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2024

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO
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XXXaigon: Party, Pleasure, and the Sociocultural Makings of South Vietnam

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Drama and Theatre

by

Michelle Vy Huynh

Committee in charge:

University of California San Diego
Professor Jade Power-Sotomayor, Chair
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University of California, Irvine
Professor Long Bui
Professor Daphne Lei

2024

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University of California San Diego
University of California, Irvine

2024

DEDICATION

A script for my *mẹ*, who never had the opportunity to have her childhood fully realized.

A book for my *ba*, who never had the means to see through his education.

A body of work for my *bà ngoại*, who provided the nurturing foundation for me to think and grow.

For all those who raised me...
I hope I have raised us upward and onward.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)
RVN	Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge all those who have helped me grow as a scholar, artist, educator, writer, woman, and friend. First, thank you to all my loved ones back home. As a proud product of the public school system from my kindergarten to graduate years, I thank all my former Hawai`i teachers for uplifting me. Thank you to my *hanabaddah dayz*, *high school-kine* friends Elizabeth Quach, Sam Wong, Angelyn Park, Deena Char, and Julian Morimoto. I want to shout out Sam for being such a fun, kind roommate this whole time—it was the best (and most extended) sleepover ever.

I am grateful for the memories, mentorships, and friendships I received from the University of Hawai`i at Mānoa. Thank you to all my former professors from UH, especially those from the Departments of Theatre and Dance, English, and Asian Studies. Thank you for opening the door for me to the ever-growing, humbling world of Asian and intercultural theatre, ethnography, and cultural theory. I am eternally thankful to all the Asian master artists and practitioners I have had the fantastic opportunity to learn from and collaborate with. Thank you to all my former peers and classmates; I will never forget our funny class projects. The warmest of hugs are to be given to my Hawai`i theatre friends Jiaxing Dean Mo (and Esco Escobar) and Kiki Rivera—thank you for being some of my best collaborators and constantly reminding me who I am as an artist.

Moving to the mainland was a massive cultural shift for me, and the people I met at UCSD during my first year truly changed my life. Thank you to my professors and staff members of the Department of Theatre and Dance, especially Julie Burelle, for being the utmost supportive mentor, and Rishika Mehrishi, for always casting a steadfast ray of light.

Thank you to my committee members, Long Bui, Y  n L   Espiritu, Daphne Lei, and Hentyle Yapp—your generous support, guidance, and wisdom are so appreciated.

I am forever indebted to my PhD advisor, mentor, and academic *t  a*, Jade Power-Sotomayor, whose daily challenges shaped and refined my approach to theorizing, writing, researching, and being. Thank you for empowering me in my darkest times and giving me the confidence to proudly claim that I am a theatre practitioner, a performance studies scholar, and so much more. You will forever be an inspiration to me.

If I could, I would scream “bless you” into the dark tunnels of Galbraith Hall as I am eternally grateful for the friends I am made from the PhD program—Jesse Marchese, Maddie Williams, Alison Urban, Desmond Hassing, Yi-Jen Yu, Kristin Leadbetter, Bosong Kim, Emma Clarke, Jazmine Logan, Nic Rodriguez Villafa  e, *bless you!* I particularly want to shout out to Jesse for being the best cohort-mate I could have asked for (and all the fun, crazy antics with the most caring Jeremy Doroski) and Maddie for being the most extraordinary writing partner and friend during our last year together as students (and all the combined fun, crazy antics we three/four had together). To all the MFA graduate students I have worked with and had the privilege to befriend, thank you for the fun, beautiful moments we shared. I *know* for a fact that we will meet each other.

Thank you to all the undergraduate students I have had the utmost honor to teach. You have helped me reshape and reconstitute the methods I use to teach my materials on traditional Asian performance and non-Western history. I will forever work to serve you and the future students I encounter. You all inspire me to keep advocating for a decolonial praxis in my work and re-envisioning what that may look like for future generations.

I am endlessly thankful for the love and tenderness of my partner, Nick Bradbury. We started our relationship right as I was finishing my first year, and now I am ending my time at UCSD as you begin your PhD journey at UCI. Thank you for reminding me that this is just a dissertation and that I am only one person. Thank you for the laughs, memes, and senseless conversations that have kept me sane the whole time. Thank you for always trying to understand what I do, even though I (we) know you have no idea.

I could not have reached this point in my intellectual pursuit and career without the immense love, care, and support of the people who have bestowed me with the unique worldview that allows me to think the way I do today—my family, my *gia đình*. Martin, *Bi*, we have been through thick and thin, and I am glad our relationship has only furthered as we get older. We rarely say this to each other, but Mom and Dad, I genuinely love you. Thank you for enduring all your pains so that I can be where I am right now; your sacrifices are not empty. I cannot wait to share my accomplishments with you. To all my aunts, uncles, and cousins, thank you for your continued support and always inviting me to your lively parties.

Finally, I am eternally indebted to the legacy of my maternal grandmother, my *bà ngoại*. Since I moved to the mainland, I frequently see giant moths in the many places I visit and call home. I would like to think this is you checking in on me. You are one of the most resilient and dedicated women I have ever known, which is why Mom is the way she is and now I am the way I am. I hope to uphold our legacy of being strong, fearless, powerful, and loud women. *Xin cảm ơn*.

VITA

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|------|--|
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

XXXaigon: Party, Pleasure, and the Sociocultural Makings of
Transnational South Vietnam

by

Michelle Vy Huynh

Doctor of Philosophy in Drama and Theatre

University of California San Diego 2024

University of California, Irvine, 2024

Professor Jade Power-Sotomayor, Chair

This dissertation conducts an investigation into how South Vietnamese-ness is seen, felt, and embodied through performances of South Vietnamese partying and worldmaking, and reconsiders the existence of South Vietnam beyond the emblematic western tropes of the Vietnam War. I explore the ways in which the elusive South Vietnamese identity has been

historically constituted and affectively conjured and recognized today, moving us away from the war-linked rhetoric to one that focuses on the sociocultural landscape of transnational South Vietnam, which includes the ever-growing diasporic community living in the West. I deploy the understanding of performance in its broadest and most expansive definition to incorporate hostess bar culture, karaoke street acts, and domestic drinking practices in Saigon, and view these partying events as expressions of South Vietnamese pleasure and nodes of sensing South Vietnamese-ness. Drawing from close examinations of auto-ethnographic case studies, I illustrate how examining these embodied sites of party and pleasure urges a reconsideration of the orientalized views of South Vietnam and its people. The project forwards a post-national framework to reconstitute the history of the Southeast Asian nation that is intrinsically tied to ideas of nostalgia, affect, identity-formation, and belonging. Acknowledging the existing scholarship on Vietnam and the legacy it holds in the fields of American history, Southeast Asian sociopolitics, and critical ethnic and refugee studies, the interdisciplinary project examines the cultural landscape of South Vietnam in order to explicate how partying and its manifestation of pleasure are at the center of understanding the sociocultural dynamics of South Vietnam and its transnational citizens.

Introduction

***Nút* - The Knot**

A nation that once was, a distinct region of Vietnam that exists today, a community that is cleaved across bodies of water—it is even difficult to pinpoint South Vietnam on a map. We can think of South Vietnam in the most literal sense as the southernmost region of the Vietnamese country while looking at a map of the twenty-first century, but there actually lived a “real” South Vietnam marked clearly off on a world map of the 1960s. Reminding ourselves of the geopolitics of the late eighteenth century, the south of Vietnam is not in the region we know today as it was where the former Champa Empire was positioned. When considering how the legacy of the former nation has transpired today, the provision is arguably discerned more so in a multi-city diasporic community in Orange County, California, as well as in dozens of other diasporic enclaves globally. The South Vietnamese nation is a challenging task to distinguish and delineate, but at the same time, it is transpiciously embodied and felt. The state of South Vietnamese-ness has been imagined and defined by both its own people and foreign outsiders, and this process of worldmaking—or rather, making out what South Vietnamese-ness is—continues to be renegotiated and re-perceived today. South Vietnam, South Vietnamese culture, and South Vietnamese people manifest and sense themselves through the complexly intriguing lenses of multi-nationalisms, Orientalism, and post-coloniality. They are among the lived experiences of colonization, war, forced migration, and reeducation, and they are amongst the cracks of the shattered grounds that construct the contemporary, global Vietnamese identity. South Vietnamese-ness is between a “not really this but not quite that” of Vietnamese-ness; it is also sensed amid the bustling sounds, flashing

lights, intense chatter, and chaotic streets of Saigon, and in the middle of a family party with screaming relatives and earth-shatteringly loud music. This all simultaneously is what constructs South Vietnamese— a grand entanglement of ideas, beliefs, histories, memories, feelings, politics, movements, practices, and embodiments that keeps edging the narrative that South Vietnamese is unlike its other counterparts. South Vietnam knows it is different from the other regions of Vietnam, but cannot outwardly say so. South Vietnam is aware of its subtle segregation from the dominant cultural narrative of communist Vietnam, yet it is forced to be enfolded in the greater commonwealth and broader national framework. South Vietnam is trapped in this “knot,” and the way to begin parsing out what South Vietnamese lies in unraveling the very braids that bind South Vietnamese together.

South Vietnamese exists as a distinct entity within the broader concept of Vietnamese, though it remains intricately intertwined with the latter. I do not aim to support a staunchly nationalist view of South Vietnam, but the complexity of this subject is heightened by the country’s former geopolitical recognition. This dissertation aims to discuss South Vietnamese, and I purposefully do not engage with North Vietnamese or even Central Vietnamese; after all, everything in and everyone of Vietnam *is* Vietnamese—all regions and people of Vietnam contribute to the collective identity of being Vietnamese.¹

South Vietnamese is felt and sensed because North Vietnamese has become the

¹ I recognize the ongoing systemic issues of ethnic oppression committed by the Vietnamese government towards minority and indigenous populations, such as the Hmong, Tày, and Cham people; the first iteration of a South Vietnamese nation was built and constructed on the land of the Champa Empire. This dissertation focuses on the conversations regarding South Vietnamese as a cultural phenomenon, which heavily implies an ethnic Việt or Kinh perspective. Though I primarily privilege the Việt outlook, I do not promote the erasure of these people’s history, identity, and worldviews and hope that the theoretical frameworks may be utilized in the future to include their voices and opinions.

dominant discursive expression of Vietnamese nationalist culture. Now, nearly five decades after the Fall of Saigon and the reunification of the country, the North Vietnamese government has since greatly reformed the social, economic, and educational systems that subscribe to their political agenda.² North Vietnamese-ness, in essence, has become the popular understanding and embodiment of Vietnamese-ness. South Vietnamese-ness encompasses both nation and culture, and it should be assumed as a separate cultural entity of contemporary Vietnam. The phenomenon is a very “real” thing—that is, what it is born out of is not solely in response to the North Vietnamese “winning” the war, but it is also this essence that was created directly from the imperialist fantasies of influences from the Vietnam War. I do not claim to “rescue” or “recapture” South Vietnam, but I aim to expose how South Vietnamese-ness is produced out of the gaping wound from the turbulent history of war, violence, and colonialism in Vietnam—in other words, the nation is generated out of its choice to stand in relation to Western imperialism, and there is an embrace that is particularly playful but extremely knotty of South Vietnamese-ness to colonial capitalism and Orientalist thought. South Vietnamese-ness is to be seen as a new cultural body, a new *thing*, and it is something tacitly assembled concerning the colonial events of the past fifty years (from the end of the Vietnam War) and even further back.

