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ORCID # 0000-0001-8172-8957

Articulating Identity: Vietnamese Diasporic Culture in Literature and Media

Nina Ha

Hanh (behavior or conduct), Ngon (speech), Cong (labor or industry), and Dung (appearance)

Ngo Thi Ngan Binh – "The Confucian Four Feminine Virtues [tu duc]"

Abstract

In her article "The Confucian Four Feminine Virtues," Ngo Thi Ngan Binh interviews contemporary Vietnamese women living in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly called Sai Gon) to highlight and analyze the contradictions and expectations of family members governing female behavior and actions. Binh's ethnographic research regarding how "modern" females--or contemporary young women--should follow tenets of societal expectations is significant when examining the stories of the two females I studied. These two individuals are Chi or Minh (the older sister nay transgender brother of the author) and Andrew Pham (the subject of Marlo Poras' documentary Mai's America). This essay explores the shifting identities of these Vietnamese females as they travel from their "home"--or natal country--of Vietnam to inhabit the borders of the US nation-state. In making this transnational move, they undergo a type of racialization familiar to travelers and those who relocate, but it plays a particular role for people of color, who have immigrated or have been part of a racial or ethnic group living in America. For example, people from the Caribbean, Latin America, or

Africa who are noticeably dark become grouped into the category of African Americans, though their migration histories and patterns may be quite different from African American counterparts (whose past is often connected to the former US slaves).

Moreover, these other groups may speak Spanish, Patois, Creole, as well as other languages. This racialization within the Black community is very similar to those in the Asian and Asian American communities living in the US nation-state. For example, Asians from countries as diverse as China, Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, etc. are considered "all alike" by those unfamiliar with the heterogeneity of the Asian body. Also, like many other non-white groups, individuals are gendered and sexualized into designated subgroups. Thus, I intend to analyze and to interrogate how Chi/Minh and Mai complicate and challenge racial, gendered, and sexualized expectations of themselves by others. I will not address what their intentions for exploring and "performing" different gender paradigms means to them (because I really could not do so), but I will try to formulate the traces or remnants of how their performances of their gender and sexuality have affected those emotionally and physically close to them, not to mention to their audiences.

Keywords

Feminine Virtues, Vietnam, Travel Writing, Transgender, Transracial, Asia

Kimliğin Ortaya Konması: Edebiyat ve Medyada Vietnam Kültürü

Öz

Ngo Thi Ngan Binh "The Confucian Four Feminine Virtues" ("Kadına Özgü Dört Konfüçyen Erdem") başlıklı makalesinde kadın davranış ve hareketlerini yöneten aile üyelerinin çelişkilerine ve beklentilerine ışık tutmak ve onları analiz etmek için günümüzde (eskiden Sai Gon olarak bilinen) Ho Chin Minh şehrinde yaşayan kadınlarla yaptığı röportajlara yer verir. Binh'in modern kadının ya da günümüz genç kadınlarının sosyal beklentileri karşılamaları konulu etnografik araştırması, bu makalenin konu edeceği iki kadının öykülerinin incelenmesinde önemli yere sahiptir. Bu iki kadın, Chi ya da Minh, (yazarın ablası/transseksüel ağabeyi) ve (Marlo Pora'nin *Mai'nin Amerikası* belgeselindeki baş kişi) Andrew Pham'dir. Bu çalışma adı geçen Vietnamlı bireylerin doğum yerleri olan, Vietnam'dan Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ne gelmeleriyle birlikte kimliklerinde meydana gelen değişimi inceleyecektir. İki kadın, ulus aşırı bu eylem ile, gezginlerin ve bir yerden bir yere taşınanların aşina olduğu ırk ayrımcılığına uğrar. Ancak bu deneyim, göçmenler veya Amerika'da var olan ırksal veya etnik bir gruba ait olan bireyler için daha farklıdır. Örneğin, Karayipler veya Latin Amerika'dan gelen koyu ten rengine sahip insanlar, göç tarihleri ve kalıpları kendilerininkinden oldukça farklı olan ve geçmişleri büyük oranda Amerika'daki köleliğe dayanan Afrikalı Amerikalı kategorisi altında gruplanmaktadır.

