowered selves.
**Challenges to Invitations**

When conventions of entitlement are flexible, invitations can be challenged. Such challenges do not necessarily indicate the inviter or invited was “wrong” and had infringed on fixed conventions. Rather, they highlight that conventions are flexible and what is considered acceptable is context-specific and is subject to multiple interpretations. In the VAC community, students typically challenged an invitation either because the invited disagreed with the inviter’s assumption of entitlement or because there was not a shared appreciation of the “what” to which the audience was invited.

**Challenges to Foster Mutual Engagement at Meetings**

Invitations that shifted between asserting inviter entitlement and equalizing inviter-invited entitlement were sometimes tricky. At times, despite his efforts to share entitlement, Bryan’s greater relative entitlement as the Chair and as a more experienced VAC student worked against his efforts as the earlier example indicated. Throughout the study, Bryan reiterated his hopes that others would assume entitlement and responsibility. During the April 29th Cabinet meeting, he seemed especially adamant about inviting the other Cabinet members to assume leadership:

Bryan: If you guys see stuff that you want or that’s not being done, do it.
Don’t, you don’t need my permission.
You never have, so don’t worry about it.
((lines omitted))
Christine, I need help with the Mentorship Program, organizing events for us.
I’ll take care of the mentees,
you take care of the activities.

Christine: Okay.
At this meeting, three Cabinet officers were planning the next general meeting, which would fall on April 30th, the day memorializing the fall of Saigon and the beginning of a mass exodus out of Vietnam. Having decided to hold a candlelight vigil at the post-meeting social event, or the “after-event,” Bryan, Christine, and Katie brainstormed what they should do during the actual meeting, which would include mentors and mentees. Christine accepted Bryan’s invitation, suggesting an activity for the mentors and mentees.

Christine: So what are we doing tomorrow? Let’s have a scavenger hunt, so we can get to know them. Split everyone up into teams. It’ll be simple. Just have ‘em run around campus. ((lines omitted)) We’re gonna have it in Aldrich’s Park, the candlelight vigil? Yeah, we’ll have a, we’ll have a scavenger hunt, and the last clue’ll tell everyone to go to Aldrich’s Park. And then we’ll have everybody there.

Christine accepted Bryan’s invitation and engaged, yet her suggestion was never discussed. In fact, Bryan decided that they should hold a workshop-style meeting rather than a “fun” meeting. In a sense, her entitlement never reached fruition, perhaps explaining her not assuming authority on the following day. Even though Christine volunteered to get candles at the Monday Cabinet meeting and I asked her about this before the Tuesday general meeting, she deferred to Bryan, stating that since he had not called her to tell her to buy them, she did not need to buy them. She told me that he typically would call her if he wanted her to do something for VAC. At times like this, flexible entitlement sent mixed messages about who should and could do what, and, as a result, the fluid give and take of invitations was interrupted.
Other times, when the invited responded to the invitation and assumed entitlement, they sometimes used that entitlement to challenge the inviter’s entitlement. In the mentorship meeting described earlier, the initial icebreaker game was cut short. In this icebreaker, each person was supposed to state two truths and one lie about themselves, and everyone else was to guess which statement was the lie. The icebreaker served as a getting-to-know-you activity. However, Bryan was the only one to take his turn because he and the other two Cabinet members present decided to cut the game short for the sake of time. They wanted enough time for mentors and mentees to brainstorm activities, so they moved to the shorter second icebreaker. Two VAC students objected.

Bryan: Uh, this is taking awhile, our time is kind of limited. We want to go on to our next thing, so we’re going to go with our first initial [icebreaker.

Duc: (teasing tone) [Wait, wait. That’s so, how come you got to talk about yourself.

((Mentees and other mentors giggle and join the protest.))

Bryan: We’ll do that at our after-event.

Johnny: Icebreaker? You can’t do an icebreaker at an after-event.

Bryan: Fine, fine. We’ll let Duc and Johnny go. There, happy?

Duc: (playful sarcastic tone) I want to hear about other people, too. I don’t want to be selfish like you.

Johnny and Duc called attention to Bryan’s unintentional spotlight on himself. As the inviter, Bryan should have encouraged participation from the invited but did not. The challenge equalized authority and heightened the invited’s engagement. The fact that the
most vocal challengers were two senior students, both formerly active in the VAC Cabinet, suggests that challenges may be more easily voiced if the power differentials are not too great.

Challenges, while sometimes placing the challenged on the spot, were useful in keeping fellow students accountable to the principles at the core of invitational rhetorics, openness and mutual engagement. In response to Johnny and Duc’s challenge, Bryan asked Duc to begin a second, shorter icebreaker, passing on the role of inviter to Duc. This icebreaker was a memory game in which each person stated their name and an animal whose spelling began with the same first letter as their name, e.g., Haivan hare. Going around the circle of attendees, each person would have to state their own name and animal (in English or Vietnamese) as well as all those preceding him or her. Duc began the game and humorously engaged the mentors and mentees. At intervals, he invited mentees to volunteer their grade-level and high school affiliation. But as the fun progressed, Duc teased one VAC student who stated one animal name with the wrong Vietnamese pronunciation. He repeated the mispronunciation:

Duc: \textit{Bwo:}

Mai: It’s people like you that discourage other people from trying to speak Vietnamese.

Duc: Yeah, I apologize.

Mai, a good friend of Duc’s, challenged Duc for halting the invitational cycle, and he good naturedly admitted impropriety and continued the invitational sequence.
The Challenge of Conflicting Values

The challenges to invitations discussed thus far held students accountable to one another and promoted openness and an invitational stance. Moreover, these challenges, edified the community because they were based on a shared understanding of how students should empower one another. By contrast, invitations sometimes were challenging because speakers and audiences did not have a shared understanding and appreciation of the world to which they were inviting one another.

Emotions ran high at one VAC general meeting where students voted for the elected Cabinet. Elected candidates for office gave a brief three-minute speech about themselves and why they would like to serve a particular position on Cabinet. Immediately before the meeting, Duc expressed his concern that the university’s student government announced that it would cancel student clubs’ high school mentorship programs, a decision that would primarily affect ethnic minority student clubs. So, when the floor opened and students asked Cabinet candidates about their political platform, the rhetorical situation became emotional. Duc’s questions invited the candidates to take a firm politically activist stance, specifically questioning whether they as potential VAC leaders would form alliances with other political organizations like the Chicano/Chicana or the ethnic Queer organizations. However, none of the candidates stated a firm political position. Rather, they claimed neutrality; as leaders, they said, they would defer to the general membership’s majority opinion on any issue that might arise. Unhappy with these responses, both Duc and William invited the candidates to re-dedicate themselves to VAC’s original political mission. However, when the candidates refused this invitation to politicize, Duc left the meeting abruptly. Because the inviters and invited
did not have a mutual understanding of the Cabinet’s function and goals, they could not come together.

Invitations were not only facilitated by a shared vision, but also by a shared understanding of how to respond to invitations. If we examine the climactic exchange between Duc and a McCain supporter at the McCain protest, which I discuss at more length in Chapter 3, we see an instance of invitation. Duc and other protesters invited community members to challenge Senator John McCain, a former prisoner-of-war, for calling his North Vietnamese captors gooks. Duc’s perspective was challenged by the invited, a community member who tried to tackle Duc:

Duc: Some guy got arrested for, he was running, running at me to knock me over, whatever. He didn’t get me, but a cop arrested him. And then we started chanting, “Do not arrest him!”

However, what Duc considered inappropriate was not the man trying to tackle him so much as the police halting the invitation. When asked why he chanted, “Do not arrest him!,” Duc replied that his invitation to the man was suppressed by the police.

Duc: My reason was, he just didn’t understand. He was my same age, you know. And we could easily talk to him, and he could easily understand us and easily identify why we shouldn’t allow McCain to use this or to be unapologetic about using it.

The police infringed on an invitational cycle, according to Duc’s views, and did not allow for mutual understanding to occur.
Another challenging response to an invitation is to not engage at all. A political science major and VAC Cabinet officer described her friends’ apathy and the seeming impossibility of mutual understanding and mutual engagement when the invited simply does not care.

Christine: Sometimes I attempt to talk about it ((ethnic identity and community issues)) with my friends, and they’ll just be like, “What’re you talking about?” Or like, they’re not into that. A lot of Vietnamese people I know, they’re not. All they care about is just going to school, getting good grades, and just being successful. They don’t really care about what’s going on in the community or anything. So if you talk about that kind of stuff with them, it’d just be like, “Why? What for? What do you mean? Who cares?”

Yeah, they just refuse to form an opinion about anything that pertains to politics or anything in general. Like if you ask people, a lot of my friends, if you ask them, “Did you vote?” “What FOR?” “What do you mean, ‘What for?’ Why not?” You know, so that’s just how they are. It’s not just with the Vietnamese community, but I think it’s with the whole country, government, everything as a whole. They just don’t like to take a stance. Form an opinion on anything.

The apathy communicated by Christine’s friends broke the invitational cycle when they did not engage in discussions about voting, community events, and politics.
Interestingly, while all of the invitations here involved conflict over what was considered appropriate invitational practice, only some could be resolved with more appropriate invitational practice. Some contestable invitations (e.g., confusion about who should participate when, challenges to assuming too much entitlement, challenges to stifling engagement) could be resolved and even enriched by returning to invitational conventions. That is, the parties involved needed to enact the principles of invitational rhetoric: openness, understanding, and engagement. They needed to continue inviting, become self-aware of perceived inappropriate behavior, and keep one another accountable. However, reverting back to invitational conventions was only possible when the inviter, invited, and overhearer had a shared understanding of invitational conventions and a shared desire. While conventions were flexible, that flexibility could only go so far. When members of VAC were completely at odds about VAC’s mission—as political or neutral—their understandings of their community differed too greatly for there to be mutual engagement. And in the last two examples, although those outside a community could certainly be invited into a community, the invited needed to value that community in order to engage. Thus, the police, who normally play a disciplining role, did not respond to the activists’ attempts to educate, and Christine’s friends, who had little interest in politics, rejected her invitations to them to vote and consider political issues.

These challenges to invitations mark the flexible conventions of invitational rhetoric and, more generally, mark VAC’s community boundaries. In a seminal discussion of ethnic group boundaries, Frederik Barth suggests that ethnic groups cannot be defined according to biological traits or self-identification. Rather, a more grounded
way to understand group identity is to look at practices that make the group’s boundaries visible. Claims of inappropriate performances of invitations reveal boundaries, showing how the actors are not “playing the same game.”

   The identification of another persona as a fellow member of an ethnic group implies a sharing of criteria for evaluation and judgment. It thus entails the assumption that the two are fundamentally “playing the same game,” and this means that there is between them a potential diversification and expansion of their social relationship to cover eventually all different sectors or domains of activity. (15)

An invitation or an acceptance of an invitation into the “game” is one instance where the boundary is made visible. When conversational parties find themselves inside or even just outside community boundaries, they could revert back to invitational conventions to resolve misunderstandings. Invitations presume that the inviter and invited share interest in the same invitational goal, rhetorical conventions, and/or community allegiances.

**Achieving Community through “Letters of Encouragement”**

Invitations may assume that there is an “us” to which the addressee can be invited, but invitations also recreate and affirm the “us.” Newsletters and other documentation of VAC’s events and history affirm the existence of VAC and the Vietnamese American community. However, in order for this community identity to thrive, members of the community must have their membership affirmed, and others must be invited to join the community. Invitations affirm the inviter and invited’s entitlement to community membership. In VAC’s first newsletter, a section called “Letters of Encouragement” affirms the work of VAC and invites them to continue their efforts. In two letters, one self-identified alumna and one professional write to current VAC
students to state their approval of VAC’s efforts, illustrating the principles of openness and mutual engagement. Explicit letters that encouraged and affirmed the addressed were not frequent literacy events, but they are important in how they marked beginnings or endings of major events such as the establishment of VAC, a year of VAC events, etc. That is, invitations as affirmation were critical to inviting new participation at the beginning of an event and establishing rapport after the event.

The letters in this section are included here. The first letter follows:

LETTERS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Dear Vietnamese American Coalition members at UCI:

As a Vietnamese alumna from UCI, I am extremely elated and proud that the Vietnamese student community at our campus has finally established an organization that could prove to be meaningful and lasting.

You may already know that the Orange County Vietnamese community is the largest of its kind and predominated by an older generation of Vietnamese. Their goals for the development and direction of our community may or may not be the same as the goals we, the younger generation, envision. Like it or not, the majority of the Vietnamese students are tied to the larger Vietnamese community in some ways. We shop there, we eat there, we go to the doctors, dentists, lawyers, etc…there. We cannot and must not, therefore, cast a blindful eye to the problems, the issues, the controversies that exist in that community.

Many of us, Vietnamese Americans, must sometimes face the dilemma of being pushed and pulled between the Yin and the Yang of two cultures. Examples of this dilemma are plentiful. This gives us more reason to establish an organization with our own goals and directions that fashion around our own needs and concerns. The Vietnamese American Coalition, I believe has the potential of achieving such a purpose. For most of us, the most feasible and the easiest way out is to study through the books and finding good paying jobs and live passive lives. Revolution and change, in our ways of living, in our ways of approaching and solving problems, however, are far more difficult to achieve. We must not elude this task. Let us approach our lives with our own vision of what the future will hold. Let us stand up in the crowd and take the
leading torch. Let us find our identity and solve our problems the way we see fit. Let us have a voice!

Your organization’s first achievement was the publication of the VAC Newsletter. I encourage you to continue with it, and perhaps expanding more. It is a good forum for Vietnamese students to explore issues concerning the Vietnamese community. Again, I congratulate you on a job well done.

[name omitted]
UCI Alumna²

The explicit message of this letter affirms the actions of the VAC founders and current members. A positive message fills the first line with “elated,” “proud,” “meaningful,” and “lasting.” “Lasting,” in particular, supports the assertion that the creation of cultural memory has more value when it lasts, when it is passed on and reshaped. Embedded in this letter is the tangled relationship between solidarity and power. Throughout the letter, the writer maps her position in relation to the older generation and the younger college students to whom she writes. The writer, therefore, draws on traditional generation-based hierarchies in order to both establish her own authority and to build solidarity, or an “us,” among the Vietnamese American students and the older community.

In addition to affirming VAC students, the writer also indirectly affirms the hierarchical social structure and her own authority relative to the students within the structure. Particular features of the letter convey her claim to authority. By stating that she is “proud of the Vietnamese student community” and inviting them into the ethnic community, the writer implies her right to evaluate the students. Several imperative statements, three “we must” and four “let us,” reiterate her claim to authority, which is further supported by her underestimating the readers’ knowledge. In the first line of the second paragraph, she states, “You may already know that the Orange County
Vietnamese community is the largest of its kind and is predominated by an older
generation of Vietnamese.” Since Orange County is a tourist haven that attracts
Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans from the United States and Vietnam and since
many VAC students socialize in this local community on a regular basis, her statement is
not informative to the VAC readership. Rather, it constructs her credibility as
knowledgeable about the ethnic community. The qualification, “you may already know,”
is a concession that places the students at the periphery of the ethnic community. Lastly,
the letter ends with a final assertion of authority. This writer and the writer of the second
letter both include titles under their names, “UCI alumna” and “Systems Science
Specialist.” While the alumna may be identifying with VAC students in her allegiance to
UCI, the title indicates her position carries more weight than the college student
readership.

The writer’s deference to the older generation of Vietnamese also affirms her
authority. In stating that “the majority of the Vietnamese students are tied to the larger
Vietnamese community,” she aligns the older generation, mentioned in the first sentence
of the second paragraph, with the “larger Vietnamese community.” The alternative and
more expected parallel construction would state that the younger generation is tied to the
older generation. The syntax therefore implies that the older generation, in being equated
with the “community,” has more entitlement to the Vietnamese community. The older
generation, after all, is closely associated with the physical location of the community, an
ethnic enclave that is located about twelve miles from the university. The writer’s
statement that “We shop there, we eat there, we go to the doctors, dentists, lawyers”
grants the ethnic enclave—and by extension, the older generation—authority as the Vietnamese and Vietnamese American commercial, political, and cultural center.

For the social hierarchy to be completely affirmed, the authority of the younger generation is understated. Um, in describing intergenerational gaps, implies that parents sometimes feel inadequate in providing necessary support and U.S. cultural knowledge to their children. The 1.5 and second generation children are forced to pick up responsibilities and learn U.S. conventions on their own, acquiring more authority than would be normal. Yet in the letter, the writer understates the authority of this younger generation. Implied in her statement that “the most feasible and easiest way out [of the Vietnamese community] is to study through books and finding good paying jobs and live passive lives” undermines the students’ authority. Whereas the older generation sits at the commercial, political, and cultural center of the ethnic community, the younger student generation could lay claim to the educational institutions. The younger generation also seems more able to move, more adept at navigating multiple communities. The writer’s statement only nods toward this authority, even critiquing its effects by indicating the “passive lives” that result from education. In place of passivity, the writer’s invitation demonstrates how there is room for “revolution” and “change” in an invitational frame.

Even though the invitational letter is framed by the writer’s authority via positionality, the body of the letter indicates a move toward solidarity, an alliance between the generations of the students, the writer, and the older generation. In the third, fourth, and fifth paragraphs, the writer aligns herself with the younger student generation: “[m]any of us”; “[f]or most of us”; “[l]et us.” Distinguishing herself from the younger
VAC generation gives her an opportunity to step back, affirm their actions, and recognize
their creation of this innovative organization, “I congratulate you on a job well done.”
But the end result of the invitation is the construction of a solidarity that she and the
younger generation share.

The second letter printed in the “Letters of Encouragement” adds one more
dimension of affirmation. Not only does this writer affirm the creation of VAC, but she
also affirms their writing.

Dear VAC,

Reading your VAC Newsletter [Volume 1, Issue 1], I am quite impressed
with VAC’s objectives and viewpoints on issues regarding the Vietnamese
community. Your constructive ideas and initiative are commendable. I
also agree with VAC’s view on the plan proposed by Councilman Lam
and Congressman Rohrabacher in dealing with the growing Vietnamese
gang problem in California. Community support and more social services
are needed to combat the problem. I have written to both the Councilman
and the Congressman to voice my opinion. I think your concerns and
active role in helping Vietnamese Americans will have a positive impact
on the community. I am very proud of you all.

[name omitted]
Systems Science Specialist³

The writer alludes to an editorial about a local Councilman and a Congressman’s efforts
to deport Vietnamese convicted of gang-related crimes. The editorial points to the
injustice of creating special punishments for Vietnamese residents that do not apply to
other ethnic groups. In stating that she agrees with “VAC’s view on the plan”—a written
view—the writer affirms VAC’s use of writing for political purposes. She goes further to
state that she also has written to these politicians to “voice my opinion.” Similarly, the
writer of the first letter saw the publication of VAC’s newsletter as “your organization’s
first achievement.” VAC’s writing is therefore seen as an accomplishment on par with its establishment as an organization.

The letter’s affirmation of writing in VAC’s community shows how writing, especially writing that is documented and distributed, is especially important to supporting cultural memory and community identity. Throughout my fieldwork, VAC students and alumni impressed me by their spoken and written affirmation of one another’s good academic, social, or community work. For instance, VAC students patted Bryan on the back when he was nominated into a leadership position in umbrella alliance of Asian and Asian American student clubs. They were supportive of a sister student club’s Culture Night production as well as the parallel younger high school club’s Culture Night. And the end-of-the-year banquet program was filled with notes of thank you to all the friends and fellow VAC students who contributed to the note writers’ development. If a community works toward solidarity, the accomplishments of one lends the entire community more authority, more recognition, and perhaps more motivation to impact more people.

Affirmation acknowledges that good work is not individual but is also supported by the community. My own involvement in the community was affirmed and made possible because of my intention to represent and be a part of this community solidarity. Participants and those I met through the participants were pleased that the community would be affirmed through my dissertation, a form of public and academic documentation. The publishers of the Vietnamese American curriculum asked if I could send them a copy of an essay that I write on their curriculum. Alison, a VAC alumna, affirmed the efforts of Vietnamese Americans in higher education, believing that
leadership that emerges out of higher education can bring good things to the entire community. Invitations that affirm, therefore, work to encourage VAC students for their innovative work and support of one another, but it more importantly can extend the bounds of their community and their activism.

**Beyond the VAC Community**

What this sketch of VAC’s invitations demonstrates is that invitations to an interaction are difficult to differentiate from invitations to wider social communities (e.g., VAC, Vietnamese Americans, Vietnamese, and American communities). Throughout VAC’s history, invitations have offered reparative ways for the VAC community to reappraise and extend the community’s membership and purpose. Invitations, more generally, enable ethnic American minorities and other mixed-blood people to build solidarity and to re-imagine our identities and roles in the U.S.

This chapter’s focus on invitation therefore brings to the forefront issues of community identity and belonging. Examining VAC students’ invitational practices reveals the several dimensions of invitational rhetorics:

- ways invitations *mark* community boundaries and rhetorical conventions
- ways invitations *act on* community boundaries and rhetorical conventions
- ways invitations *open up new possibilities* for social action that often extend beyond community boundaries

First, invitations mark group boundaries and individual’s standings within their groups. They make visible the insider-outsider positions that we hold, the extent to which we are welcomed or excluded, and the boundaries that define our communities. Second,
invitations act on these boundaries and standings, asking a person to stand in new places and asking others to recognize that she stands in many places. These acts often require an entitlement that the audience accepts. Finally, a growing base of invitations eventually lend the community a heightened authority, and with this authority, invitations and their effects on dynamic cultural memories open up new possibilities for social action that were once unavailable.

These functions of invitations—to mark, affirm, and extend a community—are rhetorical strategies that work toward what Tannen and Brandt call involvement. Through invitations, the invited and inviter achieve two dimensions of involvement, which Tannen labels the “emotional experience of insight (understanding the text) and connectedness (to other participants, to the language, to the world)” (Talking 13). Whereas the traditional attention to persuasive rhetoric often focuses on the former, on meaning and on a given issue, invitational rhetoric calls attention to connectedness and belonging to a community. Playing both the researcher and the participant roles in the VAC community, I cannot emphasize enough how important connectedness and a sense of belonging were to my involvement and other individuals’ involvement in the community.

While invitations sometimes extend the community, these invitations only work when the inviter and invited share at least some small element of invitational conventions. Whether this element is a political motive or shared discourse conventions, some kind of shared understanding would need to be at work for involvement to occur. When the addressor is situated too far outside the community of the addressee, enacting one’s own rhetorical conventions exacerbates the problem because conventions are not
shared. Tannen states, “[T]he level on which differences occur, and the depth of misunderstandings, are far more extreme in the case of broadly cross-cultural communication” (11). In these instances, both parties need to find a way to identify with one another through shared rhetorical motives or shared rhetorical conventions. Chapter 2 considers this concept of identification, where identifications did not mean inviting others into the VAC community so much as identifications meant that VAC students and others jointly created new alliances, even new communities, where none had previously existed. Such identifications are important because they keep communities from becoming too insular and self-serving in their efforts toward solidarity.
Notes to Chapter 1

1 Vietnamese coffee shops on the main streets of Little Saigon in Orange County, California, are known for having scantily clad women serving Vietnamese coffee (espresso with condensed milk). Men frequent these coffee shops more than women. The coffee shops have gained notoriety in the past for gang-related shootings.


3 Ibid.
CHAPTER 2

IDENTIFICATION BEYOND THE VAC COMMUNITY

My position [on solidarity] is *not* incompatible with urging that we try to extend our sense of “we” to people whom we have previously thought of as “they.”

Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 92

Identity involves a “change of identity” insofar as any given structure of society calls forth conflicts among our “corporate we’s.”

Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes toward History* 269

The metaphor of movement, I believe, complicates easy understandings of who 2001-2002 VAC students were, how they spoke, and how they wrote. Identities shift, community borders move. In the previous chapter, I worked to convey the ways that invitational rhetoric enabled social movement. Students, drawing from sometimes cultural and sometimes institutional entitlement, invited fellow Vietnamese American students into the VAC community and, in doing so, created and affirmed their community. But solidarity was also expansive, where students made connections beyond their immediate circle, connections that I call “identifications.” The VAC “Statement of Purpose,” after all, declared a threefold commitment to their university, the local community, and Vietnam. In this chapter, I move outward in students’ social network,
following them as they “identified” with other minority people, with political contingents, and with fellow student organizations.

I cast wider in my search for the available means toward solidarity rhetoric because I wish to argue that identifications enabled movement in a different way than invitations, and these “shifting [identifications],” as Judith Butler proposes, “may well be one sign of hope for the possibility of avowing an expansive set of connections” (Bodies 119). In what follows, I place students’ identifications alongside Kenneth Burke’s valuable insights on rhetorical identification and thereby amplify several dimensions of the concept: the assumption that division precedes identification, the tension between autonomy and sociality, and issues of authority. After addressing these dimensions singly, I discuss their dynamism in a tense student government meeting. What I find is that the wide and varied identifications that I locate—between Chicanos/as and Vietnamese Americans; between proponents of homosexual couples’ civil liberties and Vietnamese Americans; between undergraduate students and university administration; between ethnic/racial minority students and fraternity/sorority “Greeks”—compel us to consider why, in terms of rhetorical practice, building social relationships are just as important as, maybe more important than, persuading an audience about an issue.

Identification: From Division to Solidarity

Students were in the company of many others, including fellow Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans, undergraduate and graduate students, ethnic and racial minorities, and advocates of civil liberties and community activism, to name a few groups. Deliberate identifications, I argue, initiated and strengthened many social
relationships that extended beyond their immediate community. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke offers a valuable account of identification, which begins, “A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes they are, or is persuaded to believe so” (20). The nature of identification unfolds as we weave Burke’s thinking about identification with students’ performances of identification.

I want to begin by clarifying an important distinction between invitation and identification. These two rhetorical strategies both have as their aim coming together. However, the primary difference is that invitations are about affirming and broadening one community (even if those outside are invited in) whereas identifications are about forging new alliances, even new communities. If invitations ask the audience to enter another’s world, identifications are the joint creation of a shared world. In Burke’s terms, we might say that invitations occur when A invites B into A’s community whereas identifications occur when A and B identify a shared interest in X or form the new alliance of Y.

Consider how Duc, a VAC student and undergraduate senior, explained his use of personal testimonies first with fellow Vietnamese Americans and next with other people of color. I suggest that Duc’s personal testimonies in the first transcript are an invitation to Vietnamese Americans:

Duc: Sometimes, I express how I feel it ((ethnic identity)) is important for myself. And hopefully, they ((his Vietnamese American audience)) would, you know, think about it, too,
because I’m not going to be like, “Hey, you should be thinking like this.”
I’m a little more sneaky than that.

Haivan: So how do- Why is it important to you?

Duc: Because like, I talk about how Vietnamese Americans, specifically second generations and 1.5-ers, are becoming more and more distant and losing culture. The culture is being diluted.
How important it is to retain because that is who we are.
Because our pasts make who we are.
Our memories make us who we are.
We are nobody without our memories and our ancestors’ memories that root us into the earth…
And how important that is.
Or why I think it’s important is because it gives us a place.
It doesn’t make us, I don’t know, floating.
It gives us a place.