² The communist Vietnamese government has since leaned towards a heavily influenced socialist structure and method of governance. A major economic reform began in 1986 with the “Đổi Mới” campaign that transformed its original command economy to a “socialist-oriented” economy, propelling Vietnam into the global market. As for education, the removal of any South Vietnamese or leftover influences from the former education system immediately followed the ending of the Vietnam War in April 1975. According to historian Kathryn Lattman, the Ministry of Education created a twelve-year system to reform the nation’s educational landscape by redesigning and republishing new historical textbooks on Vietnam that support the communist regime’s retelling of the war. This resulted in nearly twenty million resources being created and later taught to Vietnamese youth. The government also nationalized private schools to enforce a centralized schooling system while improving educational access for all Vietnamese, particularly those from rural areas.

This dissertation is an attempt to interrogate and discern these coiled constructs and twisted relationships through the explorations of the “party,” which is what I demonstrate and argue as a South Vietnamese cultural practice and way of “sense-making.” In doing so, I not only expose the sociocultural and political complexities that are involved in recognizing a unique South Vietnamese identity, but also theorize and reimagine how a culture may subsist in the everyday sites, bodies, and practices of its people, even if the nation the culture is tethered to no longer exist. It is within the varying practices of partying that we may understand South Vietnamese as this is the way I have grown to understand my own cultural identity. I also do not aspire to re-open the ever-imperative but overmentioned narrative of the “lost nation.” Certainly, South Vietnam is no longer a politically existent state, and I do not deny the ending occurrences of what unfolded from the Vietnam War, but South Vietnam is more than just a vanishment or bygone of the past; it is an identity disoriented in the great latticework to claims of resistance, survival, trauma, nostalgia, and hope. I work to extrapolate how South Vietnamese may be read alongside the scholarship on the Vietnamese diaspora, but not be so overpowered by the rhetoric and practices of those overseas across the Pacific and settled in the West. I acknowledge that South Vietnam cannot be thought of without the inclusion of diasporic and refugee studies, but there is something fascinating and equally as refusing in its identity to become fully enveloped by the post-war identity of Vietnam by the unique cultural embodiments of South Vietnamese citizens, particularly those in Saigon. My intended goal is to contribute to the greater discourse on Vietnamese performance and cultural studies by foregrounding how the history of colonization, imperialism, and war in Vietnam has inevitably constructed different

understandings of Vietnameseness; I assert that South Vietnameseness is merely one of them—the main focus for this dissertation—and a method I find appropriate for sensing South Vietnameseness is by means of partying.

Before extrapolating the framework of uplifting the party-as-method, I first expound on the metaphorical knot that makes up South Vietnameseness. The notion of South Vietnameseness is not just one knot, but it is a series of multiple knots all enmeshed against and around one another, making it an extremely complicated entity to detangle. In a sense, the exploration of South Vietnameseness is an examination of the *knottiness* of South Vietnamese history and identity through its intra-, inter-, and transnational ensnarement with France, America, Southeast Asia, East Asia, the Global South, and especially, itself. The very threads themselves are coated (and coded) with notions of a Vietnam that have been historically romanticized, fetishized, sexualized, and Orientalized through early popular literature stemming from the establishment of the French colonial state of Indochina; there, the creation of and critique on the feminization of Saigon are birthed. However, there is also an appetitive sense of *naughtiness* imbued in this study because the examination of the sites and performances of South Vietnamese party deals with the delicate matters of pleasure, sensuality, and complicated gendered dynamics—greater themes that are central to this dissertation and key to unraveling the South Vietnamese knot.

Edward Said's canonical text *Orientalism* comes to the forefront in this discussion of South Vietnameseness, as well as how the West's derisory portrayals of the Orient have come to be the way in which the West has known itself. In the case of Vietnam—Jeffrey A. Keith, who writes on the feminization of Saigon—argues that Said's text was written in response to

the media's depiction of Vietnam and the connection that vantage point is owed to the French colonial era and the US's adoption of that lens. Saigon, a "contact zone"³ of East-West encounters and a victim of the Orientalist gaze, gives rise to depictions of it being a "sensual and feminine place."⁴ During the Vietnam War era, the feminization of Saigon became a common concept that was adopted by the US government, according to Amanda Boczar. Due to the ideologies that South Vietnamese laws on morality, as well as the US's interest in maintaining military morale, the US viewed South Vietnam as a "desirable, exotic, and sensual object" but had to be discouraged from encouraging "sexual promiscuity and other immoral behavior."⁵ In a sense, the creation of the submissive, docile, and hard-to-get (but somewhat easy) Vietnamese female figure is conjured to the West by both the South Vietnamese and US governments. It is further legitimized as the US had printed brochures stating "Sex by Subscription"⁶ to the general public enticing young men to join the military.

The conversation expands as Nguyễn-Võ Thu-Hương considers how different portrayals of the feminization of Saigon shape the way reality is meant to be presented to the public. Drawing back to Boczar, Nguyễn-Võ investigates sex through the discourses of freedom that have infiltrated Vietnam through the colonial powers and the country's own stance on feminist values. She calls for a reflective mode of thinking about how sex has become the site for interventions that deal with neoliberal capital. This bleeds into Kimberly

³ Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession*, 1991, 33–40.

⁴ Keith, Jeffrey. "Producing Miss Saigon: Imaginings, Realities, and The Sensual Geography of Saigon." *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, vol. 22, no. 3, 3, 2015, p. 248

⁵ Boczar, Amanda. "Uneasy Allies: The Americanization of Sexual Policies in South Vietnam." *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, vol. 22, no. 3, 3, 2015, p. 191

⁶ Boczar, "Uneasy Allies." p. 192

Kay Hoang's work on furthering this representation of Saigon through her ethnography on the dependency the city has on its relationships of intimacy and their fueling of the economy.

Hoang explains the intricate workings of sex work in contemporary Saigon that is all linked to the South's wartime history. Like Keith, Hoang describes Saigon as a "critical space where dreams and deals are traded."⁷ I follow Nguyễn-Võ's and Hoang's trajectory to expand further on how Saigon is not only dependent on desire but also on pleasure and seeking enjoyment that is not just for the Vietnamese elitists or powerful men. Part of the knot of South Vietnamese-ness is that it is intrinsically linked to the notion of pleasure, and Saigon is a particularly robust culvert of and to pleasure.

I recognize that to say pleasure in Saigon is "for all" is rather naive—especially if pleasure is only understood via sex as suggested before—but I expand our understanding of pleasure to include a desexualization of pleasure that South Vietnamese people sense by privileging the practice of party and moving through the nightlife space. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes pleasure as,

The affective positivity of all joy, gladness, liking, and enjoyment—all our feeling good or happy... Pleasure neither easily fits, nor has been widely thought by theorists to fit, the standard paradigms of sensation, whether of qualities of outward things or of those of either localized or diffuse bodily sensation, since it seems any typically pleasant sensory state or quality may be enjoyed less or even not at all on occasions, while its sensory quality and intensity remain much the same.⁸

As much as pleasure is "sensed," the experience of pleasure is inconsistent—a particularly sensory experience that should be pleasant may not be pleasurable at any given time. Even if

⁷ Hoang, Kimberly Kay. *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work*. University of California Press, 2015. p. 5

⁸ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. "Pleasure," June 17, 2016.

the sensory quality and intensity of an experience remain the same, the level of pleasure derived from it can vary. The pleasure, then, from a sensory experience is deeply influenced by other factors, such as mood, context, environment, and one's psychological state. Pleasure moves differently across people, places, and points of access, and is (trans)formable and pliant to the individual. The pleasure that exists from the sexualization of Vietnam, as Keith and Boczar note, folds into Hoang's ethnographic research on how the sexualized discourse on Saigonese nightlife has only become more deeply intertwined into the fabrications of contemporary South Vietnamese life. The pleasure acquired is manifestly from the naughty happenings and parties in the city center and its outskirts, and the pleasure embodied is that of cultural affirmation and belonging. This creates an overly saturated sensation of pleasure in Saigon—one understood via the entanglements of sex, fun, party, and naughtiness.

The notion of attaining pleasure through naughtiness is brought forth because of the circulating colloquialism that the Saigonese people and/or people from the southern region of Vietnam “party hard.” There are multiple phrases in the Vietnamese language that could be used to describe the party hard culture that is evident within the cultural environment of the southern region, such as “*phá quá*” (“messing around too much”), “*ngịch quá*” (“being too naughty”), and “*ham chơi*” (“to play in excess”). I observe that these phrases can be applied to express anyone or anything that exhibits any sort of bad behavior, and they are not exclusive to terms used specifically by or for South Vietnamese people. However, it is within the cultural context of how one uses the phrases to describe South Vietnam and its residents that elicits a national cognizance that “*người miền Nam*,” or “Southerners,” cannot inherently be “good.” In a sense, the South Vietnamese have a naughty side to their recreational habits, and

people are aware of this—it is when Southerners follow the rules or are not misbehaving that raises a flag. It is not necessarily a red flag, but one substantial enough to be recognized by others that they are being obedient and, potentially, not enacting a trait of South Vietnamese—naughtiness that is ostensibly tied up with her “being easy” and “giving of herself too freely.”

Because of the feminization of Saigon, the expression of South Vietnam being the “bad girl” is intriguingly raised. The Vietnamese imaginary is incredibly gendered, and the country is often conjured as “*ba cô gái*,” or “three ladies,” which further separates the southern region from its counterparts. If we are to follow this personified rendering and view the three regions—North, Central, and South—as siblings, then South Vietnam does earn a reputation of being the “naughty sister” from its acceptance and continuation of highlighting its nightlife scene and party culture.

This is, hence, why the title of my dissertation begins with “XXX” — let me further explain. First, it is a riff on the global notation of something relating to an explicit or extreme nature. Second, it is a metaphor for the significant knot that is South Vietnam. And last, it is a deliberate choice to privilege the thoughts, conversations, and senses of naughtiness that are highlighted to explain the quandary of South Vietnamese. Additionally, I deliberately attach it to the spelling of the larger investigation site for this dissertation. The “X”⁹ gives a nod to the sensual nature of this project—sure—but it also grounds the research in using the moniker of Saigon as the investigative site of party and pleasure; “X” marks the spot. The change of spelling to now state “Xaigon” is another play on words in the Vietnamese

⁹ The reading of the “X” as such is allowed under the helm of other cultural studies field, such as Black studies, Latinx studies, and Queer studies.

language. While “*xai*” (flat/no tone) does not necessarily denote anything in Vietnamese, *xài* (falling/down tone) means “to spend, use, or expend.” At the same time, Saigon in full diacritics is spelled as *Sài Gòn*. If one were to keep the spelling, but change the tone of the character, the word (*sai*) then means “wrong” or “mistaken”—which is quite appropriate for this project.