Buna ek olarak, bu gruplar diğer dillerin yanı sıra İspanyolca, Kreol ve Patois dillerinde konuşabilmektedir. Siyahilerin maruz kaldığı ırk ayrımı yoluyla sınıflandırma Asya ve Amerika'da yaşayan Asyalı Amerikalıların maruz kaldığı sınıflandırmaya benzer. Örneğin, Çin, Japonya, Malezya, Vietnam, Kamboçya gibi ülkelerden gelenlerin hepsi, Asyalı beden yapısının fiziki çeşitliliğine aşina olmayanlar tarafından "benzer" olarak görülmektedir. Beyaz olmayan birçok başka gruba olduğu gibi bu bireylere de cinsel özellikler atfedilmekte ve bireyler bu özelliklere göre alt-gruplara ayrılmaktadırlar. Bu çalışma, Chi/Minh ve Mai'nin başkalarının ırksal ve cinsel beklentilerini nasıl karmaşıklaştırdıklarını ve bu beklentilere nasıl meydan okuduklarını

inceler. Çalışma, Chi/Minh ve Mai'nin farklı cinsiyet paradigmalarının kendileri için ne ifade ettiğini keşfederken amaçlarının ne olduğunu açıklamaya çalışmayacak (çünkü bu pek de mümkün değildir), bunun yerine cinsiyet ve cinselliklerini yaşayış şekillerinin kendilerine duygusal veya fiziksel olarak yakın insanlar ve okuyucular üzerinde nasıl bir etki yarattığını ortaya koymaya çalışacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Kadın Erdemi, Vietnam, Gezi Edebiyatı, Trans Birey, Irk Çatışması, Asya

In Ngo Thi Ngan Binh's article "The Confucian Four Feminine Virtues (Tu Duc)," the author interviews young Vietnamese women living in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Sai Gon) to survey familial expectations of these young women in an urban setting. She frames her inquiry concerning Viet Nam's Confucian tradition, which holds that there are four preeminent categories of feminine virtue: Hanh (behavior or conduct), Ngon (speech), Cong (labor or industry), and Dung (appearance) (Binh, 47-49). Using these feminine virtues as a foundation, Binh framed her research around young metropolitan women's struggles to uphold or break with traditional familial expectations in an urban-modern setting. Binh's ethnographic research highlights several themes and tensions that are in evidence in other depictions of young Vietnamese women struggling with questions of family, identity, and modernity, including the negotiating of constraints of familial expectation and tradition. Two examples of young people's experiences resonating with these themes and tensions appear in Andrew Pham's memoir, *Catfish and Mandala*, and Marlo Poras' documentary, *Mai's America*. In Pham's narrative, he recalls the experiences of Chi (later known as Minh), his elder sister, who becomes his transgender brother. In Poras' *Mai's America*, a teenaged girl studying in the United States inclines toward flexibility in her gender performance. This paper explores the shifting identities of these two Vietnamese subjects as they try to adapt, through migration, from their "home" or natal country of Viet Nam to the United States.[1] Building upon Leslie Bow's analysis of the interstitial subject by applying to transgender theory to *Mai's America* in her essay, "Transracial/Transgender: Analogies of Difference in Mai's America, I argue that both Chi/Minh

and Mai occupy liminal spaces due to their "transracial" statuses of being neither black nor white and misread as either /or and neither/ nor female/male. As Bow highlights, "The condition of those who 'fall in the interstices of social structure' [Turner (1969, 125)] speaks to the cultural placement of transgender and transracial individuals: not female-not mail and not black – not white subjects" (89). This transnational transition, with its geographic, cultural, racial, and social dislocation, leads to a confrontation with familial and traditional gender and sexualized norms, which are accompanied—in each case—by a reconsideration of racial and gender identity/performance.[2]

The difficulties of Vietnamese women upholding traditional feminine virtues in an urban-modern context, similar to those examined in Binh's study, are identifiable among these young Vietnamese subjects of the diaspora. Yet, their diasporic experiences altered or intensified these difficulties in foundational ways. In the face of these pressures and tensions, Chi/Minh and Mai try out similar tactics to overcome gendered boundaries, adapting and improvising with (more or less) success.

