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Delivering Home,
Gendered Labor and The Consumption of Intimacy in The Vietnamese Diaspora

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Asian American Studies

by

Phuc Duy Nhu To

Thesis Committee:
Dr. Judy Tzu-Chun Wu
Dr. Dorothy Fujita-Rony
Dr. Thuy Vo Dang

2020

DEDICATION

To

my parents, Thuy Ngo & Hung To,

for their support, love and patience.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Delivering Home;
The Invisible Labor and Consumption of Intimacy in Vietnamese Diaspora
by
Phuc Duy Nhu To
Master of Arts in Asian American Studies
University of California, Irvine, 2020
Professor Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, Chair

Focusing on intimacy, this study is situated at the intersection of Food Studies, Critical Refugee Studies and Gender Studies. Centering on cơm tháng (monthly rice), a meal delivery service that mimics the format of traditional Vietnamese family meals, this project interrogates Vietnamese American women's agency and negotiation of gendered labor within the private realm (the home and the family unit) and the quest for home through food consumption. The analysis of this study is drawn from materials collected through oral interviews, English and non-English materials, including printed, online newspaper articles, blog posts and online forums. The gendered and patriarchal relations of a home are manifested in the mundane acts of cleaning, cooking, grocery shopping and even driving, all of which are integral to food preparation. Cơm tháng provides an entry point to the domain of intimacy; it sheds light on shifting family structures, gendered labor roles, Vietnamese women's agency, and fissures within the Vietnamese diaspora. Cơm tháng illuminates the affective labor and the double shifts performed by women that are often invisibilized, shows that cơm tháng's providers participate in the patriarchal construction of the home while exerting their agency and helping other women fulfilling their second shifts. The consumption of cơm tháng also presents a form of forced queering of the heteronormative home.

INTRODUCTION

Growing up in a small home in a little coastal town of Vietnam, our house is many things: a home, a business, a place of refuge for everyone from all walks of life, including the people who work as employees. Our family meals were often crowded, because we shared food with everyone who was there. It was only in recent years when my time at the house was limited that my parents and I started having meals with just the three of us. We found a corner on the second floor that has enough room for three and used a wooden stool to place a large tray of food, and that was our lunch/dinner table. It was in this open yet intimate space where my parents were present, and that I felt at home.

During the last meal before I went back to the United States, my parents asked what I wanted to bring back with me. As I was savoring the moment and the food we ate, I told them I want to bring a container of măng khô kho (braised dried bamboo shoot), a typical dish that my mother always makes during Tet holidays. My father stormed at me for having a ridiculous thought — bringing a container of cooked food overseas. “The food will get bad by the time you get there. It’s a waste of time and effort. Why don’t you just bring over the ingredients and your mother can show you how to prepare it?” he said. It wasn’t the flavors or the taste that I craved. It was my mother’s labor of love and the memories attached to this dish that I wanted to bring with me, and so I did.

When I heard of cơm tháng (monthly rice), a Vietnamese American meal delivery service that mimics the format of a family meal at an affordable price of \$6-8, it didn’t surprise me. It made sense: who doesn’t crave home and the convenience of delivery while living in a hostile and capitalist society where one must work and produce to belong? Com

tháng is not only about the physical aspect of food but also the affective experience, as it offers the familiar format and flavors of a family meal. To understand why cơm tháng is so necessary, it is important to address the militarized context upon which the Vietnamese diaspora is built.

Displacement and migration as a product of the war forced the war generation and later generations of Vietnamese Americans to ponder the question of origin -- where is “home”? The Vietnam War and the loss of South Vietnam remain an integral part of Vietnamese American cultural and political identity. Being subjected to family trauma, systematic oppression, alienation and disenfranchisement for being the “other”, Vietnamese Americans and immigrants long for a space of belonging. Food embodies the familiarity of home and maternal love. Food is a flavorful mobile home.

Wars are never just about physical violence and loss in the public realm. As Stephen Whitfield eloquently puts it, war “has a geopolitical and social temporality: even if the war has ended in the geopolitical dimension, it has not necessarily done so in the social dimension.” Looking from a feminist framework, war is “a complex process that transforms not only public institutions and national economies but also intimate relationships.”¹ The Vietnam War ended in the public realm but continues in the domain of intimacy because of the burden of remembering the loss of one’s nation, the intentional erasure of its history, and the tearing apart of one’s family through war. It’s the trauma from within that causes emotional displacement, engenders longing, and intensifies the search for membership and belonging.

¹ Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(Es)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

Delivering Home presents the dynamic and complex ways in which Vietnamese and Vietnamese American women negotiate their gender roles, exert agency, and establish independence within the constraints of the home, the family unit and the Vietnamese diaspora. In advancing the topic of the intertwined relation between food and identity, *Delivering Home* makes an argument for eating as consumption of “home”, intimacy and emotional labor.

Focusing on intimacy, this study is situated at the intersection of Food Studies, Critical Refugee Studies and Gender’s Studies. Centering on cơm tháng (monthly rice), this project interrogates Vietnamese American women’s agency and negotiation of gendered labor within the private realm (the home and the family unit) and the quest for home through food consumption. Cơm tháng exists in both the Vietnamese diaspora’s formal and informal economies as well as in contemporary Vietnam. What differentiates cơm tháng from other meal delivery services is the maternal labor that is used, the private space in which these meals are produced, and the community to which it caters. The gendered and patriarchal relations of a home are manifested in the mundane acts of cleaning, cooking, grocery shopping and even driving, all of which is integral to food preparation. In addition, the negotiation and maintenance of one’s ethnic identity are intertwined with what one eats. The yearning for food that is associated with home reveals the subject’s relationship to the home, especially as the meaning of home intensifies with displacement. Thus, cơm tháng provides an entry point to the domain of intimacy; it sheds light on shifting family structures, gendered labor roles, Vietnamese women’s agency, and fissures within the Vietnamese diaspora.

The experience of Vietnamese immigrants and Vietnamese Americans are not always generalizable due to the locality and specificity of this study. Nevertheless, they still contribute to larger conversations regarding belonging, gendered labor and the continuation of the Vietnam war in the social dimension. This project is an attempt at inserting the voices of Vietnamese immigrants, women in particular, who might not have either the language or access to have their stories heard.

The thesis consists of four parts. Part one, “A Taste of Home,” goes into the origins of *cơm tháng* as well as how this service operates in the Vietnamese diaspora and contemporary Vietnam. Part two, “The Invisible Labor,” investigates how gendered labor among Vietnamese women and family has and has not changed after the Vietnam War. Specifically, I analyze the ways in which Vietnamese women have crossed the gender, public/private divides and exert agency while upholding the importance of the family and the home. To further extend the discussion around the question of “home,” Part Three, “Queering The Home,” explores the affective component of food, and how *cơm tháng* allows for the queering of the normative home. Part Four, “Eight Dollar of Labor”, is a creative project that features a series of photographs taken by me through the process of research in the U.S and contemporary with the theme of food and gendered labor.