The calling to these words makes its way, though very slightly, into my dissertation as I further explore the payouts and exertions of energies that come into play when partying. I also note the intentional use of calling the city Saigon (and only as such) throughout this project as part of my personal refusal to call this conquered space its political, “legal” name that many people, too, actively deny; this practice is utilized by people living in and out of Vietnam; it is also the moniker my family and I have only ever used to name the city. If and when I choose to name the space “Hồ Chí Minh City,” the city’s internationally recognized denomination, it will be used to delineate ties to specific political regimes and/or to cite other scholars’ works that have adopted this moniker.

Beyond the sexual connotation of the triple Xs, I view the three crosses as twistings, entanglements, or, more precisely, *knots*. I regard the complicated South Vietnamese identity as this extremely rigid knot, and the act of unraveling the knot to understand South Vietnamese-ness requires incredible carefulness, meticulous effort, and extreme patience from both researcher and reader. The knot is not just one thread but multiple strands that embody different affects relating to party, pleasure, play, and sensuality—individually, in a particular strand, and simultaneously, all together as a knotted ball. It is further complicated by the including threads of trauma, war, right-wing conservatism, refugeedom, and nostalgia which

create the tangled mess; this is, in part, what distinguishes South Vietnam from other “partying” cultures.

In what is a clear appreciation I have for motifs and metaphors, the knot extends itself to my usage of “knotty” and “naughty”—*knotty* for South Vietnam’s intricate, complex webbing of politics, remembrance, temporalities, and sensings; and *naughty* for it is the turn to exploring South Vietnamese partying and pleasurable practices, and my playful and what may be deemed as a “vulgar” reading of my cultural heritage. As I naughtily read through the city cracks and cultural gaps to understand a South Vietnamese-ness that acknowledges its own misbehaviors within the transnational cultural landscape in order to exist, this is a way for me to make sense of a knot that feels so inflexible and incredibly strained due to the cultural burdens of violence and loss that it has so tightly ensnarled with. Essentially, pleasure and naughtiness become threads from which I pull in order to feel and uncoil the knot.

The Seriousness and Knottiness of Party

However, as elementary as it is, we must first define and describe what a “party” is beyond the understanding that it is a mere “social gathering.”¹⁰ The concept of the “political party” is acknowledged, though it is not the focus of this dissertation; nonetheless, the parties I investigate here are intrinsically political by nature. I view the party as an act of leisure or entertainment, and it is rather antithetical to conducting research into something that is supposed to be a recreational occasion. There are also many different types of parties, so it proves challenging to analyze parties because it may lead to an overgeneralization of the

¹⁰ “Party.” In Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2010.

social phenomenon. The term party is simultaneously an act and action—one may go to a party, and one also may go out to party. Its very definition is quite expansive as there are many different types of parties, party-ers/party-goers, and acts of partying. and each party has different sociopolitical and cultural stakes.

Within minoritarian and queer studies, the party is an important spatializing and idealizing practice and performance of building community. For example, Joshua Chambers-Letson writes,

The party: an organic entity, a living, breathing being, a gathering together of the multiple in the one, an obscure order, a whole which is not one, a many that is singular, a kind of provisional “we” at different with itself from the inside out... The party is as much as a site of refuge as it is the site of revolutionary planning, but ‘even though the party is, and takes place in, and takes place as, a kind of refuge, refuge still indicates that those who take it are refugees and people tend not to want to to have to live like that.’ The party, as refuge, is a place to catch one’s breath when you can’t breathe. It is a way of staying alive and of keeping each other alive.¹¹

Chambers-Letson explains the delicate workings of the social convention he and his peers attended after José Esteban Muñoz’s death and names the makings of “the party,” which include loneliness, violence, pain, escape, memory, and compassion. Accompanied by drugs and music, this party was more than just a mere gathering or mourning. In many ways, the party provided a cultural assemblage where minoritarian subjects gathered to share, reallocate, and reassign the embodied codes and resources to sustain queer of color life. The party he describes is a spatializing practice to make “more life,”¹² and it is by route of the party that life—in juxtaposition to death—makes greater and more transformative sense.

¹¹ Chambers-Letson, Joshua. *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*. Vol. 4. Sexual Cultures. New York University Press, 2018. p. xi.

¹² Chambers-Letson. *After the Party*. p. x.

I borrow Chambers-Letson's theorization of the party to foreground the ways I explore the party in South Vietnam. Thinking alongside him, the ways of performance and partying are methods of keeping people and the memory of those people alive, which speaks to the processes by which South Vietnamese people view the practice of party. Similarly, for South Vietnamese people, the party surely "is an ephemeral, temporary happening in which singular beings crash into each other for a time to become a being singular plural."¹³ However, he notes that when dawn nears, the party "comes undone."¹⁴ Chambers-Letson develops the "entanglement" as an imperative analytic to describe the "communism of incommensurability"—the connection between objects and beings that have no customary measure with one another. Though he is discussing the entanglement through the performance analysis of Eiko & Koma's *Naked*, Chambers-Letson recognizes the convoluted embodiments of gendered abuse, violence, fetishization, and near-annihilation that is evident with the liveness of bodies assembling, histories intertwining, and souls and spirits coalescing with one another.

Chambers-Letson views the party as summarily Marxist, though he notes that his party was not a politically communist one, but explains the event as an "endlessly renewable chain of events performed into being by a plurality of broken people who are trying to keep each other alive."¹⁵ The party is an actively created and maintained collective gathering where people who are marginalized or hurt come together to uplift and support one another. The collective subject arises from shared experiences of oppression, the need for survival, and the

¹³ Ibid. p. xxi.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. xxi.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. xv.

resistance to alienation (or the estrangement of individuals from their labor and, most importantly, from each other). South Vietnamese people certainly have a deep relationship with themes of survival and resistance, but I assert that South Vietnamese partying is enacted against the effects of Communism. Whether by forced coercion or passive assimilation, South Vietnam has historically aligned itself with the West, which creates a tricky quandary that becomes a part of the knot of South Vietnamese-ness. The types of communalism and collective that Chambers-Letson discusses in his notion of the party are in relationship to basic concepts of socialism and a social order led by individualism and meritocracy. What is, of course, confusing is how the trauma faced by South Vietnamese diasporic people (and other colonized immigrant populations) from the violence of communist regimes has passively created a response that puts them in a submissive, acquiescent position to a (Western) culture with drastically different values all in the name of the belief of safety and protection. Despite the contradicting opinions towards governance and identity, it is imperative to highlight the political dilemma that is exposed by pillaring the party as a sense-making practice and tool of embodying South Vietnamese-ness. While I do not particularly seek to fully engage in the impassioned discussion about Communist ideologies within the greater Vietnamese community, particularly those who have staunch fervor of the former state of South Vietnam, I deploy the party-as-method to better discern the strong apprehensions towards Communism and demonstrative affection for partying together that South Vietnamese-ness is contiguously enveloped with.

While Chambers-Letson uses the party to think about the “after”—a way to make sense of death, advocate for performance, and subsist—to provide a means of queer-of-color

worldmaking, I view the entangled apparatus of the party to be an imperative framework for sensing South Vietnamese-ness. The South Vietnam I further in this dissertation was a project created out of colonialism, imperialism, and conquest, and so are the following parties I explore. Before explaining the parties, I must extrapolate on the labyrinthine making of the South Vietnamese nation because the great stakes of the party are intrinsically linked to the country's and region's crucial history.

Though recognized as an official country in 1955, South Vietnam (or, formerly, Cochinchina) was realized from the first interventions of French colonists invading Southeast Asia in their great efforts to establish Indochina and grow their presence in the Asia-Pacific region. During World War II in the early 1940s, the Japanese government occupied most of Southeast Asia, including all of Indochina. This was a turbulent but critical period of Vietnamese history because not only was it the start to the end of French colonization via the Japanese overthrowing of the French from Vietnam, but Vietnam's last emperor Bảo Đại abdicated the throne in 1945 upon the Japanese troops' global surrendering. Swiftly afterward, the Việt Minh (precursor to the notorious Việt Cộng) leader Hồ Chí Minh proclaimed Tonkin and Annam as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and subsequently controlled the near-entirety of modern-day Vietnam. Cochinchina was the last piece to Uncle Ho's¹⁶ collection, but the French declared the southern region a republic in what was their last attempt to reclaim the Indochinese colonies. With the military aid of the British, both Western powers fought the Việt Minh for control of the southern cities, which led to the 1946 French

¹⁶ Uncle Ho is a colloquial way of addressing Hồ Chí Minh. In Vietnamese, people may call him "Bác Hồ," transliterated as "Uncle Ho." For many South Vietnamese—particularly South Vietnamese diaspora—his name is not commonly spoken aloud nor is his figure regularly discussed.

Indochina War. Several years passed, and the DRV grew its international cognizance by acquiring the ever-imperative alliance with the Soviet Union. The Soviet's recognition of the DRV (as well as the Chinese's) fed into the "Red Scare" from Western forces, particularly of the US government. The tumultuous events of the 1940s and 1950s peaked at the 1954 Geneva Conference that declared Vietnam to be a nation divided along the 17th parallel north, where the DRV administered north of the line and South Vietnam, or the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), headed the territories below. Though there was a strong assumption that the RVN would align themselves as a French dependant, the South Vietnamese Premier (at the time) Ngô Đình Diệm ultimately decided to seek support from the Americans in order to separate the region from their oppressive colonists. What ensued in the aftermath of Ngô's settlement was the full invasion (and its succeeding tragedies and misfortunes) of the American military into South Vietnam and the greater Southeast Asian region.¹⁷ Of course, the aftermath of the Vietnam War did not favor the South Vietnamese, and the legacy of the nation lives within the embodied memories and experiences of those who lived in the former country and their descendants.

This incredibly knotty history of South Vietnam speaks to the "entanglements" born from and between the greed of white Europeans, labor exploitation, cultural dispossession, and egotistical imperialism. The traumatic experiences South Vietnam and its people endured during this long period are the simplest way of naming the atrocities that came from the events of the Vietnam War. After two decades of war (if we do not include the years prior of constant war and violence), about two hundred thousand Army of the Republic of Vietnam

¹⁷ Hall, Mitchell K. *The Vietnam War*. New York, NY: Routledge.

(ARVN) soldiers were killed, and nearly a million South Vietnamese civilians were murdered at the hands of both North Vietnamese and American fighters.¹⁸ This number does not include the displacement of an estimated two million Vietnamese who fled political, ethnic, and religious persecution from the communist government. This created one of the worst refugee crises in human history, resulting in hundreds of thousands more deaths as many Vietnamese people, or “boat refugees,” were not able to make it out of rough waters to safe grounds. To say this is “depressing” is an understatement, especially as this is the history of my people. I am still grappling to comprehend fully a history that I had to teach myself as I was not told about my family’s lived experiences until I became an adult.