In the cases of Chi/Minh and Mai, their transplantation into the American context leads to a new external identity that is a new way of being seen, adding another layer of complexity to the paradigm outlined by Binh in her ethnography about females in Ho Chi Minh City. Chi/Minh and Mai experience for the first time an American racial positionality ("Asian"), unlike anything they could have experienced in Viet Nam. Each subject undergoes a racialization that is specific to the experience of people of color who have immigrated to the United States, as the predominant racial categories of American social life lead to new ways of being seen, (mis)recognized, categorized, and associated. For example, people from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa with darker skin tones become grouped as Black or African American in the United States even as personal histories diverge so radically as to be the difference between elective immigration and transportation-enslavement-disenfranchisement. The question of language identity—critical for experiencing as well as engaging the world—is similarly lost in racialization during the transition to the United States. This racialization, within the Black community, is similar to U.S. Asian and Asian-American communities. For example, Asians from countries as diverse as China, Japan, Malaysia, Viet Nam, and Cambodia often find themselves perceived as sharing some essential likeness, from the standpoint of those Americans who are either unfamiliar with

Asian heterogeneity or disregard that heterogeneity as expedient or advantageous. More specifically for Vietnamese Americans, racial identification stings more profoundly because of the failed American War in Viet Nam and the protesting at home.[3]

Refugees fleeing Communist violence, re-education camps, and even genocide may be conflated with either an old wartime foe or—no less stingingly—pitied for what Americans did to the Vietnamese upon their arrival to the United States. Thus, the racialization experienced by people with Vietnamese backgrounds is in some ways shared with other racialized peoples in the United States, but, in different ways, it is unique to people with Vietnamese backgrounds.[4]

Gendering and sexualizing associations accompany the phenomenon of racialization. How individuals react to these identity processes demonstrate the recourses that individuals have to this leveling power of racialization. The works of Pham and Poras offer vivid examples of young women responding to this process by altering their gender comportment to escape, not only the constraints of American racialization, but also familial pressures to fashion themselves as "traditional" women acceding to patriarchal authority. Chi/Minh and Mai, the young people depicted in the works of Pham and Poras, although experiencing the United States from very different geographic and socioeconomic locations, come to experiment with similar solutions in their negotiation of racial, gendered, and sexualized expectations.

To foreground Chi/Minh and Mai's experiences, I turn to Viet Nam's social policies focusing on reproductive health and population policy in the work of Daniele Belanger[5] who observes that state policies do not account for women, whether young or old, who are not of child-bearing age. Moreover, Belanger writes that "[f]emale sexuality not within the bonds of marriage is considered non-existent." Belanger argues that single, childless women living in Viet Nam face scrutiny about their sexual identities. Although Belanger alludes to women's sexual identities, nowhere in her research does she directly address Vietnamese women and homosexuality or queer identities. Yet, being queer in both Viet Nam and the United States could be another reason why some women choose neither to marry nor to have children. Belanger's work superficially approaches the subject of queer identity, but more direct research is needed to more fully understand how queer

Vietnamese women and queer Vietnamese subjects navigate realms of feminine virtue and identity in Viet Nam as well as within the United States. Through Pham's memoir and his recalling of Chi/Minh, and Poras' documentary film on Mai's journey in the United States, this understudied space of queer identity and familial duty can be observed and considered. Chi/Minh and Mai react to prescribed roles of gender and sexuality, exploring their genders and sexualities and transgressing certain "acceptable" norms and boundaries, while at the same time demonstrating concern and even despair about preserving familial and social acceptance. As they perform prospective identities, they are wary of straying too far and either breaking their community bonds or neglecting their familial duties.