The production and consumption of *cơm tháng* allows for the propagation of patriarchy in the form of gendered labor; but at the same time, it’s a leverage for these women to bargain with patriarchy itself while queering the “home.” The stories of providers and consumers all together are critics of the U.S empire, capitalism and patriarchy.

Although the women in this study perform gendered labor in the confined space of the kitchen and the home, the women find ways to exercise their independence and agency as “managers” and business owners.” In contrast to the masculinized cooking profession, providers make a living out of the invisible, unpaid labor that is often associated with domesticity. There is also a sense of maternalism infused in *cơm tháng*; it’s the familiar tastes and flavors of mom’s home cooking that people are buying and consuming.

These women, providers and consumers, also challenge the notion that an increase in financial capital correlates with more freedom outside of the home. Although having more freedom in spending, Vietnamese women still perform the second shift and remain caregivers and/or providers for the family. For these women, the public and private divide is irrelevant, because they navigate and function within both spheres on a daily basis.

CHAPTER 1: METHOD

Given the lack of primary materials collected on this topic, I utilize a variety of sources that include oral history and ethnography. In addition, I used English-language and Vietnamese-language materials that are not officially archived, including blog posts, digital and printed newspapers. The individual stories and experience of Vietnamese women were essential to this project. Oral history fills the gaps of knowledge and brings texture and depth. Ethnography, on the other hand, provides insights into the gendered labor and unspoken social structures through the observation of the everyday life routine and patterns. As a result, my ability to speak and write in Vietnamese was invaluable throughout the research process.

While cơm tháng is present in multiple Vietnamese diasporic communities, the materials utilized in this study are primarily from Little Saigon in Orange County, California and Houston, Texas. However, the bulk of my research materials were from Orange County. The geographical scope of this study is defined by the available materials written on cơm tháng. *Người Việt Newspaper*, the oldest and largest daily newspaper published in Vietnamese outside of Vietnam, is based in Orange County. Orange County has the largest population of Vietnamese Americans living in the United States and also is the economic capital of the Vietnamese diaspora, given the concentrated numbers of Vietnamese American businesses. The owner of the newspaper ordered cơm tháng for his staff on a regular basis, dedicated a column for cơm tháng's advertisement and wrote a piece on cơm tháng. In contrast to the materials on Orange County, materials on the Houston community

were more limited. Claudia Kolker's *Immigrant Advantages* has a chapter that documented cơm tháng as a practice utilized by Vietnamese Americans in Houston.

Providers and consumers were difficult to get in touch with due to many factors. In recent years, cơm tháng's providers cooking at home have become less visible due to the crack down on health codes.² Fewer people are willing to run cơm tháng operations from their kitchen and do not have the resources to open businesses. The precarity of immigrant life, especially informal economies that rely on gendered labor, is also reflected in the closing of these home operations during the Covid-19 global pandemic. Working in the informal economy allows providers more control, flexibility and the competitive edge in pricing. It is also this informality that leads to closing of home operations due to health and safety concerns during the pandemic.

These informal enterprises are advertised through word of mouth within close-knit circles and cater to international students, single working individuals, couples living in rented rooms without access to kitchens, families, and elderly people who live far from their children. I located providers through newspaper searches as well as asking cashiers and strangers in Vietnamese supermarkets in Little Saigon of Orange County. Most cashiers in these supermarkets are women. When asked if they know anyone who offers cơm tháng at home, some would note down my contact information, ask how many meals I want to order and say they will get back to me later. I, however, did not receive any calls back from these exchanges. The providers whom I made contact with are those that publicly advertised their service in Vietnamese newspapers or have a website of their own.

² Claudia Kolker, *The Immigrant Advantage: What We Can Learn from Newcomers to America about Health, Happiness and Hope* (Place of publication not identified: Free Press, 2014), <http://www.myilibrary.com?id=899318>.

There are multiple obstacles in getting in touch with these providers. Whenever I contacted a potential provider, I would ask where they prepare the food, as I'm invested in knowing more about their perspective. However, I did not realize that this held the potential to shutdown pathways of communication due to the fear of health regulations. I interacted with a total of three providers and remained in close contact with two. Xuan is in her 60s and owns a bakery in Little Saigon, which is also where she prepared food for delivery. Linh is in her 50s and does cơm tháng in a rented kitchen space. I built trust and connection with these providers by purchasing their meals, offering help with delivery, visiting them weekly at their stores and checking-in with phone calls. We spoke on the phone and in person but never had formal and structured interviews.

I conducted formal interviews with two consumers: both are first generation Vietnamese Americans in their 60s and 70s. Duong came to the United States with her husband in 1967, who was an international student at the time. Duong is a Californian, divorced and currently lives in Irvine. Thao immigrated to the United States in 2003 through spouse sponsorship. She is currently living in a rented room with her two sons and two grandchildren in Garden Grove.

Piecing together english and non-english materials collected from site visits, interviews, printed and online newspaper articles and online forum, the following chapter will dive more into the origin of cơm tháng and how it has changed over the years and after migration.

CHAPTER 2: A TASTE OF HOME

The literal translation of cơm tháng is rice month. In Vietnamese culture, rice is a required component of every meal, thus having/eating “cơm” (rice) can be translated to having a meal. Cơm tháng (monthly meal/rice) is an arrangement in which the customers consume their daily meals from the same provider and pay by the month.

During the Vietnam War, cơm tháng was a way to feed soldiers or scholars who preferred home-cooked meals; monthly rice then became a mode of sustenance for working-class Vietnamese who commute to work and college students who study away from home.³ The commute is often long because of traffic, and there is an abundance of food-to-go places on every street. It's cost effective and less time consuming to have lunch delivered to your workplace or to eat at a nearby food-to-go place. In contemporary Vietnam, cơm tháng has evolved into both formal and informal business models that cater to populations from distinct socioeconomic status — the office workers, the service-sector workers, and college students.