I grew up knowing two different versions of Vietnam: one of my mother’s and another of my father’s. I share my own family’s history as an insightful tool to explain how their different upbringings have informed my understanding and connection to greater Vietnam and South Vietnamese-ness. My parents had very disparate childhoods in the same country, and it is their combined histories and experiences that have allowed me to think critically about the similar and contrasting ways they sense and embody South Vietnamese-ness. My mother grew up on the farmlands of South Vietnam on the outskirts of Saigon. She quit attending school in ninth grade, spent the majority of her teenage years tending to the crops and animals, and later learned specialized cooking skills for large-scale catering services. My father, on the other hand, grew up in the heart of Saigon—District 1—never having consumed fish sauce during his childhood because his French-speaking grandfather heavily influenced his daily diet and lifestyle. His childhood home was only a few blocks away from the well-known Lê Hồng

¹⁸ Ibid.

Phong High School for the Gifted (formerly known as Petrus Ký High School), one of the oldest high schools in Vietnam that is still operating today, which meant he was within riding distance to many Saigonese attractions, which included the popular nightlife hotspots and red-light districts. While my mother's Vietnam may be that of the rice paddies and pulling wooden carts, my father's was one of swerving along city streets and playing soccer on the street. Rather than the conjuring of the entire Vietnamese country, this was specifically my father's *Saigon*—but both of my parents' envisionments are quintessential depictions of South Vietnam.

No matter how disparate their upbringings were, the country my parents were born into and were told to love as children is that of South Vietnam—a Vietnam that once was but no more. Like everyone, they have their own connections to the motherland and understandings of the Vietnam War. By conception and arrival, my mother is a product of war as she is a white-presenting woman who was abandoned upon birth in early 1970 by her biological mother¹⁹ in Đồng Nai Province. As much as she solely views herself as a Vietnamese woman (which she rightfully is), her pale, hazel-eyed physical appearance takes precedence in other's prejudices against her. She was eventually adopted by a young North Vietnamese-speaking widow who fled to South Vietnam as a child upon the North's unofficial purge of Catholic followers; the village in which she grew up and was raised is mainly comprised of former North Vietnamese who pledged allegiance to the South. My father saw

¹⁹ Though I do not delve into my mother's racial identity in this dissertation, I highlight that my mother is mixed-race. She does not know her birth parents, but after nearly fifty years of not knowing her ethnic mapping, she decided to take an ancestry test, which proved that she is mainly of European descent but has an interesting quarter percentage of Vietnamese (with a small mixing of Thai and Cambodian). I acknowledge that her lived experiences growing up as a white-presenting woman in rural South Vietnam have heavily shaped my understanding of Vietnameseness and the colonial and racialized complexities involved.

the Fall of Saigon happen with his own eyes as an eleven-year-old—the same age I was when I first learned about the Vietnam War. Most of his family members fought for the South Vietnamese military, and so many of them he never saw or heard from them again after April 1975. They both briefly experienced a “reunified” Vietnam until they were forced to leave; my mother’s departure was due to the fortunate, last-minute arrangement of American sponsorship as she faced life-threatening assaults by the local government radicals, and my father’s boat journey out of the country was from his mandated conscription to fight the Khmer Rouge as a member of the infantry division. Both my parents left because they knew they were to die in the hands of the land they called home, but at the very least, they wanted to die on their own terms and by means of fighting and not giving in.

And there is *my* perceived understanding of Vietnam. It is undeniably not the South Vietnam my parents knew or the Vietnam that came to be directly after the war. My Vietnam is a Vietnam where it is Saigon and more; a place where any thoughts of war are suppressed; a country I was annoyingly forced to travel to during summer breaks (but eventually grew to love); a place I feel connected to but am constantly told I am not of their kin; an ancestral homeland that is no longer a home but a fleeting memory; a motherland that could have been mine but was never mine in the first place. It is a Vietnam made up of unforgettable memories of the crazy family parties I had; a country where I first got drunk with my father; a place where it is socially acceptable and expected to party hard; a motherland where I understood why my parents had to leave to survive. The equation of what, then, is my cultural heritage is the conundrum that I have yet to resolve. However, it is also an issue that I have come to terms with, never finding a clear conclusion. This dissertation is an attempt at trying to find

the appropriate language to express these dilemmas in a way that makes sense for us—the South Vietnamese—and rectify the tropes and identities that have been placed upon us. In its granular essence, it is an experiment to see if this can work and learn if it is worth working out, threading through, and partying around.

But where does the party come in? And why is the discussion of South Vietnamese people abroad essential to the exploration of sensing South Vietnamese-ness via party? I provide the personal anecdote of my family (and myself) because this complicates our understanding of South Vietnamese-ness. Though the discussion has since been focused on South Vietnam (as in, former country and region) itself, South Vietnamese-ness cannot be thought of without the acknowledgment and discussion of its former refugees and growing diasporic population situated across the world in multiple continents. South Vietnam's legacy, I contend, is sensed more prevalently within the diaspora because of the embodied knowledge of the direct descendants of the country's former residents. The South Vietnam sensed from and by the motherland citizens today is indubitably not the same South Vietnam sensed through memories and imaginations of the Vietnamese diasporic immigrants, which is a part of the growing complexities of South Vietnamese-ness and the knottiness of the party itself.

Like Chambers-Letson, I view the party as a “site of refuge”²⁰ for South Vietnamese people, where they gather, move, sing, and drink to “sustain” their South Vietnamese-ness in this post-war setting where the nation has no longer existed now for almost five decades. The party encompasses many characters, spaces, voices, dreams, and sensations, and it lives in the vibrant nightlife and party culture scenes of South Vietnam, such as the fun and naughty

²⁰ Chambers-Letson, Joshua. *After the Party*. p. xi

happenings within bars, clubs, lounges, house parties, and lively street bazaars. It also lives in the proxies of South Vietnam—the dozens of Little Saigons throughout the world that were created as essential sites for South Vietnamese survival and resistance. The party—wherever it is—offers a rich, fertile zone to spatialize, temporalize, and embody the sensations of pleasure that are needed to sense South Vietnamese-ness. For South Vietnamese living in Vietnam, the party is the grounds to enact a cultural identity that uniquely separates themselves from the greater national imaginary of modesty and reunification through the recognition and performance of naughtiness. For South Vietnamese immigrants, the party may offer refuge from the confines of the memories of war and the constant acts of resistance and survival. For both, it provides an embodied language to speak to one another, to (re)connect, to negotiate the notions of South Vietnamese-ness, to sense why we are “different” from our other Vietnamese counterparts and why there is no other way to live but to be different because, without the difference, South Vietnam would die. Similar to the arrival of dawn undoing the party in Chambers-Letson’s narrative, South Vietnam and its entities and memories die with the undoing and stoppage of the party itself—the party is where there is “communism of incommensurability”²¹ for South Vietnamese citizens and South Vietnamese immigrants.

I privilege the party specifically as the rhetoric on South Vietnam often focuses on the region’s nightlife scene, which is charged with hundreds of parties on any given day. There is a common understanding amongst the Vietnamese community that people who live in or are from South Vietnam—particularly Saigon—“party hard,” which is one of the ways of

²¹ Ibid. p. xxi.

understanding the aforementioned manners of *ham choi*. Saigon is the central site of exploration in this dissertation because I view the city of Saigon as a cultural conduit of South Vietnamese-ness; after decades of colonial rule, I posit that the affective sources of South Vietnamese-ness are devised from western-prescribed appointments of red-light districts and nightlife culture, making the city the ultimate party and pleasure-seeking zone, and the practices translate from Saigon to Little Saigon.

I also emphasize the party occurrences in Saigon as this is the way that South Vietnamese people and its transnational diasporic members have come to understand *how* to party. There are many cities around the world that are designated “party cities” across Asia, such as Bangkok, Tokyo, Seoul, and Boracay, and Saigon is surely one of them. The South Vietnamese city is known for its signature coordinated chaos and cacophony of motorbikes revving, horns honking, street vendors hawking, and family members yelling at each other. The city of Saigon is, by no means, ever a quiet one; Saigon is thunderous at all times of the day with its bustling streets that are underscored by the ear-splittingly loud music playing from the streetside businesses (and vice versa)—without one or the other, Saigon cannot be fully heard. However, Saigon has a unique and vibrant nighttime radiance that, unlike some other cities in Asia where nightlife is concentrated in specific areas, Saigon’s energy spreads across the city and into the suburbs—where people in businesses, along sidewalks, and in homes rival each other for who is the most resounding in not only the city but the greater region. The uptick in volume, traffic, and movement during the evening creates a greatly enlivened and vigorously nocturnal Saigon. The party atmosphere is transmuted overseas via the clamorous karaoke and equivocally booming music played at the house parties. No matter

what, alcohol is the defining cultural object that is featured as the main star of every South Vietnamese party, and the drink of choice is beer. The constant sight and presence of beer—whether it be placed on a table in a Saigonese beer club or Little Saigonese bar—becomes a comforting familiarity to have in hand and consume when around a sea of strangers that one just met or cousins that one forgot about.

Overall, the party serves as a practice of sense-making for South Vietnamese. Though the party may assuredly be a worldmaking practice, I determine the party as sense-making because all paths of the South Vietnamese party lead to a sensorial experience of creating and negotiating the elusive South Vietnamese identity. This sense-making process is not merely about cultural expression but about actively engaging with and challenging the historical and political forces that have marginalized South Vietnamese people to their own culture. The party is not so much about exposing a practice of how South Vietnamese people “see the world,” but it is about how South Vietnamese people make sense of the sociocultural position they are in and how they sense their silenced sociopolitical claims to Vietnamese. I stress the subversive, resistive practice of the party as an ever-continuing process to decipher what works to create a sense of belonging for South Vietnamese people and why it is essential to continue the narrative that South Vietnamese is different. It is about a set of actions, doings, performances, and embodiments that bring this fabricated version of South Vietnamese into being, and it does so in the way all identities are constructed. South Vietnamese people do not just party hard, but they *party loud*, they *party heavy*, they *party sharp*, they party *naughty*.

Positionality & Methodologies

As Marvin Carlson suggests, “The difference between doing and performing, according to this way of thinking, would seem to lie not in the frame of theatre versus real life but in an attitude—we may do actions unthinkingly, but when we think about them, this brings in a consciousness that gives the quality of performance.”²² This dissertation utilizes the significant tools and lenses of performance studies as I believe they offer a robust framework for critiquing cultural identities by examining how identity is constructed, enacted, and negotiated through various performative practices. Focusing on performance as both a metaphor and method allows us to explore the ways in which cultural identities—such as South Vietnamese—aren’t static or inherent but are continuously shaped and reshaped through social interactions, quotidian behaviors, and embodied practices. Performance studies challenge essentialist notions of identity and culture by highlighting its fluidity and contradictions, showing how communities and individuals perform their understanding of their identity in response to shifting sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Ultimately, the field reveals the ways that culture moves and flows through bodies, people, and communities, and it is within the very nuanced site of performance and embodiment where South Vietnamese is best extrapolated. Through this lens, I uncover the intricate ways in which culture is sensed through quotidian performance and embodiment, highlighting the dynamic interplay between history, contemporaneity, and identity within the practice of partying.