Chi/Minh ultimately commits suicide, seemingly as a result of her excommunication from her family and inability to return to Viet Nam, where her grandmother shielded her from the bonds of familial—especially paternal—expectations. Old Quan, an elderly Vietnamese American man who articulates the patriarchal and heteronormative reaction to Chi/Minh's life and death, expressed the nature of the expectations imposed upon her/him pointedly. Quan addresses Andrew Pham after learning of Chi/Minh's suicide:

> She became too American….
>
> Your sister Chi - too selfish, too into herself. She wants to be herself.
> That's wrong. All wrong. To live a good life, you live for others, not for yourself. Your parents bring you into this world so you be what they want....
>
> Your sister, she not know how to ignore desire. Not know how to accept herself. She not see her duty to parents. To her, desire is above—higher—than duty to parents...She not know sacrifice. (184)

For Old Quan, and perhaps for many members of the Viet Kieu ["Overseas Vietnamese"] and Vietnamese communities, personal desires must be subsumed for the sake of the family, a concept that is Un-Vietnamese and "too American," as implied by Old Quan. Thus, Chi/Minh's actions could be interpreted as that of "willfulness," a consequence of living in the United States and being "too American"

or too "willful." I utilize this term, willfulness, in reference to Sara Ahmed's research about willful subjects, especially those subjects who are female and queer as presented in her 2014 book *Willful Subjects*. Also, Ahmed analyzes willing bodies while juxtaposing these subjects who are willful or unwilling. The willful subject, according to Ahmed, performs these actions because "[s]he wants to be herself" and to do so goes against not only the wishes of her parents but also of her community that no longer supports her. Further, Ahmed points out, "To be identified as willful is to become a problem. If to be willful is a problem, then willfulness can be understood as the problem of will… Even suicide is an expression of the will…" (Ahmed 3). This burden to sacrifice oneself for the family falls especially hard on women, who hold a proverbial duty to perform and adhere to the expectations of their families, lest they are identified as a problem, or, in Chi/Minh's situation, "too American" and are shunned or exiled by their cultural/racial community.

The legacy of Viet Nam's 6th-century religious prophet Không Tu exemplifies this familial pressure placed upon women to be willing subjects rather than willful.[6] The tenets Không Tu expressed are as follows:

> Tai Gia tòng Phu In childhood, a woman must obey her parents.
> Xuât Gia tòng Phu In marriage, a woman must obey her husband.
> Phu tòng tu tu In widowhood, a woman must obey her son.

The influence of Không Tu on Vietnamese women's roles and lives persists and pervades the households of many Vietnamese, whether they live in Viet Nam or overseas. Tu's words have been circulated and explored through various media, notably in Trinh T. Minh-ha's documentary *Sur Nam Viet Given Name Nam*, in which the Vietnamese and Francophone filmmaker explores the culture and society of Vietnamese women living in Viet Nam and the United States. Minh-ha presents the three tenets as the expectations that Vietnamese women are consciously or unconsciously obligated to fulfill. The feminine duty to abide by the three principles of Tu's doctrine instills a patriarchal control over women's bodies and choices, indicating what Adrienne Rich has termed a "compulsory heterosexuality,"[7] that openly declares that women must be heterosexual and reproductively active.

Nonetheless, filmmaker Minh-ha does not engage in questions of queer and/or transgender identity in her exploration of the roles of Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic women in connection to Tu's legacy. While filming a heterogeneous group of women from various generations, with a mixture of those living in the United States and abroad, Minh-ha does not interview queer women or transgender people. Although the documentary challenges the presupposition that these Vietnamese women should acquiesce to patriarchal norms, all the women who were interviewed addressed heteronormative attitudes relating to dating cis-gendered men or reflected concerns about dating or being married to these cis-gendered men. Their Vietnamese female identities were still intimately tied to the heterosexual, patriarchal familial structure.