In Orange County, cơm tháng arises from demand. Vietnamese women need a source of income, and members of the community crave the flavors of home and convenience of delivery. Vietnamese refugees' and immigrants' credentials, skills, and work experiences were difficult to transfer, forcing many to work in the low-paid service sector. Because of unstable housing and having to fulfill family obligations, Vietnamese women gravitated towards the informal economy as it allows shifting and switching between

³ Do, Anh. “In Little Saigon, Scraping out a Living, One Home-Cooked Meal at a Time.” *Los Angeles Times*, 16 June 2017.

different responsibilities. These conditions result in the commercialization of Vietnamese women's domestic labor, one of which is food preparation.⁴

Cơm tháng exists in both the formal and informal economies — restaurants, food stalls inside supermarkets, and home-operated units. Due to its scale and informality, the home-operated cơm tháng does not require a lot of infrastructures or a large sum of money to operate. Food providers use savings to buy ingredients, their home kitchen or rented kitchen space to cook, their culinary skills to make a profit, and a community to consume their products. These women capitalize on their social reproductive labor -- the labor that does not carry market value and yet is essential in reproducing the workforce.

The meal is a traditional multiple-course meal, prepared daily and delivered to homes with a price as low as \$6 a meal. The price, however, varies among providers and has also gradually increased over the years. The number of cơm tháng providers and customers also has decreased slowly over the years due to the marginal profit, intensive labor and health regulations.⁵ In 2011, there were between fifty to one hundred and fifteen meals delivered daily, and there seem to be at least four documented providers but likely many more in Orange County according to multiple newspapers. These are providers who advertise their services publicly in the newspapers. There are potentially more providers who do not advertise publicly. But now, based on the two providers that I spoke with, seventy five is the highest number of meals delivered daily per provider.

⁴ Nazli Kibria, *Family Tighrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁵ Kolker, *The Immigrant Advantage*.

What differentiates cơm tháng from other meal delivery services is the maternal labor that is symbolized and/or used, the private space in which these meals are produced, and the community to which it caters. The businesses in Little Saigon provide service to international students, single working individuals, and elderly people. While the service does cater to normative, established families, cơm tháng is also utilized by non-normative families such as couples and families living in rented rooms without access to a kitchen.

Cơm tháng is invaluable to women, heteronormative and non-normative families at different stages of their life cycle. Stemming from the pressure to perform their role as “good” mothers, Vietnamese American women with younger children use cơm tháng to fulfill part of their family commitments and alleviate the guilt of working outside of the home.⁶ It also removes the burden of food preparation that is often placed on the Vietnamese women after a long day at work. Cooking for family is both an obligation but also a labor of love for their children. At the age when children no longer live with their parents, cơm tháng becomes a practical substitution for cooking for two; it saves money since the customer will not need to buy too many ingredients. Also the purchase does not have to invest labor and time in food preparation.

Cơm tháng is both a local and transnational phenomenon as it exists both in the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States and in contemporary Vietnam. Although the form of service changes after migration, its functions remain unchanged. Cơm tháng offers affordable and convenient meals that are very similar to home-cooked food. In later

⁶ Lan, Ngoc. “Nấu cơm tháng ở Little Saigon.” *Ngươi Viet Online*, 9 Nov. 2012, www.nguoi-viet.com/little-saigon/Nau-com-thang-o-Little-Saigon-5624/.

chapters, further analysis of the demand as well as the supply reveals the gendered division of labor and the affective consumption within the Vietnamese diaspora.

CHAPTER 3: THE INVISIBLE LABOR

“ Khi giặc đến nhà, đàn bà cũng đánh”

“When the enemies arrive at your door, even women must fight.”

This is a Vietnamese proverb that reflects a tradition of women warriors leading military efforts, fighting alongside the men and advancing economic and political movements. The long history of Chinese domination and French colonization in Vietnam motivated women to become active players in the public realm. They cultivated global sisterhood and international peace movements, and became military leaders, activists, politicians, and doctors. While being pioneers and active players in the public spheres, these women remained devoted to the wellbeing of their family. Their war fighting and peace activism stemmed from not only the desire to be liberated from oppression but also to be united with the family. The defense of the nation and family have been described as extensions of women's roles.

As a political strategy, normative values and lived reality, this language is represented by the Vietnam Women's Union members attending the Indochinese Women's Conferences in 1971.⁷ Despite cultural, racial, political viewpoints as well as class differences, Vietnamese women connected with other women through the language of universal sisterhood, motherhood, and protecting their families and the home. It was not a

⁷ Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

fight against the annihilation of the nuclear family model but rather the lived reality of family separation due to war.

The emphasis on motherhood and the family unit continues to this day; it is shown in choices of both the consumers and providers of *cơm tháng*. *Cơm tháng* also illuminates the maternal and affective labor performed by Vietnamese American women. A labor that is invisibilized in capitalist society, because it is unpaid, expected of women, and consumed literally. What happens then when this labor becomes “visible” through commodification, which is the case of *cơm tháng*? In answering that question, *cơm tháng* also complicates what agency might mean and look like in the space of domesticity.

Labor performed within the home is unpaid and thus does not carry much value in the capitalist society. However, *cơm tháng* challenges this assumption as it provides an example in which domestic labor, such as cooking, is packaged, commodified and distributed outside of the home, thus gaining monetary value. This crossing of public/private divides results in the increase in financial capital and more potential freedom and agency for Vietnamese American women. Greater earning potential also could lead to an increase in negotiating power as well as an elevated status within the family. However, this is not necessarily the case for these women. Vietnamese women continue to perform the second shift of unpaid domestic labor. They remain the caregivers, even as they become the primary economic providers of the family.

Cơm tháng providers come from very different walks of life, age groups and years of arrival. However, what they all have in common is the lack of English language skills as well as job experience and educational degrees in the U.S. These conditions force them to

rely on their culinary labor, which is often performed in the private sphere, to make a living. Lacking language fluency, work experience, social and financial capital, some initially resort to working in Vietnamese restaurants and later open their own businesses. The working conditions, however, are brutal. An informant shared she had to sneak into the bathroom in the middle of a shift to eat, because she was about to faint from working long hours.

To start *cơm tháng* in the informal economy, the providers ideally have a prior network of customers. They acquire these connections either from networks of friends, neighbors that need help with cooking, or frequent customers they came to know while working at food-to-go places. “Food-to-go” is referred to the form of food service that resembles fast food services such as Panda Express, except the food being served is traditional authentic Vietnamese food. Food-to-go places prepare a wide variety of dishes ahead of time, and the customer can choose the portion size. To add an extra source of income, these places started offering delivery in the form of *cơm tháng*.

In contrast, *cơm tháng* providers operating in the informal economy are often Vietnamese women who don’t have the financial capital to open a business, are unemployed, and need a source of income. They utilize either their own kitchen or rent kitchen space, and use personal savings and the family unit to run *cơm tháng*. Operating in the informal economy provides them with financial flexibility as well as the ability to switch between jobs, given its low risk and low investment.⁸ These following are providers that were documented in an article from *Nguoi Viet Newspaper*.

⁸ Kibria, *Family Tightrope*.