This dissertation is one part academic project and another part personal essay—one that attempts to work through questions that have long defined my way of moving in and

²² Carlson, Marvin. *Performance: A Critical Introduction*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2003. p. 4.

through a world where I am at odds with my own culture as well as the cultural environment I live in. My positionality is crucial to developing my theoretical framework and the greater connection I have to my cultural heritage as a second-generation (South) Vietnamese immigrant who has a difficult time connecting with “mainland” American culture. For a dissertation that mainly focuses on transnational South Vietnamese events, I was neither born nor raised in Saigon (or its adjacent suburbs and provinces), nor did I grow up in any of the “Little Saigons” in the continental US. I recognize the privilege I grew up with to be able to travel to the motherland from my parents annually, but by no means do I claim I am a Vietnamese national citizen. The closest Little Saigon to me was over two thousand miles away by a six-hour flight, so I do not pretend like I was born into and raised by that particular diasporic community. Essentially, I am in a unique position because I am an insider and outsider to my own culture.

I came into academia as an ethnographer first, and so I utilize the methodologies of spatial, creative, and auto-ethnography to not only tell my stories but to theorize “better.” The concept of auto-ethnography grew out of a response to the hegemonic ethnographic practices embedded in anthropological methods. Additionally, it came out of feminist and cultural studies scholars who wanted a more “authentic” narrative and approach to the extractive, patriarchal nature of ethnographic work. The rise of the auto-ethnographic method recognized by the academy slowly began during the late 1990s, and the boom is happening now.

Practitioners of auto-ethnography need to be “particularly aware of the politics of representation and [the dynamics] of power relations inherent in traditional ethnographic

accounts,”²³ as auto-ethnography advocate Deborah E. Reed-Danahay states, and this dissertation intends to be cognizant of such politics and critique them as well. Of course, the “problems of auto-ethnography are the problems of ethnography compounded by the researcher’s involvement and intimacy with [their] subjects.”²⁴ The issue of working within a colonial methodology while imbuing my own insights that Daniel M. Hayano mentions is a complication that I acknowledge, but I challenge myself to be ethically responsible and learn how to navigate those methodological disputes in my research. However, as Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland state, “There is a distinction between the claim that experience does not directly connect ideas and reality and the claim that experience cannot tell us anything.”²⁵

Understanding other cultures is of key importance in ethnography, and my project is about critically understanding my own cultural background as well as illustrating the unique attributes of South Vietnamese that deserve to be recognized as its own stand-alone culture. Of course, the main ethical concern associated with using ethnography is the continuation of colonial and Orientalist practices embedded within traditional anthropological methods. Throughout this dissertation, I write in a personalized, sometimes vernacular style speculating my own experience growing up in an inherently South Vietnamese immigrant household that frequently visited the cultural motherland to extend a unique understanding of the South Vietnamese identity. I also draw from my experiences of visiting and living in

²³ Reed-Danahay, Deborah. *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*. Berg Publishers, 1997. p. 4.

²⁴ Hayano, David M. “Auto-Ethnography: Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects.” *Human Organization*, vol. 38, no. 1, 1979, p. 99.

²⁵ Ramazanoglu, Caroline, and Janet Holland. *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices*. Sage Publications, 2002. p. 124.

Vietnam to nuance my comprehension of South Vietnamese-ness as a descendant of South Vietnamese, but not actually a Southerner myself. At the same time, I did not grow up near a well-established Vietnamese diasporic community, such as that of Orange County's Little Saigon, which deems me as equally an insider and an outsider to many aspects of this project. In all fairness, I am constantly at odds with my own reflexivity because of my position in the culture of which I am exploring. As much as I identify as a Vietnamese woman, I theoretically grew up understanding the motherland as the former South Vietnam and not that of modern-day Vietnam. When traveling to Vietnam, I am always recognized as an American first, no matter how many times I visit; because of my upbringing in the colonized state of Hawai'i, I have adopted more of the claims of a multicultural Asian-Pacific transnational identity than that of being a "mainland American." Lastly, I do not have the same conception of Vietnamese-ness and South Vietnamese remembrance that the residents of Little Saigon do because there was (and is) no community such as that in Hawai'i. I am stuck within my own knot of identity to the very knot I am examining, which is perhaps why this project holds even more critical stakes. I have to first read *against* my own culture to be able to read *alongside* and *through* South Vietnamese-ness, and I mean to do so in a way that does not negate my cultural upbringing nor the experiences lived by those in and adjacent to South Vietnam; this project is about highlighting and uplifting the dynamic distinctiveness of South Vietnamese-ness.

Furthermore, my background as a performer who has studied how to enliven the body and voice through a non-Western lens has offered me a critical tool as an ethnographer attuned to the gestures and affects of those with whom I share space as well as attending to

my own body's sensations, movements, and urges. I combine the interpretations of my ethnographic observations with historical research, cultural and queer theory, and the methodologies of performance studies on spatialization, temporality, and the body. Because of the auto-ethnographic inclusion in this project, I am both spectator and participant, so I use interviews conducted with voluntary contributors and conversations with peers and family members. I also look at musicals, films, music, social media, online forums, and secondary sources to demonstrate other naughty/knotty aspects of my analysis. This interdisciplinary approach allows me to extrapolate on what precisely is South Vietnamese and demonstrate how the party-as-method concept is a way to sense a cultural identity that may be verbally muted but affectively verbose; altogether, the mixing of methodologies is what makes South Vietnamese visible and tangible. Though I am arguably upholding the colonial institution of the academy by pursuing this dissertation, this is why I emphasize the auto-ethnographic, the performance studies lens, and the creative nature of this project for this is equally about me trying to describe the layered affective happenings within the South Vietnamese community as a burgeoning scholar and me (re)discovering my cultural identity and parsing out what South Vietnamese is as a curious mind.

For the entirety of this project, the body of investigation is not only my own, but my family's, my kin's, and the people that represent and embody that culture. I am reminded of Etheridge Knight's poem, "The Idea of Ancestry," and the following lines, "I know their style, they know mine... I am all of them, they are all of me; I am me, they are thee."²⁶ The encounters I research are related to me through (in)tangible objects, feelings, and experiences

²⁶ Knight, Etheridge. "The Idea of Ancestry." *The Essential Etheridge Knight: Selected Poems*. Pittsburgh, PA, 1986.

that are unique to the cultural insider that proves difficult for a non-member to understand but, most imperatively, to *critique* in an empathetic, careful, and prudent manner. Sarah Ahmed writes, “Solidarity involves commitment and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground.”²⁷ The solidarity, in this context, is the mutual accord between the denizens of South Vietnam and its diaspora, which is separated by distance but bridged by cultural kinship. For this project, the “common grounds” is the affective site of the party as, I contend, it inhabits a place within the South Vietnamese memory, conscience, and body that operates as a force of transgenerational understanding that is, at times, indescribable.

Chapters & More Knots

The chapters of this dissertation are organized around the motif of the “naughty/knotty party,” and they all examine the embodied, spatial, and affective performances that romanticize, realize, and subvert our sensing of South Vietnamese-ness through the quotidian acts of partying. Using the term performance capaciously, these party performances are staged on the streets, in enclosed spaces, on colonized/conquered land, at home, within memories, and on funeral grounds—the party persists in our daily environment and is always happening around us.

Each chapter grounds itself within one investigation of a specific “party,” but each case study entails a deeper examination of other cultural acts and objects that prove difficult to think of without one another. For instance, in one of my chapters, I explore the embodied

²⁷ Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Routledge, 2004. p. 189

acts of drinking and what happens to the conscious state of the intoxicated individual. By discussing the matters of drinking, I must delve into the individual who is drinking, the body's relation to its space, and the cultural object of the beer itself. The following chapters are purposefully messy in their examination and analysis because there are myriad knots that need to be first unwoven and explained to recognize the grand knot of the selected party at hand. The entanglements are incredibly taut, and I must go against the linear, hegemonic ways of thinking, organizing, and writing, especially as these are cultural matters that bear a lot of sensitivity to the transnational South Vietnamese populace.

Chapter 1, entitled "In Search of Miss Saigon: Bargirls, Transorientalization, and Naughty Existences," focuses on the spatial performances within Saigon's red-light districts lined with hostess bars, nightclubs and salon brothels as well as the embodied acts of Saigonese bargirls to investigate the hypersexualized environment. Like most of this dissertation, I am constantly in chase of a better understanding of what it is that makes up the South Vietnamese cultural identity; thus, I am in pursuit of the woman who has become the representative idol of South Vietnam—the great "Miss Saigon" from the popular musical of her name. The Western-made and Orientalized character is someone who I have a love-hate relationship with, which I recognize may controversially go against the critique imposed by other Asian and Asian-American activists who denounce her.²⁸ I agree with what critics say about Miss Saigon being a racist, misogynistic conjuring of the Eastern identity and that the continuation of the musical only iterates those tropes further for Asian women; I, myself, get asked frequently if I would like to be cast in the musical. However, the story of the "country

²⁸ See Viet Thanh Nguyen's "Close the Curtain on 'Miss Saigon'" (*The New York Times*), Diep Tran's "I am Miss Saigon, and I Hate It" (*American Theatre*), and Kimber Lee's *untitled f*ck m*ss s**gon play*.

girl-turned-sex worker” is very much *real*, and there are thousands of women who are still alive today to tell the tales of the Vietnam War. In fact, most of the bargirls who I met and interviewed for this project are a part of this legacy narrative by being from rural Vietnam themselves. The chapter traces the history of the feminized and sexualized imaginary of South Vietnam, navigates how the icon of the bargirl came to popular existence, and examines the workspace of the bargirl within the city’s contemporary red-light district. Drawing from Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism as an identity-making method for the West, I trace echoes of how Orientalist thought and perception of South Vietnam have come to be entwined into and constructed into the South Vietnamese identity, which I deem is a “transorientalizing” act. The bargirl is indeed a stand-in figure of South Vietnam—both imaginary and living—and the urban spaces of Saigon have—cognizantly and not—supported her existence and continue to sustain her survival.

Chapter 2, entitled “The Party of One: Street Karaoke and Disobedient Leisure,” moves us from the grandeur of Saigon’s red-light districts and focuses on the solo performances of karaoke sung on the city’s streets. Saigon is a city designed around pleasure and leisure, and karaoke is one of the main services and practices for attaining them. Karaoke is heard and performed throughout Vietnam in many different spaces, but I argue that singing karaoke out *into* the streets, as opposed to simply hearing it *from* the streets, is a performance of “disobedient leisure”—an act of naughtiness that knows it is inherently misbehaving but does not care; the singer and the performance both relish in its excess indulgence. Examining the embodied acts of pleasure through the practice of street karaoke, I consider the Marxist writings of labor and leisure and reflect on a Saigonese sense of temporality that does not

strictly adhere to the bounds of work, but instead acknowledges the sense of party within time. Reflecting upon the post-war environment of Saigon through Vietnam's socioeconomic policies, I explain how street karaoke serves to release the singer from the confining sociopolitical pressures of Vietnam and the traumatic bonds of the war today. This also works to evoke a feeling of nostalgic leisure that connects the singer to the memory of a pre-1975 South Vietnamese homeland that may not be tangibly sensed but is embodied via the singing performance.