For Duc, personal testimonies are invitations, offering a perspective and creating an open space where fellow Vietnamese Americans could offer their perspectives in turn. Duc’s invitation asks the audience into a community that they already share. Jointly, Duc and his Vietnamese American friends are to “retain” their culture and community. As I argued in Chapter 1, the speaker of an invitation assumes a community to which he invites the audience, and he assumes his insiderness and entitlement to that community. The invited audience then responds to the invitation depending on how much they value and want to participate in that community. Such invitations maintain and reaffirm a shared community: “our pasts,” “our memories,” and “our ancestors’ memories” ground speaker and audience to a single community and its history. “[W]ho we are” is not called into question because the community already is, and, in this account, Duc is an unquestioned part of that “we.”
By contrast, identifications are about multiple “we’s” coming together. In this sense, identifications reach beyond a single community—here, VAC or, more generally, Vietnamese Americans—and assume division between multiple parties. Multiplicity and division result in more tenuous ground where the multiple parties identify and negotiate a shared interest and possibly a newly shared community. How identifications are made relies on purpose, level of mutuality, and relationships of authority. This becomes clearer in Duc’s cross-cultural identifications:

Duc: I talk to, um, other people of color. I have spoken to Chicanas or Chicanos about it ((ethnic identity))—or who may not identify as Chicana or Chicano. And I talk about myself in the same context because, hopefully, they will share something about themselves. Sometimes, you know, they don’t. ((lines omitted)) Hopefully, they’ll think about it. And I also, when I talk to Chicanas or Chicanos, I, I would bring up connections between Vietnamese Americans and Chicano-Chicana communities and how important it is for us to have this connection because I think our experiences are very similar. Heck, our roots are very similar, too, because, politically, in Orange County, we can be one community, and we can mobilize as one community. It’s the language barrier that separates us.

Cross-cultural interactions demand identifications that further broaden community boundaries. Duc’s identification with his Chicano/a friends works from a starting point of cultural difference, and through an identification of shared interests and experiences, they forge a connection that did previously exist. Neither enters the other’s community. Rather, Duc rhetorically constructs the shared immigrant experiences. This construction centers both Vietnamese Americans and Chicanos/as in a shared world and thereby
creates the potential to “mobilize as one community.” Multiplicity and division calls on speaker and audience to create a shared community. The newly created “we” may, in turn, lead to invitations to others to join that “we.” Invitations and identifications thereby enter into a mutually productive relationship.

I discuss Duc’s explanations of identification here and in the next sections because he makes issues of fragmentation and the need for identification visible. We might recall his comment from the previous chapter that membership in the “Vietnamese American community” is not automatic and, in fact, may exclude those who are homosexual or mixed race, for example. To be sure, he is not representative of VAC students’ political views or even their discourse conventions—as I mentioned earlier, students’ perspectives and practices were too wide and varied to generalize—but I think he expresses a common sentiment that students face the task of bridging communities divided by generations and by race and ethnicity.

“Identification is compensatory to division,” Burke tells us. “If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity” (Rhetoric 22). Burke notes how division is central to Aristotle’s oft-cited observation that to praise Athenians among other Athenians is a much different matter than praising Athenians among Lacedaemonians (55). If Burke, writing in 1950, explains that such division has only become more evident with the specialization of scientific and technological professions, his remarks are even more provocative in today’s climate of increased professional compartmentalization, late capitalism, and the general pressure for an American multicultural consciousness. With increasingly diverse audiences, speakers and writers face the challenge of how to identify with this multiplicity.
A final note on invitation and identification: First, invitations and identifications were the primary source of contention in the VAC community. Most would have agreed that the VAC students were inviting, but several challenged that invitations alone kept VAC static and insular (perhaps even self-serving). For activism to occur, VAC needed to identify with others, to build new alliances and mobilize with new partners. Second, I should clarify that Foss and Griffin do not make the distinction that I make here. In their early proposal and in Foss and Foss’ later textbook discussion of invitational rhetoric, these writers’ beliefs in “equality,” “immanent value,” and “self-determination” confer a naïve degree of authority to individual speakers, what others have called “autonomous authority” (Mortensen and Kirsch). Their proposal does not account for issues like entitlement and community boundaries since absolute equality means that anyone can invite or identify. However, invitations and identifications are based on social relationships, not on autonomous authority.

**Autonomy and Sociality**

The tension between autonomy and sociality is not simply a theoretical debate but a tension that is visible in VAC students’ speech and writing. The openness of Duc’s personal testimonies may lead us to believe that identifications are only a nice gesture, but identifications and a consciousness of sociality (as opposed to autonomy) are, in Duc’s estimation (and also Burke’s estimation), a responsibility. When I asked Duc about his participation in VAC, he illustrated such social awareness through an example from 2000:
Duc: I bring up issues.
I remember one,
I remember one instance where during a cabinet meeting,
during a board meeting,
I knew that Senator ((name omitted)),
state senator in California,
had a measure that he was gathering signatures for that was
most likely going to make it on the ballot for the upcoming
election.
So, I wanted the group to take a stand on it to say that we are
against it
because that, that initiative became Proposition 22,
which is the limits-on-marriage initiative.
And I wanted VAC to take a stand on it
because Vietnamese Americans are affected by this.
Everyone’s affected by it,
and the majority of people were very reluctant to take a stand
on it.

Haivan: And why is that?

Duc: At that time,
one person said,
at that time,
((name omitted)) High School in ((name omitted)) City was
dealing with that issue of having a gay-straight alliance
student organization on the ((name omitted)) High School...
And the school board, you know, didn’t want the students to
have their organization.
Eventually, they got it.
And that might affect Shadow Day, which is VAC and UCI’s
largest high school outreach effort.
And VAC was afraid,
or that person voiced his concern,
that they might not get students from that high school if VAC
took a stand on this issue
because that school was already anti-nonheterosexual anything.

Duc, the VAC Newsletter editor at the time, invited fellow Cabinet members to identify
with a civil rights issue that is still being debated today. In 2000, when an initiative that
eventually became California Proposition 22 proposed to limit the right to marry to only
heterosexual couples, he approached VAC students to help rally against the initiative’s
becoming a proposition. His dismay at his peers’ reluctance reflects disapproval of a community that only serves itself, presuming what Burke has labeled “autonomy.”

In Burke’s mind, to believe in one’s individual or community autonomy is to cordon off one’s social identifications, or as David Bartholomae might say, to make a “tidy house” and live in it. Duc’s argument to the Cabinet to take a stand on the limits-on-marriage initiative “because Vietnamese Americans are affected by this” implores them to take off their social blinders and recognize that civil rights issues affect their community. In this sense, identifications unmask a false sense of autonomy and reveal that issues and rhetorical agents are located in a web of social relationships. If we consider the issues and agents that Duc mentions, the Cabinet’s silence would indicate their identifications (whether deliberate or a rhetorical effect) with limits-on-marriage advocates and a school board that is reluctant to grant high school students a gay-straight student organization. Identifications are inevitable, “hardly other than a name for the function of sociality” (Burke, *Attitudes* 267).

Burke, in fact, seems so convinced of the need for identification and consequent social awareness that this theme shows up repeatedly in his prolific work, most prominently in *A Rhetoric of Motives*. In *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, he writes,

> By “identification” I have in mind this sort of thing: one’s material and mental ways of placing oneself as a person in groups and movements;…clothes, uniforms, and their psychological equivalents; one’s ways of seeing one’s reflection in the social mirror. (227)

Then, in *Attitudes toward History*,

> Identity involves a “change of identity” insofar as any given structure of society calls forth conflicts among our “corporate we’s.” (269)
And finally, in *Language as Symbolic Action*, he explains identification and autonomy through illustration:

The concept [of identification] is also relevant because it admonishes us to look for modes of Identification implicit or concealed in doctrines of Autonomy that figure prominently in our theories of technological specialization. Simplest instance: If the shepherd is guarding the sheep so that they may be raised for market, though his role (considered in itself, as guardian of the sheep) concerns only their good, he is implicitly identified with their slaughter. A total stress upon the autonomy of his pastoral specialization here functions *rhetorically* as a mode of expression whereby we are encouraged to overlook the full implications of his office. (302)

Similarly, if the VAC Cabinet were to side with a school board averse to a gay-straight high school student organization because the Cabinet wanted that high school and its students to support a VAC-sponsored college recruitment event, then VAC would be identified with “anti-nonheterosexual” stances—ironically, disidentifying with those high school students who wanted the gay-straight organization. VAC eventually did take a stance against Proposition 22 but not until after it had officially become a proposition.

The struggle that Duc sketches, over how to support civil rights issues and a specific group of local high school students, demonstrates how difficult it can be to negotiate identifications in a plural social context. Wendy B. Sharer’s analysis of the changing names of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom seeks to explain a similar struggle. Following the organization’s renamings from “Woman’s” to “Women’s,” “Party” to “League,” and “Peace” to “Peace and Freedom,” Sharer argues, “Tracing the evolution of an organization’s name and the contests that surround that evolution sheds light on how discursive strategies help create collective identity as a basis for political action” (235). The contests over an organization’s social identifications, too, might make visible the making and remaking of collective identity.
In Duc’s view, VAC had a political obligation to “mobilize” as a community, and he hoped that VAC’s identifications would be deliberate and strategic. Such mobilization would extend VAC’s community membership and the scope of their activism by addressing not just an insular VAC but communities that include and extend beyond VAC. Duc’s argument for identifications follows:

Haivan: So how did you respond or try to persuade them?

Duc: I was like, “What the hell are you talking”—
I was really angry.
I was really angry.
I don’t know if I expressed my anger.
Probably did.
I said, I think I said, “If you’re gonna represent Vietnamese Americans,
you need to include everybody.
There are nonheterosexual people in our community.
Beyond that, this is a civil liberties issue,
this is a human rights issue.
And since VAC is a political organization,
or claims to be a political organization”—
get my little stabs in there, too, you know—
“or claims to be a political organization,
then we should take a stand on this.”

We didn’t make a decision until it was assigned Proposition 22,
it was assigned a number of 22,
and a week before the election.

We could’ve totally had an education effort in our community
because that campaign was very good on using the church,
on influencing the ethnic congregations of churches to vote yes
on it.
to approve that measure, you know,
because ethnic churches are voting blocks. It’s amazing.

If you get one church to do it, one religion to do it, you got that
block.
It’s a whole block.
They’re all gonna vote.
Yeah, it’s amazing.
To support the claim that “we should take a stand on this,” Duc offered two lines of reasoning, each one illustrating solid logic. He began with an invitational stance, reaffirming the presence of homosexual people in the Vietnamese American community:

- Premise 1: VAC represents Vietnamese Americans.
- Premise 2: “There are nonheterosexual people in our community.”
- Conclusion: “We should take a stand on this.”

The first premise begins with VAC’s inclusion of Vietnamese Americans and moves inward to the specific group of homosexual Vietnamese Americans. The invitational stance, however, quickly turns to identifications of social relationships that extend beyond VAC and Vietnamese Americans:

- Premise 1: “This is a civil liberties issue, this is a human rights issue.”
- Premise 2: “VAC is a political organization.”
- Conclusion: “We should take a stand on this.”

In this second line of reasoning, Duc begins with the larger civil liberties issue, identifies VAC as a part of that, and finally ends with his conclusion.

That Duc spent more time tracing social identifications beyond their immediate community stresses that VAC should not see itself as autonomous. For VAC to question his conclusion, they would need to re-examine their group identity, implied by Duc’s “little stab” that VAC “claims to be a political organization” but risks not living up to that claim. The sarcastic comment here reveals a division between what VAC is and should be. His second line of reasoning, moreover, proposes possible identifications by locating
VAC in a body of social identifications. With the phrases “using the church,” “influencing the ethnic congregations,” swaying “voting blocks,” and wanting to “educate our community,” Duc moves outward from the VAC social network and explores possible connections. Extending the VAC community’s “us” is especially important since student organizations such as theirs experience rapid turnover. Without a stable core membership, VAC and other student organizations need to gain facility with invitations and identifications that constitute and reconstitute their community.

Burke’s remark about writer-character-reader relationships, that “[t]here is no ‘spectator’ here; there are only ‘participants,’” also holds true for speaker-audience relationships (Attitudes 189n). The question for a community member is not whether to participate in social contexts but how to participate in those contexts. Autonomy is not an option, but individuals can choose how they participate socially and with whom and with what they identify. One more noteworthy consideration: this account of initiating an anti-limits-on-marriage stance was Duc’s response to my question about his role in VAC. My expectation was that Duc would talk about his role as a Newsletter Editor, which he indeed did but not in the way that I anticipated. As a writer and as the 1999-2000 Newsletter Editor, Duc did not only use writing to express his perspectives and to identify with others. Additionally, he used his position as Newsletter Editor as a pivot point from which he could enter discussions with other Cabinet members and thereby initiate political activism. Although I am certain that VAC students would reject any implication that Cabinet members have authority over other students, the Cabinet positions craft a space for authority with others, authority to lead discussions and initiate
activities. Duc’s use of his editor position brings to mind questions of how authority factors into rhetorical identification.

**Authority: Playing Whose Game?**

The division and sociality inherent in identifications require that multiple parties negotiate their shared interests and also their ways of speaking and writing. On the subject of cross-cultural exchanges, Pierre Bourdieu writes, “If one had to propose a transcultural definition of excellence, I would say that it’s the fact of being able to play the game up to its limits, even to the point of transgression, while managing to stay within the rules of the game” (78). But this raises an important question about authority, one that continues to preoccupy composition researchers and teachers: Whose game are students playing? In this section, I explore identification and authority through an excerpt from a Spring Quarter 2002 general meeting.

At one of VAC’s general meetings, Duc invited fellow VAC students to identify with free speech protesters and, in doing so, to jointly demand the replacement of student kiosks on their university campus. Displeased by the university administration’s decision to remove student posting kiosks for the sake of aesthetic renovation, student activists planned to protest the removal of free speech forums. Bryan, the VAC Chair, facilitated this meeting and indicated to Duc that it was his turn to speak. Duc then invited his peers to join him and other activists in this protest:

Duc: Hi, hi, everybody. My name is ((says full name)) I’m from the Association of Queers Intersecting Race and Ethnicity. It’s a group for non-straight, non-white people.
And, um, there’ll be a free speech protest tomorrow, organized by AQIRE, myself, in association with the Campus Progressive Alliance and other organizations. The free speech protest is going to ask for demands that the university—

These demands will be won. The reinstallation, the reinstallation of the free speech posting kiosks that were taken away during the redesign of the plaza by the flagpole, and they were not reinstalled. And during that redesign of the plaza, they also took away all the other free speech posting kiosks, too.

This is a direct act of oppression against us as university students. We will protest this, tomorrow at twelve noon by the flagpole, so please be out there. We will distribute whistles, and there’ll be a megaphone, there’ll be signs, and we’ll hand out chalk as well because chalking is a restricted act on campus. And they fine you for it, and that shouldn’t be right. Chalking is an expression of free speech. And also, the reason why we’re trying to propose that chalking is not, for chalking not to be illegal, is that there is no stipulation in the “University Policies of Defining Campus Activities, Organizations, and Students.”

There’s no stipulation in here that chalking is illegal, yet they are contending that damage to property has been done by chalk. And therefore, the clean-up and the fine will be billed to those students or individuals or organizations who have chalked. And that is not right. Agreed?

Do you agree with that?

Bryan: That’s right, the kiosks are gone.

Duc: That’s right, the kiosks are gone. Every time I say that, no one realizes that, but they’re gone. And I’ve met with the Assistant Executive Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs since last year, ((name omitted)),

110
and he gave me the runaround.
He said, “I don’t know who you should talk to.”
It’s interesting because they don’t allow—
They deny students access to free speech and forms of speech such as *Anteater Weekly*.
They denied myself as a registered student.
And yet, they allow a private corporation and entity to be able to post on *Anteater Weekly*.
That entity being Orange County Performing Arts Center.
And that is in violation of their policy.
I’m trying to get attorneys from the ACLU on this, and also other attorneys.
It’s like a crazy hectic process, but please be out there to kick off this.

Haivan: How long will you be out there?

Duc: From noon til one.
There will be amplified sound.
In fact, we did get a permit for this, and, um, I went to scheduling, the scheduling office, to ask to use University property.
And the person said, “Are you a registered campus organization?”
I said, “No.”
And then she said, “You can’t do it.”
And then I said, “Wait right here.”
I ran over to Dean of Students, picked this book up, turned to page forty.
Read with me 40.00A: “used university-related persons or groups, registered campus organizations, student governments, and university personnel as well as students, faculty, and staff may use university property.”
So they tried to restrict me.
It’s all ignorance that they’re using against us to oppress us.

Katie: So did she eventually allow you?

Duc: Yeah, yeah, they have to especially if you protest for free speech.
It’s just free speech allowance for free speech.

Group: (laughter)
Duc: Um, this is available to every student on demand at the Dean of Students Office.
If you want to go there, go in.
Make them make more copies because every student should know their rights.
We live in a university, we go to a university where we do not know the laws that apply to us.
We live in a society or a government where we don’t know the laws that apply to us in *that* government.
So please know your rights.

Vu: Are they open?

Duc: No, they’re not open right now.
Go tomorrow, you can any time.

Authority enters this passage at two explicit levels: first, student activists’ claiming their authority as members of the university when the administration removed the kiosks, and second, Duc’s claiming authority when a university scheduling office staffperson questioned his right to protest. Additionally, Duc’s statement invites VAC students to authorize the protest by identifying with other student activists and participating in the next day’s events.

In order to navigate these several layers of authority and identification, I would like, first, to summarize the multiple agents to whom Duc calls attention and the authority that they carry and, second, to address how such varied authority affects identification. Peter Mortensen and Gesa E. Kirsch’s sharp inquiry into authority is informative to this analysis. In “On Authority in the Study of Writing,” Mortensen and Kirsch review several notions of authority, first naming two kinds of authority (authority of “office” and authority of “expertise”), next summarizing two ostensible responses to authority (assimilation and resistance), and finally proposing a “dialogic model of authority” (559).
To begin, these scholars write,

The *Oxford English Dictionary* posits authority within a fairly narrow compass. Since the fifteenth century, authority has designated both the “power to enforce obedience” and the “power to influence action, opinion, belief.” The theoretical distinction between power to enforce and power to influence is key here, a distinction that maps onto two functional categories: the authority of office and the authority of expertise. (559)

The theoretical distinction is also important here in my analysis of Duc’s argument since, in the first two struggles for authority that I mention above, the authority “enforc[ing] obedience” relies on an “authority of office.” The “university,” the “Assistant Executive Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs,” the “Dean of Students Office,” and, to some extent, the “government,” according to Duc, used their institutional and social authority to retract venues for students’ free speech. In fact, the authority of office is so overpowering that students get lost in a bureaucratic “runaround.” We might note that only two individuals with such authority are named, one whose name is preceded by his institutional title and a second referred to as “the person.” Duc’s first reference to the “Dean of Students” as an office, moreover, equates the person with the office.

By contrast, Duc and other student activists could rely on an authority of office as the university administrators do. Duc identified himself with the “offices” of the Association for Queers Intersecting Race and Ethnicity (AQIRE), the Campus Progressive Alliance, and the ACLU. However, the first two student organizations hold little, if any, “authority of office” and Duc holds no office in the third organization. In fact, I read Duc’s introductory identifications as ironic in that he introduces himself formally, stating both his full name and his campus affiliations, to an audience who had known him for several years. This hyperformality perhaps comically juxtaposes
university administrators, who are typically introduced by their office and title, with student organizations, whose “office” and title lack institutional authority. The ironic tone has the effect of identifying students with one another but against the administration.

Because an “authority of expertise” might entail authority granted by universities and other institutions, Mortensen and Kirsch’s distinction between an “authority of expertise” and an “authority of office” might be confused. I might therefore rename students’ authority from an authority of expertise to one of expertise and experience. The references to free speech, the government, and the ACLU suggest that these student activists derived their authority from their experiences as students and as democratic citizens. The identifications that Duc constructed in this passage position administrators and students oppositionally and thereby make a case for the next day’s protest. Whereas Duc identified administrators with the university, commercial entities, and the government, he identified students alternatively with grassroots campus organizations, the ACLU, and by extension, democratic citizens.

However, as Mortensen and Kirsch suggest, even if the authority of office and the authority of expertise/experience are sometimes at odds, they are also intertwined. Students, in the process of appealing for the reinstitution of free speech kiosks, used democratic and institutional discourse conventions in the service of their argument and thereby drew from an authority of office. That is to say, students heralded what our government and universities already explicitly value: free speech, writing, and general expression. For this reason, the student activists at the protest distributed and used implements for speech and writing, including whistles, chalk, and a megaphone. When I asked Duc what students used to post on the kiosks before their removal, he rattled off a
series of possibilities ranging from for-sale postings to announcements of community speakers. These, however, were unimportant from his perspective; what mattered most was the ability to “speak” to other students and the commitment from the university to support this forum. We see this belief supported by Duc’s invitation to VAC students to join him in identifying with student activists. Reading Duc’s statement, I locate four interwoven rhetorical purposes that relate to the larger valuing of free speech, all of which relate to speech and writing: to inform the audience of the protest for the reinstallation of “free speech posting kiosks”; to explain how chalking restrictions on campus are not right; to note that students cannot contribute to the Anteater Weekly; and finally to cite students’ rights from a book outlining university policies. This emphasis on freedom of speech identifies the student activists as American citizens exercising their democratic rights.

Interestingly, Duc draws authority from the “University Policies of Defining Campus Activities, Organizations, and Students” to support his right to protest, his right to free speech. Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “authoritative discourse” is useful here: “Another’s discourse performs no longer as information, directions, rules, models and so forth—but strives rather to determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behavior; it performs here as authoritative discourse, and an internally persuasive discourse” (342). The citation from the university handbook, then, grants Duc authority from the university—in other words, the “authority of office,” which is quite literally from the office of the Dean of Students. In this way, Duc and his fellow student activists identify themselves with the very “office” that they were to protest. Students’ use of institutional authority and their identifications with the
university administration would make it seem that they had assimilated but only if we adopt the assimilation-resistance binary.

Mortensen and Kirsch disrupt this binary and instead draw from feminist theory to propose a dialogic model of authority. The pervasive models of authority in studies of writing, they explain, have been based on assimilation and resistance. On the one hand, scholars like David Bartholomae have argued that students need to assimilate to university discourse conventions in order to gain institutional authority. This perspective presumes a model of “autonomous authority,” where individuals are equally entitled to an authority ready to be acquired. On the other hand, Mortensen and Kirsch continue, societies are not purely egalitarian, and advocates of resistance therefore “have insisted that we account for authority by examining attempts to subvert it” (558). The problem here is that authority is required to resist authority: “Such [objective] questioning [of authority] fails, finally, because it feigns critical distance from subjects in which it is thoroughly interested” (559). In this case, students required institutional authority in order to protest and thereby subvert authority.

Duc and his peers’ resistance against the university, therefore, is necessarily caught up with their belonging to and their commitment to the university. To understand students’ identifications with university discourse practices as assimilation not only falsely presents authority as autonomous but also severely underestimates students’ abilities to take such conventions and play with them. Judith Butler’s discussion of identifications indicates how such identifications do not necessarily mean that writers and speakers are overpowered by institutions:
That identifications shift does not necessarily mean that one identification is repudiated for another; that shifting may well be one sign of hope for the possibility of avowing an expansive set of connections. This will not be a simple matter of “sympathy” with another’s position, since sympathy involves a substitution of oneself for another that may well be a colonization of the other’s position as one’s own. And it will not be the inference of an equivalence based on an insight into the partially constituted character of all social identity. It will be a matter of tracing the ways in which identification is implicated in what it excludes and to follow the lines of that implication for the map of future community that it might yield. (Bodies 119)

Thus, what Duc’s roundabout identification with the university means is that he and other student activists protested the university administration while simultaneously affirming their membership in the university. Butler’s remark also indicates how identifications open up “an expansive set of connections” as much as they reveal disidentifications, and we find these disidentifications in the Assistant Executive Vice Chancellor and the Dean of Students Office staffperson’s reluctance to engage with the student activists.

Mortensen and Kirsch’s dialogic model of authority enables readers of Duc’s statement to value the push and pull of his identifications, and this dialogism, I think, enables me to place student activists’ authority on the same footing as university administrators. That is to say, students and administrators identify with one another through their shared interests in the university but also thwart their own identifications when they regard one another oppositionally. I might therefore rephrase the question from “Whose game are students playing?” to “How do students and administrators change, maintain, and play the game?” Frederik Barth, in his influential Ethnic Group Boundaries, explains how identifications can maintain a static group identity but also diversify the group:
The identification of another persona as a fellow member of an ethnic group implies a sharing of criteria for evaluation and judgment. It thus entails the assumption that the two are fundamentally “playing the same game,” and this means that there is between them a potential diversification and expansion of their social relationship to cover eventually all different sectors or domains of activity. (15)

The dialogic authority that gets played out in identifications reflects the tug-of-war between Bakhtinian centripetal and centrifugal forces. In other words, this dialogism demonstrates the constant vying for a diverse but a unified community identity.

Such necessarily dialogic identifications often work in tandem with invitation, illustrated by students’ comments in this chapter. Identification further extends any encapsulated community that invitations might foster, where activists like the 1960s anti-war group Vietnam Summer in Kenneth Keniston’s study *Young Radicals* build solidarity but only among themselves. Overwhelmed by their large-scale social concerns, the Vietnam Summer activists lost sight of their own social identifications and therefore lost their basis of activism. Together, invitations to identify and identifications themselves enable activist groups to broaden their communities and, as more than one VAC student expressed, to “mobilize.”

**Responsibility to Identify**

As the several dimensions of identification—division, sociality, and authority—thread together and become dynamic, they call up the need for an ethics of discourse. Identification, as a dialogic process, requires speakers and writers to take responsibility for their part in a mutual interaction. The more I read and listen to VAC students’ writing and speech, the more I am impressed by these students’ ability to identify with others by
seeking out shared interests and becoming adept with other communities’ discourse conventions. When speakers and writers have to put this ability into play in more public situations involving multiple parties, their rhetorical agility is put to the test. In this chapter’s final illustration of VAC students’ identifications, I explore how the interwoven dimensions of division, sociality, and authority demand that students practice an ethics of discourse in order to be rhetorically effective.

In late May 2002, several “cultural” club constituents attended a student government legislative council (“leg-council”) meeting because they were concerned with a decision made by the judicial board (“j-board”). At UC Irvine, like at many universities, the student government is modeled after our federal government with its three branches. The leg-council representatives informed student clubs that had high school outreach programs that student government money would no longer fund their outreach. According to j-board members, j-board received an anonymous letter that stated that the student body money being allocated to high school outreach programs was unconstitutional because that money did not benefit UCI students. According to one leg-council member, j-board had concluded that

The activities and programs ((of student clubs’ high school outreach)) are not open to the participation by the greater student body and thus do not benefit associated students. The critical argument that these programs benefit the facilitators is acknowledged, but the number of facilitators is not proportional to the budget allocation nor to the greater student body.