Nguyen Thanh Thuy was one of the cơm tháng providers in Little Saigon who owned a food-to-go restaurant for seven years before switching to doing cơm tháng at home for another eight years. At the beginning, Thuy had a banh mi store that was popular not only among Vietnamese but also white and latinx customers. After being asked repeatedly if she has rice based dishes, Thuy decided to add grilled pork, chicken with rice and salad to the menu. The store slowly turned into a food-to-go place. She noticed more and more people ordering portions to take to work and to take home for dinner. She then started cooking according to the customer's requests. Thuy delivered on average fifty portions a day to their homes. After transferring her food-to-go place to a new owner, she continued doing cơm tháng at home for another eight years before retiring.⁹

Mai's path to cooking for a living is in reverse from that of Thuy. When she first arrived in the United States, she worked for a restaurant for a couple of years but had to quit after giving birth. She had to take care of her newborn, cook for the family, and make some extra money from cooking for her neighbor. Mai's neighbor loved her cooking and introduced Mai to more customers. As a result of this increased interest in her cooking, Mai began preparing the food, portioning them into multiple tiffin boxes that were ready for pick up after work hours. As the number of customers increased, Mai opened her own restaurant and did cơm tháng at the same time. She delivered on average 150-200 portions a day. For Mai, cơm tháng was a way to gain the resources and connections to open a restaurant of her own.¹⁰

⁹ Lan, "Nấu cơm tháng ở Little Saigon."

¹⁰ Ibid.

In contrast to both Mai and Thuy's stories, Loan started doing cơm tháng while taking care of her father at home and cooking for her family. Since her husband worked outside of the home, Loan only does cơm tháng three days a week to gain additional income. She delivered on average thirty portions of lunch for office workers and dinner for eight families.¹¹

All of these accounts were documented in 2012. Eight years later, cơm tháng providers decreased significantly in numbers and also their visibility in the public realm because of the enforcement of health regulations. The *Ngươi Viet* newspaper dedicates a small section in the advertisement column for cơm tháng. However, in recent months or years, there are only two or three names listed. These services also do not deliver outside of Little Saigon, the Vietnamese ethnic enclave in Orange County. The difficulty in locating these services is not specific to Orange County; cơm tháng providers in Houston have also become very difficult to find.¹² The demand for cơm tháng is still pretty much there. It's unclear whether the decrease in visibility of cơm tháng is associated with an actual decrease of cơm tháng providers. It's possible that after providers acquire enough customers, they stop advertising in newspapers and develop their customer network through word of mouth. The cashiers I talked to in the process of research were very open to starting cơm tháng if the number of meals was large enough, which suggests that the practice of cooking in exchange for payment is still present.

In conducting research for the present thesis in 2019 and 2020, I interacted with a total of three providers: one is located in a food court on the second floor of a Vietnamese

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Kolker, *The Immigrant Advantage*.

market, one has a bakery that resembles a mini-convenience store, and another provider cooks at home and in a rented kitchen space. Linh arrived in the United States in 1997. She started working in a Vietnamese restaurant, opened her own restaurant but moved to doing cơm tháng at home due to the high cost of maintaining a physical location. Working within the informal economy gives Linh the flexibility of scheduling and allows her to avoid paying tax, rent, and other related costs. The lower cost of preparing the food also gives Linh the competitive edge in pricing.

Linh named the business after her first name, “Linh cơm tháng,” and listed two numbers for contact. The first number reaches her husband, and the second number reaches Linh. He collects money from customers, notes house addresses and does delivery. Linh gets up at 4:00 a.m in the morning to start preparing the ingredients. After finishing cooking around 10:00 a.m, her husband and son help with delivery. Together, the family cooks and delivers around seventy five meals each day. Most of the delivery concentrates in the city of Westminster, which is one of the cities with the highest population of Vietnamese Americans in Southern California. They only deliver within a five-mile radius. Each meal costs \$8 without rice and extra charge. Around 11:00 a.m everyday, customers will receive food packaged in microfoam cups. While all the order inquiries and delivery are done by the husband and her son, Linh does grocery shopping and cooking. At one point, Linh underwent surgery, the business had to stop taking orders for a couple of months. The operation depends on her. They can find substitute drivers but only Linh can do the cooking. This is also the case for other providers.

Working in the informal economy gives Linh the flexibility and competitive edge in lowering the price of each meal but becomes a disadvantage in the time of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. Profits mostly come from the large number of customers and Linh's grocery shopping skills. She utilizes coupons, keeps track of the price of ingredients from different stores and buys in large amounts. However, with the Covid-19 pandemic, fresh ingredients became pricier and the number of customers decreased due to health concerns and unemployment. Linh, herself, is very wary of grocery trips due to her age and pre-existing health conditions. Linh shared that it wasn't just an income for her; it's also for her family back in Vietnam, which is why she put up with the heavy tasks. But in times of pandemic, there isn't much profit in doing cơm tháng anymore, so she stopped.

Another provider whom I interacted with has a bakery located at the front of a food market that is located in the heart of Little Saigon. Xuan came to the United States in 1989 and opened the store ten years after her arrival. The shop is a display of the culinary skills that allows her to make a living. It's a bakery but also sells a variety of Vietnamese refreshments, food, and snacks. It resembles a mini-convenience store, except with a kitchen. At the corner of the bakery, there is a food-to-go section, serving typical Vietnamese lunch dishes and desserts.

Xuan prepares the food daily and watches the store for her husband and sometimes her sister to do delivery around 11 a.m every day. She also packs the food in advance for pick-up orders in the afternoon. She started doing cơm tháng about five years ago when there was a decline in the number of customers visiting the store. Xuan only does delivery

that is within a five-mile radius and also charges a delivery fee. In contrast to Linh, Xuan handles the customers herself and any order request and payment is made through her.

cơm tháng is labor-intensive, but it is necessary for the economic survival of the family here in the United States. And for some, it's also a source of income for families back home in Vietnam. The women are the primary managers of the operation as it's specifically their labor that is the selling point for cơm tháng. All providers advertise cơm tháng using their first name as a way to declare quality and pride. They make a claim for their culinary skills, labor and simultaneously capitalize on their womanhood.

The labor is gendered, but for the women, the public/ private divide is irrelevant. Working outside of the home is just an extension of the home-making process. The women are in the charge of the operation at home. In order to gain profit, they are also in charge of planning different meals for the week, the list of ingredients as well as where to buy them. While cooking is often associated with domesticity, the labor of driving, grocery shopping and spending money fall outside the private realm, yet the women perform all of the above. They are their own agents navigating both public and private domains in order to maintain their families.