No South Vietnamese party is fun or seems “right” without a drunk uncle, and Chapter 3, entitled “Warm Beer Over Ice: Domestic Parying, Drinking Practices, and the Act of Becoming-Drunk,” is inspired by that statement. In this chapter, I look at the intense and repetitive drinking practices endured by South Vietnamese men to highlight the cultural significance of “becoming drunk.” Drawing from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of the “becoming,”²⁹ I challenge the common phrase of “getting drunk” to explore more appropriately how drinking helps to sense a South Vietnamese-ness that is perpetually moving, operating, and existing along multiple spatialities and temporalities. Alongside that thought, I examine another cultural object of Vietnam, which is a glass mug filled with beer and ice, which I argue is intrinsically connected to the South Vietnamese identity and its drunken body. The chapter surveys the South Vietnamese cultural practices of consuming alcohol as related to “becoming-drunk” to explain the personal stakes, consequences, and resistance that occur with and when one drinks. I do not argue that drinking beer is exclusively South Vietnamese, especially within a country that is fueled by beer both socially

²⁹ Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

and economically, but it is about recognizing the histories of what the South Vietnamese body and memory have endured to highlight how drinking beer becomes an imperative practice for South Vietnamese existence.

The last chapter of this dissertation, entitled “Drunken Hope, Drunk In Dreams: Transnational Performances of Party and Community in Orange County’s Little Saigon,” utilizes the theoretical frameworks explored in the previous chapters to explore how the party-as-method is distinctly embodied, conjured, and sensed in the largest South Vietnamese diasporic enclave in the US. Orange County’s Little Saigon is home to ten percent of the entire Vietnamese American population,³⁰ and it is impractical to think of South Vietnam today without the addition of Little Saigon. I am reminded of the Vietnamese proverb “*cha mẹ sinh con, trời sinh tính*,” which roughly translates to, “parents give birth to their children, the heavens birth characteristics.” The parties within the community are not like those seen across the Pacific, but I argue that the understanding, intentions, and instructions of partying are renegotiated and *re-presented* for the growing generations and identities of Vietnamese immigrants, such as those who do not have any first-hand experience of the Vietnam War itself and who do not identify as “South” Vietnamese. I view the two themes of hopes and dreams as central to the parties that occur in Little Saigon, whether they are on the streets of Westminster, at home with the family, or in the nightclubs of Garden Grove. I contend that these types of parties—the three I focus on—are inherently influenced by the partying acts performed and practiced in Saigon today, albeit they are not as outright naughty as their predecessors; the party is certainly knotty in how they resist total American assimilation as

³⁰ Nguyen, Phuong NguyenPhuong. “Vietnamese Americans in Little Saigon, California.” In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Urban History*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

well as the sociopolitical reunification of post-war Vietnam. They function to recapture a pleasurable node of the fun-spirited, sexy vibes of pre-1975 South Vietnam and allow an opportunity to crystallize a nostalgic longing for the motherland without necessarily needing to mourn. The act of partying is not only celebratory, but it is also instructional for South Vietnamese immigrants to connect to their South Vietnamese roots or, oppositely, for non-South Vietnamese people to discern why it is that partying and its public display is necessary for South Vietnamese identity to continue to exist.

This dissertation is not intended to provide the end-all characterization of South Vietnamese culture and its people; the culture itself cannot be simplistically compounded into one project. However, this work aims to present an affective framework for theorizing the complex sociocultural entanglements that comprise an existent, *very real* transnational South Vietnam—a South Vietnam that I have felt and will continue to sense. To write and theorize about South Vietnamese-ness is a subversive but imperative act given that most area studies scholarship on South Vietnam as a nation narrowly focuses on the matters of the war; scholarship on its diaspora tends to deal with themes of trauma, resistance, and remembrance (and rightfully so). By privileging the South Vietnamese practices of singing, drinking, gathering, and overall partying, it adds new context to the conversations of post-war identity and worldmaking; the dissertation foregrounds South Vietnamese subjectivity through methods that have yet to be explored. In what follows, I aim to discuss the ways that South Vietnamese-ness is sensed by privileging the very acts that provide pleasure, create a cultural specification, and potentially cause harm to its people.

Một... (1)

Hai... (2)

Ba... (3)

Vô! (Cheers!)

Chapter 1: In Search of Miss Saigon: Bargirls, Transorientalization, and Naughty Existences

“There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgements it forms, transmits, reproduces.”³¹ —Edward Said, *Orientalism*

“Oh, ‘Miss Saigon’. The heat was on from the moment the mega-musical premiered on Broadway in 1991, met by protests against its yellowface casting and its orientalist depiction of Vietnamese women as either naive, virginal waifs or as prostitutes. Or both, in the case of the main character Kim.”³² —Tim Bano, “Review of Kimber Lee’s *untitled f*ck m*ss s**gon play*,” *TimeOut Magazine*

“The GIs who returned to the bars, night after night, month after month, were in search or more than just female company; these were the only places where they could, for an hour or two, get away from their army environment and imagine they were back home, sipping ice-bold beer while listening to familiar music.”³³ - Edward Behr

“How about something fresh from the country?

Legs unparted, parts uncharted...”³⁴

- The Engineer, “The Heat Is On In Saigon,” *Miss Saigon*

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In 1989, Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg created and produced the next hit musical, *Miss Saigon*, breaking global records for ticket sales. Over a decade after the Vietnam War ended, theatregoers flock to London’s Theatre Royal and are immediately sent

³¹ Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge, 1978. p. 19-20.

³² Bano, Tim. “Review: Untitled F*ck M*ss S**gon Play.” *TimeOut Magazine*, September 25, 2023.

³³ Behr, Edward, and Mark Steyn. *The Story of Miss Saigon*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1991. p. 5.

³⁴ Schönberg, Claude-Michel, and Alain Boublil. *Miss Saigon*. Musical. London, n.d.

into a world of smoke, sex, and soldiers. After the beginning overture, the musical excitingly jolts its audiences with the iconic, vibrant song “The Heat Is On In Saigon.” The upbeat tempo of the song, underlined with Vietnamese bargirls giggling over their clients and American GIs yearning for the women, as well as the accompaniment of fast-paced, sexualizing choreography, creates the facade of a Vietnam that is sensual, feminine, enticing, and rather mysterious. The musical later performs a dramatized re-enactment of the Fall of Saigon, showing many Vietnamese people desperately trying to leave Vietnam with the abandoning Americans. Instead of the sexy Vietnam we were introduced to, she is now a weak, dejected, and inferior Saigon. The musical ends with the death of Kim, metaphoric of the demise of South Vietnam.

For many Western viewers, *Miss Saigon* is the only theatrical work they are exposed to that centers the story around Vietnamese people. The musical is set within the greater anthology of Vietnam War-related media that explores the American-Vietnamese dynamic through the inclusion of a romantic relationship between a US soldier and a Vietnamese sex worker. The critically acclaimed 1987 film *Full Metal Jacket* offers one of the most iconic lines in cinematic history and is spoken by the minor character of an unnamed Vietnamese call girl, “Me so horny. Me love you long time.”³⁵ In the 2002 film adaptation of *The Quiet American*, the character of Phuong is frequently described as a prostitute by critics, though she is merely a young mistress of British protagonist Thomas Fowler. Both women are arguably other versions of *Miss Saigon*’s Kim; this was a Vietnam that was rendered as a

³⁵ *Full Metal Jacket*. Columbia-Cannon-Warner Distributors, 1987.

seductive woman, and this is, yet, the Vietnam that temptingly lingers in the public's conscience.

Now musical aside, let us travel to Vietnam to meet Miss Saigon in her prime element and in the "flesh." There stands the iconic Miss Saigon Pub on the chaotic Bùi Viện Street, one of the major red-light districts in contemporary Saigon. With its blindingly bright neon lights, deafening loud club music shaking the ground, and outdoor go-go dancers, the bar is hard to overlook. One night, sitting at the establishment's inner bar counter by myself, an older, scruffy Australian man drinking a pitcher of a fruity, red cocktail introduces himself to me. The man asks what I am doing sitting alone at a bar like this one in this specific district. Most of the women working at the establishment are bargirls, and they are all lined in the front of the bar, hollering and trying to lure patrons into *their* bar (and not the surrounding bars). Presumably, he knows I am not one of the workers, so I decide to tell him that I simply "enjoy the vibes." To his surprise, he exclaims: "Your English is so good! Did you study abroad?"³⁶ and proceeds to sit next to me. This is not the first time I have heard these kinds of statements or experienced these actions, and I never know if I should be interpreting them as a compliment or an insult. At that moment, I glare at him and shake my head. After a few minutes of conversing and finishing my drink, I tell him that I am to be on my way out of the bar and wave bye to the man. Because of the booming speakers twenty feet away from us, I don't overhear exactly what he shouts at me, but what I catch: "Have fun!... Hopefully, I...

³⁶ Personal conversation, February 13, 2023.

beautiful girls here!”³⁷ Assuming he has never watched *Miss Saigon*, I respond: “Good luck! The heat’s definitely on in Saigon tonight!”

“Miss Saigon” and all her entities certainly exist, whether on stage or in the streets—it is only a matter of finding her. What are the consequences if we catch or fail to catch her? Can we afford to let her slip through our grasp? Is she even something that can be possessed, or does the very act of trying to claim her threaten to diminish her existence? Should we confine her behind closed doors, or does doing so risk losing something vital, something “essentially” South Vietnamese? The slippery figure of Miss Saigon and the chaotic chase for her is what I describe as a method of sensing South Vietnamese-ness throughout this chapter. Reflecting on my encounter with the Australian man I met at the bar while in Vietnam conducting field research, I was never actively trying to source out who, where, or what Miss Saigon is; I personally did not have this question coming into the country. In hindsight, that was all I was doing in my pursuit to make out what South Vietnamese-ness entails. By being in the red-light district and enacting my own embodiment of South Vietnamese-ness, I was part of what is perhaps the most provocative party of this project—the search party for the woman who embodies the dialectical tension of Western imperialism, Orientalism, and (what has become an indispensable) South Vietnamese cultural symbol. Miss Saigon (and *Miss Saigon*) embodies the notions of a misreading, wrongful narrative, complicated personality, and a “naughty knot” of South Vietnamese history and global Asian representation.

The creation of *Miss Saigon* came to be a crucial milestone within the discourse of contemporary Asian-American casting; the musical was and is a catalytical event that—for

³⁷ Ibid.

better or worse—defines the practices of twenty-first-century Asian-American and diasporic performance. I acknowledge the controversies that ensued from the first mention of a Madama Butterfly-inspired musical set during the Vietnam War and recognize that the legacy of the musical is beyond the controversies of the Western-written book and lyrics. The analysis I expound on is not a personal commentary on the musical nor is it an invitation to continue the show's racist views on the Vietnamese. Instead, my survey is to question the potentiality of a "real" Miss Saigon—such as the bargirl characters featured in the theatrical hit—and see how Miss Saigon lives in the bargirls of contemporary Saigon and functions in Vietnam. I recognize the musical's dissensions regarding Asian feminization, racialized prejudices, and sexual imperialism.