Therefore, while j-board expressed their belief in the importance of high school outreach, they claimed that it was unconstitutional to fund outreach with associated student money.
Bryan, the 2001-2002 VAC Chair and a former high school mentee from VAC’s mentorship program, and other student club representatives who coordinated outreach programs were understandably upset about both the decision and the methods used to make the decision. Given their protest, the leg-council activated a judicial oversight committee. The five-member oversight committee would review j-board’s decision. A majority vote would challenge the decision; with a tie, the decision would stand. The oversight committee consisted of two j-board members, one leg-council member, an executive member, and the Executive Director, a staffperson who coordinated student clubs and oversaw the budget. The oversight committee would meet two days after the leg-council meeting.

On the day preceding the leg-council meeting, at the VAC Cabinet Meeting, Bryan informed Katie and me about this news and his argument against the decision. As with my earlier examples in this chapter, VAC’s identifying with other student activists was preceded by an invitation to other VAC students to join in the identification. Bryan had been meeting with other university constituents the entire day leading up to our meeting at seven in the evening, and he began by explaining the argument from j-board’s perspective:

Bryan: Okay, just to educate like every-, like you guys on it because it’s important. Well, it’s more important to her because she’s a UCI student. But, um. ASUCI has decided that, um, money allocated toward high school outreach programs are unconstitutional.

Katie: What?

Bryan: Because ASUCI’s money comes straight from students’ fees. Right?
Katie: Mhm.

Bryan: Which we pay.

Katie: Yeah.

Bryan: Well, it’s only right that what we pay, we get back, right?

Katie: Mhm.

Bryan: But the students we outreach aren’t UCI students,

Katie: O:h.

Bryan: It is not directly benefiting UCI students.
So it’s unconstitutional, it’s found somewhere.
Someone apparently wrote an anonymous letter last year saying so,
that they didn’t think it was const-, right.

Her interspersed comments indicate that Katie, the VAC Freshman Representative,
accepted the invitation at least to this interaction. Bryan went on to invite Katie and, by extension, fellow VAC students to identify with student activism and to “mobilize.”

Bryan stressed, however, that they and other student activists needed to prepare before approaching leg-council the next day. Preparation first meant gathering momentum from other student organizations, and here identifications began. Through Bryan, VAC banded with the Pan-Asian Pacific American, Japanese American, Chicano-Chicana, and African American student organizations. Speaking of one student organization, Bryan stated,

Bryan: They’re ready to go out there and storm down ASUCI.
We’re like, “No, ask questions.
Find out as much as you can before we do anything.”
And then, we need to form a coalition between all the student groups and decide collectively what we want to do.
And then formulate that and move on.
In this explanation, the “they” become part of the “we” coalition. As this and other VAC identifications indicate, identification begins with division, but that division is not necessarily oppositional. In fact, often students needed to make connections not because they had antagonistic differences; it was more often the case that they needed to identify with one another for some rhetorical purpose because they had been too busy or had retreated into a comfortable stasis.

Bryan continued, “We want to question everything…. We want to know just as much as them if not more before we start talking to anybody, you know. We want to question, question, question.” That is to say, student activists needed to be able to identify with j-board and leg-council’s train of thought. In order to gather effective grounds for appeal, Bryan explained that student activists needed to study the constitution to make a case for outreach. Without explicit knowledge of the constitution, their assertions would seem irrelevant. Bryan therefore researched the make-up of the oversight committee, the committee’s function, and the requirements to amend the constitution. In particular, the oversight committee seemed conflicted. Although j-board made the original decision, the oversight committee of five people included two j-board members who would predictably support their own decision; moreover, the Executive Director was not a student but a staffperson and, therefore, Bryan claimed, should not be on the committee. This identification with the student government’s discourse conventions and accepted evidence—namely, the constitution—garnered authority for Bryan and his fellow activists as we will soon see.

From his conversations with others, Bryan made several more discoveries about the unfairness of how the decision was made. During a preliminary hearing, none of the
student organizations with high school outreach were given notice that their funding was under review, and the j-board gave the undergraduate student government Vice President only one hour to prepare a statement on behalf of the outreach programs. Furthermore, the decision to revoke funding had been made one year earlier, but Bryan and other student groups had only just found out about the decision recently. The funding revocation would take effect the next year. J-board claimed that they had posted the decision on a billboard outside of the student government office; however, the student activists rarely ever walked by that billboard.

Finally, and this assertion did not explicitly make it to the leg-council meeting, Bryan heard from a peer that the resistance to high school student outreach stemmed from a prejudice against the “cultural clubs.” He recounted the associate student President’s comments on the high school outreach program:

Bryan: See the ASUCI president is also like—
He told us one time—
He said about our ((high school outreach)) conferences,
“Well, like, they’re somewhat exclusive, right?”
Because we, we geared it toward our minorities, right?
People of color.
He’s all like—
That’s his argument.
He’s all, “Let’s be realistic.
Can I as a Caucasian male go to your conference, you know, and feel comfortable?”
You know?
I’m like, “You can go and do whatever you want to do.
We don’t exclude anybody.
You can be a part of our conference as long as you go to the training, da da da, do all the logistics.”

Except for the student government’s own high school outreach program, all of the student organizations with outreach programs self-identified as specific ethnic or racial student
organizations. By contrast, in the student government, few self-identified ethnic and racial student groups were represented as officers. In response to “cultural” student clubs expressing that their concerns are rarely heard, they were often told to run for office. However, Bryan explained that the student government was controlled by fraternity and sorority “Greeks,” who he distinguished from Asians and Asian Americans:

Bryan: So we, we thought at least ASUCI, being fellow students, would support us. But no, they’re not. And see, they tell us, “Well, you should send a representative. Someone should run for something, right?” We have. We, we’ve run for things, but the thing is the people—Ninety percent of the people that are elected or win elections have a, have a background in Greek organizations, meaning they get their fellow Greeks to vote for them. And Greeks have a lot of power on this campus. Asian Greeks are separate from Greeks. We don’t have voting, like we don’t have a Greek Council. Asian Greeks are on their own. So it’s kinda like, what the heck, you know?

Although Bryan stated about leg-council that “they’re not the enemy” since they support outreach and represent the student body, the leg-council meeting was still divisive—perhaps due in part to this subtext of racial tension. The physical presence of nonwhite students on one half of the room and a majority of white students on the other side of the room at the leg-council meeting made this subtext even more visible.

The next day, approximately 50 people attended the leg-council meeting. Twenty two were leg-council members, and the rest were constituents from the several student clubs that Bryan mentioned. Bryan, Katie, another VAC student William, a mentee, and I attended on behalf of VAC. Following Robert’s Rules of Order, the leg-council
meeting was highly structured in its strictness of who could and could not speak and initiate topics. One leg-council member moderated speech during the meeting, calling the meeting to order, initiating topics, requesting responses, and confirming that decisions were official. VAC students performed identification first by adopting the genre conventions of the leg-council meetings by observing acceptable turn-taking, imitating questions and assertions, even using the same word choice occasionally.

Not until the moderator had gone through two other items on the agenda and initiated the topic of the oversight committee did one of the student club constituents ask about the make-up of the oversight committee and state that he found it irrational that an oversight committee consist of two j-board members when they were overseeing j-board:

“My point is that there are two members of judicial on the board reviewing their own decisions. But I know there’s nothing you can do, but—.” The moderator gave a quick response (“All right”) and moved on to the topic of who would serve on the oversight committee. Given a murmur of questions during a break, the moderator reinitiated the topic of the oversight committee, and the discussion became more heated—perhaps both because the issue was frustrating but slowly because the room became incrementally more divided. When VAC student William asked about whether the oversight committee meeting would be an open or closed meeting, the moderator replied that the constitution did not say, “but—.” Before she could finish, William interrupted, “Thank you. That’s all I wanted to know.”

After a series of questions and responses, the moderator and a few of her leg-council members responded in several ways. The first comment, although referring only to the open or closed nature of the oversight committee meeting, gets to the heart of the
division between the two sides of the room. One leg-council member responded that meetings were closed unless otherwise stated to be open, which he assumed to be true for the student clubs. However, from my participant observation, VAC meetings were open unless explicitly stated to be closed (which they never were). This difference of opinion echoes Bryan’s earlier conflict with the student President, who believed that the ethnic minority student clubs’ outreach efforts were exclusive (in particular, excluding students who were not of the same ethnic/racial background as the student organization). Bryan’s estimation, on the other hand, was that everyone was welcome. The issue at stake here was that leg-council assumed the autonomy of student organizations because the student government functioned under a strict constitution where each branch was disallowed from interfering with other branches. VAC and other “cultural” clubs, on the other hand, were working toward coalition building with one another and with the high school students they mentored.

Although leg-council members felt bound because this autonomy restricted them from influencing j-board’s decision, discourse conventions and their primary authority of the constitution encouraged autonomy—both discursive (one person speaks at a time and only oversight committee members can attend the meeting) and social (this is leg-council’s responsibility, this is j-board’s responsibility, and this is what student organizations can do). In fact, a student from one organization picked up on this difference in mindset about open and closed meetings, expressing his desire for face-to-face interaction with the oversight committee:

Student 1: Also, with all due respect, I agree—
I mean, I have a lot of respect for AS.
But with that comes a responsibility that you should have meetings open. I know it’s not in the constitution. You represent us as constituents, and us not having a voice—Email won’t do—Constant emails won’t do it. They don’t have to read it.

We just want to talk about it. Not attack one another. We just want to get our issues out.

This student, moreover, responds to the assumption that the “cultural” clubs want to “attack” leg-council and j-board members. Indeed, two students did express anger explicitly. One interrupted a leg-council member mid-sentence, and another explained her frustration at j-board, not leg-council, was a democratic act. This second student, interestingly, was both a leg-council member and a member of the Chicano/Chicana student club. She explained, with “we” referring to the “cultural” clubs:

Student 2: What these students are asking, I think, is very legit. This is what we’re used to. We’re used to being turned down all the time. And the only thing that we have, in order to protect ourselves, is methods of intimidation. And that’s why we want to be there ((at the meeting)). Yeah, they’re stubborn and might not change their mind. But the power of the people is the only thing we have. And that’s why we have the right to be there. It doesn’t say we don’t have to be there. Not that we’re going to intimidate and go, “Oh, we’re going kick your ass and da da da.” But you know the power of the people, that’s what we’re trying to show them. That’s what we’re trying to prove. That’s what we’re trying to say.
As student organizations continued to state their perspectives and leg-council repeatedly explained their limited ability to help, identifications strengthened. The student organizations, as Bryan had hoped, did come together and mobilize. Leg-council members also identified with one another and more adamantly with the student government’s policies and constitution. But these two threads of identifications became oppositional—increasingly so because a few leg-council members felt that the few who expressed anger and frustration directed that anger at leg-council. Even though only two or three student organization members expressed anger explicitly and only two or three leg-council members explicitly stated that this anger seemed directed at leg-council, the strong identifications at the meeting meant that those few were identified as speaking for student organizations or leg-council, respectively. Tensions mounted, and a division grew between the entire body of student organizations, on the one hand, and leg-council members, on the other hand.

So, whether or not other student organizations agreed that their frustrations were a democratic “power of the people” directed at j-board, the tension in the room caused some leg-council members to focus more on the anger than on students’ assertions. One leg-council member believed that the anger was directed at leg-council:

Leg 1:    Um.
          You guys are.
          Well, preaching to the wrong crowd.
          You’re getting angry at us,
          and we’re trying to help you out here.
          So I’m going to give you the best advice that I can right now.
          Is to take Cal for example and rally against it—
          Against this decision.
          Hold a protest.
          Get students to support your actions, your claims, your arguments, your positions.
Go out there.
Be seen by the student body.
Most of the people who are out there on campus do not know what’s going on.
We have had a lot of drama in this room over the past two quarters,
and the majority of the student body does not know what’s happening.
You need to go out there and inform the students,
and tell them what they judicial board is doing is wrong.
“This is what we should do.
This is what, um, our views are.
Support us.”

Moreover, the moderator added that the student organizations’ representatives did not bring forth logical (i.e., constitutional) arguments even though the first two questions from student organizations commented on the definition and procedures of the oversight committee, questions about text and logos. Her claim follows:

Leg 2: U:m,
also another clarification that—
The judicial board,
it’s not their job to represent UCI students.
It’s because they’re appointed.
It’s their job to interpret the constitution.
So if you guys want to talk to them about it or argue about them,
you have to get the constitution and have constitutional background.
Your interpretation of the constitution.
Because that is the only way that they will change their mind.
Because if they see that there’s constitutional backing as far as pulling high school outreach,
then they won’t reconsider.
But as far as just talking to them and arguing with them about it,
it’s not gonna do anything because you’re, you’re going there,
it’s just kind of like, with blanks.
You’re not saying anything because you don’t have any constitutional backing.
Despite comments and questions raised from the constitution and its by-laws, this moderator and other leg-council members suggested that, again, the students were only appealing to the emotions with no textual backing: they were ignorant of acceptable evidence. Leg-council’s constructions of student clubs as angry or ignorant of evidence did not match with what the student club constituents were actually saying. Rather, these leg council members seemed to focus only on a few students’ frustrations and identify those feelings (and little else) with the coalition of student organizations. This identification of student organizations with an “attack” stance, therefore, tainted how some leg-council members read student organization representatives’ sound arguments.

Bryan objected, demonstrating his understanding of the evidence that should have been acceptable to leg-council:

Bryan: First of all, I’ve read the constitution. Okay?
And there’re supposed to be guidelines to this oversight committee, but there aren’t.
They’re supposed to be in the by-laws, but I didn’t see that there, online.
Second of all, there’re supposed to be seven judiciary members, right?
But I only counted five.

In the first two points, Bryan does show his knowledge of the constitution by mentioning the lack of guidelines to the oversight committee and the lack of judiciary members.

When someone suggests that the students alter the constitution rather than fight j-board, he replies that getting the requisite 25% vote would be nearly impossible since the best turn out ever was 22.7%. Here, he further demonstrates that he’s done his homework; he’s studied text:
Bryan: Third of all, 25 percent?
The last elections, we only had 22.7 percent total.
To turn out.
That’s the best turn out we’ve had,
so how are we supposed to get 25 percent to change the constitution?

And finally, in the fourth point, Bryan goes beyond logos and comments on how j-board’s decision affects the ethos of UCI students, a decision that would render students selfish.

Bryan: Fourth of all,
the rationale that they say that outreach does not represent UCI students,
that we can never as student groups or as students ever help out any other people other than ourselves.
We can never go, let’s say feed the homeless and use AS money to do so because those people are not UCI students.
So if this comes down,
so that’s saying that our student groups can never help out the community, at least not with AS money because that does not represent UCI students, right?
That’s their rationale.
If that happens, as long as that occurs,
<?> that’s just one thing that we can never have the capacity to do so.

This final line of reasoning returns to student organization’s desire to grow their social identifications rather than to build authority through autonomy—in this case, an autonomous authority ostensibly offered by the constitution.

Daphne Desser tells us, through her multiple readings of her great-grandfather’s letters, that reading (and, I might add, speaking) consists of multiple identifications, nonidentifications, and reidentifications. Other student organization members reidentified with leg-council members by reconstructing themselves as not angry but
concerned and as not attacking but understanding. Prior to leaving, one thanked the leg-council for their time:

    Student 1: We just want to thank you for hearing our voices, for letting us bring our issues to the table.

Another student responded directly to the assertion that student organizations seemed angry:

    Student 3: And I just want to, um, one clarification.
    We don’t think that—
    I mean, we’re not here to be mad at you guys.
    He said we’re angry with you guys.
    We’re not.
    We’re just trying to have a discussion about what’s going on and coming to you guys because you guys do know the constitution and rules and things like that.
    We just, you know, got put up on game or however you want to say it, and we basically want to know what’s going on.
    And that’s all that we’re doing.
    He said that we’re coming in here angry.
    Nobody’s just angry here, and we understand your position.
    And like the gentleman already said, we thank you guys because you guys sit, basically dedicated your whole meeting to hear our concerns.

Upon identifying with the leg-council and with “the gentleman” from another student organization, this student also delicately turned the attention back to the leg-council’s agency.

    Student 3: Basically, my point was,
    I think I just wanted to ask you guys.
    We are all in support of the same issues.
    What do we gotta do from here?
    Because you guys are well versed in the constitution, so what are you guys, as representatives of your institution.
    We’re your constituents.
While several leg-council members also tried to reidentify, expressing their own frustration with the bureaucracy, they denied an ability to act. The moderator stated, “I understand where you’re coming from, but there’s nothing you can do here today or on Thursday” at the oversight committee meeting. Rather, leg-council recommended that student organizations act independently: to rally, to find money from the Dean of Students, to question j-board’s interpretation of constitutional terms, to petition to change the constitution. In the end, even though both leg-council and the student organizations were on the same side, both in support of outreach, a misidentification still occurred, and everyone left the meeting frustrated.

This missed identification, I argue, requires that we examine speaker-audience social relationships more than logic and evidence. As Tom Fox asserts in Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education, learning the authorized discourse conventions and accepted grounds for arguments is sometimes not enough. We have seen how VAC students were rhetorically sophisticated in reading their audiences and seeking out community discourse conventions. On both sides, students continued to return to the constitution and the idea of autonomous authority because the constitution was what authorized students (both cultural clubs and the student government) in this situation, and I would venture to guess that such facility with autonomous authority was what also enabled them to enter and succeed at a prestigious research university. Nevertheless, leg-council and student organizations alike continually asserted how they felt confined by the constitution and by institutional practices that disallowed them from helping one another.
Like Mortensen and Kirsch, I turn to Patrocinio Schweickart for her critique of an “ethic of rights” (Gilligan qtd. in Schweickart 86). With division rather than identification edging into the meeting, all parties retreated to an ethics of rights, increasingly claiming autonomous authority derived from the constitution. But in mastering this autonomous authority, the individuals became autonomous and began to limit the “power of the people.” Schweickart proposes an alternative to this ethic of rights: an ethic of care, which we see glimpses of in students’ reidentifications toward the end of the meeting. She proposes, “To listen with care is to treat the text not merely in its textuality but as the expression of a subject” (89).

Although treating the text “as the expression of a subject” seems more likely in a face-to-face discussions than when reading a written document, an ethic of care seemed to be thwarted by the students’ social context. The dialogic nature of identifications would have required that both leg-council members and student organization representatives embrace mutuality, listening to one another’s perspectives as “resources for [their] understanding” (Foss and Foss 12). This suggestion of dialogic authority coincides with Andrea Lunsford’s suggestion that speakers and writers move toward a “responsible” authority. Lunsford writes, “I am thinking, in making such a move, of all those students who identified authority as authority ‘over’ someone or something. Might they think instead of responsibility to, of responsibility for, of responsibility with?” (74)

In fact, we do find a glimmer of hope after the student government meeting as students’ enacted a “responsibility with.” Despite the missed identification with leg-council members, the student organizations’ representatives were able to identify with one another. In their similar efforts to identify with the genre of a student government
meeting and to re-construct leg council’s negative constructions of the student clubs, the student clubs managed to cooperate with one another. After the meeting, they made plans to talk about their next course of action and thus began an alliance.

**Social and Memorial “Bodies of Identifications”**

Identification, as a rhetorical strategy, enabled VAC students to manage a fragmentation catalyzed by diaspora and diversity among Vietnamese American and other communities. Drawing on Burke’s elaboration of identification, this chapter has considered the persistent tension between identification and division. The push and pull between identification and division opened up a space for rhetorical agents to create or hinder identifications. But while Burke suggests that speakers and writers identify with an audience in order to persuade that audience, VAC students’ speech and writing suggest that identification is *more* than an aid to persuasion. Identification enabled students to create social relationships that did not exist earlier.

That identifications could foster new alliances is noteworthy because such coalition-building enabled dialogue and even social activism. Judith Butler aptly speaks to the social connections that identifications engender, “That identifications shift does not necessarily mean that one identification is repudiated for another; that shifting may well be one sign of hope for the possibility for avowing an expansive set of connections” (*Bodies* 119). Identifications enabled VAC students to move outside their own encapsulated community, to weave themselves into the fabric of their social context, and to thereby build a base from which to “mobilize.” Such identifications, therefore, worked in tandem with invitation to build community solidarity.
From VAC students’ discourse, we also have seen that identification, like invitation, requires authority. The dialogue analyzed in this chapter demonstrates how students derived their authority both from their lived experiences and from their status as university community members. What this suggests is that “resistance,” “assimilation,” and other models that bifurcate students and educators, home and school communities, or any other us-them model are inadequate. Such models do not account for the ways that students take and remake conventional sources of authority. To accept a resistance-assimilation binary does a disservice to students and to our discipline; rather, Mortensen and Kirsch’s suggestive dialogic model rightly presents authority as flexible, as something continually drawn from and reshaped by speakers and writers.

Woven together, these dimensions of division, sociality, and authority call for an ethics of discourse that rejects a this-is-mine-that-is-yours ethic of rights. An ethic of rights encourages an individualist bootstraps mentality, where each rhetorical agent works toward his or her own best interests. This ethic of rights can be counterproductive when agents are working at cross-purposes. Rather, for identifications to be effective, agents need to see one another as resources and allies, even if they do not agree with one another. The confining treatment of texts as autonomous units may make students critical readers of conventions and evidence but not of social relationships. Identifications seek to bridge those divided social relationships.

Whereas Chapters 1 and 2 have focused on social solidarity fostered by involvement and here-and-now interaction, the next chapter turns to identifications that operate on a wider scale: memorial identifications. Memory, one of the five canons of rhetoric, has had a socializing function since antiquity. The re-presentation, repetition,
and sharing of memorial texts (spoken or written) are, in fact, acts that bind people together—socially and historically.
CHAPTER 3

RHETORICAL MEMORY AS CULTURAL MEMORY

We have a memory of water. Ankle deep, back bent by the sun, verdant fields. Shallow basins, eyes sealed with tears, ornate cathedrals. Salt water shrouds, lips cracked, silent flotilla. We have a memory of water. A memory that is only sometimes our own.


Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was—that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared that particular way.

Toni Morrison, “Memory, Creation, and Writing” 385

History is important, not just in terms of who writes it and what gets included or excluded, but also because history, by its very inscription as history, has social, political, and cultural consequences.

Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams, “History in the Spaces Left: African American Presence and Narratives of Composition Studies” 563

Memory, as a rhetorical art and as a means of sharing culture, reveals yet another dimension of VAC students’ solidarity rhetoric. Students have forged alliances within and beyond the VAC community, I think, because our American histories have had
“consequences.” That is to say, our mainstream American cultural memory has been disturbingly silent about Vietnamese Americans and, more generally, Asian Americans. In recollecting the Vietnamese American cultural memories forgotten by school curricula and public media, students were indeed engaged in “a form of willed creation,” re-membering (and re-peopling) our heritage and community.

When student activists founded VAC at the University of California, Irvine in 1993, they began a longstanding commitment to the local community and to several related rhetorical aims: political participation, social involvement, and what quickly became a struggle over “a memory that is only sometimes our own.” During the 1993-2002 period examined in this study, memory took form as spoken and written texts that were part of discourse events but also as a larger call for social institutions to make space for underrepresented memories. Early movements in favor of Asian American studies and Vietnamese language courses, annual “Black April” events to memorialize Saigon’s fall and the subsequent diaspora, and the 2000 student protest against Senator John McCain’s utterance of “gook”—worse yet, “I hate the gooks”: these efforts toward community activism name just a few of the memory-embedded discourse events where students argued for the rightful place of Vietnamese American cultural memories. In re-collecting a memory, students shared and reconstructed their heritage and their relationships to one another, their solidarity.

As rhetoricians, we face the question of whether classical rhetorical definitions can account for memory’s social relevance. Can these ancient treatises explicitly address the contemporary social and ideological interest in memory? What is memory’s social function today? How and why are memories authorized? What shape does memory take,
and how is memory practiced in communities? Engaging these critical social perspectives reveals that, in terms of its form, production, interpretation, and function, memory lacks clear definition (Climo and Catell; Reynolds; Welch).

As a result, this chapter analyzes VAC students’ memorial acts through a social lens, recognizing that what rhetorical memory is is inseparable from what it does. For VAC students, what memory does is bring people together—whether textually or physically. While classical rhetoric is helpful in beginning an examination of VAC’s memorial acts, VAC students’ discourse eventually requires a deep understanding of rhetorical memory’s social function. Through analyses of VAC students’ practices of memory—as both a rhetorical art and a means of sharing culture—I pursue a definition of rhetorical memory that makes explicit its social function. In addition, I argue that, when analyzed through a social lens, the practice of memory makes palpable the links among discourse, ethnic identity, and solidarity in the VAC student community.

In what follows, I offer an overview of rhetorical memory before turning to an examination of salient memorial features in VAC students’ rallies for political awareness and community action. Finally, I turn to a case analysis of one VAC student’s account of the 2000 protest against McCain’s use of the racial epithet “gook.” Drawing from this case analysis, I propose that the students’ art of memory relies on three classical rhetorical principles: signification, composition, and social involvement.

**Memory in the Rhetorical Tradition**

On the surface, memory appears deceptively simple. After all, Aristotle’s definition confirms today’s everyday understandings of memory: the art of investigation
that calls up from the past what is absent in the present. However, memory, since the classical Greek and Roman periods, has played a pivotal role in how culture is shared (Havelock). In order to unravel its complexity, this section explores how memory has been variously defined and practiced throughout the Western rhetorical tradition. To account for the shifts and fluctuations in memory’s form and function, I work toward what classical rhetoricians call *copia*. *Copia*, one of the standards for a good memory, strives toward plural—even if conflicting—understandings of one subject. As I lay out various historical perspectives, my intent is to render a textured understanding of memory. Such *copia* will lead readers through shifting conceptions of rhetorical memory, where classical and medieval memory is cultural, modern memory is individual and mimetic, and postmodern memory is suspect. What pertains most to VAC and a revised art of memory is the persistent pre-modern valuing of *copia* and the analogous postmodern goal of pluralism. *Copia* opens up a space for students to re-collect Vietnamese American cultural memories where there had previously been a gaping silence.

**Memory Flourishes in Antiquity**

As early as fifth century BCE, classical Greek rhetors taught the art of memory to their pupils, whose education prepared them to memorize and later deliver speeches. The art of memory, amply detailed by Francis Yates’ *The Art of Memory* and Mary Carruthers’ *The Book of Memory*, taught students mnemonic techniques to memorize the main ideas of a text (*memoria ad res*) or to memorize texts verbatim (*memoria ad verba*). Teachers mentored students on how to create mnemonic “images” and “*loci.*” Images
were visual and also aural representations that cued a word or idea. These images would be deposited on a memory place, such as a building or street, and the place, in turn, would cue the order in which the ideas or words should occur. Classical rhetoricians suggested rules for images and places; in brief, images should be striking, and places should be well lit, neither too large nor too small, and not too alike. As students gave their speeches, they imagined themselves walking through their memory places, retrieving each image (Yates 1-26). Roman rhetoricians recorded these mnemonics in textbook-like guides. The most oft-cited sources on the classical art of memory, according to Yates, are the classical Roman instructional texts: the anonymously authored *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Cicero’s *De oratore*, and Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria*. Each provides widely adopted guidelines on how to supplement natural memory with artificial memory, *Rhetorica ad Herennium* being the most detailed.