The end of the Vietnam war resulted in the displacement of many Vietnamese, which altered the family structure and gender relations within Vietnamese American families in profound ways. One of these ways was the shift in gender balance of power between Vietnamese American man and women — women became the primary breadwinner of the family, and participating in the public domain became a natural extension of women's

homemaking activities.¹³ These processes also were documented in previous decades by Kibria. informants are mostly war refugees and immigrants arriving in the United States in late 1980. While the providers in my study are from the later wave of migration in the late nineties, the same pattern of the reversal of gender relation is reflected. This suggests that this patriarchal gender relation is shaped by both the persistence of patriarchal ideology and structural barriers that prevent womens from equal participation.

These women work in partnership with their husbands rather than in a subordinate position. The power dynamic in this partnership is the reverse of that of a patriarchal relationship; he works with/for her. She is indispensable. The business closes if she's sick but not the other way around. Although the men are performing the work that is outside of the home, their task is only peripheral to the business itself. The women perform work at home not because they are trapped, but because they already have their partners doing the peripheral work. This structuring is gendered yet quite queer because of its reversing of norms: the patriarchal power relation and the association between paid labor and the public sphere. These women are making money out of what is often considered unpaid labor in the space of domesticity while having their partner supporting them. In addition, these women also utilize the family as a production unit; every family member plays a part in this intricate unit centered on the reproductive labor of women. The reversal of gender power relation is partly due to the lack of transferable skills and low social-economic status for the men as well as an increase in societal resources and freedom for women after migrating to the United States.¹⁴

¹³ Kibria. *Family Tighrope*.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

While being the providers of the home, these women are simultaneously expected to be the caregivers for the family. In addition, while gaining more financial freedom, they continue to be subjected to a second shift of unpaid labor at home. For example, after her husband underwent a pancreatectomy, Xuan had to go back and forth between the store and her home to manage both business and to take care of her husband through the recovery period. She would feed him in the morning before leaving for work and come back to fix him lunch after all the meals were delivered. Xuan then would go back to the store to continue preparing the ingredients for the next day. During her husband's recovery, Xuan's sister helped out with delivery. Similar to Xuan, Loan has to take care of her ill father while doing *cơm tháng*. This is no different for Linh. After finishing her work in the morning, she continues her housework in the afternoon.

It is evident that the burden of homemaking and caretaking falls on the women, even if they provide for the family financially. The commercialization of domestic labor for financial gain speaks to the Vietnamese women's agency, which is reflected through their utilization of resources, mobilization of human capital (their family) and the crossing of the public/private divide. However, their agency falls short in that it does not allow them to escape the gendered expectation of caretaking shaped by a patriarchal hierarchy of labor.

Cơm tháng might help disrupt gender norms for the consumers in that the women are purchasing instead of performing the gendered labor of cooking. *Cơm tháng* also queers the capitalist model of labor through assigning a market value to labor that is often unpaid. However, it does little to change the expectation that women are required to make sure there is food on the table at dinner time. Although it helps other Vietnamese women

fulfill their responsibility at home, in exchange for rest and more time with the family, công thức further enforces and propagates gender and patriarchal relations in other homes.

What engenders the invisibility of women's labor at the home? The process of commodification brings the “invisible” labor outside the home and assigns a price to it, making it “visible”. However, this visibility is acquired by following the same capitalist logic that engenders the invisibility of women’s labor in the first place. By being visible, the domestic labor of cooking is now paid but at a relatively low price, which justifies the continued devaluation and exploitation of women’s labor by others including women themselves. At the root of this invisibility is gender inequality shaped by patriarchal relations and masked by familial obligation, collectivism and the everyday expectation of mothering.

Vietnamese women continue the tradition of fighting and working outside of the home to protect and nurture the family unit; however, their participation is complicit in the patriarchal construction of the home and the capitalist narrative that continues to devalue reproductive labor. The invisibility of reproductive labor performed by women is the product of patriarchy and the fraudulent notion of “productivity.” The labor of care is “invisible”, because it is pervasive and integral to the fabric of the society. It permeates various dimensions of life that it cannot be quantified or purchased. The labor of care is “invisible,” because it is often given unconditionally and without an intention to gain profit. Patriarchy continues to persist but not without resistance; công thức, given all its flaws, provides a refreshing model in which the women bargain with the system, take the central role and exert their agency even if that is within the constraints of the family units.

CHAPTER 4: QUEERING THE HOME

“Only the baker knows that bread is a form of our deepest human
wish, a shape of love ...

Love is a massive compass and several gravities, numen manifest in
What can be eaten. Know how bread is knit by salt. For tears alone
Are active seed, leavening perishing forms, apparent at an imperishable
Wheel of hunger ... No one merely kneads any wheat with water, the way
is remembrance to the one whose hands are had by love’s cold ache,
suffering the adjustable flesh.”

The Winged Seed

Li-Young Lee

The meaning of home intensifies with displacement. The desire for home engenders creative, alternative pathways and mechanisms in revisioning, idealizing, and reimagining home. Home is a mobile structure of feelings that transcends the temporal and physical space. Because of the neurological coupling of memories, senses, and actions, preparing and eating familiar food recreates the structure of feeling of belonging. Here I want to situate food within the economy of affect and argue that eating is the consumption of intimacy; and by intimacy, I mean a temporary moment of arriving or returning to a space of memories, familiarity and comfort through eating. Just like gardening practices, the continuation of *cơm tháng* in Vietnamese diasporic communities demonstrates the

fundamental role of food in community formation and the home-making processes in the new host society.

Home often is associated with the reproductive unit of the family. By conventional definition, to be at home is to be within the presence of loved ones. However, this definition is not inclusive of those who are displaced or exiled from the home by their family because of their sexual orientation, political ideologies, gender identity, or other reasons that cause them to remain distant from loved ones. This definition of home doesn't situate the home within one's self thus conditions for a pursuit of home that might never be archived. This is not to say that a home only defined by the family unit carries no merit, but rather to offer an alternative way -- that is perhaps a bit queer -- in reconstructing what home might mean, and how food plays a role in recreating this structure of feelings. To borrow from Eve Sedgwick's definition of queerness:

Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, troublant. The word “queer” itself means *across* – it comes from the Indo-European root *twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (*traverse*), Latin *torquere* (*to twist*), English *athwart* [...] Keenly, it is relational and strange.

To queer is to trouble, challenge, disrupt, twist any form of normativity. Through consuming home-cooked food, one arrives at the space of comfort and familiarity normally associated with the home without being accompanied by others, thus presenting a mode of queering. In this case, it's the heteronormative home.