Acclaimed Vietnamese-American author Viet Thanh Nguyen appropriately wrote in a 2019 *New York Times* opinion essay that "it's 'Miss Saigon's' turn to die,"³⁸ critiquing the Broadway revival of the musical in 2017. Nguyen demands Broadway and the greater global theatre industry to "close the curtain" on *Miss Saigon* with passionate, justifiable claims to cancel the musical. He notes,

Some people who are irritated by these criticisms of "Miss Saigon's" enduring popularity will say, *It's only a show, nothing more*. But the enjoyment of the show's fantasy is precisely why the show matters. Fantasy cannot be dismissed as mere entertainment, especially when we keep repeating the fantasy. Fantasy — and our enjoyment of it — speaks to something we deeply want to believe. The enjoyment of this show is based on the privilege that the audience feels, the privilege of not being that Asian woman who kills herself... Our enjoyment of a work of art does not mean that the work cannot be racist or sexist, or that our enjoyment does not come from a deep-seated well of derogatory images of Asians and Asian women. The unsettling

³⁸ Nguyen, Viet Thanh. "Close the Curtain on 'Miss Saigon.'" *The New York Times*, August 3, 2019.

paradox here is that we can indeed love and desire people whom we see in completely racist and sexist ways. That is the real, unintended universal truth of “Miss Saigon.”³⁹

Considering the quintessential Saigonese bargirl *is* the titular character, the challenge now is to address how to most appropriately eliminate the musical from the global conscience without actually killing off the body that memorializes South Vietnam in all its naughty and problematic forms. To completely efface Miss Saigon—character, musical, sex worker, entrepreneur—is, then, to abolish the current sex work industry in South Vietnam, which is unapologetically on display and overwhelms the nightscape of Saigon. In all its hatred and glory, Miss Saigon cannot die because that would mean that South Vietnam withdraws from social existence as well. However, it is precisely those exact controversies that eclipse the lived experiences of women who dealt in South Vietnam’s nightlife and sex work industry. The dismissal becomes an attack on not only the character of Miss Saigon, but undeliberately also of the women who put forth this onerous labor. I contend that South Vietnam (and all of the country) has been exploitatively historicized as a subordinate paramour of and to the West, and in doing so critique the construction of a femininized Vietnam.

I do not claim to support the racist continuation of producing the musical, but I acknowledge the serious consequences of erasing a critical body (and bodies) of history, all in the name of empowering Asian and Asian American representations. While I will never know or understand the lived experiences of Vietnamese sex workers during the French colonial period or the Vietnam War era, *Miss Saigon*—in all its problems and enigmas—does touch upon a very *real*, corporeal, material archive of Vietnamese women’s history. Thinking

³⁹ Nguyen, Viet Thanh. “Close the Curtain.”

alongside Diana Taylor's work on the significance of living spaces as sources of embodied knowledge and performance's capacity for remaining⁴⁰, the contemporary spaces of Bùì Việ̣n and Phọ̉ Nhậ̣t are cultural epicenters of this significant but dark memory of colonial and violent sexual imperialism. Over and above that, the two red-light districts are the nuclei to sensing South Vietnamesẹness that naughtily undertakes the Orientalist identities of those prescribed to them but, in return, creates a complicated knot within that South Vietnamesẹness. Whether the knot can be untied to discard the thread of Miss Saigon, in itself, is the main conundrum. Overall, the very knot of "transorientalization" must stay within the cultural webbing̣s for Saigon to continue existing in the way it is today. This is why it is imperative that we attempt a search for Miss Saigon; without trying to find her, we cannot begin to know South Vietnam.

For this discussion, Miss Saigon is as much a character in a musical as a real woman working in the local hostess bar; she may live next door and only be perceived in the mind; she should be thought of as fictionalized and desired as much as she has the contentious potential to be realized and culturally valued. Thus, Miss Saigon—both fictional and real—becomes the target of a precariously delicate parley on respectability politics.⁴¹ On one hand, the musical is beloved by so many people (particularly Western theatergoers and general musical fans) for its memorable score and grandiose spectacle despite the decades-long

⁴⁰ Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

⁴¹ The philosophy of respectability politics has been foregrounded by Black scholars and thinkers to describe the behaviors and strategies adopted by marginalized groups to gain legitimacy within the dominant white, heteronormative spheres of society by conforming to its standards. Though I do not necessarily critique this concept in this dissertation, I note this mode of being as a minoritarian practice of combating stereotypes for survival and agency. I use the term to note how respectability politics is, overall, a systemic method of white supremacy and Western hegemony.

debates about how problematic and misrepresentative the musical actually is for Asian Americans; but on the other, the denunciation by the Asian American community has yet to reform (or cancel) the musical substantially. It certainly is challenging to discern whether the responsibility (and respect) of Miss Saigon should come from the Asian American population, their non-Asian counterparts, or, actually, *both*. To put it differently, she is caught between the discursive sites of, one, the imagined figure that has become the Orientalized stand-in for Vietnamese femininity; and, two, the real, authentic women who fashion themselves to those eroticized and desirable signifiers.

This chapter investigates the hypersexualized environment of the Saigonese red-light districts and its bargirls (and sex workers) to suggest that sensing South Vietnamese-ness is deeply embedded within the Orientalist creation of these spaces and figures. The Orientalist preconception of Vietnam, I assert, eventually becomes enfolded in South Vietnamese culture, consciously and not. I argue that the performances of the bargirls and remunerative patrons are exemplifications of a colonially intertwined—what I deem as “transorientalized”—dynamic that constructs the South Vietnamese perception of worldmaking through the presence of and interactions with these women. By drawing attention to how Orientalism lives within the conjuring and embodiment of Miss Saigon-likeness from the bargirls, we are provided an available discursive practice for Vietnamese people to understand themselves, albeit through a problematic enactment of and leaning into Orientalism. As much as Said’s *Orientalism* has dispensed an accessible vernacular for the West to know themselves, his text also allows Vietnam a language to understand itself both outside and within Orientalism. While challenging the Orientalized and feminized rendering of Vietnam, I do not aim to erase

the existent history of Saigonese bargirls and the ongoing sex industry that is intrinsic to the city's identity. However, I am interested in how we can contend with the specters of Miss Saigon found in the Saigonese red-light districts in our convoluted desire to seek her out. This is interestingly juxtaposed by the growing criticism by Asian American artists and activists to get rid of the Orientalist tropes of the musical, which inscribes an underhanded dismissal of the experiences of the bargirls that live this life and the active, real happenings in Saigon. How do we come to terms with the violence brought upon the women, as well as the lived realities of those who continue to labor in this capacity? What else can we do but rid ourselves of the figure of Miss Saigon? What does ridding ourselves of her identity entail, and what are the consequences?

I embrace the figure of Miss Saigon, and I realize how my positionality as an ethnographic researcher reifies the colonial practice of cultural voyeurism; as Edward Said wrote, "anyone who teaches, writes about or researches the Orient... is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism."⁴² However, I intervene in Said's statements to add that in order to begin parsing out the innumerable ways that South Vietnam exists through the body and imaginary that is Miss Saigon, I have to lean rather heavily into the Orientalist gaze to even begin to see and sense her. I, myself, am doing the problematic work of transorientalizing my own people. I am cognizant that this is a naughty, "shame on me" moment, that I "should know better," and overall, not the correct way to feel for *Miss Saigon* perhaps; but it is why this is also a knot—eliminating Miss Saigon leaves us without a clear way into South Vietnamese-ness. Without such, it is difficult to make Miss Saigon out from the

⁴² Said. *Orientalism*. 1978. p. 10.

thick, confusing “heat” of the South Vietnamese capital. The tropical humidity not only makes for steamy bodies but also sticky situations where a culture’s identity is initially circumscribed by outsiders and then re-expressed by its people. I acknowledge that “Miss Saigon” and bargirls may still surely exist and be attended to without the musical figure of *Miss Saigon* (for example, the character of Kim), but there is a slight aspect of naughtiness—the very action and thread that allows us to pull at the knot of South Vietnamese— that is dulled and paled. It is not so much about the inability to let go of *Miss Saigon*, but rather the absence may make it that much more difficult to unravel and fully understand the intricate layers of South Vietnamese that are tied to her legacy. In other words, the transorientalizing act of South Vietnamese is not as extensively influenced now by Western imperialist or Orientalist dynamics, and we must carefully consider the impact of the specific actions that have shaped South Vietnamese thus far.

In what follows, I provide a review of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and imperative critiques of and contributions to his work to elaborate on the concept of transorientation. Then, I present the history of Saigon’s development of becoming an Orientalized entity and how the feminine imaginary of Saigon is conjured today by later drawing from my ethnographic data from the city’s two main red-light districts. I contend that these areas exude two different energies that operate together to bestow the contemporary imaginary of Miss Saigon. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of how the fictionalized concept of a split-identity “Miss Saigon” has become knotted within the construction of South Vietnamese identity and, thus, is subsequently personified by Saigon and its people.

Orientalism and Transorientalization

Edward W. Said's seminal work *Orientalism* was published in 1978 and refers to the Western conceptual phenomenon of contemptuously depicting the "Near East," or the Orient, as exotic and inferior subjects. The Orient is not only about the Middle Eastern and North African countries that Said focuses on, but has grown to encompass all civilizations and cultures beyond the West. The processes of Orientalism are observed and experienced by the imbalanced relationship of power and dominance between the Orient and Occident, always favoring the latter. Being published three years after the Fall of Saigon, there is strong reason to believe that Said wrote his theory with the Vietnam War on his mind. American studies scholar John Carlos Rowe notes how Said "often characterized Orientalism as part of his own antiwar response to U.S. involvement in Vietnam."⁴³ Though Said published *Culture and Imperialism*—a collection of essays that explores the connections between Western imperialism and the cultural patterns that ensued from those encounters— and directly addresses the US in his work, the Western power is ostensibly a major player in the coinage of Orientalism.

Said's work has become fodder for critique from non-white and diasporic scholars, or figures who have a direct experience with the consequences of Orientalism. The coinage of Orientalism provides a means for the Western powers to understand itself and its relationship to non-Western societies. Within the past few decades, there has been a large body of scholarship that instead critiques the actions of Orientalism and uses the term to explain the East's relationship to the West. In particular, Asian and Asian-American scholars have used

⁴³ Rowe, John Carlos. "Edward Said and American Studies." *American Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2004): 33–47. p. 36

Said's text to expound upon the complicated ways that Orientalism has come to function and become a method of identity-making for former colonies of the West. Orientalism only notes a one-way power relationship between the East and West, and there is no challenge to the Orient-Occident binary.