Even though the classical treatment of memory might appear remarkably reminiscent of outmoded epistemologies in which individuals are containers that input and output knowledge without alteration, classical rhetorical memory was indeed socially contingent like all other aspects of rhetoric. To understand this contingency, we need to take into account three assumptions about memory that are not always made explicit in classical treatises. First, classical rhetoric clearly begins with the assumption that memory is a rhetorical art, *not* a matter of rote repetition. Aristotle, in *De memoria et reminiscencia*, uses different words to distinguish between natural memory, which even animals have, and artistic recollection. Recollection is subjective, involving a conscious recall of ideas that is aided first by the association between memory images (based on
relationships of similarity, dissimilarity and contiguity) and second by the ordering of these images (Yates 33-35).

Second, recollection calls up memory symbols, not the memory referents. Therefore, memory images are symbols that require interpretation, and these symbols are always partial representations. Carruthers explains the notion of “memory as sign” when she introduces one of two archetypal metaphors for memory: writing. The memory-as-writing metaphor first occurs in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, where he compares memorial processes to the imprinting of a seal on wax. Classical memory suggests that the seal, like a word, is a sign, not a mimetic representation. Aristotle most clearly explains the symbolic nature of memory images when he points to their dual function as “figure” and “copy,” that is, a physically present thing and a representation of something not present (Carruthers 21-24). Thus, “[b]ecause it recalls signs, reminiscence is an act of interpretation, inference, investigation, and reconstruction, an act like reading” (25). And also, I might add, an act like writing.

Lastly, and most important, the normative techniques for memorizing and delivering memorized speeches played an invaluable role in fostering culture and solidarity in antiquity. Even after writing was invented, oral memory persisted as a means of sharing culture. As late as sixth century BCE, Greek society employed *Mnemones*, or memorizers, who would memorize historical persons and events. These professionals were charged with knowing history (Havelock 84). In addition, orators were to “compose in such a way that [the audience] can not only memorize what they have heard but also echo it in daily speech” (92). Therefore, speakers were responsible for enabling audience members to share culture.
The Morality of Medieval Memory

Memory continued to take on the dual rhetorical roles of signification and socialization in the medieval period. Both Yates and Carruthers assert that the socializing function of memory in medieval monastic culture was to enable people to memorize virtues and vices. In medieval culture, memory was the mark of morality. Moral and rhetorically adept friars like Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas compiled memorized authorities, such as Biblical references and commentaries on Scripture, in compositions. Like in classical Greek orations, the re-collection of authorities in a medieval composition was meant to edify readers, and the memorable form of the composition should also enable those readers to share memorial compositions with others.

The relatively increased use of print in medieval culture makes apparent how memories were gathered and composed. In medieval monastic culture, the practice of gathering memories began with an introspective investigation; Albertus Magnus, for instance, describes the process of recollection “as the ‘tracking-down’ (investigatio) of what has been ‘set aside’ (obliti) through and by means of the memory; this process differs in nature from ‘rote repetition’ (iterate scientia)” (Carruthers 20). But this only began the composition process that made memory public. Gathering memories was a composition process, refined through copiousness and suitability to the occasion. Carruthers explains, “So the act of invention, carried out by cogitation [or meditative reflection on memory] was thought to be one of combining or ‘laying together’ in one ‘place’ or compositive image or design the bits previously filed and cross-filed in other loci of memory” (197). Composition, in this sense, required reflection and piecing
together of memory, and, for Saint Augustine, a memorial composition was greater than
the sum of its parts.

According to medieval thinking, such memorial composition strove toward
copiousness and also suitability to the occasion. First, medieval speakers and writers
were more concerned with copiousness, which Carruthers equates with our national
motto *E Pluribus Unum*, than accuracy (160). At first glance, the valuing of *copia* above
accuracy may not seem radical, but prioritizing *copia* turns upside-down today’s
mainstream American ideologies and epistemologies. The dominant ideology in the
United States is based on the idea that self-actualized individuals complete society, but
*copia* presupposes the inverse—that is, society completes the individual. In other words,
“[p]ublic memory is a needed ethical resource for its contents complete the edifice of
each individual’s memory” (185).

Second, a copious memorial composition should also be suitable to the rhetorical
situation. Achieving copiousness did not simply entail listing multiple memories, but
copiousness as a rhetorical strategy should be tailored to the audience and situation at
hand. Carruthers explains, “*Memoria ad res* compels the recollector to actively shape up
material for an occasion, whether as composer or viewer or reader, and thus is ethically
more valuable [than verbatim memorization], consistent with the moral emphasis given to
rhetoric by Cicero, Quintilian himself, Augustine, and the traditions of monastic prayer”
(74). Pre-modern rhetors, like later postmodernists, were skeptical of verbatim
memorization, which they associated with parlor tricks and mindless mimicry rather than
memorial ability. In fact, medieval preachers would often choose to memorize the main
ideas of a text over memorizing a text verbatim because they could then tailor words and
delivery to the occasion. Medieval writers of manuscripts, too, would be consciously
\textit{inaccurate} so as to tailor compositions to their purpose.

The belief that rhetors could adapt other authors’ written texts again turns upside-
down our current notions of individualist ideology and intellectual ownership. Memorial
activity was not simply a matter of reception and regurgitation; it was a matter of social
involvement. Because reading and composing were considered processes of
personalization and internalization, Carruthers disputes psychologists who claim a
distinction between rote and personal memories. Summarizing Petrarch, she states,
“Each memorized bit…is regarded in the first instance not as ‘information’ to be
reproduced but as a personal event with full phenomenological status” (61). Digestion,
therefore, is an apt metaphor for memorial processes. By murmuring, chewing, moving
the mouth, ruminating, and regurgitating memories, a reader uses cultural memories to
nurture her body, making the memories hers. The point of reading memories was not to
figure out the meaning that an author or text intends but to figure out “what the text
means to us when we turn its words like a mirror, upon ourselves, how we understand it
when we have domesticated it and made it our own.” (168).

In medieval societies, memory functioned to foster morality, and this morality
was a social, not individual matter. Furthermore, the entextualization of memory was not
only important to sharing culture, it was a civic and moral responsibility. Carruthers
writes, “An author who does not share his work and launch it, as it were, into the stream
of literature, is thought to be guilty of a sin against community” (208). Classical and
medieval rhetorical memory, therefore, were foundational not just to speech and writing
but also to creating and maintaining cultural heritage and community solidarity. From
the ample literature on classical and medieval memory, we might elicit the following principles:

(1) Memories require interpretation.

(2) (Re)collecting memories is a kind of composition, copious and suitable to the occasion.

(3) Memorial activity is a matter of social involvement.

At the heart of these principles was the belief that memory was a civic, cultural, and moral responsibility.

From Silent Memories to Anxious Forgetting: Memory in Modernism and Postmodernism

As celebrated as memory was in pre-modern periods, memory was curiously neglected during modernism and postmodernism—though for starkly different reasons. The growth of method, objectivism, and individualism drastically altered the valuing of copia and collectivism that characterized classical and medieval societies. Modernist epistemology valued singular rather than copious memories and strove toward accuracy. In authorizing singular memories, modernism neglected memories and communities that were in the minority. Although postmodernists react against modernist omissions of underrepresented cultural memories, they, in effect, replicate the erasure of memories and the rhetorical art of memory. More extreme postmodernists, suspicious of cultural memories that indoctrinate and normalize individuals, might reject the value of any memories
Sharon Crowley’s *The Methodical Memory* and her later essay “Modern Rhetoric and Memory” are important works that examine how modern thinking treated memory in terms of a banking concept of learning and remembering. Modernism epistemology, Crowley argues, marks a stark shift from earlier rhetorical thinking that based knowledge on cultural authorities. Individuals were considered to be receptacles that received external stimuli and knowledge. In modern epistemology, knowledge was derived not culturally but introspectively through “method.” Method, a highly individualistic process, began with an introspective version of invention, in which a speaker gained knowledge through sensory experience. In method, “[m]emory is a critical (though often unacknowledged) component of any introspective theory of invention. The rhetorician’s memory of her mental procedures must be accurate; if it is not, the outcome of the entire process is thrown into doubt” (‘Modern Rhetoric and Memory’ 21). Memory’s job continued during the composition stage. The process of investigation dictated the arrangement of a modernist composition, so the modern speaker or writer would remember the process in order to translate it into language. Language, in turn, would accurately and mimesically represent memory. Contrary to contemporary understandings of language as symbolic, modernism treated language as a transparent medium. Crowley elaborates, “Michel Foucault called modernism an age of representation, because its adherents believed that human reason repeated the truth of nature (including human nature) and accurately represented this truth to itself” (32). In sum, modern memory was introspective, mimetic, and accurate.

Paradoxically, memory was crucial for modern thought and discourse even though the modern definition of memory denigrated memory’s function to mere storage
that requires direct translation. It is this simplistic definition that makes rhetorical memory so easy to dismiss. Yet Crowley argues that modern rhetorical memory, in fact, is not rhetorical at all because while modern memory is introspective and mimetic, rhetoric is social and contingent. Moreover, the modern conception of memory is simply wrong. In his seminal 1932 study of memory, psychologist Frederick Bartlett highlights the inaccuracies of research participants’ memories and attributes their memory distortion results from social factors. Based on his experiments, Bartlett concludes that remembering is not a process of animating discrete objects but rather is a kind of “imaginative reconstruction.” Articulated memories, in this sense, are not directly translated but reconstructed based on individuals’ schemata, or the set of past reactions and experiences that predispose them to certain responses (213). Despite these early findings, modern notions of memory remain surprisingly persistent.

Kathleen Welch argues that this modern relegation of memory to the status of a tool is part of larger national forces that treat writing as a tool, a simple how-to discipline. She states, “It is crucial to an understanding of Western literacy at this millennium to recognize that the disappearance of memory and delivery is not a benign removal; rather, it is part of a larger movement in the United States to pablumize the humanities in general, and to vitiate writing in particular by behaving as if it were a mere skill, craft, or useful tool” (18). Welch continues that the neglect of the two canons of memory and delivery, which are more visibly social than the other three canons, mitigates the social significance and potential impact of speech and writing. Modernism had explained away social contingency by assuming that every individual, by nature, engages in identical processes of thought and discourse. The consequence of this modern uniformity was
extreme normalization that deemed differences irrational and deficient. Authorizing a dominant way of thinking and communicating enabled self-justification of oppressive measures. After all, states Crowley, “In Europe and America, modernism was the age of science, enlightenment, and liberal politics. It was also the age of colonization, genocide, and systematic destruction of the environment” (“Modern Rhetoric and Memory” 31).

The persistence of narrow and fallible modernist notions of memory is one reason for the easy dismissal of memory in current rhetorical theory. More important to this study, perpetuating dominant histories often results in the exclusion of ethnic minorities’ cultural memories from dominant narratives.

Postmodernism has taken modernism to task for such omissions. Through critical theory, postmodernists have reacted against authorized modern memories and the consequent omission of Other memories. Suspicious of normative memories that fuel “colonization, genocide, and systematic destruction of the environment,” postmodernists treat memory as suspect, challenging the power assumed by authorized memories. Understanding cultural memory as indoctrination is a direct reaction against modern memory, which was ostensibly accurate, authorized, and normative. Interestingly, in challenging modern memory, the postmodern reaction does not restore a rhetorical memory but replicates the erasure of an art of memory.

As a result, the postmodern composition classroom, argues Marion Joan Francoz, teaches students to purge memories, or the seeds of cultural indoctrination (24-25). Francoz elaborates on the disjunction between postmodernism and memory,

[A] disturbing silence prevails concerning the rift between memory and postmodern rhetorical theory and practice. Yet in seeking reasons for the demise of memoria, this estrangement reveals a far deeper antipathy than
has been conceived by [John Frederick] Reynolds and his colleagues. After all, the whole enterprise of postmodernism has been devoted to the lifting out and dismantling of epistemological foundations, to the deconstructing of the body of privileged knowledge. The memory as a mirror of nature and culture has become an agent of insidious “reproduction.” And when knowledge itself is suspect, the expert is seen as the agent of cultural cloning, “the source of many of the major ills in Western society” (Geisler 54). (12)

Francoz suggests that in questioning privileged memories, postmodernism also questions the art of memory. Attributing the decline of rhetorical memory to a postmodern suspicion of authorized memories, she supports challenges against modernist cultural reproduction but also questions extreme forms of postmodernism and their “fear of cultural enslavement” (26). The solution, she proposes, lay in diversity and “strong competing voices” (25).

In this overview of modern and postmodern understandings of memory, we find the reasons for memory’s curious absence from contemporary rhetorical theory. These epistemologies result in memory’s double erasure, once by modern epistemology that relegates memory to individual mimetic representation and again by extreme forms of postmodernism that fear cultural indoctrination and its memorial conduit. Important to note is that neither modern nor postmodern epistemologies offer an adequate model that accounts for, much less values, the cultural memories of VAC and other groups whose memories are overlooked.

What the postmodern questioning of dominant modern histories does offer us, however, is the understanding that memory is subjective and always partial. In fact, memory distortion is frequently a way for dominant groups to maintain social cohesion. James Kammen, a historian, explains the phenomenon: “Memory distortion has occurred
in important instances because of a deep desire for social or religious autonomy; because the force of public opinion requires more logical coherence between disparate elements in a civic value system; or because of the desire for social accommodation or assimilation among newcomers in a nation of immigrants” (201). For instance, Kammen describes how after the Civil War, a strange silence about the conflict blanketed the nation for decades. While Kammen’s concept of “memory distortion” is useful for eliciting the partial nature of memory, “distortion” perpetuates the modernist binary of accuracy versus distortion in memory.

A postmodern and a pre-modern rhetorician might restate the goal of memory as copia, not accuracy. Postmodern rhetoricians—those who can work beyond the anxiety over memory that Francoz describes—are interestingly like pre-modern rhetoricians in finding copiousness valuable. Multiple and diverse memories mitigate the dominance of a single indoctrinating memory. In particular, striving for copiousness takes shape in the postmodern effort to include multiple voices in ethnography, accomplished by incorporating multiple participant and thematic perspectives (Lincoln). Multiple voices challenge one another and provide a more textured composition than a single authoritative voice offers. Most important to this study, the respect for and the continued fostering of multiple perspectives and multiple memories was the goal for VAC students’ community activism.

Interdisciplinary Interest in Memorial Recovery

Interestingly, accompanying the postmodern turn, there has also been an interdisciplinary inquiry into memories that had formerly been oppressed or repressed,
thereby raising questions about the social function of memory and memory recovery. At least since the 1950s, the interest in recovering cultural memories, personal memories, and, more generally, vernacular memories has resurfaced in multiple disciplines including rhetoric, sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, and neuroscience. Perhaps we find the most visible efforts to authorize diverse and competing cultural memories in attempts at reparations for political traumas. Philosopher Avishai Margalit offers an example of the relationship between gross injustices and systematic forgetting, “[T]he French people, for example, with the help of that great censor Charles de Gaulle, in their attempt to protect the glory of France from the shameful memories of Vichy, repressed those memories and removed them from the public sphere” (5).

Anthropologists Jacob Climo and Maria Catell describe those acts of memory that resist gross injustices, “South Korea protested the description of 10,000 South Korean women taken to Japan to serve soldiers as prostitutes during World War II. The text called them ‘comfort women.’ South Korea said they were ‘sex slaves’” (26). Holocaust museums, the San Francisco exhibit on the “Rape of Nanking,” and pressure on Japan to acknowledge and express remorse to Korean “comfort women” suggest that social responsibility requires us to remember and redress injustices. The uses of memory in these events are consistent with rhetoric, composition, and literary theory’s current embrace of resistance—whether in critical theory, border pedagogy, or other ideological criticisms against those who control cultural capital.

Acts of memory include rhetorical resistance, a heuristic often aligned with ethnic minority rhetoric, but I argue that such acts are certainly more than resistance. The danger in aligning Vietnamese American rhetorical memory with resistance alone is that
this interpretation maintains the stereotype of us as products of conflict, war, and even violence. Ethnic minorities and other historically underrepresented groups not only participate in acts of deconstruction and resistance (which assign us to the roles of aggressor and victim), but we also participate in acts of construction: artistic creation, community building, and social action. In the constructive sense, memory functions as “resourcement,” offering an alternative construction not necessarily in direct contradiction to an existing claim (Foss and Griffin).

Memory resourcements introduce alternative memories and value plural perspectives, but rhetorical action is not defined by its opposition. Climo and Catell offer one example of resourcement, where South African residents responded to the myopic white histories of apartheid society. Former residents of a district in Cape Town created, in the District Six Museum, “an exhibit of the district’s old street signs and other memorabilia rescued from the physical destruction of what had been, before apartheid, a vibrant multiracial, multiethnic community” (29-30). Such resourcements of memory do not pit the residents against an Other; rather, the resourcements propose an alternative truth. Further, anthropologist Luke Lassiter adds that resourcements do not simply re-envision the past but also act on the present. In his research on speeches about past heroes and traditional songs among three Native American tribes, Kiowas, Comanches, and Kiowa-Apaches, Lassiter shows that the authors and singers engendered “community consciousness, an identity powerfully existing in the present” (138).

Clarifying the concept of memory in terms of its social function becomes even more immediately pressing when we consider how officialized American histories have
had consequences for ethnic minority people. Across ethnic groups, histories are riddled with dismissive neglect as well as nationally sanctioned policies of exclusion.

**Vietnamese Americans and the Imperative for Cultural Memory**

The neglect or negative representations of Vietnamese Americans in mainstream American histories, curricula, and popular media have created a demand for recollections. Rewriting cultural memories to include Vietnamese American experiences have provided a basis for VAC students and, more generally, among Asian Americans to come together.

Throughout U.S. history, Asians and Asian Americans have been invited into mainstream America for national economic gain or to serve as model citizens, proof that the American Dream works. Lisa Lowe, in *Immigration, Citizenship, and Racialization*, points to the “history of immigration exclusion acts that restricted and regulated the possibilities of Asian American settlement and cultural expression—the exclusion of Chinese in 1882, of Asian Indians in 1917, of Koreans and Japanese in 1924, and of Phillipine immigrants in 1934” (6-7). Treatment of Asian Americans “as immigrant, as the ‘foreigner-within,’” continued even after the “repeal of actual laws prohibiting Asians from citizenship” (5). Even in rhetoric and compositions studies, Catherine Prendergast notes that, “Asian American students don’t exist in composition studies—they are either ESL students or unnamed (white). The discrimination that Asian Americans face (in some cases through their positioning as ‘model minority’) is culturally unintelligible in composition’s discursive space” (51).

In the *VAC Newsletter*, a letter from a Congressperson’s office makes obvious the Asian-American-as-foreigner-within mentality. In 1993, a VAC student wrote a letter to
a local Vietnamese Councilperson and a Congressperson to object to their proposal to deport Vietnamese immigrants arrested for illegal activities, arguing that the crime problem—specifically, the gang problem—originated in large-scale social problems and not individual aberrations. While a letter of reply from the Congressperson’s office expressed an appreciation for “the Vietnamese community and other immigrants I am honored to represent,” the letter also represented Vietnamese Americans as ungrateful immigrants. The letter, reprinted in VAC Newsletter, reads,

Dear Friends:

If an immigrant from Russia, Ireland, Vietnam, Switzerland, Nigeria, El Salvador, Pakistan or any other country breaks our laws, especially as a member of an organized gang, he or she should be deported, hopefully to spend time in the prison of his or her country of origin. We are a nation of immigrants and proud of it. We stand for freedom and are a haven to the oppressed. We are the land of opportunity—not for criminals to prey upon others—but for people who want to better themselves and their families through work. The Vietnamese community and other immigrants I am honored to represent have contributed greatly to our country’s well-being. I have made a great effort to make clear the difference between Vietnamese and other “legal” immigrants and refugees, on one hand, versus illegal aliens and criminals on the other. It is a great disservice for anyone to blur the distinction between these groups. Your statement on deportation of gang members is hurtful to the Vietnamese community. It also indicates a lack of appreciation for the generosity of the American people who have the most open immigration laws in the world. No other country comes close.

Sincerely,
[Name]
Member of Congress (emphasis mine)¹

Despite his diplomatic identification with immigrants, the author distinguished between unappreciative Vietnamese American immigrants and “the American people” in the sentence that I stress above. The implication was that the Vietnamese American students should be grateful to “the generosity of the American people,” as if the Vietnamese
Americans were not themselves the “American people.” This distinction was not lost on the VAC student who wrote a rebuttal printed in the same newsletter issue,

> As you say in your letter, ‘We are a nation of immigrants and proud of it.’ Thus, you and I are immigrants, or have an immigrant background. But your proposal is race-specific. It can be applied to me but not to you. How can we feel as though we are a part of American society, that we belong and are progressing, when we have legislation that can punish us differently or more harshly from mainstream Americans because of our color?²

This VAC student unraveled the Congressperson’s premise, revealing the pervasive perceptions of Vietnamese Americans as foreigners.

> For Vietnamese Americans, popular media, educational curricula, hate crimes, and corporate America’s abuse of Southeast Asian labor perpetuate the oppression and repression of diverse Vietnamese American cultural memories. Mainstream American narratives restrict Vietnamese Americans to a cultural memory centered on war. The most dominant narratives about the Vietnamese Americans come from Vietnam War films that glamorize American heroism, neglect South Vietnamese involvement, and demonize North Vietnamese soldiers. One-dimensional depictions not only perpetuate stereotypes, but they also make us lose sight of the complexity of politics, justice, and humanity. In the Vietnam War film *We Were Soldiers*, for instance, the storyline foregrounds American strength and suffering (via Mel Gibson’s character), yet the mass media by and large neglected the real life persecution of one of the Vietnamese actors. After this actor filmed *We Were Soldiers* and *Green Dragon*, about a California refugee camp in the mid-1970s, the Vietnamese government accused him of betraying his country, revoked his passport for five years, and curtailed his acting career. This case
exemplifies how it becomes easy to sympathize with fiction rather than identify with people.

Mainstream American representations of Vietnamese Americans as evil soldiers, victims of war, prostitutes, and passive women fail to account for the diversity of Vietnamese Americans in the United States. In a special issue on Vietnamese American diaspora in the academic journal *Amerasia*, Linda Võ, an Asian American studies scholar, introduces the special issue’s several articles. CitingVu Pham’s essay “Antedating and Anchoring Vietnamese America: Toward a Vietnamese American Historiography,” Võ comments on how Vietnamese American history typically pivots around the Vietnam War:

> Many scholars have mistakenly placed the historical marker on the fall of Saigon—April 30, 1975—as the beginnings of the Vietnamese American experience. However, there was an American presence in Vietnam and a Vietnamese presence in the United States prior to this period, with the latter including military trainees, diplomats, international students, and war brides or international brides. (xiii)

Yet people of Vietnamese heritage have resided in the U.S. at least since World War II, when the number who immigrated to the U.S. rose from 200 between 1952 and 1959 to 3,000 between 1960 and 1969 and 15,000 between 1970 and 1974. In his historiography, Pham claims that the U.S., in hopes of suppressing communism, encouraged Vietnamese international students to come to America during the Cold War and that history’s silence about this population was due to a sociopolitical climate of fear. Pham’s recognition of pre-1975 immigration is essential to redefining Vietnamese American cultural memories because “during decades prior to the refugee exodus of 1975, Vietnamese Americans published many magazines, newsletters, and other documents to promote a better
understanding of Vietnam as a country rather than merely a war, and to help themselves adjust to life in the U.S.” (150). By shifting the dates of Vietnamese American history back several decades from the traditional marker of 1975, Pham defines Vietnamese Americans in the context of the creation of heritage as opposed to the context of war and violence.

Võ adds that Vietnamese American diversity only becomes more complex as time passes,

Even those who have arrived since 1975 are not homogeneous and include: adoptees who left in 1975 through Operation Babylift; refugees including many ethnic Chinese, who escaped Vietnam by land or by boat; immigrants who came through the Orderly Departure Program; mixed race individuals and their families who arrived through Amerasian Programs; former political prisoners and their families who entered through the Humanitarian Operation Program; recent immigrants who are reunified with family members, including transnational brides; and contemporary adoptees. (xiii)

In fact, even though the VAC students discussed in this study came out of the same generation, they mirrored this diversity. While many students’ families had immigrated to the U.S. by boat and through refugee camps, one was born in the United States, another was born in Canada, and a third was raised in France. Even among those who had immigrated, the conditions of their immigration varied—some had family members whose immigration into the U.S. was staggered, some had only their immediate families in the U.S., some already had families in the U.S. prior to their immigration and thus were able to receive emotional and financial support from close social networks. These immigration conditions name a few of the ways that students were diverse, not to mention their economic status, academic and career interests, and sexual orientation.
In an effort to accommodate the diverse interests of Vietnamese Americans, a community member living near University of California, Irvine, also a former professor in Vietnam, proposed that an archive be established. In 1985, University of California, Irvine accepted this community initiative, creating an archive of Southeast Asian collections. Local community members and others across the nation and abroad donated materials to the archive. Anne, who in 1993 became VAC’s staff adviser, was appointed as the head librarian who managed the collection and the acquisition of additional materials. Recently, in 2003, Anne and a colleague, Dorothy B. Fujita-Rony, co-authored a scholarly article explaining that the archive meant to accommodate the diverse and perhaps competing interests in Vietnamese American history. One reason for the rather narrow perspective that American narratives take concerning Vietnamese Americans, a perspective that pivots around the Vietnam War, is the political and social contention surrounding the Vietnam War. They argue,

Take, for example, African American soldiers who might have experienced a different reality than their European American counterparts because of race, or Asian American activists in the United States who might have made specific political linkages about the “U.S. in Asian and Asia in the U.S.” as one contemporary article noted. These groups often have multiple if not competing claims to “Vietnam” as a site of memory. Simultaneously, less discussed in mainstream culture as a whole is the significant presence of Vietnamese Americans themselves in this country. (Fujita-Rony and Frank 153)

The authors go on to articulate the need to make space, to physically make space in libraries, for these competing interests—a goal that singular modernist and nationalist histories have not strived toward. Additionally, what is interesting about the archive, she explains, is that it was a grassroots effort, established because community members wanted a resource where their cultural memories could be accessed. The authors write,
“As a ‘grassroots’ collection for which community support remains primary, it is a
testimony to the determination of Vietnamese Americans and other groups connected
with Southeast Asian American immigrant and refugee experiences to preserve history
for present and future generations” (162).

The point that I stress here is that mainstream American histories, filtered through
modern and postmodern understandings of memory, have erased Vietnamese American
and other minority groups’ cultural memories. Modern conceptions of memory
streamline American history into dominant national narratives that leave little room for
the diversity and competing interests that Vietnamese American scholars foreground.
And while postmodernism questions the dominant narratives, extreme forms of
postmodernism reveal an anxiety over cultural indoctrination that also leaves little room
for authorizing underrepresented memories. We therefore confront the problem that, in
spite of the impact of the over one million Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans living
in the United States today, mainstream American historical narratives and scholarly
traditions have largely ignored Vietnamese American and Asian American communities,
and this silence implies that we are not American enough, we have not contributed to
American culture, or we are otherwise negligible. VAC students and other Vietnamese
Americans, however, have expressed an avid interest in revision for complexity and
plurality. The project of recovering and appreciating cultural memories, not specific to
the Vietnamese American community and not specific to rhetoric and composition
studies, responds to the gaps left by modern and postmodern epistemologies.
Memory’s Form in VAC

As I turn now to analyze memory in social terms, it becomes necessary to define the forms that memory takes in VAC students’ discourse. Earlier historical studies of memory drew from textbook instructions about the teaching and learning of memorial techniques, but my examining memory through a social lens requires taking a look at the social manifestations of memory. In a social sense, memory takes two interrelated forms in VAC students’ discourse:

1. *memorial entextualizations*, or the spoken and written references to something from the past that is absent in the present, and
2. the *call for cultural memory*, or the making of institutional conditions that enable the existence and sharing of multiple and diverse memories.