While Minh-ha's documentary was produced in 1989, her film and Tu's words are embedded ten years later in Old Quan's conversation with Pham in Pham's 1999 memoir. Chi/Minh's "desire"—the word used by Old Quan in critique of Chi/Minh—is coded to mean sexual desire, perhaps even queer and transgressive desire. This desire, according to Old Quan, is "selfish" and "wrong," and thus an insult to the community, which is what caused Chi/Minh's excommunication from the family and subsequent suicide. The reality is much more tragic: it is the community's ostracism and punishment of the now "deformed" Chi/Minh that caused he/him to take her/his own life. It was her/his isolation through his family's inability to accept her/him that caused her/him to turn to the only form of a reprieve she/he could see for her/himself. Once again, Ahmed's work proves useful as she writes, "Willfulness is thus compromising; it compromises the capacity of the subject to survive, let alone flourish. The punishment for willfulness is a passive willing of death, an allowing of death" (1). Later on, in Pham's work, he notes that the youngest sister of the family did not even know that she had an older sister/brother. Thus, the family allowed Chi/Minh to die and, in fact, erased Chi/Minh's existence in life and in death, most likely due to Chi/Minh's willfulness or "Americanness" in not conforming to heterosexist, patriarchal and familial Vietnamese expectations.

In his search to understand Chi/Minh's death, Andrew Pham conveys the following:

> Chi was just never meant to be a girl. That simple. I had always known she was different. Unusual. An active,

> quiet, and thoughtful first-child, Chi carried herself in such an unassuming way that I instinctively looked to her as my oldest brother. Perhaps I even resented it as a child because I was the first son. While I reaped the prodigal privileges, I suspected they should have been her honor. (Pham 189)

Chi's "masculine abilities" faced a different interpretation when she/he lived in Viet Nam. While Pham's family was still living in Viet Nam, it was Chi who looked after the family, and it was Chi who taught her/his younger brothers how to swim and catch fish. It was also Chi who carried their brother Hien on her back for miles and held Andrew's hand as they waded into the water and onto the boat that would take them away from their homeland, Viet Nam. Chi's masculine strength was trusted and valued, and it had proved itself time and again, especially while living in Viet Nam.

This perceived strength becomes "willfulness" and changes through the family's transnational geographical migration. What was once an asset changes to a liability. As Pham describes, it is when the family moves to California that Chi fully transforms herself from female to male and becomes Minh. Pham explicates:

> The first thing Chi did when we moved to California was throw away all her dresses and skirts. From her first day at high school, she wore men's clothing. Her teachers, misled by her confident male body language, instinctively classified her as a boy.... Whether she wanted it or not, Chi had a new identity. At school, she was a he. And she used the boys' locker room and competed in boys' sports. She didn't speak much English then, but what friends she had were all boys. She was one of them. (Pham 195)

Although it may appear that Chi/Minh transformed, in Pham's eyes, the reality is that her/his subjectivity and "masculine" characteristics had always been present, both in Viet Nam and the U.S.; nevertheless, the transnational geographical migration highlighted and underscored this transgendered identity more forcefully, perhaps, than if Chi/Minh had stayed in Viet Nam.[8]