It is not a coincidence that *cơm tháng* is present in the Vietnamese diasporic community in Orange County and Houston, home to the two largest populations of Vietnamese outside of Vietnam. What is it about *cơm tháng* that allows it to persist in these settings? In the first part, I explained the economic benefits and motivation undergirding

the supply for cơm tháng, but the question of “why cơm tháng?” remains unanswered. Why choose cơm tháng given the availability and the abundance of other forms of meal prep and delivery services?

I argue that cơm tháng offers a form of intimacy that is gendered and convenient; an intimacy that differs generationally but is very much rooted in a shared Vietnamese-ness. Consuming cơm tháng is a consumption of intimacy and emotional care. When placing the multi-course meal on the table, it stages and reconstructs the image of the everyday home, thus acts as an emotional anchor, an alternative microscopic space of memories and longing. Because the visceral experience of home-cooked food is coupled with memories and stories, eating is also an affective consumption. Although embodying effective labor, the meals are also associated with loss — loss of cultural skills required to recreate certain tastes of home, loss of time for those whose responsibilities deprioritize food preparation, loss of memory and connections due to migration and displacement. Furthermore, single individuals that utilize cơm tháng participate in actively queering the home space as it allows them to arrive at “home” without the presence of a normative family. This form of queering, however, can be either forced or voluntary.

Intimacy carries different meanings for first generation and later generations of Vietnamese American, because the definition of home and the underlying reasons of displacement varies generationally. For the first generation, the “home” and “homeland” are two separated entities, which are the United States and Vietnam. The question of “home” and “homeland” differ greatly between first and later generations of Vietnamese Americans because of their relative proximity to Vietnam. The loss of South Vietnam drives first

generation Vietnamese American's longing for eventual return to the place of origin. But for the second-generation Vietnamese Americans, they are already living in their place of origin (the United States), and so the desire and search for "home", I would argue, are not so much because of migration and war but rather the trauma and violence engendered by their family and White America. Because of this differential proximity to the "homeland" and the "home," the second generation Vietnamese American relationship with Vietnamese food, and in this case *cơm tháng*, is different from that of the first generation.

The subject of this intimacy also varies between the first and later generation of Vietnamese American. For the first or 1.5 generation Vietnamese American, it's the intimate relationship with Vietnam that they crave. But for the later generations, it's the intimate moment, flavors of the home and the love that they desire. Both of these cravings are satisfied through the consumption of a family-style meal that *cơm tháng* offers.

Cơm tháng offers a form of intimacy that is convenient. No food service can offer an eight-dollar family-style meal with variation throughout the week, delivered free of charge to your doorstep at the same time everyday. It takes away the burden of grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning and the risk of a bad homemade meal. For married women, it takes the weight off from having to prepare a multiple-course meal every day for their family. For an elder single/ married woman, it becomes a practical substitution of cooking for one or two people. For younger Vietnamese American adults and students, it solves the issue of lack of time and the culinary skills required to mimic the flavors of home.

Although cheap and convenient, the business isn't exploitative of its consumers, because *cơm tháng* providers rely on the large number of customers and their intensive

labor of meal prepping for profit. A traditional Vietnamese meal often consists of steam rice, dipping sauce, soup, steamed or stir-fried vegetable, one or two protein dishes (such as chicken/fish/shrimp/seafood). They are prepared in many different ways, including through braising, deep-frying, stewing, grilling, or boiling. Traditionally, Vietnamese women are expected to prepare these meals with variation in dishes and ingredients for their family every day. The food needs to be prepared properly and also taste good. This tradition is still dominant in Vietnamese culture and is present in many Vietnamese American families.

Cooking for the family is both a labor of love and also an obligation, a burden that is pronounced for those who work outside of the home. With cơm tháng, many women can have more time with their family and still be able to enjoy a family dinner together. Cơm tháng thus represents a symbiotic relationship between these two groups of women – those who rely on cơm tháng for a living and those who purchase meals to replace her domestic labor. In the case of these Vietnamese American women, the service that cơm tháng offers, a traditional Vietnamese meal, plays an important role. cơm tháng allows Vietnamese Americans to both fulfill their responsibility and to provide structure to their home; in this case, it's the gendered and patriarchal dinner table.

Lana, a working mom in Houston, has been using cơm tháng for years. It's her solution to the fatigue after work and the burden of cooking for her family. With cơm tháng, she has extra time to relax and to spend with her family.¹⁵ Lana also loves the food as it reminds her of her mother's cooking. Her children are not very fond of the food, and so

¹⁵ Kolker, *The Immigrant Advantage*.

Lana uses cơm tháng periodically and cooks for her family whenever she has the time. This suggests that Lana's utilization of cơm tháng is to satisfy her craving of home and also to maintain the Vietnamese identity among her children. She trades her financial contribution through work outside of home with rest and extra time with her family. Although cơm tháng helps Lana fulfill her second shift at home, it further reinforces the gendered expectation of home cooking and mothering.

Duong, an informant in her late seventies, shared that she used cơm tháng in 1996 out of convenience. Duong came to the United States with her husband in 1967, who was an international student at the time. He acquired a masters degree in Physics from Japan and hoped to return to Vietnam afterward. But due to the ongoing war in Vietnam, he continued to pursue a PhD in the United States. Duong had a life of her own in Vietnam and was fulfilling her dream as a highschool teacher. After knowing each other for six years, he asked her to marry him and to relocate to Japan together for his master degree; she eventually did with much thought, leaving her dream behind.

Duong wanted to have children because for her, motherhood is a source of joy. They eventually did have children after settling in graduate housing at UC San Diego. After her kids grew a little older, she started attending evening classes in a nearby college and eventually obtained an associate degree. She took care of the kids so her husband could focus on his studies, but that wasn't the case for her when she started pursuing her own studies. His reason was that he could work and provide for the family, while she took care of the family; thus a degree or a job isn't necessary for her. Lacking the support and the

increasing difficulty of her course work, Duong stopped her academic pursuit after receiving the associate degree.