Winifred Horner’s term “cultural memory,” or those institutions that enable the collection and future recollection of memory to occur (e.g., libraries, schools, popular media, etc.), calls our attention to institutions as sites of memory (Reynolds 11). These two manifestations of memory often appeared together in discourse events where students rallied for political awareness and community action.

For instance, a speech act by Bryan, the 2001-2002 VAC Chair, illustrates how the functional aspect of memory (cultural memory) and the textual reference to memory (memorial entextualizations) come together. Early in Spring 2002, Bryan introduced a newly released high school curriculum on Vietnamese American history to VAC general members. The curriculum had just been released to the press, and Bryan wanted to inform fellow VAC members about this advocacy for Vietnamese Americans in schools.
As he argued for the value of the curriculum for mainstream high school education, he stated,

Bryan: Just think about it.
The first Americans were boat people just like us.
Right?
They just came on the Mayflower.

Bryan’s statement draws from two memorial entextualizations: first, the explicit spoken reference to Mayflower immigrants and, second, the implicit reference to the written curriculum’s introduction of Vietnamese immigrants who arrived by boat in the United States post-1975. Juxtaposing Vietnamese “boat people” and the canonized Mayflower “boat people,” Bryan’s arrangement of memorial entextualizations authorizes Vietnamese American immigrant history.

Secondly, the speech act is an argument for cultural memory. In other words, the Vietnamese American curriculum potentially serves as an institutional site for memory that enables Vietnamese American memories to be remembered, shared, and extended.

During an interview, when I asked Bryan what issues Vietnamese American students continue to confront, he responded

Bryan: Being able to look at what we learn in the educational system is important.
Is it reflective of our communities?
Is that what we want to teach other people that, say, aren’t Vietnamese?
Is that what we want to be known for?
The war?
Is that it?
Within high school, when you think about history, you learn—
If you’re not Vietnamese, then what you learn about Vietnamese is that they’re poor people.
They’re a product of the war.
We’re more than that.

Bryan’s suggestion that public schools should teach students about Vietnamese American history indicates how entextualizations of memory—or the curricular texts that report Vietnamese American memories—is tethered to the issue of cultural memory. The curriculum serves as an institutional site for memory that potentially has positive consequences for Vietnamese American memorial recovery.

Notably, Bryan’s response raises an important issue that should be addressed in this section on the forms of memory: what is the relationship between memory and history? A central article in memory scholarship by Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” differentiates between memory, which Nora deems living, and history, which he calls dead. However, in Bryan’s response, the history taught in public schools is living in that it has consequences for how others perceive Vietnamese Americans as products of war, as victims and aggressors. For this reason, this study treats memory and history in the same way. Both are living and have the potential to recognize, authorize, and pass on Vietnamese Americans’ past.

From 1993 through 2002, VAC students confronted and redefined several of the cultural, political, and social consequences of myopic mainstream American histories: UC Irvine’s failure to offer sufficient Asian American studies courses prior to 1993 and Vietnamese language courses prior to 2000, courses that would support students’ efforts to communicate with their parents and the local Vietnamese community; textbook and popular media representations of Vietnamese Americans as social deviants including prostitutes, sadists, gangsters, criminals, and, more generally, the poor; educational
curricula that narrowly represent Vietnamese Americans as a mere aftermath of war; and a cultural amnesia that has sometimes enabled racial slurs, violence, and corporate oppression to recur with relative impunity as if each occurrence were a rarity. It was these negative representations of Vietnamese Americans in America’s cultural memory that VAC students revised through recollection.

In reclaiming Vietnamese American cultural memories, VAC students were striving for *copia*, a classical rhetorical criteria which values diverse and competing interests that do not easily fit into a linear narrative. Copiousness, a goal in antiquity, asks us to look at the same subject in multiple ways and thereby emerge with a more textured understanding of that subject than we would have with only one narrative. Such *copia* respected students’ re-collections, re-collections that, in turn, provided a basis for social identifications. VAC’s memorial events ranged from demanding that their university curricula represent their cultural memories to historicizing Vietnamese American representation in popular media to using rhetorical strategies that would enable them to share cultural memories with a broad audience. In order to sift out the more specific principles of a rhetorical art of memory, let us now turn to a close reading of one memorial event: a VAC student’s account of a protest against Senator John McCain’s use of the racial slur “gook.”

**Reviving and Revising Rhetorical Memory: The Case of the McCain Protest**

On March 1, 2000, a member of VAC, Duc, led fellow members, Asian American students, and other activists in a protest against Senator John McCain’s unapologetic use of the racial epithet “gook.” That year, McCain had been campaigning for the
Republican presidential nomination, and one of his rhetorical strategies was to forego his six-year imprisonment as a POW in the Vietnam War. Referring to his North Vietnamese captors as “gooks,” McCain created an alliance with both Vietnam veterans and many of the South Vietnamese diaspora who had survived the war. One liberal local newspaper, the *Orange County Weekly*, described McCain’s utterance soon after the protest:

Most recently, McCain uttered the slur on Feb. 17 and openly encouraged journalists to report the fact in Vietnam-veteran-loaded South Carolina. “I hate the gooks,” said McCain, a Vietnam War POW more than a quarter-century ago, “and I will hate them for as long as I live…and you can quote me.” Five days later, after the South Carolina primary, he issued a press release apology, claiming that “gooks”—a derogatory term primarily used by American soldiers against Asians for more than a century—referred only to his North Vietnamese captors. Many elder statesmen of the local Vietnamese community—happy that the fellow Republican and vocal anti-communist was coming to town—decided to accept that explanation.

As the article indicates, there was a strong perception that those Vietnamese immigrants who had lived through and fought in the war had a strong Republican and anti-communist sentiment and would therefore support McCain. To date, much of the Vietnamese and Vietnamese American population in the U.S. remains Republican although there is certainly more political variability among the Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans who grew up after the Vietnam War.

But McCain’s use of the racial epithet created a divisive split in the community, where younger Vietnamese Americans took offense to McCain’s irresponsible use of a racial epithet. Although McCain did apologize for offending people by stating that he meant the epithet to refer only to his North Vietnamese captors, VAC students and other Asian American activists saw his apology as half-hearted, feeling that he should not use
the term to describe anyone. When McCain stopped in Little Saigon during his campaign, Duc, fellow VAC students, and other activists (primarily students) also showed up and protested his comments. Wearing handmade t-shirts labeled “American Gook,” these student activists chanted their objection to McCain. According to Duc, their aim was twofold, to educate the community about McCain’s use of a racial epithet and its harmfulness to the ethnic community and to demand that McCain retract his use of the term.

Duc’s account of the McCain protest during an interview in 2002 enriches our understanding of memory not because it is representative of all VAC students’ memorial practices—these practices were too varied—but because it demonstrates the primary principles of their memorial practice, also the principles elicited from classical and medieval rhetorical theory:

(1) Memories require interpretation.

(2) (Re)collecting memories is a kind of composition, copious and suitable to the occasion.

(3) Memorial activity is a matter of social involvement.

In the close reading that follows, I shift the focus of classical rhetorical memory away from mnemonic techniques and reframe rhetorical memory in terms of its social function. Whereas modernism resulted in the erasure of the rhetorical art of memory and the erasure of minority groups’ cultural memories, pre-modern (and potentially postmodern) rhetorical theory’s emphasis on copia offer a potentially transformative way of authorizing historically underrepresented groups and their memories. Duc’s re-collection of “gook” as a racial slur was a call for solidarity. He had wanted community members
to rally around their shared cultural memories as Vietnamese Americans and to rally against the violence of racial slurs. What resulted from Duc’s invocation of a cultural memory was solidarity—for him, but also against him.

**Principle 1: Memories Require Interpretation**

In June 2002, over two years after the McCain protest, I interviewed Duc in the courtyard outside his part-time workplace, a movie theatre across the street from campus. At the time, Duc was a fourth-year college student majoring in political science. Early in my interview with him, I asked Duc to describe his most memorable literacy experiences, and he playfully replied, “I have a lot of memories. And of course, to answer that question, I would have to process it in my thinking now, my current thinking, which includes all memories created after that first memory, that memory that we are talking about.” Duc’s comment echoes one of the foundational principles of rhetorical memory. Like words, memories and memorial entextualizations are signs and therefore require interpretation. The point to be stressed, moreover, is that interpretation requires a historically contextualized understanding of how a memory sign is used. In other words, how do the audience’s memories of past uses of a sign impact the sign’s present meaning?

In the McCain protest, the central sign that requires interpretation is the racial epithet “gook.” The process of interpretation includes an investigation into how “gook” has been used in the past. Asian American studies scholar William Wei claims that increasing popularity of “gookism” awakened an Asian American consciousness in the
1690s. The term “gook,” first used during the Philippine-American War from 1899 through 1902, initially referred to Filipino people with no mix of European heritage: 

Historically, the appellation has been applied to Haitians, Nicaraguans, Costa Ricans, and other people of color, but since the Korean War it has been used mainly by U.S. soldiers to denigrate Asian people. It implied that they were something less than human and could be dispatched with few qualms. It was used in the Vietnam War to prepare soldiers psychologically to maim and kill Southeast Asians, according to some Asian American veterans. (38)

The term, asserts Wei, served to dehumanize Asians and Asian Americans, eventually resulting in the loss of civilian lives in Vietnam. As soldiers carried “gookism” beyond the war into their daily lives, the epithet became more widespread. During anti-war movements, Asian Americans grew to see U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam War as operating out of a sense of ethnic superiority. If not stemming from attitudes of superiority, the violence of the Vietnam War was at least spurred on by “gookism.”

In order to “read” the term “gook,” Principle 1 suggests that readers need to investigate or follow the memorial traces left by society’s past uses of the sign. As mentioned earlier, classical and medieval rhetoricians like Aristotle, Albertus Magnus, and Thomas Aquinas treated recollection as a conscious act of investigation (Carruthers 20). The investigation, however, does not necessarily lead readers through the same “traces.” McCain’s lack of empathy with the Vietnamese American activist position was due to his own recollection, an investigation that traced “gook” through the memories of U.S. soldiers in the Vietnam War. In contrast, because Duc’s interpretation of the memory of “gookism” stemmed from Asian American activism, Duc argued against using the term at all—whether referring to a Vietnamese American or a North Vietnamese communist.
With his reading of McCain’s utterance of “gook,” Duc approached VAC Cabinet officers, asking them to join him in a protest against McCain and identify with Duc’s objection to McCain’s flouting of cultural memory. His account of the appeal follows:

Duc: Shit, that was tough,
      that was tough.
      I didn’t receive word that he was gonna be in town until like
two days before.
      I was trying to mobilize and stuff,
      and at the time,
      I was on Cabinet in VAC.

Haivan: Was this when you were doing the newsletter thing?

Duc: Yeah,
supposedly,
something like that I think.
I went up to the cabinet members,
and I said, “Oh, please be out here,
you know,
we need the numbers,"
and cabinet members,
mostly guys,
said,
“We have an intramural basketball game that night.
We’re playing <?>.”
So, they can’t be out there,
right?
Because they’re playing an intramural basketball game.

Haivan: Well,
      back up a little.
      How did you describe the issue to them,
or did they already know?

Duc: They pretty much knew.
      And if they didn’t,
      I told them that,
you know,
it’s, it’s wrong.

((Children walk by, making clanging noises.))
Duc: We can’t allow a public figure, any public figures, anybody that has influence upon people (Long pause as noise diminishes.) to use that kind of language, to use the term gook so casually. And to convince our community that gook equals communist? Because it does not. And how Vincent Chin was killed because of racial slurs and anti-, like, people-of-color sentiment?

((Noise rises again.))

Duc: Thien Minh Ly, you know our own Vietnamese American brother who was killed. And how racial slurs dehumanize people and lead to hate crimes. And I can’t believe what I got was that we’re playing a freakin’ basketball game. And I told them, of course, you know, I’m like, go-, I had to threaten them. I said, “If you guys aren’t gonna be out there, don’t have the organization. It’s pointless, you know. You should all just, like join some other club and play basketball because if VAC claims to be a political organization and to represent the community, we have to be out there. And if you guys aren’t out there, I’ll be very, very mad.”

Duc tried to persuade fellow cabinet members of his claim that McCain’s use of “gook” was harmful to Asian American and other ethnic minority communities. One of the premises that supported this claim centered on the interpretation of “gook.” Duc’s statement, “And to convince our community that gook equals communist?” foregrounds the military context in which McCain defined gook. Shifting the lens from McCain’s
source of military-based memories, however, Duc aligned the history of “gook” with an activist memory of “racial slurs” and “anti-people-of-color sentiment."

Duc continued to follow the memorial traces of “gookism” through two hate crimes that are well-known in Vietnamese American communities, citing racial epithets as both an aggravating factor if not a cause in these tragic events. He stated, “And how Vincent Chin was killed because of racial slurs and anti-, like, people-of-color sentiment? Thien Minh Ly, you know our own Vietnamese American brother who was killed. And how racial slurs dehumanize people and lead to hate crimes.” Vincent Chin was a victim of hate crime memorialized in the documentary, Who Killed Vincent Chin? In 1982, in the midst of anti-Japanese attitudes resulting from the depressed auto industry in Michigan, a white employee from Chrysler and his son beat a Chinese American man to death with a bat. The documentary introduces the conflict as beginning with the murderers’ comments about Chin’s race, which they mistakenly associated with Japanese auto industry competitors.

The more recent case of Vietnamese American Thien Minh Ly, in 1996, was also a hate crime framed by racial epithets. Gunner Lindberg and his friend beat, stomped, and stabbed Ly, a 24-year-old who was rollerblading near a community tennis court in California. According to the Los Angeles Times, Lindberg wrote in a letter to a friend in prison, “’Oh, I killed a jap a while ago” and detailed how he had killed Ly. The Times continues, “In a four-page letter filled with casual mentions of birthday plans, a friend’s new baby, and the need for new tattoos, Gunner J. Lindberg may have also laid out a murder confession that led police directly to his door in their search for the killer of the 24-year-old Ly.”
Alluding to the disturbing nature of both hate crimes in the context of McCain’s “gook” statement, Duc foregrounded the violent anger directed against Asians and Asian Americans, as in Chin’s case, and the casual dehumanizing of Asians and Asian Americans, as in Ly’s case. McCain’s directing “gook” against his North Vietnamese captors captured both of these meanings, the harsh anger and the casual utterance of a racial slur. Moreover, those who have seen the documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* know that the atrocities of Chin’s murder resulted in a national Asian American movement, indicating the race problem was a national phenomenon and not the aberration of two men. The trial against Chin’s murderers resulted in a three-year probation and a $3,000 fine. The ease with which two men could beat to death a Chinese American sparked a national controversy, eventually leading to a civil rights case against the men, but they were both exonerated. By alluding to this famous case, Duc also alluded to the Asian American activism that grew out of the trial and activists’ efforts to collectivize against injustice.

Following these traces of “gookism” throughout history, we are left with the question of how the term “gook” potentially impacts our present, and it was this question that Duc pursued. The *Orange County Weekly* reported Duc as stating, “The fact is that the American public can’t differentiate between his captors and us. We look just like them. Slurs are dehumanizing. They hurt our community. There’s no excuse—even for a POW, a senator, a public figure running for president—to use the term.” Duc was conscious of the impact that McCain as a “public figure” with governmental authority would have on future interpretations and uses of the term, and he objected to potential ways that McCain’s statement could perpetuate racial slurs and dehumanizing of Asian
Americans. Duc’s attention to McCain’s ethos suggests that listeners and readers would interpret “gook” within the context of McCain’s history, within the history and experience of the U.S. military’s memories. Largely ignoring the memories of Vietnamese Americans and other Asian Americans, Duc argued, would have harmful effects on our communities, aggravating the anger, violence, and dehumanization of Asian Americans. Whether or not McCain intended “gook” to refer to North Vietnamese soldiers, the fact of the matter is that no one can distinguish, in a physical sense, between a Viet Cong soldier and Vietnamese Americans.

What Duc’s protest against McCain’s utterance shows us is that signs, especially names and labels, index a context of memories that impacts our understanding of the term. This matter of interpreting names, what names are acceptable and what names accurately depict ethnic identity, did not stop with racial slurs. Rather, names had histories that impacted how VAC students defined their ethnic identity especially since the college years appeared to be a time when many of these students searched for their ethnic identity. No name, word, or other sign is without indexed memories. For this reason, reading memory texts requires an investigation into how the memory sign had recurred within specific contextual memories and to understand how writers and speakers frame signs within these contexts.

**Principle 2: (Re)collecting Memories Is a Form of Composition**

Although I have been analyzing “gook” as a memorial term, we should recognize that Duc’s interview account of the McCain protest is also a memorial text, one that reflects copiousness. In the interview, I asked Duc to tell me about the McCain protest.
Rather than beginning with McCain’s utterance, however, he re-collected memories from several contexts. In other words, he reframed his narrative about the protest three times, first as the persuasive dialogue with fellow VAC students discussed above. Drawing on the same memorial premises, he then reframed the narrative as a persuasive speech event in the Little Saigon rally:

Duc: I spoke in Vietnamese on the, on the bullhorn =

Haivan: What did you say?

Duc: To the people at the rally, and I was explaining it to them in Vietnamese. (lines omitted)
I was saying how this term is unacceptable, how terms like this lead to hate crimes and murders, and I brought up Thien Minh Ly. I brought up how people can’t tell the difference between a Vietnamese commie, or, or VC, and you or I, you or me.

Haivan: How did they react then?

Duc: They were listening. They were listening. And we were rallying, too. I got, I got the bullhorn, and I was like, “Are you a gook?” to, like, those people who were, like, there to support McCain. And they were actually on our side. You know, we were rallying, you know?

Haivan: So they fluctuated?

Duc: We got a rally. And all of a sudden, I don’t know what happened. I think, I think the McCain people, like, got in there and started that whole mess, I don’t know.
But they probably did because I was rallying people, too, like to not accept that term. You know, because they know it, too. They totally know it. They totally know that you can’t tell the difference. They totally know that that term is not a good term for our community here in America.

These two contextual frames for his memory and the cultural memories within the narrative reveal the complex layers of intertextual memories at work. Copiousness is not a matter of simply listing many memories, many versions of the same story; copia that is rhetorical also requires that the copiousness have a purpose. In the first framing, Duc spent relatively more time arguing about the harmfulness of “gookism,” the resulting hate crimes, and VAC’s relationship to these political issues, and he framed all this with an explanation of VAC students’ responses about a basketball game. In contrast, in the second frame, Duc spent relatively less time on the premises of his argument and more time on the audience’s participation. By stressing he was speaking Vietnamese in the excerpt above and several other moments in the interview and by stressing the audience’s involvement, Duc emphasized that his argument was not directed at McCain so much as it was directed at the Vietnamese community who had shown up in support of McCain. And furthermore, many in the Vietnamese community had supported the activists’ efforts, being informed of what McCain had said and being persuaded that it was harmful.

Shifting frames a third time, Duc then described a conversation he had with a disillusioned friend:
Duc: We went out there. And another thing I remember from that was a friend of mine— Everyone was really upset at the reaction from the comm-, at the reaction from the people who were Vietnamese American who went to rally in support of McCain. And one of my friends got so upset, and he, he was telling me that we just need to wait until they, being older Vietnamese Americans who don’t understand or whatever, to die. And I was like, [my God].

Haivan: [What do you] mean “wait for them to die?”

So:. Duc: Wait for them to die because, because they’re slowing us down, because they don’t know, because they’re countering us or whatever.

Haivan: So before you protest, you should wait til they die?

Duc: No, no, no, no, no, like, like, wait til they die out. Like, that’s when [we’ll progress.]

Haivan: [And then what will] happen?

Duc: I don’t know. That made me very angry. That made me extremely angry. And I was trying to tell him, “No. That’s not it.” Because we were there to educate them, you know? We were there to educate the community. We didn’t know the media was going to be, like, swarming around us.

Duc’s account, as a memorial text, reveals how copiousness can result in more textured readings of an event. Duc used copious cultural memories and personal memories to
frame his meaning. The three frames crafted three interrelated rhetorical assertions: VAC students should prioritize community activism; the Vietnamese community had supported his efforts; and Duc’s intention had more to do with empowering the Vietnamese community than an abstract cause, i.e., “Because we were there to educate them.” Moreover, through these triply reframed accounts, we understand the multiple participants involved in this event: Duc and other activists, VAC students, Vietnamese community members, and a disillusioned friend. McCain, in fact, has little agency in these accounts and recedes into the background of Duc’s telling. With these framings, we can read Duc’s purpose as one that was more focused on community activism for the community rather than against McCain.

Duc’s reframings, therefore, do not only reflect copiousness but also reflect compositional strategies that respond to the context and purpose at hand. Since cultural memories are entextualized and composed for specific purposes and those compositions are always subjective, the rhetorical focus of cultural memories can alleviate postmodern anxiety over cultural indoctrination.

Principle 3: Memorial Activity Is a Matter of Social Involvement

Finally, memorial activity is a matter of social involvement. For Duc, the point of the McCain protest had to do with the social impact of McCain’s “gook” utterance. The social impact of McCain’s utterance could be twofold: first, that McCain and his audience would read “gook” as something innocuous, what a patriot, war hero, and political authority had uttered, and/or second, that Duc and his fellow activists meant to foster social involvement, a dialogue between themselves and the Vietnamese
community, in order to claim agency over the “sign” and its historical recurrence. Duc was trying to explain how Asian and Asian Americans had historically been tangled up in “gookism,” and, moreover, he was trying to share the cultural memory of “gookism” with the ethnic community. Philosopher Avishai Margalit aptly explains, “The significance of the event for us depends on our being personally connected with what happened, and hence we share not only the memory of what happened but also our participation in it, as it were” (53). In this sense, Duc aimed to increase community members’ participation in claiming agency over “gook” as a sign with a memory.

Margalit describes this social involvement in memory as a mnemonic division of labor, where what is important is not just the memorial referent but participation in the memorial activity (51-53). Composition as a memorial process potentially fosters participation. Because each participant’s memory is necessarily partial, participation in memory presumes a spirit of humility and cooperation. Toni Morrison comments on the potential participatory nature of memorial composition in her own writing:

My compact with the reader is not to reveal an already established reality (literary or historical) that he or she and I agree with beforehand. I don’t want to assume or exercise that kind of authority. I regard that as patronizing, although many people regard it as safe and reassuring. And because my métier is Black, the artistic demands of Black culture are such that I cannot patronize, control, or pontificate. In the Third World cosmology as I perceive it, reality is not already constituted by my literary predecessors in Western culture. If my work is to confront a reality of the West, it must centralize and animate information discredited by the west—discredited not because it is not true or useful or even of some racial value, but because it is information held by discredited people, information dismissed as “lore” or “gossip” or “magic” or “sentiment.” (388).

In the McCain protest, Duc’s purpose also went against this kind of “patronizing”—an attitude reflected in the disillusioned students’ comments that they should wait until the
older oppositional generation died. Rather, Duc used cultural memories to work toward establishing involvement and solidarity in the present.

The following account of a climactic conflict between Duc and an audience member who opposed the Asian American students’ activist stance does not include memorial entextualizations but rather reaffirms how those earlier memorial entextualizations (references to “gookism,” Vincent Chin, and Thien Minh Ly) functioned socially. Here, memory became a cultural affair where Duc’s purpose was to have the community jointly call attention to the harmfulness of the term “gook.” Duc explained that some opposition in the audience had started calling him and his fellow protesters “communists” with the rationale that if they were opposing McCain, a POW held by the North Vietnamese, then they must be communists. With the protest taking place in the commercial center of Little Saigon, where people had fled because of North Vietnamese persecution and violence, the allegation of being “commies” had heavy consequences. The crowd became violent, pushing the protesters into oncoming traffic:

Duc: All of a sudden, it became a whole crowd of people. I don’t know h-
All of a sudden, just instantly. They started pushing us.
And then, like, a lot of my friends kind of protected me as I continued to speak. (laughs)
And

Haivan: What were you saying?

Duc: And I was still continuing my little spiel.

Haivan: In Vietnamese, right?

Duc: Yeah, and then we started chanting, you know. And then they continued to push us.
And they poked us and they pinched and people spat on us and they threw stuff at us. And they pushed us onto oncoming traffic on Main Avenue. And at the same time, while that was all happening, when we first started rallying, you know, all the cameras are pointed onto the stage, onto that media press thing up high, I guess bleachers or whatever.

Haivan: Where was this?

Duc: Right in front of Asian Center Mall.

Haivan: O:h.

Duc: Right in the heart of Little Saigon. So: dramatic. And all of the cameras turned around. And all of a sudden, it was a mixture of people poking us and spitting on us and throwing stuff at us and yelling at us and saying we were commies and going ((makes an angry face)) like that.

Haivan: In English or in Vietnamese?

Duc: In Vietnamese and in English. I spoke in English, too. And we weren’t all Vietnamese Americans, you know. There were Japanese Americans, Filipino Americans, you know. There were Chinese Americans.

Haivan: Mostly college students?

Duc: Yeah, mostly college students from UCI. And a lot of people I didn’t even know who got the flyer and, “Hey, you know, totally, we’ll be out there” and whatever. And they showed up. And they pushed, they pushed all of us. Some guy got arrested for, he was running, running at me to knock me over whatever. He didn’t get me,
but a cop arrested him.  
And then we started chanting, “Do not arrest him.”

Haivan: Why is that?

Duc: **Because** we felt that, or I,  
I think we all did because we started all chanting that, you know,  
probably for different reasons or maybe the same reason?  
I don’t know, you know,  
and I can’t **know** what other people are thinking.  
(laughs)

Haivan: Right,  
**Your** reason your reason.

Both: (laughter)

Duc: My, my reason why.

Haivan: We can start going in circles again.

Duc: I know.  
My reason was, he just didn’t understand.  
He was my same age, you know,  
and we could easily talk to him,  
and he could easily understand us  
and easily identify why we shouldn’t allow McCain to use this  
or to be unapologetic about using it.

Despite the fact that a man was charging him, Duc remained steadfast in his intention to communicate with rather than defeat those who disagreed. He continued to uphold his rhetorical purpose of social involvement as he explained to community members why McCain’s use of “gook” was harmful. Bringing up memory was a way of inciting participation, involvement, and solidarity among the Vietnamese and Vietnamese American community. The struggle here was about Vietnamese American and other Asian American student activists entextualizing their cultural memories and literally
placing their memorial practices center stage, where only silenced memories and
McCain’s racial epithet had previously been recognized.