In addition to being misrecognized and read as male, Chi's/ Minh's relationship with their father worsens when the Pham family

is living in the United States. Although Chi has always enacted and performed a masculine role--both in Viet Nam and the United States--at least in Viet Nam her grandmother, with whom she wanted to live even after Chi's father planned the family's escape from Viet Nam, mediated her interactions with her father.[9] Chi's grandmother encouraged Chi to be independent and act in whatever manner she wanted, while Chi's father disciplined and punished his children, obstructing their self-realization. Without Chi's grandmother to intervene, Chi's father would typically punish his children by beating them with a belt. In Chi's/Minh's final act of rebellion against her father, when they were living in the United States, she/he reported her/his father to the police, who came to the Pham's residence. Chi's/Minh's father was handcuffed in front of his wife, children, and community. It was in this act of shaming that Chi's/Minh's father finally disowned Chi/Minh and exiled her/him from the family. Might this final break have occurred because Chi/Minh was confronting her/his father as a man, holding Pham, the father, responsible for his actions and putting a check on his recourse to physical violence? Or was this break the result of Chi/Minh having outsiders intervene in familial matters, which thereby resulted in her father's emasculation in front of his family and the Viet Kieu community? There could be numerous reasons for Chi/Minh's exile, all befitting a heterosexist, racial, and patriarchal structure that punishes willful actions by queer and/or female subjects, highlighted notably in Ahmed's work on willful issues and exemplified by Chi/Minh.

Although her story is not so tragic as Chi's/Minh's, Mai in *Mai's America* also performs and plays with her gender and queer identity. The audience is introduced to Mai as she is walking in downtown Ha Noi, the capital, which is located in the north of Viet Nam. Mai, wearing glasses and sporting shaggy, bowl-cut, short hair, encounters two young shoeshine boys on the streets. Although she could be mistaken for a young boy herself, Mai is introduced as coming from an upper-class, wealthy Vietnamese family. Her family lives in one of a few hotels that her father owns, while her mother is a schoolteacher. As a former soldier who drove tanks for the North Vietnamese army, her family is politically well-connected, and through her father's political connections, the family enjoys a better life than most Vietnamese. This privilege is demonstrated narratively by the filmmaker through the depiction of Mai driving her motor scooter, and later playing the piano in the family's large living room. Mai's family are in such robust

economic circumstances that Mai has the opportunity to become a foreign exchange student in Meridian, Mississippi, where she at first lives with a white family and then a black Baptist one. *Mai's America* is well researched and analyzed in both Leslie Bow's article, Transracial/ Transgender: Analogies of Difference in Mai's America and Cynthia Wu's article, "Distanced from Dirt: Transnational Vietnam and the U.S. South," two works I have interspersed throughout this essay.

Cutting from the scenes in Viet Nam, the viewer is introduced to the opening of an American football game that begins with public prayer. Mai is in attendance. As the movie continues, the audience is brought into Mai's world, and the interactions between her and her host family are revealed. Mai is unhappy because her host family does not make her feel either accepted or welcomed, except the host parents' elderly parents, whom Mai refers to as "Grandpa" and "Grandma." They appear to enjoy her reference to them as being part of their family, and the viewer notices an instant bond that Mai has with her adopted grandparents. It is in one of these exchanges between Mai and her Grandpa, whom she visits when he is convalescing in the hospital that Mai tries out a novel performance of gender.[10]

Mai walks into the hospital room bearing gifts. Her hair is shaved close to her head, and Grandpa notices right away, stating: "I like your haircut. You look good but a girl ain't supposed to cut all her hair off." Mai replies, "I'm not a girl anymore," to which Grandpa responds, "Does your daddy know?" Mai answers, "My daddy doesn't know." Grandpa then adds, "Will you grow it out anymore?" In that last exchange, Mai does not answer [Film: 20:05]. This silence could be interpreted in multiple valences. As a willful subject in many scenes, Mai may not want to incur Grandpa's disapproval and thus stays silent to continue to be accepted by Grandpa and Grandma.