Duong later started working as a social worker helping Vietnamese refugee families with resettlement. Valuing time with her children and worrying that they wouldn't be treated the same because of their skin color, she didn't utilize childcare until her youngest son grew a little older. Duong also shared that she asked her youngest son for forgiveness before sending him to childcare and starting her work outside of home. She started using cơm tháng when her children were already in college. The labor involved in cooking for her and her husband every day was just too much. This shows that although cooking for the family was done out of obligation, it was also done out of love. Duong chose her children. She chooses not to cook when they were no longer there. Although she loves him, her objective wasn't to serve him but to feed her children. Cơm tháng wasn't an option when her children were at home. It was important for Duong to cook for her children, and also her children were not familiar with traditional Vietnamese cooking and preferred American foods. Duong explains why she does use cơm tháng when her children are still at home below:

Có con ở nhà thì nấu cho nó r ễ chứ đâu có nói chuyện cơm tháng. Lúc con nó đi học hết chọi, còn có hai vợ chồng thôi thì khi đó mới đi ăn cơm tháng. Với lại tụi con nó sanh đẻ ở đây, nó ít ăn đồ th ần tí Việt Nam lắm. Mình phải nấu những món Mỹ một chút ...thỉnh thoảng làm spaghetti meatballs, r ễ làm lasagna ... đồ của Mỹ nó ăn. Cũng đệm thêm mấy cái đó chứ Việt Nam quá như ố qua nh ấ, nhớ đâu có ăn đâu.¹⁶

When the kids are home, we have to cook for them And of course not cơm tháng. When they left for college and there were just the two of us, we started using cơm tháng. Also, because the kids are born and raised here, they are not familiar with traditional Vietnamese food. I had to make American dishes for the ... sometimes I

¹⁶ Duong Nguyen, Interviewed by author, Irvine, October 14, 2019.

made spaghetti meatballs, and lasagna ... American food they eat. I had to add some of these dishes ... Vietnamese dish like stuffed bitter melons, they can't eat.

For Duong, cơm tháng symbolizes an inadequacy in her mothering. Cooking is not done with an intention to communicate love but rather an obligation carried out by love and concerns. Duong seems to have the agency to choose to cook or not to cook for her husband, but when it comes to her children, cooking and feeding them is the default. In this instance, patriarchy is not about a man talking down to his wife or a woman having to serve or obey her husband, but it is reflected in the division of labor, where reproductive labor is a women's job.

In contrast to Duong, Hien immigrated to the United States in 2003 through spousal sponsorship. However, this was a transaction between the two rather than a marriage found upon mutual love. In other words, she paid a Vietnamese American man to marry her, so she could come to the United States to start a new life and offer the possibility of chain migration for her children. Hien had to sell all of her properties in Vietnam to afford the marriage, which was the pathway for her U.S citizenship. They quickly got divorced after she received her green card. Hien's two sons and their children recently arrived, and they all live in a rented master bedroom. She knew that if her son got married, it would take longer for his paperwork to be approved. So when he got married, she asked that he not file it officially. As a result, Hien is currently living with her partner, two sons and two of her grandchildren. Switching between multiple jobs, she currently works at a childcare agency and is the main provider for the household. As a woman and a mother, Hien is the provider, the caregiver and also the source of chain migration to the United States.

Hien's story reveals the hypocrisy of U.S immigration policies and its violent war machines, which engenders Hien's aspiration for the American dream, which is a chase of the promise of "freedom" at the cost of a comfortable life. When asked how her life has changed before and after migration, Hien returned to why she came to the United States emphasizing the expected freedom and civilization in the new society.

Cuộc sống của cô thay đổi như thế nào khi cô ở Việt Nam và sau khi cô qua đây?

Có nhiều cái sự thay đổi. Từ một xã hội là ... ở Việt Nam thì không có được tự do. Thì khi đến Hoa Kỳ thì nó được cái tự do, văn minh, ... chuyển qua một xã hội mới ... tự do, văn minh của nước Mỹ.

Cô thấy tự do hơn sau khi đến đây?

Thì đúng rồi. Nước Mỹ mà. Tất cả mọi người ai cũng đều đến nước Mỹ. Tất cả ai cũng thích đến nước Mỹ.

Thích này là, cái môi trường sống nó tốt hơn? Tự do đây là? không có bị ràng buộc của con người.¹⁷

How has your life changed after your migration?

There are a lot of changes. From a society ... In Vietnam, there is no freedom; but in the United States, there is freedom and civilization ... a new society ... with freedom and civilization.

You have more freedom here?

Of course, it's America. Everyone comes to America. Everyone loves America.

By love America, you mean the living environment, life quality? And by freedom you mean?

You're not constrained by the people.

When being pressed on what she means by having more freedom in the United States, Hien's response is vague, and she repeatedly emphasized that everyone loves America and not just her. Hien later elaborates that by freedom, she means a loose societal expectation of how a woman presents and carries herself. Undergirding Hien's pursuit of a better life is the ideology of American exceptionalism that idealizes and flattens the ugliness of systematic racism and capitalism. The three fastest routes to obtain a U.S citizenship is

¹⁷ Hien Tran, Interviewed by Author, Garden Grove, CA, September 29, 2019

through marriage, the military and investment. Hien is the remnant of the U.S imperial project. Hien's case shows that immigration is gendered.

It's expected of Hien to cook for the family. She found purchasing food in substitution of preparing the food herself as an indication of inadequacy on her part. Before her sons and their children migrated to the United States, she and her boyfriend did utilize cơm tháng out of convenience, but the food didn't fit their taste. The price is reasonable and cheap, she explained; but the taste and flavor were very different due to regional differences. Hien, herself, cooks for her friends in exchange for food stamps and gas money. Being a good cook herself, Hien wants to open a restaurant like the one she has in Vietnam, but that dream is far away as she doesn't have the resources. She thought of doing cơm tháng, but living in a rented room, Hien only has limited access to the kitchen, thus cooking in large amounts isn't feasible.

Hien lost her job due to shelter-at-home order in March and struggles to pay rent. Her oldest son found a job at Home Depot and started providing for a total of six people living in the room. Being at home, Linh makes sure that everyone is fed well even with as little that she has. To maintain some privacy, the landlord built separate entrances for the rented room so that tenants do not have to enter the landlord family's living area to get to their room. To avoid complaints from the landlord for cooking so frequently, she sets up a mini gas stove at the separated entrance outside her room. When there isn't much left, Hien offers her children and grandchildren her affection through food and her cooking. When asked if she cooks for her family out of love or obligation, Hien explained that it's both.

Duong looks at cơm tháng as an inadequacy in her roles as a mother and not as a wife. In contrast, Hien views eating out and utilizing cơm tháng as an inadequacy in her role as a woman. Duong's husband didn't like that she utilizes cơm tháng instead of cooking for him, but she went ahead to subscribe to the service for a month anyway. She stopped because it didn't fit her taste. Duong waited until her childrens finished college and had jobs to file the divorce. She didn't want the divorce to affect their studying. Hien is an agent of her own, getting divorced in her late fifties, purchasing U.S citizenship through another marriage, making a life of her own and starting the chain migration for her children. Yet Hien believes in very rigid gender roles, one of which is that the women have the responsibility to cook for her partner and children. In Hien's narrative, to be a mother and to be a wife is the same thing; it's a woman's job. When asked if she feels an obligation to spend more time working at home because of her job outside of the home, she responded as follow:

Khi đi làm thì mình ít nói chung là hai bên đều phải có trách nhiệm hết á con. Khi đi làm, thì mình phải hoàn thành trách nhiệm ở chỗ làm. Khi về nhà thì ... nói chung mình phải ... phụ nữ mà. Mình phải giải quyết việc nhà, cơm nước cho chồng, cho con, nhưng mà đây hông có chồng cũng không có con, có một mình nên nó cũng dễ. (Hien cười)¹⁸

When you go to work ... in general, you have to fulfill responsibilities on both sides.