**Cultural Memories Re-Performed**

If VAC’s rhetorics weaved community solidarity, then student members nimbly
used memory as their thread. Since their beginnings in 1993, they consistently
challenged depictions of Vietnamese American history and representation and offered
alternative memories that functioned to bind their community. Students’ rhetorical
strategies reveal how intricate layers of cultural memories are re-collected into oral and
written compositions and how the textured meanings that emerge from this copiousness
foster social involvement and community solidarity. Their memorial practice coincides
with what Melvin Dixon describes as African American poets’ memorial art: “Memory,
whether acquired (through received images as in Cullen) or lived (recalled or recollected
images in Senghor and Walcott) or mythologized (as in Lorde), is the poet’s chief means
of writing the self into the larger history of race” (26). From cultural memories emerge
cultural pride, psychological security, and social solidarity.

Making, learning, and participating in our own memories are especially necessary
for a rhetorical borderland that has experienced so much loss and instability. VAC
students’ entextualization of Vietnamese American cultural memories responds to
Royster and Williams’ call to write in the “spaces left” and to resist the primacy of
officialized narratives. In this respect, writing the self into the community and weaving
cultural memories into mainstream ones is a form of cultural reclamation for minority
groups. This cultural composition of memories works toward building community
solidarity and requires that speakers and writers create conditions that enable social involvement.

Whereas Duc, in his desire to connect with a heritage peopled by multiple and diverse generations, cued cultural memory in his everyday speech, several VAC students also revised cultural memory in staged public texts. In Chapter 4, I follow individual students beyond their VAC activities to analyze public texts that they authored, performed, or otherwise participated with. These varied public texts revise Vietnamese American and American cultural memories, thereby introducing several new sources for identification. Such re-visionary public texts indicate shifting identities, specifically Vietnamese American and American identities, on which solidarity is often based.
Notes to Chapter 3


2 Ibid.
i tell you all this
to fill the void of absence
in our history
here

....

let people know
VIETNAM IS NOT A WAR

let people know
VIETNAM IS NOT A WAR

let people know
VIETNAM IS NOT A WAR
but a piece of
us,
sister
and we are
so much

more

The resignification of speech requires opening new contexts, speaking in ways that have never yet been legitimated, and hence producing legitimation in new and future forms.


While earlier chapters have focused on VAC-sponsored events, this chapter follows individual students and alumni beyond VAC as they participate in constructing texts that reach wider audiences: a curriculum, a “Culture Night” performance, and several works of performance and textual art. As our investigation into solidarity rhetoric takes us to public texts, we certainly do not depart from the rhetorical strategies discussed thus far. Invitation, identification, and cultural memory, in fact, come together in the several VAC-involved public texts examined in this chapter and thereby contribute to the texts’ performativity. In these texts, we see how invitations are about asking audiences to engage with (even co-construct) a public text, identifications inspire writer/performers and audiences forge new alliances, and cultural memories deliberately place the public text in a sociohistorical context. Together, these rhetorical strategies create public texts that assert Vietnamese American and American connectedness and solidarity.

Performative public texts represent the deliberate culmination of these strategies to recall (and perhaps rewrite) speaker, writer, and audience’s identities, cultural memories, and social relationships.

By calling these public texts “performative,” speech and writing that do rather than report something, I suggest that solidarity is not rigid but must be repeatedly performed. As I explore the relationship between performativity and solidarity, I begin with J.L. Austin’s introduction of performatives into speech act theory, but I turn quickly
to Judith Butler’s extension of performativity as critical theory. Butler’s valuable claim that utterances perform (rather than express) gendered identity enables me to unravel how Vietnamese American public texts have shaped and reshaped ethnic and racial identities. These public texts, I wish to argue, are performative and, as this chapter’s epigraphs suggest, “open new contexts” to legitimate constructions of Vietnam and Vietnamese Americans as “so much more” than a war.

The spring of 2002 saw students become involved in, author, and/or perform public texts that reinforced and revised their social identities, specifically their ethnic and racial identities. That April, the Orange County Asian Pacific Islander Community Alliance (OCAPICA), whose former Associate Director James had co-founded VAC nine years earlier, held a press conference to inaugurate a Vietnamese American social science curriculum for middle and high school students, the first curriculum of its kind. Then, in May, VAC’s sister Vietnamese student organization put on a Culture Night performance, authored by a VAC student, to an audience of well over 1,000 students, alumni, and friends. Lastly, as the quarter rounded to a close in June, two VAC students and classmates from their performance art course produced and performed in a show, and another VAC student posted textual art stating “I LOVE YOUR ACCENT” and “I WANT A THICKER ACCENT” around the fine arts corner of campus. While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine these texts exhaustively, the analytic lens of performativity leads us to the complex tugging and stretching that make identities and, moreover, open up possibilities for a transformative rhetoric of solidarity.
Performativity: From *How to Do Things with Words* to Subversive Performatives

To begin, J.L. Austin’s widely influential 1962 *How to Do Things with Words* has challenged the traditional philosophical assumption that we can measure statements only as true or false. Austin goes beyond this category of true-false (or constative) statements and proposes the category of performatives acts “in which to say something is to do something” (12). More clearly illustrating the performative are his classic examples “‘I do (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)’—as in the course of the marriage ceremony” and “‘I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow.’” where “I do” and “I bet” enact a state of affairs that do not refer to something beyond the immediate speech situation (5). In this way, Austin reconceives of language as an act rather than a mirror and thus sets about articulating what is now known as speech act theory.

At first defining the performative as the grammatical structure of first-person pronoun followed by a verb in the present indicative tense, Austin reasons that we cannot easily locate performatives through grammar. Performatives are often implied as when an umpire says, “Out,” but does not explicitly state, “‘I declare, pronounce, give, or call you out’” (62). The impossibility of distinguishing performatives by way of grammar further leads Austin to blur the distinction between constative statements and performative acts. While the constative calls attention to the utterance’s referential act (or locutionary act) and the performative highlights the utterance’s force (or illocutionary act), “every genuine speech act is both’” (146). In fact, “[w]e must consider the total situation in which the utterance is issued—the total speech-act—if we are to see the parallel between [constative] statements and performative utterances, and how each can
go wrong. Perhaps indeed there is no great distinction between statements and performative utterances” (52).

Regardless of the difficulty in locating definitive grammatical rules, Austin indeed contributes an important functional distinction between constative statements and performative acts as he moves us beyond positivist true-false criteria to a “doctrine of infelicities.” That is, we cannot talk about performatives as true or false but rather as happy or unhappy. The felicitous-infelicitous measure compels us to consider VAC students’ rhetorical strategies as performative (“I invite,” “I identify,” and “I recollect”) and to then question what would make these performatives felicitous as they come together. For Austin, a happy performative relies on the invocation and execution of performative discourse conventions by appropriate participants. The individuals in a wedding ceremony, for instance, must be authorized and willing to participate in a conventional ceremony for the performative to succeed. Even if such conventional circumstances were not observed, the speaker’s utterance would still be performative; only, it would be an unhappy performative. These circumstances, Austin elaborates, must be considered in light of the “total speech-act.”

But what defines the “total speech-act” becomes a pivotal question for Judith Butler as she takes our inquiry into performativity from speech act theory to postmodern critical theory. With a deft turn, Butler revises Austin’s proposal that we “do things with words” to say that words themselves do things; words are “transitive” rather than “instrumental.” The parameters of Austin’s “total speech-act” include only the immediate situation of the performative utterance, which centers around a single speaker’s utterance and intended illocutionary force. Butler, however, contends that the
total speech act goes beyond the immediate situation because a single utterance calls up iterations of that performative: “The illocutionary speech act performs its deed at the moment of the utterance, and yet to the extent that the moment is ritualized, it is never merely a single moment” (Excitable 3).

Butler’s attention to repetition is fundamental to her several studies of gendered identity and hate speech. Signs perform and constitute identity, and, moreover, the repetition of these signs authorizes particular constructions of gender and racial identity. Identity, then, does not refer to an authentic self—in this study, an authentic Vietnamese American identity—but rather an intertextual web of preceding constructions of identity. It is for this reason that Senator John McCain’s utterance of the racial slur “gook,” discussed in Chapter 3, was offensive to student activists. Even though he directed his attack at the North Vietnamese military, McCain’s utterance was not singular but carried the weight of preceding inflictions of the word. As much as repeated constructions of identity often limit women and minorities, Butler finds hope in the potential for repetition with variation:

[A]gency is the hiatus in iterability, the compulsion to install an identity through repetition, which requires the very contingency, the undetermined interval, that identity insistently seeks to foreclose…. [T]he future of the signifier of identity can only be secured through a repetition that fails to repeat loyally, a reciting of the signifier that must commit a disloyalty against identity. (Bodies 220)

Since each iteration is its own performance, there is the potential to re-signify the iteration in a new context. In this sense, the student activists who opposed McCain’s utterance introduced a “hiatus” to the slur’s repetition and re-performed the signifier by
ironically writing “American Gook” on their T-shirts, perhaps implying that the utterance hurts Americans.

Such agency is what I call attention to in the public texts circulating among, even created by, VAC students. By inviting, identifying, and recollecting in and through public texts, VAC students and other Vietnamese Americans could interrupt limiting iterations of their identity. Public texts potentially introduce identities contingent on socio-historical conditions that subvert earlier constructions of identity as universal. Drawing from Slavoj Žižek, Butler explains that this effort to authorize a revised identity creates a “temporary linguistic unity,” a short halting of the repetition, so as to create solidarity (220). The revisions are not an assertion of a “true” identity so much as they are another performative that will likely be revised again. Performativity thereby enables marginalized people to exercise agency over constructions of their identity, and such constructions become a basis for solidarity. The following discussions of a Vietnamese American curriculum, a Culture Night performance, and performance and textual art demonstrate the ways that public texts play a fundamental role in the ongoing repetitions, subversions, and reauthorizations of identities.

“and we are so much more”: A Vietnamese American Curriculum

On April 20, 2002, the Orange County Asian Pacific Islander Community Alliance (OCAPICA), a community health and education nonprofit organization, invited news media and local Vietnamese community members to the official press release of a Vietnamese American curriculum. A curriculum committee consisting of local community members (teachers, a graduate student, a foundation grantmaker, the Director
of OCAPICA) produced the curriculum, which was meant to supplement middle and high school students’ social science and language arts learning. Several lines from the poem “Shrapnel Shards on Blue Water,” included in the curriculum, crystallize the public text’s performative dimension. After a few stanzas recounting memories to her sister about how their parents, “ma” and “ba,” had worked for the family’s survival, the poet expresses to her sister a hunger for history that risks being erased. She closes the poem with simple but poignant lines,

let people know
VIETNAM IS NOT A WAR
but a piece of
us,
sister
and we are
so much

more

Similarly, in recounting personal and collective experiences of Vietnamese people in the United States, the curriculum, Vietnamese Americans: Lessons in American History, evidences, first, the dual workings of constative statements and performative acts in public texts and, next, the balance between authority and revision that felicitous performatives require.

An Overview of Vietnamese Americans: Lessons in American History

One week before the press release, Bryan, the 2001-2002 VAC Chair and an OCAPICA intern, had invited me to an OCAPICA meeting for press conference preparations, and it was there that I first learned about the curriculum. The committee kindly offered me a copy of the curriculum when they heard about my interest in VAC
and Vietnamese American students. *Lessons in American History* begins with a preface that explains the purpose of the curriculum,

> What does it mean to be “Vietnamese American?” How is this different from being “Vietnamese,” from being “American,” and from being “American Vietnamese?” This Vietnamese American curriculum guide does not attempt to definitively answer these questions, but rather it hopes to shed light on the complexities of such an identity group, while bridging cultural gaps with more awareness of shared experiences. (vii)

The preface then opens into eight sections:

- Historical Overview
- Timelines
- Maps and Demographics
- Lesson Plans
- Primary Sources
- Glossary
- Bibliography
- Resources

In the first sections, readers find background information about the immigration experiences and social circumstances surrounding Vietnamese people’s immigration to the U.S. An excerpt from Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston III’s *Straddling Two Social Worlds: The Experience of Vietnamese Refugee Children in the United States* reviews the displacement of Vietnamese refugees to the U.S., reporting numbers of refugees and later immigrants, major waves of immigration, and, lastly, U.S. public policy that has affected Vietnamese refugees. Next, timelines list major political events in Vietnam, among Vietnamese in America, and among Vietnamese in Orange County. The latter two timelines report a range of events: President Clinton’s normalizing diplomatic relations with Vietnam; incidents of hate crime; actor Dustin Nyguen’s starring role on the television show *21 Jump Street*; and the National Football League’s first Vietnamese
American player Đat Nguyẽn. A third section summarizes demographic and geographic information about Vietnamese Americans and Vietnam.

Following these socio-historical sections, we come upon what the editors call the central part of the curriculum, lesson plans:

- The Boat People: Separation and Loss
- Immigrants and Refugees
- Voice and Identity
- Hate Crimes
- Human Rights
- Ho Chi Minh and Freedom of Speech
- Oral History and Multiculturalism
- A Vietnamese American Monument
- Supplemental Activities in Multiculturalism and Human Relations

These lessons introduce teachers, who would in turn introduce students, to issues of social displacement, identity formation, and civil rights. Drawing from recent news stories and narratives of personal experience, student readings touch on topics including immigration policy, the brutal hate crime against Thien Minh Ly, community protests against a Little Saigon business owner who proudly displayed Vietnam’s current national flag, human rights violations in Vietnam, and oral histories of Vietnamese survivors of the Vietnam War. Supplementing these lesson plans, the next section includes original poems, short stories, and oral histories. The curriculum then ends with a bibliography and list of community resources (nonprofit organizations, libraries, politicians, and media websites) meant to support further study.

The Vietnamese American Curriculum as Performative

*Lessons in American History* indeed plays both a constative and a performative role—constative because the curriculum asserts “true” events and thereby contributes to a
more comprehensive U.S. history and performative because it does not simply report history but makes history through the reporting. First addressing the curriculum as constative—that is, as making our history more comprehensive and, therefore, more “true”—the editors of the curriculum assert that K-12 education has neglected a major thread of American history and culture. In an article that appears in _Amerasia Journal_’s special issue on “Vietnamese Americans: Diaspora and Dimensions,” they persuasively argue for the urgency in implementing curricula that address Asian Pacific American experiences since, across the U.S., state content standards for K-12 public schools rarely mention this American contingent. The silence is gaping:

In California, the state with the largest API [Asian Pacific Islander] population, the only mention of APIs in the California Content Standards for the Social Studies from seventh through twelfth grades—the extensive document adhered to by all public schools statewide—is in the case of the forced internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. (Beevi, Lam, and Matsuda 166)

American histories that neglect Asian Pacific American experiences, particularly those histories authorized by schools, also bear a performative force, constructing and perpetuating a limiting Asian Pacific American identity. When the only Asian Pacific Americans included in K-12 curricula are Japanese American and they are depicted only in the context of war and as potential enemies and perpetual foreigners, we face a history that is not just deeply partial but also harmful. Add to this the string of cultural stereotypes running through films and news media, for instance, Vietnam War films that “include sadistic Viet Cong soldiers, helpless villagers, and desperate prostitutes,” and the need to revise cultural representations becomes even more pressing (167). Rather than inviting Vietnamese American students to conceive of themselves as part of a larger
American history, rather than asking other American students to identify and re-construct
American history, such curricula are acts of disinvitation and disidentification.

It is for this reason, because of this performative dimension of school-sponsored
history and culture, that Lessons in American History was written. In an interview during
my fieldwork, Bryan brought up the curriculum and the more general need for
Vietnamese American representation in K-12 education:

Bryan: Being able to look at what we learn in the educational system is
important.
Is it reflective of our communities?
Is that what we want to teach other people that, say, aren’t
Vietnamese?
Is that what we want to be known for?
The war?
Is that it?
Within high school,
when you think about history,
you learn—
If you’re not Vietnamese,
then what you learn about Vietnamese is that they’re poor
people,
they’re a product of the war.
We’re more than that.
Like any other ethnic group, you know?
So, having a say in education,
like in the curriculum with which we learn.
Both levels, high school as well as college.
Even earlier.
That’s one issue.

The curriculum, then, was a collective effort to revise schools’ versions of our histories
and our identities. A collaborative project, the curriculum was edited, written, and
produced by the Vietnamese American Curriculum Project Committee, primarily made
up of volunteers—including James, the former OCAPICA Associate Director and one of
VAC’s co-founders. James had worked to start up OCAPICA after receiving his
bachelors from UC Irvine and then his masters in public policy from Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government. His continuing interest in social issues is evidenced by his involvement in the curriculum. The curriculum committee, an OCAPICA initiative, was further assisted by current VAC students, Bryan, who interned for the nonprofit, and Duc, who contributed signage for the event. Notably, the attribution of the curriculum’s authorship to the curriculum committee broadens more traditional notions of the author since the committee ranged from editors to writers to producers of the final text. Together, the committee’s collaborative authorship, appeal for community approval, and efforts to garner media attention indicate their awareness of the curriculum’s sociohistorical context and the text’s potential to revise constructions of Vietnamese American history and culture.

This rhetorical consciousness, in fact, influenced the committee’s distribution and subsequent revisions to the curriculum. From drafting to revising and later publicizing the curriculum, the editors continually invited others to respond to the curriculum and identified with their readers’ interests. In March and April of 2001, after drafting the curriculum with the help of an Orange County Human Relations Commission grant, the curriculum committee piloted several lesson plans with students at one local high school and also students in an inter-high-school Vietnamese student organization. Then, in May, the committee held a training workshop for 27 teachers in the Anaheim Union High School District, where 12 to 15 percent of the student body at that time was of Asian Pacific Islander heritage. After their discussions with students and teachers, the editors made revisions over the next four months that “incorporate[d] feedback from students, teachers, and other outside evaluators” (Beevi, Lam, and Matsuda 168-169). By summer,
the local newspaper Việt Tide printed the headline “Making, Teaching History,” reporting that the curriculum committee was working with educators at the Anaheim Union High School District to pilot the curriculum (Phan).

The preliminary drafting and the pilot project cue the immediate levels at which performativity operates: one, between the curriculum committee and the public (including the media, teachers, and citizens) and, two, between teachers and students. Regarding the first level, the curriculum, as a public text, would have to circulate widely to have any impact. “Our next step,” the editors write, “was to get the word out to the local schools, the communities, and the public and political officials about the critical content and importance of Lessons in American History, and its potential impact on students’ personal and intellectual growth” (Beevi, Lam, and Matsuda 169). Attune to the curriculum’s potential reach, the curriculum committee has been conscientious about appealing to and identifying with the public media, educators, and other concerned citizens.

As a result, on April 20, 2002, OCAPICA held a press release in the conference room of a local, major Vietnamese newspaper called Ngữ Việt. In Little Saigon, most who attended were journalists from local mainstream and Vietnamese news media as well as Vietnamese and Vietnamese American community members. With these multiple audiences, the press release speeches about the curriculum and the curriculum itself became multivalent sources for identification, where the editors asked audiences to identify with the curriculum’s reconstruction of cultural memory. The first-generation, culturally conservative Vietnamese community identified with the preservation of culture, the persistent attention to human rights violations in Vietnam, and the desire for
their children to connect with their generation. Also appealing to Vietnamese Americans, including VAC students and myself, the curriculum committee introduced cultural pride, identity formation in the U.S., and struggles for civil liberties. In the few days before and after the press release, articles reporting on and affirming the curriculum appeared in several local Vietnamese newspapers: Việt Báo Daily News, Người Việt, and Viễn Đông Daily News.

Additionally, the curriculum’s authors identified with the general American public, especially necessary since the committee hoped that the curriculum would transform schools across the nation. The morning of the press release, in the local section of The Orange County Register, journalist Katherine Nguyen’s article “Guide on Vietnamese Experience to Debut” reported on the day’s events. After announcing the press conference and briefly summarizing the curriculum’s key points, the article closes with a summary of one of the curriculum co-editor’s comments:

“When teachers teach their students about First Amendment-rights issues, they can refer to the Little Saigon protests,” said Michael Matsuda, a teacher in the Anaheim Union High School District and chairman of the Orange County Asian and Pacific Islander Community Alliance, which gave $20,000 to print 500 copies of the curriculum.

About a dozen educators and community leaders collaborated for over a year to design the lesson plan.

Matsuda and alliance members said they hope teachers across the county will incorporate the material into classroom lessons.

“The story of the Vietnamese (in America) is universal, like the Italians or the Jews,” Matsuda said. “They are stories of survival and growth and need to be acknowledged as part of the American mosaic.”

In this article, Matsuda aligned Vietnamese American experiences with Italian and Jewish people who have immigrated to the U.S., and during the press conference, he similarly compared Vietnamese Americans to other immigrants. Those on the
Mayflower were “boat people” just like Vietnamese Americans, he asserted (and Bryan later echoed in a VAC meeting). Given his central role in editing and writing a curriculum grounded in local political events and cultural materialist analyses, Matsuda surely understood that he was making simple comparisons of quite disparate immigrant groups, and he makes these identifications, I believe, because of his rhetorical awareness. To identify the curriculum with mainstream America, he appealed to simple but desirable constructions of cultural and national unity. Matsuda and the other authors’ appeal to multiple audiences and multiple histories is a re-membering of American history, both a recollection and a re-peopling.

In the preface of the Lessons in American History, for instance, the authors invite readers to consider the curriculum as part of the American experience:

We hope that this curriculum will inform teachers and students about some of the important experiences of the Vietnamese American community today, so that we can better understand and value the complexities of this group of Americans. These Vietnamese American experiences, however, are only one part of the richly textured American fabric. We hope that this curriculum will launch future curricula about other equally important, but often neglected, communities that make up the United States. Only by including instruction on these groups in schools and by promoting knowledge of the experiences and contributions of diverse communities can we begin to teach tolerance, acceptance, empathy, and appreciation of the unique tapestry that is America. (xi)

The “unique tapestry that is America” becomes a repeated source for identification, difficult to reject since to learn about Vietnamese Americans is to become more knowledgeable about Americans. The title of the curriculum echoes that it offers lessons in American history, not solely Vietnamese American history, thereby resignifying or at least asking readers to question what it means to be American.
The curriculum, then, is “making history” in two senses. In the more common idiomatic sense, “making history” means putting forth an innovation. Local newspapers introduced the curriculum as the first of its kind, an educational supplement that could enrich current education about American history and culture. But the curriculum also literally makes history, constituting Vietnamese American cultural memory and identity and, moreover, American cultural memory and identity. “The signifiers of ‘identity’ effectively or rhetorically produce the very social movements that they appear to represent,” Butler writes. “The signifier does not refer to a pregiven or already constituted identity, a pure referent or essential set of facts that preexist the identity-signifier or act as the measure of its adequacy” (*Bodies* 210). The challenge that the curriculum committee and teachers face when identifying with a shared American identity lies in the precarious balance between using contingent Vietnamese American experiences to revise American identity, on the one hand, and subsuming Vietnamese American experiences under already prevalent constructions of Americanness, on the other.

**Felicitous Performativity: Authority and Revision**

We might recall from Austin that performative texts require social conditions that are conducive to the texts’ felicity. In this case, these conditions include assumptions of multiplicity and the authority to revise curricula, history, and identity. Readers must assume that America is multiple if we are to prevent contingent Vietnamese American experiences from being superceded by dominant American narratives of survival, hard work, and the American Dream. For this reason, the authors of the curriculum write,
Since this guide is also an attempt to encourage students to recognize and appreciate differences and commonalities between various groups, it hopes to explore the complexities and limitations of the designation “Vietnamese American.” Given the pervasive, racialized perception of Asian Americans as foreigners and model minorities, “Asian American” and “Vietnamese American” as political markers are often excluded from the usual public discourse on race and from discussions on and considerations of social policy formation. The community’s experiences and struggles should ideally be considered alongside those of African Americans, Chicanos/Latinos, and Native Americans, Pacific Islanders and other Asian Americans. (viii)

Constructing a plural America means placing side-by-side the particular experiences of multiple groups (African American, Chicanos/Latinos, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders and other Asian Americans) and never growing satisfied with any of these “identity” signifiers.

But who has the power to revise Vietnamese American and, more generally, American narratives? A second condition required for a performative text’s felicity, as my earlier chapters on invitation and identification suggest, is the authority to perform and interject revisions to dominant constructions of American identity. The curriculum committee certainly has a strong ethos; the authors, including James, collectively have intensive education and experience with teaching, community action, and public policy. However, Butler suggests that authors only bear a small proportion of power when she persuasively counters Austin’s presumption of the speaker’s inherent authority:

> If a performative provisionally succeeds (and I will suggest that “success” is always and only provisional), then it is not because intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that act echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices.* (Excitable 51)

The authority to revise American history and identity reaches beyond the immediate speech act and into the utterance’s “historicity of force” (51). Butler’s model does not
deny agency but indeed argues that agents are even more responsible for “injurious speech” since their speech carries the accumulated force of prior repetitions.

Because the curriculum is the first of its kind and is “making history,” then it cannot rely on its own prior repetition but the repetition of that which it revises: mainstream curricula that have neglected Asian Pacific American experiences. The authors and teachers who adopt the curriculum draw from the accumulated authority of American histories and also from the accumulated authority of school discourse conventions. As social institutions, schools wield publicly sanctioned authority and therefore have specific powers of performativity. Educators’ evaluation of student work is performative, nurturing but also constituting students’ competence and intelligence through evaluation. This performative dimension of teacher discourse demands that students prove their expertise. Teachers are therefore authorized by educational institutions’ centuries-old practice of determining what competence and intelligence entail and what content will reach their goals. The curriculum and discussions surrounding the curriculum therefore draw from the authority that school discourse has accumulated.

By identifying with school discourse conventions, Lessons in American History asserts the authority to revise curricular content. The curriculum, first of all, mirrors the conventional organization of school discourse: historical overviews, timelines, lesson plans with secondary and primary sources followed by questions, and resources for further research. The editors also call attention to the few but important precedents set by similar curricula, including the Japanese American Citizens League’s A Lesson in American History: The Japanese American Experience and the California Heritage Pilot.
Project directed at the Chinese American experiences (Beevi, Lam, and Matsuda 166-167). Finally, the curriculum is also authorized by those who promote and distribute it. The curriculum was widely circulated in Orange County—the teachers who served on the curriculum committee were important to this distribution. What is important here are the people and organizations that sponsor the curriculum: the Anaheim Union High School District, a local university that offers training workshops for implementing the curriculum, and, more recently, the Southern Poverty Law Center’s web project “Fight Hate and Promote Tolerance” (http://www.tolerance.org/teach/expand/vietnamese/). The Southern Poverty Law Center, in purchasing the right to distribute the curriculum online, grants the curriculum more authority with progressive educators and other citizens who challenge racism and other discrimination.

The social authority of educational institutions, on the one hand, enables the curriculum committee to appeal to the public and, on the other, positions teachers to use this curriculum with students. For educators, ritualized institutional authority may empower them to adopt an innovative curriculum but may also revise the old curriculum only to assert another version of American history and identity. What was intended to be a revised and even subversive curriculum could simply replace the old dominant construction of “American” with another dominant construction. Performance studies scholar Marvin Carlson explains this dilemma, “The central concern of resistant performance arises from the dangerous game it plays as a double-agent, recognizing that in the postmodern world complicity and subversion are inextricably intertwined” (173). We take heart, however, since complicity is only temporary, subversion peering around the corner. Butler explains that any construction of identity—whether gendered,
Vietnamese American, or American—is always provisional; the construction has no true referent and therefore the referent is the “site of impossible desire” (*Bodies* 219).