What is to be gleaned from these questions and answers between Grandpa and Mai? What are the implications of both the questions and the answers? Moreover, why did Mai get a "buzz-cut" and what was the cause for concern in Grandpa's tone and demeanor? The most natural response is that Grandpa, standing in for Mai's father, as the heterosexual, patriarchal authority figure, is concerned with Mai's lack of femininity (i.e., her hair). Since her hair was a symbol of her female gender, getting a buzz-cut made it harder to distinguish Mai as a "girl." It is more challenging to interpret Mai's response that she is no longer

a girl. Could it imply that she wants to be seen as a woman? If that is the case, then why did she not answer Grandpa when he asked her if she would grow her hair out? Significantly, she also refused to tell her "biological" Vietnamese father in Viet Nam that she had cut her hair. Thus, does the cutting of her hair symbolize her need to express her queerness and desire to be perceived as a boy? This concept, in fact, may be the case when it is juxtaposed with two previous scenes.

In one episode, Mai is in the bathroom, and her head is shaved. She is seen applying makeup, implying that she will be going out partying or socializing for the evening. While she is putting on her makeup, she provides a running monologue:

> All mothers in Viet Nam want their daughters to be charming and gentle. And a typical wife in Viet Nam, when a husband comes home, she should take off his jacket, prepare the meal, and never, ever talk back.... [pause]... I don't think I will ever be a typical wife. [Film: 18:02]

This scene in the bathroom reveals certain fissures in Mai's gender formation and sexual identity, the enactment of willfulness. Although she recites the traditional roles and customs that are expected of her as a dutiful Vietnamese daughter and obedient wife—referenced at the beginning of this essay—the person in front of the camera defies these categories, with her buzz-cut hair and face plastered with makeup. How would her gender and sexuality be experienced and perceived by others? To answer this question, the viewer can witness the interaction between Mai and Mai's gay friend Chris, whose other persona is Christy, who described his first meeting with Mai as follows: "The first time I met Mai, I thought she was a little boy. I said, 'Oh, Lord, not another little Oriental boy, not another one.' But, she turned out to be the perfect little young lady that you'll ever meet" [Film: 31:00].

Being mistaken as a boy was the reaction that Mai wanted from Chris/Christy when she showed him her new haircut.[11]

> She asked Chris, "Do I look like a boy now?" Chris replied, "You're more of a girl than me." [Film: 18:30]

What should be considered from this exchange is why Mai would want Chris/Christy to assume that she is a he. Is it because Mai is attracted to Chris/Christy and by making herself more like a man,

then Chris as Christy would desire Mai as male? Does Mai want a gay relationship with Chris or a lesbian relationship with Christy? These questions I raise are neither answered nor resolved because after Mai moves away to college, her relationship with Chris/Christy ends.

After all, it is only when the viewer is introduced to Chris/ Christy and when their relationship blossoms that Mai fully enacts a confident "female masculinity." [12]

Throughout the film, particularly during the interactions between Mai and Chris/Christy, there is a definite shift in Mai's appearance. What is harder to understand are Mai's motivations behind her physical, transgendered metamorphosis. There are many scenes of men dressing up as women in the documentary, and Mai is enamored with Chris and the ways he prepares himself and transitions into Christy. In such situations, Mai is also in "costume" or "drag." Is she a woman who looks like a man who is dressed like a woman? What is reflected and represented to the viewers, and how much of it is Mai's active agency in performing in "ethnic drag," and what part may come with Mai not knowing the cultural referents relating to queer identity, mainly as it is presented in the United States?[13] Since it is evident throughout the film that Mai does not always understand the English that is spoken to her, would she then be able to catch the cultural signifiers that go along with language and social expression? Leslie Bow's analysis underscores my argument about trying to understand Mai's motives. Bow writes:

> Mai's inability to grasp the full meaning of those around her is a constant theme running across ethnic lines: she fails to appreciate the pun made by a white Mardi Gras reveler with a horned headdress who self-identifies as a 'horny beast.' She mistakes a Vietnamese American's view on the war when he attempts to inform her that 'not all Vietnamese wanted Communism.'… These repeated scenes of failed interpretation underscore her status as an outsider to American culture, its linguistic codes, its class and race associations, and its Cold War politics" (93).