When you go to work, you have to finish your tasks. When you get home ... because

¹⁸ Hien Tran, Interviewed by Author, Garden Grove, CA, September 29, 2019.

we're women, we have to do house chores, cook for husband and children, but now I don't have either husband nor children, so it's easier. (Hien laughs)

Duong, however, offers an alternative narrative where motherhood is not necessarily patriarchal. The intimacy that Lana, Hien and Duong obtained through consumption of *com thán*g is the returning to the "home" in Vietnam.

Home or the family unit is perceived as a space of heteronormativity and patriarchy. It often is constructed on the model of the nuclear family. Hien and Duong present a model of home and family that deviates from that norm. Duong is living on her own and doesn't eat much because of her age. She often buys one or two dishes from food-to-go places to eat for the week. Hien continues sharing a room with her companion, children and grandchildren for the time being; but after her sons have their own place, she intends to live by herself alongside with a companion. Hien and Duong engage in a radical act of queering the socially constructed nuclear family and the heteropatriarchal "home." The "family" structured around their "single" status disrupts the reproductive and traditional thinking of what a family means. However, it is also important to take in consideration the stage of the life cycle these women are in, that perhaps give them more room and autonomy in exerting their agency. These women present a mode of queering and yet maintain a patriarchal mindset, which suggests that this queerness is not voluntary but rather forced. This is due to the fact that their singularity is partially forced. For Duong, it's because of tension at home that resulted in the separation. Hien left Vietnam because of past trauma as well as the hope for a better future for her children and grandchildren.

Cơm tháng is utilized by international students, single working or elderly individuals, mothers and elderly couples because of the affordable convenience, familiarity and comfort of home-cooked meals that it offers. Further deconstruction of this demand reveals an affective mode of consumption and queering of the heteronormative home. Cơm tháng also allows for the theorizing of an alternative understanding of home that is perhaps queer and more inclusive. Home is a mobile structure of feelings that is empty of attachment, and the intimacy of this space is fulfilled through the affective labor embodied in food. Eating can revoke a structure of feelings that brings the subject back to the space of familiarity of the home. Given this powerful affective component of food, eating is a consumption of intimacy; an intimacy that varies generationally because of the different reasons of displacement and the differential affinity to the homeland and the home. The stories of Lana, Duong and Hien illuminates the continuing emphasis on motherhood and the role of Vietnamese and Vietnamese American women in maintaining the family units. In this emphasis, we see beauty, love and at the same time the sacrifices, burden, constraints as well as the weight these women carry.

The study of cơm tháng, a local and yet transnational phenomenon, reveals the larger forces and institutions — capitalism, U.S imperialism and patriarchy — that involve in shaping and propagating the gendered division of labor, power dynamic and the yearning for home in the private realm. Most importantly, this study raises questions around a broader topic on women's agency. Agency is defined as the ability for one to act independently and to make their own free choices. Were the choices these women make free? Did they act independently if their actions are complicit in the patriarchal and

capitalist projects themselves? Is it agency or cruel optimism? Berlant describes cruel optimism as follow:

A relation of optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food; it might be a fantasy of a good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes that aim that brought you to it initially.

We cannot separate ourselves from the institutions and systems in which we live, function and uphold; but this also means these institutions and systems cannot exist without us. If our choices are forever compromised because of our positionality within the institutions, how might we construct a model of agency and activism that is not cruelly optimistic?

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EIGHT DOLLAR OF LABOR

Gendered labor, Intimacy and Belonging through a Camera lens.



Eight Dollar of Labor

This photograph is taken using the food from cơm tháng. Cơm tháng is both a consumption of intimacy and a mode of queering.



Heaven

The different dishes that are offered at a côm thág (côm bình dân) establishment in Saigon/ Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam)



Power

The person in the photo is the owner of a popular *cơm tháng* (*cơm bình dân*) situated in the first district of Saigon/ Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam). As the owner, she sits at the front of the store collecting money from the customers accompanied by the little fan to keep her cool.

She literally holds and dresses in power. Each meal costs from 30,000 - 40,000 VND (\$0.1-\$0.15). In her left hand is a stack of 200,000VND (yellow bill) and 500,000VND (blue bill), which are the highest banknotes in Vietnam. Given its location and price range, this establishment caters specifically to a higher working class, office workers in particular.



Stratified Chaos

This cơm tháng (cơm bình dân) establishment is located in an alley that is about 5 miles from the center of the Saigon/ Ho Chi Minh city. The demographics of the consumers drastically shifted as well as the price and food selection. This reflects the stratification in class but at the same time reveals a common factor, a desire for a meal that mimics mom's cooking.



Savoring the Moment

With 20,000 VND (\$0.8), a customer is offered a plate of rice with steam vegetables, a bowl of soup and a portion of braised fish. Given the abundance of côm thág establishments on every street of the city and its affordability, most people don't pack or come home for lunch.



Behind These Glasses

Often standing behind these food stalls are the women of the family. They capitalize on their reproductive labor — cooking — to make a living, to provide and to maintain the family unit. Besides catering to the working class from different socioeconomic status, cơm trắng (cơm bình dân) is also for college students studying far away from home. The establishment in the photo is located at a college town in Nha Trang, a central coastal city in Vietnam. At noon, there would be a long line of students, both female and male, waiting to get food. The reproductive labor is distributed in a commercialized manner yet familiar.



Commodified Beauty

Beside reproductive labor, women or young girls also capitalize on their gendered appearance. This photograph is taken inside a coffee shop. As coffee is often consumed by men in Vietnam, to attract more customers (men), many coffee shops hired young girls as waiters and required them to dress in feminine clothing. This is a reflection of both gendered consumption and performance.



The Price of Belonging

Citizenship is not so much about being an American but rather an apparatus in policing race, class, gender and sexuality. If citizenship is up for purchase, which is in the case of arranged marriage and international investment, while children and war refugees are locked in cages for the lack of documentation, what does that say about the humanitarianism of America?



Love

The affective labor often falls on women. Since they are literally consumed and do not carry a market value, it often is invisibilized. However, flourishing from it is the humanities — the scholars, teachers, agents of change — in resistance to ugliness and cruelty of this world. This is dedicated to my committee members; Thuy, Dorothy and Judy.