When a performed identity is no longer felicitous, agents might revise identity. Not only was identity performed between the curriculum committee and general public and between educators and students, but also the curriculum asks students to talk back to the public. The lessons ask students to identify with the issues raised by Vietnamese American experiences, such as displacement, freedom of speech, and human rights violations, but they also call on students to revise what is already in the lessons’ texts. The lesson on hate crimes, for instance, has students write a “Personal Action Plan” to combat racism (68-71). When students read about human rights violations in Vietnam, they are to write letters to President George W. Bush recommending action (88-89). Then, after reading the oral history of a South Vietnamese soldier about his experiences in a re-education camp, where he went from 165 pounds to 88 pounds, students are to write narratives from their own oral history interviews (112-121). In these lessons, students do the work of revising cultural representations and identity, of making history.

*Lessons in American History* responds to two pointed questions that Judith Butler raises about identification and solidarity: “What are the possibilities of politicizing disidentification, this experience of *misrecognition*, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong? And how are we to interpret this disidentification produced by and through the very signifier that holds out the promise of solidarity?” (*Bodies* 219) The curriculum committee steps into a moment of disidentification with mainstream middle and high school social studies curricula, revising the source of that disidentification. As Butler suggests, the recognition that
identity is performed and then authorized through repetition opens a space for democratic revision of that identity. The curriculum as a public text uses this space to re-perform American history, cultural representations, and identity among the general public, educators, and students and, in doing so, again holds out the promise of solidarity. This solidarity is one that is based on a collaboratively constructed cultural memory of Vietnamese American experiences. What we learn from the performativity of this curriculum is that such solidarity is temporary and vibrant, awaiting and even encouraging yet another performance.

**Re-Presentations of Vietnamese American Women in a Culture Night Performance**

Let us next turn our attention to a second public text that performs Vietnamese heritage and Vietnamese American identity: Culture Night. Culture Night performances are mixed-genre celebrations of Vietnamese and Vietnamese American cultural memories, typically framed by a play but also including a range of traditional and contemporary dance, song, and fashion shows. Every year, Culture Nights take place at many U.S. universities during the month of May, Asian American Heritage Month. The student production involves a team of dedicated volunteers not from VAC but from its sister student organization, the Vietnamese Student Association (VSA). While VAC students work toward political and community activism, VSA students direct their efforts toward cultural and social events like Culture Night. The fact that four of the twelve 2001-2002 VAC students I interviewed contributed to the VSA Culture Night—as writer, actor, dancer, and fundraiser—and that all twelve attended the event speaks to VAC students’ commitment to cultural heritage in addition to activism.
In 2002, William, an active member in VAC and VSA, wrote the play What Dreams May Come for that year’s Culture Night at the University of California at Irvine. What Culture Nights demonstrate is that performance is potentially performative in terms of constituting (not expressing) ethnic identity and cultural memories, and What Dreams May Come, in particular, reconstitutes Vietnamese American cultural memories by stressing the centrality of intergenerational, familial relationships—specifically, grandmother-mother-daughter relationships—as part of who we are.

What Dreams May Come was performed on May 11, 2002, before hundreds, if not over a thousand, students, alumni, family, and other community members. The play, which knits lighthearted humor with drama, opens with the birth of My Anh in a scene entitled “1925 The Birth of New Hopes and Dreams.” Taking more of an epic than narrative form, the three acts each move through a quarter of a century and follow three generations of women through struggle and survival. In Act I, we meet the baby girl My Anh whose birth is marked by social pressures when her father comically seeks out a priest and then a monk’s blessing for the son he wishes to have. When her parents face dire economic circumstances, they send My Anh to live with her older sister Nga in Hanoi. Distressed, My Anh’s mother gives My Anh a book to remember her by. As the years pass, My Anh grows up to become an intelligent young woman and soon falls in love with Quan, who is a busboy but tells My Anh that he is studying to become a doctor. My Anh eventually learns that Quan is not a medical student but a secret agent working for the U.S. government and against the French and Japanese military. Meanwhile, Nga’s internalized colonial sensibility leads her to hold the French in higher esteem than
the Vietnamese. She therefore disapproves of Quan and disowns My Anh when they ask for Nga’s blessing on their marriage.

In Act II, we follow My Anh and Quan to their first apartment, where they raise their only daughter Uyen. Increasingly, the characters’ lives are punctuated by political turmoil: My Anh realizes that Quan has worked as an American spy against the French and Japanese; Japanese forces retreat from Vietnam; and finally, the French colonial rule also departs from Vietnam. As the family migrates south to Saigon in 1950, we turn increasingly to the next generation, Uyen. Despite the ongoing civil and then American war symbolized by the Tết Offensive’s uproar, Uyen and her sweetheart Hai decide to get married. Following Saigon’s fall, My Anh, Quan, Uyen, Hai, and the newlywed’s new child try to escape Vietnam by boat. The boat, however, only has room for three adults and the child, so Quan stays behind in hopes of catching the next boat—only to be detained at a “reeducation” camp for the rest of his life. Quan’s former work for the U.S. secret service, however, enables his family to eventually leave the refugee camp for America.

Act III, “Being American,” takes us to the contemporary period in the U.S. Uyen and Hai’s children Sara and David form the “typical Vietnamese family.” A dinner conversation breaks out into a contemporary fashion show and then a hiphop dance performance, the first cued by David’s expressed desire to be a fashion designer and the second by Sara’s watching MTV as she contemplates marriage even though she will just have finished high school. As mother and daughter disagree, we see that the “typical” family involves lack of understanding between the generations. Sara, however, begins to learn that she has taken for granted the powerful history that her mother Uyen and her
grandmother My Anh experienced during their lives. Following a birthday celebration for the beloved grandfather Quan, My Anh offers Sara the book that My Anh’s own mother had given her in Vietnam. The play ends with Sara reading the book aloud,

Once there was this beautiful girl from the countryside who came to a big city to live and learn. She carried with her no money or riches, only the hopes of her dreams and the promises of her memories.

The Performativity of Performance

“Are performances necessarily performative?” This provocative question graces the back cover of Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Performativity and Performance*, a valuable collection of essays that merges theatre studies’ inquiry into performance with language studies’ inquiry into performativity. With regard to Culture Night, I believe that the 2002 performance is performative. My reading of *What Dreams May Come* suggests that the Culture Night performance was issued as a performative—meaning that the performance constitutes and reconstitutes Vietnamese and Vietnamese American cultural memories and identity—but, without public reviews available, it is impossible to say whether that performative was felicitously received or even received as a performative among a general anonymous audience.

Notably, there is an important difference between the performativity of the curriculum, on the one hand, and the performativity of Culture Night and other creative performances set in traditionally staged contexts, on the other. The curriculum asks readers to participate in the performative dimension of the text by completing homework, answering questions, and giving testimony to personal experiences that fit the curricular paradigm. In this sense, the most immediate audience—here, students—is scripted into
the performative text, becoming performers themselves by writing and speaking Vietnamese American and American cultural memories. By contrast, the Culture Night performance does not overtly script the audience into the performative act, and we therefore cannot predict the audience’s response. A modernist audience may read the performance as a theatrical representation of a story, a representation based on the sharp division between theatre and social reality, while a postmodernist audience, if assuming that stories constitute our worlds, may read the performance as another constitution of our constructed realities and engage accordingly. Although an audience’s acceptance and involvement in a performative text is critical to the performative’s felicity, my analysis is limited by the nature of public texts’ audiences as numerous and anonymous.

Regardless of this difference between the curriculum and Culture Night, we might still say that both are performative. Felicity is a goal of performatives, not a prior necessary condition. Even if the Culture Night audience’s response is largely unknown, what makes the student production performative is that it constructs what culture is on this Culture Night. Vietnamese and Vietnamese American culture, in this performance, is based on intergenerational, familial relationships and experiences.

VSA’s stated purpose in producing Culture Night clarifies the performance’s performative purpose, to reconstruct cultural memory and thereby foster solidarity. A letter written from VSA students to local Vietnamese small business owners, which requested financial support for the 2002 production of Culture Night, attests to the performative nature of Culture Night. Given to me by Lisa who was then a second-year student belonging to both VAC and VSA, the letter introduced Culture Night in the following way:
The purpose of the Culture Night is to preserve yesterday’s traditions and to incorporate a modern perspective of the evolving Vietnamese American culture through performances such as dances, skits, fashion shows, vocal performances, and live instrumental recitals. The Vietnamese Student Association aims at educating the community across generation lines through building a foundation where parents can understand the modern Vietnamese American culture and children can discover the awesome history of their parents.

This letter from VSA students was an invitation to community members to give their support and thereby commit to strengthening relationships with the younger generation. This letter mirrors Culture Night’s larger purpose: to rewrite social relationships that extend beyond the performance’s story. The performance and texts surrounding the performance, like the letter, were thus instrumental to bridging generational ruptures caused by diaspora, loss of language, and a perceived loss of heritage.

One might argue that the Culture Night’s being instrumental is not the same as its being performative. We might recall that Butler revises Austin’s theory by claiming that performative utterances are not instrumental so much as they are transitive. That is, we do not do things with words so much as words themselves are doing things, operating in an intertextual web of meaning. Students involved in What Dreams May Come, however, talked about the performance as both instrumental in bridging Vietnamese and Vietnamese American cultures and transitive (or, in Butler’s perspective, performative) by asserting what Vietnamese and Vietnamese American cultures are. Not only is the performance instrumental to bridging traditions and “modern perspective[s],” but also the performance is performative in constructing what traditions and modern perspectives are. Because Vietnamese Americans are so often neglected in school texts and so often negatively represented in film and news media, the few positive performances of
Vietnamese American identity and cultural memories, even if presented in fiction, have that much more power to assert a revised construction of who we are.

The dual instrumental and performative dimensions of *What Dreams May Come* become even clearer in the writer’s comments about the performance, first in the program and later during an interview. First, in the program’s foreword, William and the 2001-2002 VSA President issued another invitation from VSA to the audience,

> The Vietnamese Student Association at the University of California, Irvine would like to extend our warmest welcome to you, our honored guests. “What Dreams May Come” is an effort to capture the Vietnamese American interpretation of the struggles and victories of our parents, grandparents, and ancestors. Through this unique collaboration of drama, dance, and music, we address pervasive themes of history such as war, separation, and hope. We would like to thank you, our sponsors, our distinguished faculty, our family, and our friends, for your support throughout the period of preparation for the show and for your presence here tonight. We would also like to apologize in advance for any material that you may find offensive in tonight’s show. Please understand that we are students [still] learning to [mediate] between our two cultures and are subject to misinterpretations. Now, we present to you “What Dreams May Come.”

In depicting the performance as a collaboration “through” which students “mediate between our two cultures,” these students suggested that the performance would be instrumental in strengthening social relationships. Faculty, family, peers, and other sponsors (indicated by the writers’ thank-you’s) evidence how the writers and audience identified with a larger Vietnamese American community, and, in this sense, Culture Night encouraged social bonds beyond that evening’s events.

More than being *instrumental*, the performance also *performs* culture, constituting the *Culture* Night by and about Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans. William spoke insightfully about the performative nature of Culture Night when commenting on
audiences who might have objected to Act III’s contemporary fashion show as not Vietnamese or even Vietnamese American. He explained,

William: But, but if Vietnamese women are in it, then it’s Vietnamese. Just like, you know, if like they say, um, like, “Vietnamese people don’t do this.” Well, if I’m doing it, it’s Vietnamese. Anything we do, it’s basically, it’s Vietnamese culture. Anything that’s said, anything you write, it’s a Vietnamese writer. You know?

Applying this statement to other elements of Culture Night, we might say that the Vietnamese American actors’ acting, the writer’s script, and the dancers and singers’ performances all constitute Vietnamese culture. Although the Culture Night play is fictional and the medley of dance, song, and fashion shows was set in a theatrical backdrop, William’s statement suggests that the performance is still a construction of our reality, of what Vietnamese and Vietnamese American culture is. The Vietnamese American writers and producers, the Vietnamese American performers, and the social context of a Vietnamese-Vietnamese American Culture Night set the stage for constructing what culture is, specifically by constructing what our cultural memory is.

Re-Performing Vietnamese and Vietnamese American Women

William’s perspective leads us finally to the ways that his play *What Dreams May Come* re-presents Vietnamese and Vietnamese American cultures. When I asked him what he had hoped to convey through his script, he responded,

William: My whole point was to portray strong Vietnamese women.
Throughout the ages.
They’ve always been strong.
It’s not only that they’ve been strong just now.
That they’ve been strong in my great-grandmother’s age, my
grandmother’s, my mom’s, and now present-day.
So, I wanted to portray that.

Culture Night, then, is a reconstitution of a Vietnamese and Vietnamese American culture
memory where women are foundational. The performance steps into the democratizing
moment that Butler describes, disrupting prior repeated identificaitons of Vietnamese and
Vietnamese American women with prostitutes and helpless victims. William asserted
that even in *Green Dragon*, a 2002 film sympathetic to Vietnamese experiences in a 1975
U.S. refugee camp, he could locate the female characters of “sad, careless mother” and
“whore.” As we follow the performance of William’s play *What Dreams May Come*, we
find an emphasis on grandmother-mother-daughter relationships that position strong
Vietnamese and Vietnamese American women at the center of history and culture.

*What Dreams May Come*, I believe, indeed achieves William’s goal of
representing strong Vietnamese and Vietnamese American women characters. The
progression of the three acts layers the experiences of grandmother, mother, and
daughter. The following outline lists the play’s acts and scenes, interspersed by dance
performances, vocal performances, and fashion shows:

**Act I: What Dreams May Come**
- Scene 1: 1925 The Birth of New Hopes and Dreams
- Scene 2: Life Changing Decisions
- Scene 3: Better Life in Hanoi
  - Solo Performance, “Khong Gia Dinh”
- Scene 4: Quest of the Unlikely Suitors
  - Traditional Fashion Show
- Scene 5: Falling for the Busboy
  - Solo Performance, “I Can Love You Like That”
- Scene 6: The Truth of Love Revealed

215
Act II: The Journey Together
- Scene 1: The Apartment of Secret and Lies
  - Solo Performance, “Khung Troi Ngay Xua”
- Scene 2: The Migration to Saigon
  - Traditional Dance
- Scene 3: Witnesses of the Tet Offensive
  - Duet Performance, “Bai Hat Xuan Cho Em”
- Scene 4: Marriage at the Worst of Years
- Scene 5: The Promise Given
  - Vocal & Instrumental
- Scene 6: Days in the Refugee Camp
- Scene 7: Ticket to America

Act III: Being American
- Scene 1: Typical Vietnamese Family
  - Modern Fashion Show
- Scene 2: MTV & More…
  - Modern Dance
- Scene 3: Chinese Foods & Fortunes
- Scene 4: Family Meeting
- Scene 5: The Celebration
- Scene 6: Memories of Que Huong
  - Solo Performance, “If We Hold on Together”

With each successive representation of My Anh in the three acts, we see her anew: first as a daughter, sister, and wife; then as a mother; and finally as a grandmother. The representations, therefore, are both culminations and revisions of her former selves.

William’s grandmother-mother-daughter theme is potentially powerful, in fact echoing several influential Asian American writers’ attention to familial relationships. In In Her Mother’s House, Wendy Ho analyzes the writing of mother-daughter relationships in Chinese American literature, specifically in memoir and fiction by Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and Fae Myenne Ng. Ho claims that making mother-daughter relationships central affirms mothers and daughters as they reclaim cultural memories and share those memories with one another. This mother-daughter paradigm is an
assertion of agency over those social and political forces that have appropriated the
telling of their experiences.

Ho explains that a mother-daughter paradigm, moreover, introduces new
understandings and new practices,

The mother-daughter stories indicate a more nuanced and complex
understanding of a social-political imaginary that has valuable
implications for rethinking notions of identity and sociality. The hard
work of talking to each other, for example, can lead toward more
compassionate understandings of our differences as well as similarities as
women. (238)

In What Dreams May Come, Sara’s talking to her grandmother My Anh enables her to
rethink her own identity. Sara needs to explore the re-presentations of her grandmother
and mother in order to get past intergenerational misunderstandings. This attention to
grandmother-mother-daughter relationships is not based on a naïve sense of womanly
camaraderie. Rather, the “hard work of talking to each other” leads to conversations
about each woman’s specific social and historical experiences. In addition to
experiencing political turbulence of colonialism and war, the three generations of women
also confront patriarchy, colonialism, classism, and racism. These threads knit together
to form cultural memories with women’s relationships at their center.

Text becomes a vehicle for accessing these multi-storied lives that make up
cultural memories. First, the book that My Anh passes on to Sara holds out the “promises
of her memories” but the book itself, taken from the past, is the memory being passed on
to the next generation. Sara’s reading the book enables her (and enables the audience) to
return to the cultural memories of her grandmother’s generation but also to re-envision
the hope that those memories carry, “what dreams may come.” Additionally, the Culture
Night performance of *What Dreams May Come* becomes a textual vehicle for the audience to access intergenerational cultural memories.

Just as the story is instrumental in centralizing female characters, the interspersed dance, song, and fashion show placed female performers, choreographers, and costume designers center stage. Christine, an active VAC member who also danced in the contemporary hiphop performance, and William separately told me how impressive it was that the contemporary fashion show featured clothes designed and made by a female VSA student. Although William was impressed by the student-produced fashion show, he expressed dissatisfaction with having to integrate seemingly disparate performances (like the contemporary fashion show) into the play when they had little to do with the storyline. Because Culture Night is always a collaborative production and traditionally includes fashion shows, William needed to include the fashion shows even if they did not quite fit into the play’s storyline. From my perspective, I would agree that the performances, at times, felt disjointed because of these insertions of musical performances or fashion shows although the varied performances created a thought-provoking ensemble. Interestingly, my sense that the fashion show and several other performances did not seem connected to the play’s storyline led me to see these performances as more immediate than the play.

This immediacy showcased the students as live performers more than as fictional characters and, with the backdrop of strong women in the play, this immediacy further placed the spotlight on Vietnamese American women. The Culture Night performance *What Dreams May Come* thus not only re-presents Vietnamese and Vietnamese American women characters in a fictional realm, but also presents Vietnamese American
actors, dancers, choreographers, singers, fashion designers, and models at the event. Both fictional characters and live performers merge to constitute what Vietnamese and Vietnamese American cultures are.

As performance studies scholar Marvin Carlson cautions, however, we need to understand performatives as enacting both subversion and complicity. Despite William’s efforts to present and re-present strong Vietnamese and Vietnamese American women, a mishap at the contemporary fashion show, in which one model’s top slipped to her waist, called attention to the persistent objectification of women. William described feedback that VSA received about the Culture Night:

William: Well, if you go on the website ((name omitted)), you’ll see that most of the positive compliments are from males who said, “The fashion show was just kickass.” “Let’s, let’s see that girl’s top drop one more time.” Or, “The girls were hot.” Or like stuff like that.

These responses, too, become scripted into the “culture” that Culture Night constitutes. Such performances, then, are neither universal nor idealistic presentations of Vietnamese and Vietnamese American culture but, like the Vietnamese American curriculum, enter into the intertextual web of subversion and complicity that continue to revise the signifier of Vietnamese American. Solidarity among the producers, performers, and the audience was based on the shared understanding of Vietnamese/Vietnamese American culture that this Culture Night performed. Most immediately, this intertextual web included the performance itself, the Culture Night program, the VSA letter soliciting community support for the performance, feedback about the performance, and, finally, the countless, varied talk and writing in the weeks before and after Culture Night. The performance
became a basis for writers, performers, and community members to identify with the intergenerational cultural memory depicted in Culture Night and, therefore, to identify with one another.

“You make whatever America is”: Performance Art and Textual Art

In this final section on performative public texts, I focus on student-composed performance art and textual art because I wish to further explore the relationship between performativity and solidarity. Thus far, we have seen how a Vietnamese American curriculum forges solidarity through constructions of Vietnamese American and American cultural memories and identities. We have also seen how a Culture Night performance forges solidarity again through cultural memories, this time fostered by women’s familial relationships. Here, I turn to performance art, “Un-Gender-Eyes” and “Speak American Damn It!,” and textual art, “I LOVE YOUR ACCENT” and “I WANT A THICKER ACCENT,” in order to elucidate the solidarity that grows out of heightened involvement between performers and audience. These works of performance and textual art subvert audience expectations, and, in those moments opened up by subversive moves, the performers challenge the audience toward new understandings and new identifications. What we find is that for solidarity to grow, the performers’ assertions of agency must be accompanied by a performer-audience sense of mutuality.

Mutual Performativity in “Un-Gender-Eyes”

Toward the end of the academic year, Duc invited me to a student production that had grown out of his performance art course. A male VAC student, Duc, and a female
VAC student, Mai, performed in the show: Mai performing “Un-Gender-Eyes” and, later, Duc, Mai, and a second male student performing “Speak American Damn It!” In the first performance, “Un-Gender-Eyes,” Mai stands center-stage, and two students hold a flat sheet vertically in front of her body. Mai walks around to the front of the sheet and, with blunt strokes of a black marker, outlines the shape of her body. She then takes a knife and slashes parts of the sheet that represent body parts: her mouth, her genitalia. In a climactic gesture, she puts the sheet back on her body, walks off the stage toward the audience, takes the sheet off, and places it on a man in the audience.

While her performance includes no spoken or written words except for the title “Un-Gender-Eyes,” the performance starkly illustrates the solidarity that can result or can be thwarted by heightened interaction. At stake in this interaction are issues of performer-audience agency and mutuality, alluded to in Mai’s interview account of her performance:

Mai: And then the ((…)) piece ((…)) pertained to sexual violence. And what I wanted to do was show how, like, society or patriarchy has placed the blame on the victim. The shame lies with the person that the violence has been placed upon, done to. And, um, what happens is, like, putting on the sheet, you step into or you become the victim yourself. And then the shame, At the end I took off the shame, right? I wanted to give it to someone. And I wanted to give it to a male person in the audience. So part of it too, like, it’s not just a women’s issue, but it’s a societal issue. And that men need to understand and connect and really empathize. Like put on the sheet over themselves. Feel the shame and feel what the women would feel if they were raped or beaten.
Mai takes what is sadly a commonplace in our culture (sexual violence and victimized women), an image that has become normalized through repetition. This performance is a repetition of the commonplace but with variation, where she confers the status of victim from an individual woman over to the audience and, more generally, to society as a whole. Through her assertion of performative agency, she then creates an imperative for mutuality. By placing the sheet, or the shame, on a man in the audience, Mai invites the audience, specifically this man, to identify with the victim. He is asked to move beyond the role of sympathetic spectator and to participate, to actively identify with the victim. No longer a voyeur, the audience member must take responsibility for his new understanding.

As an invitation, Mai’s performance caused the man and onlookers like me to question our role in the performance, to wonder what the sheet symbolized, and to consider whether the man should accept it. More overtly performative than the Culture Night production, “Un-Gender-Eyes” scripts the audience into the performance. That is to say, the meaning of the performance erupts from the performatives that Mai and the audience each issue or fail to issue. In fact, the title of the performance, “Un-Gender-Eyes,” might be read as a performative utterance. Could the title be read as an imperative, a commanding invitation to deconstruct gender? “Ungender, Eyes!” Or perhaps, with a play on sound, Mai’s rhetorical gesture is the action itself, the process of “ungenderizing” the audience. In both cases, the audience can “ungender” by crossing gender constructions in order to empathize and take action against the social problem of sexual violence.
To ungenderize the audience requires courage because the audience’s response is wholly unpredictable. Mai described the audience member’s reaction at this show:

Mai: I don’t know, he just took it. It was very interesting. He accepted it, but I guess it’s also because it’s a performance, like what is he going to do? I’m sure he was shocked. He’s like, “Why me?,” right? When I did it the first time in class, I chose a person in class. And when I gave him the shame, he didn’t want to take it. He’s like, “Why, why me?” He thought that I was placing blame on him, like he was the perpetrator.

This keen observation hones in on the risks in generating new vocabularies, new meanings. As speakers and writers attempt to buck convention and to create new vocabularies that can heighten solidarity, they can also risk alienating the audience. The risk can often result in a defensive measure, a sense that “This is not mine” or “Why me?” Interestingly, this male student’s response might be read as a complete identification with the victim, “Why me?” However, without growing aware of the doubleness of performance art, where he might enact a constructed role and also reflect on that role, this audience member could become immobilized by the performance. Mai assessed this student’s response well:

Mai: I think men avoid that because they’re afraid they’re going to be looked at as the perpetrator, you know. As the enemy. But that’s not the issue.”

The issue, rather, is to create an ability to empathize and build solidarity that is not only nominal but that places all parties at risk and that makes all parties vulnerable to the
community. In “Un-Gender-Eyes,” involvement is risky. Mai thus compels us to consider how performative agency and mutuality come together to produce new meaning as risky as that production might be. Like the performances of solidarity that we saw in earlier chapters, such solidarity is about social relationships and the potential for more lasting alliances.

Mutuality Reinforced in “Speak American Damn It!”

A second performance in this student production also strives toward a sense of mutuality—this time, making the audience’s tendency toward self-centeredness even more alarmingly apparent. Mai, Duc, and another classmate performed “Speak American Damn It!” Before this performance, another performer was crushing aluminum cans on the stage. As the performer clears the cans off the stage, the audience hears a loud conversation and boisterous laughter from three performers. The “beginning” is unclear. Mai, Duc, and a third student are engaged in a lively and colorful conversation for about ten minutes: talking trash, joking about sex, cursing Ho Chi Minh—but completely in Vietnamese. An ethnically and racially diverse audience, most people probably could not understand the language. The conversation ends as it begins, without clear boundaries.

Later asked to describe the performance, Mai said,

Mai: That was just, like, some random conversation that we, um, kind of did in the audience, and we spoke in Vietnamese. And the point of that is that like, whenever, like in the United States, you’re always forced to speak English. Like when you, when you arrived here as refugees or immigrants, whatever,
like you immediately are forced to speak English and you’re immersed into this culture.
And, even when you go outside of the country, you expect other people to speak English, or Americans expect other people to speak English, right? So that was kind of like a play on that. And we used “American” because people always referred and have associated English as the American language, and we wanted to emphasize that English is not American. That American can be anything. Like, speaking American or whatever. Because America is, like, multicultural, speaking Vietnamese is speaking “American,” quote unquote, right? So:
And also we wanted to create a level of, like, discomfort for people in the room that did not speak Vietnamese and who could not understand.

Duc described the performance similarly,

**Duc:**  I describe it as exhilarating because you know what? That threat always exists in America of not speaking English and knowing that people around you don’t understand you because they will be very defensive towards that. It felt exhilarating because although we may or may not be talking about them, the listeners may not understand us. They feel very threatened. They do. And, and they should feel comfortable. We want to create that.