How then, is one supposed to read Mai when she, intentionally or unintentionally, is marked as transgendered and/or queer? Do these codes even matter? But how could they not matter, especially to a marginalized and racialized group such as the queer Viet Kieu women,

who are typically forced to be silent and remain invisible, mainly if they are willful rather than willing to adhere to societal norms and pressures? Mai's friendship with Chris/Christy is driven at least in part by how enthralled Mai is by how Chris/Christy destabilizes gender. Chris/Christy may lead Mai to sense the possibility of liberation from gender norms, from the four feminine virtues and the three tenets of Không Tu. Chris/Christy, a friend who was older than Mai, seemed to have it figured out. If Chris/Christy could switch genders, perhaps Mai could escape the narrowness of that life outlined by the confines of patriarchal subordination. This tantalizing possibility Mai seems to experience has an echo in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Might this be an encounter with "the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power"? Mai seems to enjoy the "subversive confusion" of "troubling" gender normativity, and she unmistakably relishes Chris/Christy's ability to be who he/she wants to be.[14]

Chris/Christy gives Mai reason to hope that she can step out of unbearable feminine virtues/duties, and break with the limiting categories that frame her identity from the outside. Throughout this essay, I provided an alternative lens from which to articulate the circumstances of many Vietnamese diasporic, queer/transgendered, and female/male subjects whose voices have been either ignored, silenced, or even erased from their familial/national/transnational her/histories. I put female sexuality in the center, rather than at the periphery to show how vital it is to address how patriarchal and heterosexist expectations of Vietnamese females continue and perpetuate the oppression of these marginalized women who seek acceptance from the very people who are supposed to be their support structure and part of their families.

Notes

[1] In this paper, I will be building upon the works of both Leslie Bow's essay, "Transracial/Transgender: Analogies of Difference in Mai's America" and Cynthia Wu's article, "Distanced from Dirt: Transnational Vietnam in the U.S. South." Bow's framing of liminality is vital here: "Liminality is a 'midpoint of transition in a status-sequence between two positions' that attends the ritual processes of initiation [Turner (1974, 237)]. Those undergoing new status definition, liminal personae or 'threshold people,' are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (89).

[2] See Judith Bulter's *Gender Trouble* for a more comprehensive examination of gender performance.

[3] As Cynthia Wu, along with other Asian American scholars have noted, "The specter of the Vietnam War, along with the intraethnic conflicts it wrought, is never far from mind" (172).

[4] For a more comprehensive study about this topic, see Yen Le Espiritu's *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*.

[5] See Daniel Belanger's chapter, "Single and Childless Women of Vietnam: Contesting and Negotiating Female Identity?" in *Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam* edited by Lisa Drummond and Helle Rydstrom.

[6] These tenets are presented in Trinh T. Minh-ha's documentary, *Sur Name Viet, Given Name Nam*.

[7] See Adrienne Rich's 1980 essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" located in the journal *Signs*.

[8] To better understand and contextualize Chi/Minh's interstitial and liminal identity, please read "Transracial/Transgender: Analogies of Difference in Mai's America," in which Leslie Bow

astutely describes the interplay between gender and race through a transgender lens that destabilizes what it means to be racialized and sexualized in the United States (75-77; 81-90).

[9] I deliberately choose to name Chi here and not Minh because in Viet Nam, that is how Chi was identified. It was only through immigration that Chi transitioned to Minh.

[10] I will discuss some earlier scenes between Mai and her gay friend Chris/Christy later on in the paper.

[11] Many of the scenes I have referenced, including this one, is analyzed at length in Leslie Bow's work, "Transracial/Transgender: Analogies of Difference in Mai's America."

[12] I use this term about Judith Halberstam's text *Female Masculinity* (Duke UP, 1998).

[13] Both Wu's and Bow's work situates Mai's America within the context of the U.S. South as well and thus, the Southern element, while not explored in this essay, is important to note.

[14] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 44.

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