Once again, agency and mutuality figure as important to this performance. The students perform the “threat” or “discomfort” that people often feel when hearing a language that they don’t understand, often a language other than English. The Vietnamese-only conversation creates an in-group and an out-group, highlighting the cultural capital that language can carry. The issue of how monolingualism or multilingualism might create
in- and out-groups, in effect, calls attention to how multilingualism could be (but is often not) perceived as invitational.

Interestingly, Duc reinscribed the “threat” with a dual meaning during his interview account of the performance. In addition to the audience’s feelings of discomfort, he also cited the multilingual speakers as being threatened by those who only speak English: “That threat always exists in American of not speaking English and knowing that people around you don’t understand you.” Duc’s statement implies that the ones threatened, in fact, are the people not speaking English while in an English-only environment. They are threatened by English-only speakers who are prejudiced against their multilingualism.

Having reinscribed the “threat” with new meaning, the performers create a sense of mutual participation with the audience by sitting in the audience. While they re-create the discomfort, there is also something welcoming in the lively, boisterous laughter. As Duc explained, “they should feel comfortable” because the performers try to create that comfort. The title “Speak American Damn It!” embodies both the discomfort and the desire for comfort. We might read it as an imperative delivered by those who feel threatened by non-English language. Or if we understand “American” to take on new meaning, then we might hear “Speak American Damn It!” as a reinscription of the meaning of American. In Duc’s words,

Duc: There’s no such thing as American.  
You make whatever America is.  
You create your own America.

Finally, as we read the performance more closely, we might locate yet one more nuance. Those who later learn the subject matter of the conversation soon realize that
there is a layer of gender politics in this performance. The talk is raunchy and abrasive as 
Mai later explained:

Mai:  It was a very like, um...
In Vietnamese, I would say iêu.
(laughs)
I don’t know.
Like, it’s very raw.
Basically talking about sex,
or like who has the bigger penis.
And like, it was just like a random, macho:istic, masculine,
like, atmosphere where I guess,
I guess I’m supposed to represent the girl who’s
I guess there’s a gender kind of thing in it,
but that’s another level.
Who’s trying to fit into this conversation where they’re talking
about,
“Who has the bigger penis?”
“Let me see yours.”
“Do you want to suck my dick?”
Whatever, whatever.

Even in the interview, Mai was hesitant to repeat the “raw” language of the performance,
toning down the impact of the sexual language and not mentioning how the performers
curse and laugh about cursing Ho Chi Minh. Although neither Mai nor Duc commented
much on the gender issues here (and this is surprising since both actively reject social
constructions of gender), Mai’s role in the conversation as a woman among two men
talking about penises impacts the interaction among performers and audience. One issue
at stake in the conversation was how the woman of the group rhetorically makes a space
for herself in the conversation. Such a realization highlights the degree to which our
reaction as audience members is self-centered. While we may be squirming in our seats,
thinking about how we feel threatened by a language we don’t understand, we miss how
Mai must navigate this masculine space. What we learn is that the talk is not only about
individuals but about the mutual construction of meaning, a continual effort to invite another in and to identify with that other.

Ellipses in Textual Art

A third artist and also a VAC student, Son, created textual art that engenders the kind of mutuality raised by the two works of performance art, a mutuality where performer and audience step into a newly formed space created by the performative text. Notably, Son’s textual art goes beyond the bounds of a staged production. While the two performance art pieces that we have explored undoubtedly took great rhetorical risks to heighten audience involvement, we should also keep in mind that these were performed in the context of a show where the audience was probably more amenable to experimentation and risk-taking. Rather than using confrontational strategies, Son’s textual art draws on a discursive strategy that would perhaps appeal to a wider audience: ellipses. Deborah Tannen describes an ellipsis as a strategy for involvement. Drawing from Robin Lakoff and A.L. Becker, Tannen elaborates that, “by requiring the listener or reader to fill in unstated meaning, indirectness [and ellipsis and silence] contribute to a sense of involvement through mutual participation in sensemaking” (Talking 23). For Tannen, such ellipsis can invoke shared understanding among speakers. In the terms used in this project, we might describe an ellipsis as an invitation, an opening for an audience to enter the conversation initiated by the inviter.

In June, Son, invited me to an exhibition of senior art major’s final projects. An art major himself, Son guided me through his friends’ works and explained how he enjoyed art that invoked response or made social commentary. Having his portfolio on
hand, he showed me an example. He had created two 8 ½ x 11” sheets that stated “I LOVE YOUR ACCENT” and “I WANT A THICKER ACCENT.” Explaining that people often say that they find French and British accents attractive, he questioned why English spoken with Asian accents were not perceived similarly. He posted countless copies around campus, primarily around the fine arts corner of campus. Needless to say, the response to these flyers was curiosity and discussion.

Figure 4.1 Son’s Textual Art, “I LOVE YOUR ACCENT”
Son’s rhetorical strategy might be described as ellipses since they created a silence that invited audiences to respond and interact. The unknown author, the ambiguity of the message, and the minimal context around the flyers contributed to the invitational ellipses, openings in which others could offer their perspectives. Son explained that he would overhear people passing by the flyers question the meaning. These passers-by therefore responded to the invitation, and, joining the dialogue that he had created, Son identified with their viewpoints and shared his own. The innovative flyers offered a resourcement to the viewers’ understanding of English spoken with Asian

Figure 4.2 Son’s Textual Art, “I WANT A THICKER ACCENT”
accents. Through such dialogue and inquiry, the speakers jointly constructed a more textured perspective of language. Son reinscribed Asian and Asian American speakers’ repeated experiences of being looked down upon for their accents. In place of such experiences and the cultural memory of such experiences, he created an opportunity for people to talk about their assumptions about accents, language, and respect.

These works of textual art did not appeal to large numbers of people as the curriculum and Culture Night performance did. However, like Tien and Mai’s performance art, Son’s texts invited heightened involvement between the writer and his audience. In their dialogue, Son and interested passers-by created moments of solidarity where they both identified with one another and, more generally, they identified Asian multilingual speakers with other multilingual speakers. Dialogue inspired by the students’ works performance and textual art thereby rhetorically performed a coming together of people and issues.

Performing Solidarity

When the OCAPICA curriculum committee generously gave me a copy of Vietnamese Americans: Lessons in American History in April 2002, I was delighted—not only because I thought that this curriculum was valuable for the local Vietnamese community, but also because I had grown up in Los Angeles and later Orange County and identified with Vietnamese American students’ potential excitement about the curriculum’s contents. That evening, I shared the curriculum with two of my childhood friends, both Vietnamese American and both still living in Orange County. We stopped to look at a timeline of the major waves of immigration to the U.S. and again to read
reprinted newspaper articles about hate crimes and political protests. Identifying the points representing our own families’ immigration and talking about our memories of the news headlines, there was an uncanny sense of connection, an *imagined* shared connection.

It was then—upon reflection about the ways that the curriculum could instill in youth a shared knowledge about Vietnamese American history and also upon reflection about what my friends and I shared in a more local interaction—that I came to see solidarity, specifically as it takes shape in speech and writing, as powerful and hopeful. In response to questions that I often receive about why I focus on solidarity, I have two answers. In this ethnographic case study, solidarity emerged, on the one hand, out of the “texts” of the VAC community. And on the other hand, solidarity also emerged as I identified with VAC students’ efforts, not out of some authentic shared ethnic identity but out of a shared hunger for cultural memories and solidarity. This hunger, for me, also came out of my engagement with rhetorical scholarship—I wanted something that made postmodern fragmentation, critical resistance, and classical rhetorical persuasion worthwhile. As I read more about language and solidarity, I was both heartened by its prevalence and surprised by the scarcity of research on its practice.

Together, the performative public texts that I briefly review in this chapter persuasively construct Vietnamese American cultural memories and identities as “so much more” than a war. These texts cause me to rethink the dominant postmodern skepticism of cultural indoctrination and the critical eye toward institutional hegemony that I described in Chapter 3. While I am an eager supporter of those analytical lenses that challenge hegemony, I also believe that these public texts and the social institutions
that sponsor them (schools, news media, arts) offer marginalized people an opportunity to re-perform our identities, cultural memories, and social relationships. Undoubtedly, my review of the Vietnamese American curriculum, the 2002 Culture Night at UC Irvine, and the several works of student-composed performance and textual art does not do justice to these rich and complicated texts. My hope is that this review does begin discussions about the ways that Vietnamese American public texts have been and will continue to, as Butler suggests, “open new contexts” and “speak in ways that have never yet been legitimated” (Excitable 41).
CONCLUSION

A MOVEMENT FOR A SOLIDARITY RHETORIC

As America enters the twenty-first century and many institutions, including our educational institutions, move to address issues of diversity and the intellectual value of examining our many American cultures, there is a need for vigilance and action in making sure that our minor narratives do not remain between the drafts of the American Story. And in my particular story, I narrate a partial history of Asian Americans so that they are not relegated to being the invisible presence, to being part of the landscape but not part of the conversation.

Morris Young, Minor Re/Visions: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship 192

Through their speech and writing, VAC college students have offered their stories to the American conversation and, in doing so, have alerted us to a rhetorical practice of solidarity where they have chosen to work and fight together. From VAC’s 1993 protest for an Asian American Studies program to more recent performance and textual art that revise what it means to be “American,” students’ rhetorics were about coming together and crossing ethnic, racial, generational, and political lines to do so. Solidarity has been no easy feat. VAC students have faced many challenges: the “invisible presence” of Asian Americans in the “American Story”; the unequal authority between students and university administration, nonwhite and white students, children and parents; multiple responsibilities to family, work, school, friends, and community activism; and diverse
and, at times, divisive political views within their own community. Yet their self-sponsored orality and literacy abounds, suggesting a solidarity rhetoric that enriches rhetorical theory.

Solidarity rhetoric is about using speech and writing to create and strengthen social relationships. In Chapters 1 through 4, my goal was to delineate several layers of social relationships, beginning with the most local interaction and moving outward toward public arenas. As linguist Deborah Tannen and literacy researcher Deborah Brandt have taught us, the interaction between speaker and listener and also between writer and reader is a social one. Fundamental to speech and writing is learning how to interpret social relationships cued by texts. In Chapters 1 and 2, I therefore considered the ways that social relationships are forged at the level of speaker-listener and writer-reader interaction. First, invitations enabled VAC students to invite their audiences to participate in an interaction and, more broadly, a community. With invitations, students marked, affirmed, and extended their communities. Second, complementing the invitations into their community were the identifications that extended their community. By identifying with others, students worked to broaden social relationships. Such identifications were a responsibility, according to activist students, and necessary to socio-political action.

Social relationships not only functioned at the level of interaction, but also spanned more widely into memorial dimensions and public spheres. As Chapter 3 has illustrated, acts of cultural memory enabled VAC students to recount Vietnamese American experiences and thereby enrich what Young calls the “American Story.” Students thus wove themselves into larger social narratives, asserting their right to revise
what it means to be American. Chapter 4 has demonstrated that public texts can advocate such revisions to the American Story. As performative texts, public texts drew from invitation, identification, and cultural memory to reflect and achieve solidarity among Vietnamese American students and fellow community members. Together, invitations into the community, identifications that forged new alliances, memorial connections that situated students into American narratives, and public texts that acted on social relationships enabled VAC students’ solidarity within and beyond their community.

The solidarity that emerges as central to VAC students’ rhetoric, moreover, is critical not only to their community but, as I suggest in this study’s introduction, is fundamental to the ways that we, as social beings, make our worlds cohere. In this sense, students’ rhetorics are instructive to the ways in which people connect through rhetorical means. As we read VAC students’ rhetorical efforts toward solidarity, I therefore ask that we turn this study back on ourselves like, as Kenneth Burke might say, a “social mirror.” In these reflections, I wish to question what we can learn from VAC students’ rhetorics and how this contributes to rhetorical theory and composition pedagogy.

**Implications for Rhetorical Research and Theory: Asian American Rhetorics**

In this chapter’s epigraph, Morris Young remarks on the “invisible presence” of Asian Americans in the American Story, and he insists on our “vigilance and action in making sure that our minor narratives do not remain between the drafts of the American Story” (192). I am encouraged by Young’s *Minor Re/Visions*, the first Asian American book-length study in our discipline, because his research introduces the “minor” subject as one who grows conscious of her positionality and acts on the culture that makes her
invisible. The revisions in *Minor Re/Visions* insist on our presence, our *participation*, in the American Story. Through this ethnographic case study of the Vietnamese American Coalition, I also wanted to contribute a “partial” account, a revision to the American Story and to Americanness. More specifically, by investigating the rhetorical practices of a Vietnamese American community, I sought to appreciate how Vietnamese Americans could contribute to contemporary rhetorical theory.

Asian and Asian American researchers have been calling for an inquiry into Asian American rhetorics, questioning what such studies might contribute to rhetorical theory. Despite their diversity, Asian American rhetorics share in common the socio-historical conditions of generational disjuncture, ethnic and racial tensions, and absence from mainstream American narratives. Our rhetorics consist of the creative and collective responses to our social, political, and historical contexts in the U.S. Many questions about our rhetorics have yet to be answered: What might we learn from the Asians and Asian Americans writing in our discipline? What do histories of literacy education tell us about how Asian Americans become speakers and writers? What can we say about speech and writing that represent and construct what it means to be Asian American? What can we say about Asian American community-based activist rhetoric? To be sure, what brings our rhetorics together is not a common rhetorical tradition or even ethnic heritage, but a shared struggle to be recognized and to contribute in meaningful ways to the study of rhetoric, literacy, and composition.

Interestingly, while researchers of Asian American rhetorics have examined widely varying ethnic communities in different times and places, most have been concerned with issues of self, community, and rhetorical positionality. Consider, for
instance, LuMing Mao’s research on the linguistic concept of “face” and indirectness among Chinese Americans; Morris Young’s insights into Asian American literacy narratives and “minor” revisions of the American Story; and Terese Guinsatao Monberg’s research on the ways that the Filipino American National Historical Society revised their ethos to bridge multiple generations of Filipinos and Filipino Americans.

This study of solidarity rhetoric among a Vietnamese American student group, I am convinced, is suggestive for Asian American rhetorical and literacy studies. Solidarity rhetoric contributes to these discussions of rhetorical positionality by proposing strategies for building alliances and strengthening relationships. Solidarity rhetoric, moreover, offers a way to make our many stories cohere, a way to make our multiple identities knit thickly together, and a way for us to forge alliances.

Such strategies are not unique to Vietnamese Americans or even Asian Americans. Rather, solidarity rhetoric is pervasive, a way for speakers and writers to navigate diversity and fragmentation. In chorus, research on Asian American rhetorics suggests that we rethink our understandings of self and community. The resistance-accommodation-assimilation model remains pervasive among compositionists; however, VAC’s solidarity rhetoric demonstrates how this model is narrowly conceived and seriously underestimates how students play with conventions. Resistance and assimilation assumes that the student self is wholly autonomous from the university community, and the student must therefore resist institutional authority or be subsumed within the university community. This either-assimilate-or-resist model presents a false dilemma to teachers and students because, as solidarity rhetoric suggests, individuals and communities are dynamic, where each continually reshapes the other. Becoming more
adept in the strategies of solidarity rhetoric means that speakers and writers might more actively achieve such dynamic selves and communities.

**Implications for Rhetorical Practice and Pedagogy: Composing Dialogue and Cultural Memory**

We thus have an imperative to collectively broaden our scholarship so that we are not only learning *about* Asian American rhetorics but also *from* Asian American rhetorics. “All too often,” bell hooks writes about liberal arts educators, “we found a will to include those considered ‘marginal’ without a willingness to accord their work the same respect and consideration given other work” (38). From VAC students’ speech and writing, however, we have elicited a rhetorical practice of solidarity that can help us reconceive the ways that we teach and practice composition. In particular, from the solidarity rhetoric sketched in the previous chapters, we might consider how self and community are written into dialogue and also memorial compositions.

While dialogue has certainly influenced classical rhetoric and, more recently, composition classrooms for some time, the purpose of dialogue in traditional rhetoric has been to arrive at a sound (and often singular) conclusion even if multiple voices make up the dialogue. A dialogue that works toward solidarity, however, does not necessarily lead speaker-listeners or writer-readers to a conclusion. Rather, the purpose would be to embark on a social relationship, engaging the reader into the writer’s world and encouraging the reader, in turn, to invite the writer into her world. By way of illustration, consider one of my best teaching moments. Mid-way through teaching a summer quarter section of first-year writing, I decided to write my students a letter. These students, most
full-time with part-time jobs and many responsibilities, had completed an entire year of
basic writing and were hoping to complete their first-year writing course during the
summer session. As the summer weeks wore on, tired eyes started to show the wear of
full and fast-paced student lives. At the time, I thought writing a letter to my students
would be an effective way to introduce the last unit on our syllabus and to express
appreciation for their hard work. Reading my note of thanks, my students seemed
surprised that I noticed their hard work and also surprised that their participation in class
affected my teaching. Despite double-column journals, informal writings to authors, and
other emphases on dialogue in the course, it was this letter that helped the students and
also helped me understand how dialogue is not only about weighing the soundest
viewpoints, but also about entering a social relationship.

Perhaps more innovative than teachers inviting students into new worlds is the
proposal that students can invite teachers and other students into their worlds. I wonder
what would happen if students were asked to write a letter whereupon the addressee
(teacher or student) could respond in kind. How might the exchange indicate to a writer
the felicity of her invitation? How might a reader actively search out ways to respond to
the invitation? Through continued letter-writing, students might tease out invitational
strategies that elicit response from their teacher and classmates. The happy by-product,
moreover, is that students and teacher alike share their communities and thereby build
camaraderie. Such activities as letter-writing, constructing dialogue, and interviewing
provide opportunities for students to rhetorically engage a listener, be engaged
themselves, and ultimately interrogate what entitlement and commonplaces assist the
dialogic exchange.
As student writers learn about the authority, commonplaces, and other rhetorical strategies that aid dialogue, they might apply their new understanding to composing identifications that extend beyond more immediate writer-reader interactions. For instance, students might write a proposal for an alliance between two parties (e.g., political contingents, community organizations, disciplines). What might be the grounds for identification? What might be the commonplaces from which writers draw? Here, solidarity and the more traditional rhetorical motive of persuasion come together, where the proposal persuades two parties to come together. Practicing invitation and identification would potentially encourage students to understand orality and literacy as social involvement.

In this sense, all writing becomes personal writing. Whether or not the “I” is explicit in their compositions, student writers learn to become personally engaged, reflecting on their relationships to other rhetorical agents and issues. By composing a “cultural memory,” students might learn to blur the lines between personal and expository writing. A literacy narrative, for instance, might shift from the common bootstraps narrative to a copious memorial mosaic. Such a memorial composition would likely be associative, where the writer follows the threads of her literacy experiences through school, friendships, family interactions, and so on for the purpose of yielding a dense and perhaps contradictory narrative. She might even follow these threads to others’ experiences, including those of published writers and fellow student writers. Finally, the student would refine the narrative, not to make it linear, but in order to create a rich narrative for a particular audience and purpose. Student writers, in fashioning such
a multivocal narrative of personal and cultural memories, would grapple with the rhetorical art of memory.

A composition pedagogy influenced by solidarity rhetoric could complement existing rhetorically based composition curricula. Working toward solidarity, strong writers would craft copious texts, synthesize multiple agents’ interests and viewpoints, and actively engage their audiences. Such writers, moreover, would fundamentally raise consciousness about and foster social relationships, an art that will follow them beyond the university into professional and other non-academic discourse communities.

Epilogue

In my own life, I have known the sense of cultural loss and consequent desire for solidarity that we have seen among VAC students. The Orange County that these students knew in 2002 was much different than the Orange County that I knew as a teenager living there over one decade earlier, but I can identify with these young adults trying to make connections with older first-generation Vietnamese. My family immigrated to the U.S. immediately after the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. Born less than a year later, I know little about the war-torn Vietnam covered in Life magazine and even less about the cultural memories of my family’s homeland. Rather, my memories extend only to the period of my family’s transition: my father worked long hours, my aunts picked up English from popular music, and my sisters, brothers, and I grew up speaking English to one another and watching American Bandstand and Soul Train in Los Angeles. When we moved further south to Orange County in 1986, I began to notice my ethnicity, particularly in light of the rapidly growing Little Saigon just a few miles
north of our home, but it was not until my undergraduate and graduate education that I developed a more activist ethnic and racial consciousness. What I learned from a budding racial consciousness was that the sense of loss and intergenerational disjuncture that I felt growing up was not personal but a sociohistorical phenomenon.

When I began this study, I was quite familiar with the ways that Vietnamese American and other racial minorities in the U.S. have rhetorically resisted normative conventions and abuses of authority. But I began to wonder, in our struggles against, what do we struggle for? I am grateful that the Vietnamese American Coalition students have called my attention to solidarity as a rhetorical lens because they thereby demonstrate what we might struggle for. Almost all of the students I interviewed in 2002 have graduated now, but these students continued their efforts to build solidarity. VAC’s co-founder James informed me that the second edition of the curriculum would soon be released. One alumna Alison, in addition to her full-time job, orchestrates a summer camp for disadvantaged youth. Mai is in the process of applying to law school to possibly specialize in international law. William, after a trip to Vietnam, began working for a financial company and writes screenplays independently. And Duc, Son, and Bryan all expressed interest in teaching although I am not certain whether they have pursued a credential as yet. From these VAC students and other minority people, we might continue to learn how to engage, how to see one another as resources and allies, and ultimately how to achieve a solidarity that inspires a movement.
APPENDIX A

LETTER TO POTENTIAL RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
1 May 2002

Dear VAC members:

I am a graduate student in the field of composition and rhetoric at Ohio State University, where I study uses of oral and written language in community settings. Having grown up in L.A. and Orange County, I recently returned to this area in order to study uses of language in a Vietnamese American group. Because it has been 27 years since the first major wave of Vietnamese immigration to the U.S. and the Vietnamese community is growing, I strongly believe that people are doing good things to make the community stronger, to build solidarity. For this reason, I am conducting a study of your student club; the purpose of this study is to provide a positive example of community-oriented Vietnamese Americans who use language to assert their ethnic identity and to benefit the Vietnamese/Vietnamese American community.

I am asking you and your club to participate in my study of community language practices. In this study, “language practices” could include any reading, writing, or conversations—e.g., VAC general and cabinet meetings, meeting agendas, newsletters, emails, IM, magazine or newspaper articles, college papers, job letters—that you might want to volunteer. What would volunteers need to do?

- Be willing to be observed during club meetings and special events.
- Fill out a brief questionnaire.
- And a few of you will be asked to participate in one or two one-hour interviews about yourselves and your perspectives on language. It would also be helpful for me if you would provide copies of written texts that you write during this time period.

Your participation is, of course, completely voluntary. I hope that you’ll participate in this study because I think that your group can demonstrate to others how you forge community with one another and how you represent this community to outsiders. If you have any questions or comments either now or at a later date, please feel free to call or email me (714.847.8962 or hoang.16@osu.edu). Or I’ll also be available at your meetings this quarter.

Thank you for your potential participation and support,

Haivan Hoang
APPENDIX B

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT LETTER
Consent for Participation in Research

I consent to participating in research tentatively entitled: *A Study of the Language Practices of a Vietnamese American Community*. My participation, at most, will entail allowing observations, filling out a questionnaire, and possibly participating in one or two interviews. I consent to having my emailed questionnaire reviewed by the investigators. And I will also allow my interviews to be audio taped for the purposes of allowing the investigators to later transcribe and review the interview.

Dr. Beverly J. Moss, Principal Investigator, or Haivan Hoang, Co-Investigator, has explained the purpose of the study, the procedures to be followed, and the expected duration of my participation. Possible benefits of the study have been described.

I acknowledge that I have had the opportunity to obtain additional information regarding the study and that any questions I have raised have been answered to my full satisfaction. Furthermore, I understand that I am free to withdraw consent at any time and to discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me.

Finally, I acknowledge that I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

Date: ___________________________  Signed: ___________________________

Participant

Signed: ___________________________

Witness: ___________________________

Principal Investigator or Co-Investigator

HS-027E Consent for Participation in Exempt Research (adapted from the sample consent form provided by The Ohio State University Research Foundation)
Family Background

- How would you describe your family background? For example, when did your family come to the U.S.? How big is your family? What is your family’s economic background?

Language Practices

- How are reading and writing important or useful to you?
- What kinds of reading or writing do you do in and out of school? These do not have to be “intellectual” or “academic”; rather, describe any reading and writing that you do regularly.
- How would you describe your literacy development – in or out of school? What are some memorable moments in this development?
- Would you mind letting me look at some of the writing that you’ve done recently, especially writing that deals with ethnic identity?
- How are speaking and listening important?
- Do you speak Vietnamese? If so, why, when, where, and with whom? How might this depend on the situation?
- Do you ever talk about Vietnamese or Vietnamese American identity? Can you give some examples (where, with whom, and why)?
- In what instances do you feel more self-conscious of “being” or “representing” Vietnamese or Vietnamese Americans?

Participation in the Vietnamese American Coalition

- From your perspective, how does VAC represent (or try to represent) Vietnamese Americans? (For example, how did VAC represent Vietnamese Americans at the recent ASUCI meeting? To the mentees? At Unity Games?)
- What is the significance of naming this group the Vietnamese American Coalition?
- Who are the various groups that VAC targets? (e.g., mentees, community, campus, other clubs, ASUCI)
- What are the various purposes of targeting these groups?
- Why did you join VAC?
- Describe your role within VAC. What events have you participated in or planned?
- Who was your primary audience in this event?
- What did you want them to get out of the event?
How would you describe your involvement in discussions during general meetings? Do you feel that your questions and/or comments are successful? Why or why not?

How do you think that your speaking or writing in general meetings differ from your speaking or writing in other settings? In what ways are they similar?

For mentors, do you think consciously about the language that you will use with your mentee? For example, how do you want your mentee to see you? How do you want him/her to see VAC?

Why is high school outreach such a large focus of VAC this quarter?

What steps do you think VAC needs to take in order to combat the recent ASUCI decision to take away funding?

For those who know about newsletters:
- What’s your general opinion of those newsletters?
- Who is the audience for this newsletter?
- What is their purpose?
- What do you think about that purpose? In your point of view, how successfully was that purpose achieved?

For those unfamiliar with newsletters:
- Even if you are not familiar with the past newsletters, do you see any purpose in having a newsletter in future years? What would be the purpose of this newsletter, and what kind of topics would it address?

What kind of writing would be good for VAC? How is this kind of writing different from school writing?

How would you describe the email messages that VAC now sends?

Are there other kinds of writing or modes of communication that happen in VAC?

For those who saw Green Dragon: In your opinion, how were Vietnamese people represented in the film, and what did you think of this representation?

What did you think of the dialogue in the film?

For those who saw Culture Night: How did the representation of Vietnamese identity in Culture Night differ from that in Green Dragon? How were Vietnamese/Vietnamese Americans represented in Culture Night?

**Summing Up**

- What are your short- and long-term hopes for VAC?
- When I write my dissertation, how do you want me to describe you, VAC, and/or Vietnamese Americans?


Francoz, Marion Joan. “Habit as Memory Incarnate.” *College English* 62.1 (September 1999): 11-29.


Nguyen, Katherine. “Guide on Vietnamese Experience to Debut.” The Orange County Register 20 April 2002.