Postcolonial studies scholar Lisa Lau writes of Re-Orientalism, which yields an exploration of the precarious positionality of the diasporic writer. They are both an insider and outsider to the culture at hand and have the ability to represent both self and other. The scholar draws from their flexible positionality to provide more appropriate representations of the Orient, but it is precisely because of their position outside of the Orient that still renders the diasporic writer as an assailant of Orientalism, consciously or not.⁴⁴ For people situated in the East, there is the process of self-Orientalism, which entails non-Western individuals to lean into "the Other." Self-Orientalism is aware of the Western stereotypes and mistaken portrayals of the East but utilizes the hegemony and (re)presents Orientalized tropes to better position themselves within the Western world or their target community. This self-realizing phenomenon is not inherently favorable to inscribe, but it potentially becomes a more efficient method of describing oneself, that is, through the prescribed Orientalist gaze cast upon the Orientalized. Within the self, reverse Orientalism may be realized. Two years after *Orientalism* was published, Sadik Jalal Al-Azm offered a counter-reading to Said and explained the "reverse" of the power dynamic between the East and West, which is fundamentally a different definition of Occidentalism. When reverse Orientalism is utilized by an Asian individual, it could be understood that the person accepts the Western ethnocentric

⁴⁴ Lau, Lisa. "Re-Orientalism in Contemporary Indian Writing in English." In *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics*, 1st Edition. London: Routledge, n.d.

thought, recognizes the Western-imposed uniqueness of the East, and creates a supposed East-West harmony.⁴⁵ Though Al-Azm suggests this, reverse Orientalism does not replace Occidentalism nor does it necessarily account for a whole system of Western identity-formation that has actually occurred and is still present.

In the case of Southeast Asia, Irene Vallaescusa Illán attempts to rewrite the Orient and defines Filipino Orientalism as “transcultural orientalism.”⁴⁶ To Illán, Filipinos can only view themselves through the lens of self-Orientalism, but they may be viewed and sensed *through* the other cultures that constitute the cultural landscape of the Philippines. In essence, the construction of Filipino identity is an entanglement of Spanish colonization, western assimilation, orientalist beliefs from and of Latin America, and Filipino transculturation; which is, in itself, a process of worldmaking through Orientalism.

Another iteration conjured is transorientalism, as coined by artist-scholar Adam Geczy, and offers a description of the relationship the West has to Orientalism, international fashion, and cultural aesthetics.⁴⁷ Geczy takes on the greater case study of the global fashion industry to explain how Saidian Orientalism cannot be utilized in prescribing the West as Orientalists. While other scholars have pointed to orientalized matters of literature, media, and music (intangible objects), fashion is unique since they are adorned by the wearer and orientalized by means of tangible items. Fashion, particularly in the contemporary world, has become a constant cycling of Western interpretation and appropriation of Eastern culture,

⁴⁵ Al-Azm, Sadik Jalal. “Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse.” In *Khamsin* 8. London: Ithaca Press, 1981.

⁴⁶ Illán, Irene Villaescusa. “Transcultural Orientalism: Re-Writing the Orient from Latin America and The Philippines.” *Unitas* 92, no. 1 (May 2019): 288–317. (The author chose not to capitalize the first letter of Orientalism.)

⁴⁷ Geczy, Adam. *Transorientalism in Art, Fashion, and Film*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

multicultural mixing, and (re)visions of past styles, so much so that Western fashion cannot be defined without extracting its Orientalist roots. However, western fashion has become so saturated in its own laundering that it is, arguably, no longer Orientalist because the accepted, new aesthetic is now the norm; the East has become a key player in the creation of Western aesthetics. On the other hand, Gerzcy also details how transorientalism provides a two-way relationship for the East to partake with the West as equal mutuals. He contends that the incorporation and re-imaginings of Western aesthetics in Asian fashion propound a cultural agency for Eastern societies as it creates a progressive sense of modernity for other global powers. Though Gerzcy is attempting to enumerate an equitable mobility of imaginative worldmaking between the Occident and Orient, the proposition of having an Oriental country assimilate into Western design aesthetics further reinstalls an Orientalist and colonial dichotomy.

What is made clear in the aforementioned claims is the “transverse” nature of Orientalism in the postcolonial era. Lau, Al-Azm, and Illán think about Orientalism from the East and the “contact zones,”⁴⁸ as Mary Louise Pratt suggests, in which Orientalized processes of cultural formations are formed. Gerzcy extends a vital understanding of the ever-changing and operative nature of Orientalism within globalization, but his work nevertheless privileges the West as authoritative figures in the global fashion industry. Outside of his scholarship on fashion and art, the expression of transorientalism is seldom used by other cultural theorists. This is, perhaps, because of the popular use of the term “Orientalist

⁴⁸ Pratt, Mary Louise. “Arts of the Contact Zone.” 1991.

dialectic,”⁴⁹ which denotes a similar process of critique that focuses on the interactions and encounters within Orientalist relationships, as Gerzcy does so aptly.

I view South Vietnamese Orientalism and, more precisely, Saigonese Orientalism as an act of transorientalization. Illán describes that transcultural orientalism “sees the orient *through* various other cultures while being in the orient.”⁵⁰ I contend that Saigonese Orientalism shares similar characteristics, however Saigonese Orientalism also views itself in contrast to the intracultural identities within the Vietnamese nation. The three major localities of Vietnam—North, Central, and South—all carry and embody their own cultural traits.⁵¹ While this phenomenon is not unique to Vietnam, many homeland citizens’ identities are attached to their hometowns, especially when a person’s Vietnamese accent makes it evident that one may be from a certain region. For example, in the case of South Vietnam, the phonetic and tonal shifts in their speech may be indecipherable to those from a more northern region and vice versa. Additionally, the Southern accent is known for having only five tones compared to the standard six spoken by those in the North; my family and I have faced encounters where I did not understand what people were saying when they had a thick non-Southern accent. The anecdote I note is not meant to aggressively separate South Vietnam to be viewed as a special peculiarity of the greater country nor is it to say that this illustrates “intra-Orientalism;” rather, it is to highlight the established regional individualism culturally

⁴⁹ Dialectical Orientalism is another term that is used interchangeably with Orientalist dialectic.

⁵⁰ Illán, Irene Villaescusa. “Transcultural Orientalism.” p. 292.

⁵¹ Geographically, historically, and colloquially, Vietnam is divided into three regions: North (Bắc), Central (Trung), and South (Nam). The populations living in those regions have their own cultural customs, food traditions, and lifestyles. People living in one region may not understand another’s spoken language as there are significant differences in accents and vernacular vocabulary. While this dissertation does not focus on the northern and central regions of Vietnam, it is imperative to acknowledge the differences among the localities.

embedded into the webbings of Vietnam that naturally creates cultural divisions. However, the complex mappings of the intra- and transcultural meshes of South Vietnam devise a fluctuating cacophony of Orientalist conceptions and regional exclusiveness that cross with one another to construct the South Vietnamese identity.

I offer the term transorientalization as an alternative to transorientalism because the former indicates an active process of making and becoming whereas the latter implies a state or condition. Said's original term denotes the style of thought that explores the epistemological relationship between the Occident and the Orient. With orientalization, it moves beyond the descriptor of the "Oriental" and explores the potential procedures of the genesis of an "Orientalized" nation or society; there is a sense of placement and performance. The West defines itself by assembling the imaginary of the Oriental, and they have come to know their identity as the ones sitting at the higher vantage point. To orientalize, then, comes from the West imparting the inferior identity onto the East, and the West's anticipated belief that the East will follow pursuit and be complicit to these acts. Transorientalization takes into consideration the actions of the East imposing those Orientalist and exotic stereotypes onto themselves as well as the exploitations that occur within the land itself that inflict another trapping of Orientalist tropes to be enacted. The act of transorientalization is not only about making the "Other" present, but it is also *re*-producing the "Oriental" in the contemporary time and space that is in constant negotiation of how the "Oriental" should be in existence. There is a cognizance of being exoticized as well as an acquired undertaking to embrace the exoticism. The traversal operations of the culture's negotiations with Orientalism do not pause nor does it want to come to an end; transorientalization is both mode and technique to make

sense of one's cultural belonging through the optics of imperialism, exoticism, and intranationalism.

Development of Sensual Saigon

Saigon's history is as contested as it is controversial due to the city's history of colonization. Before the Vietnam War ensued, the country had split into two factions—the Trinh Dynasty of the North and the Nguyen Dynasty of the South—due to a truce that was drawn from a decades-long civil war. In the seventeenth century, neither dynasties of Vietnam had yet acquired what we know as modern-day South Vietnam. The neighboring Khmer Empire had immense control of the southern point of mainland Southeast Asia, which formerly belonged to the Chams. At the time, the land was seldom seen as one of value as the Mekong Delta was described as “swampy and inhospitable [and] infested with crocodiles and other dangerous wild animals.”⁵² It was in 1698 that Emperor Nguyen Anh (of the South) seized the political and economic autonomy of the Mekong Delta, although the Vietnamese had already been granted permission to settle in the region by King Chey Chettha II decades prior. This area is what is known as the first iteration of the southern capital. The once-soggy terrain of Saigon is later constructed to become a congenial place of living, furthering the constant volley of manipulation the city has been under. The process of “making” Saigon was a violent and tumultuous one, as its ownership was being tossed back and forth.

Saigon has also held many different monikers. From its Khmer and Cham roots, Prey Nokor was the first iteration of South Vietnam's title, pulling its etymology from Sanskrit.

⁵² Vo, Nghia M. *Saigon: A History*. McFarland & Company, 2011. p. 14.

Once the Vietnamese seized the land, Emperor Nguyen Anh named his newly acquired region Thành Gia Định, commonly known as Gia Định. East of the area was Đồng Nai⁵³, in which the borders of the two provinces would get muddled. Confusing the places for each other, historians have noted the usage of both names. While history can date Emperor Nguyen Anh declaring the former Prey Nokor as the capital, there is no exact date for when the renaming of the city to Saigon occurred. By the time Catholic missionaries entered Vietnam, Saigon had stuck with the Europeans and became the main denomination. This is one of many initial encounters with the West that exemplified the power they held to define the East to their liking.

The debate of whether the capital city's name has Chinese influence is contested. Given China's long history of imperial rule over Vietnam and the many battles that have taken place to fight for Vietnamese independence from the Chinese, some people are hesitant to claim belief in its Chinese roots. In the early eighteenth century, merchants and travelers noted the Cantonese enclaves they would run into and trade with, though the moniker the Chinese settlers used was Chợ Lớn (Cholon).⁵⁴ The varying names from different parties emphasize the stakes of who receives a claim to the city and who is allowed to describe the very people who inhabit it.

I note the etymology of Saigon's title to highlight the southern capital city's incessantly turbulent history of claim. Saigon has been regiven, reconquered, and renamed multiple times during the span of two centuries. In this modern iteration, the city is rendered

⁵³ The area today is still called Đồng Nai, and more formerly, Đồng Nai Province. Now, the province has different border demarcations than in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

⁵⁴ Today, Cholon is the name of Saigon's large Chinatown. The name is still in popular use and is spoken by both the Vietnamese and Chinese in the southern region.

female, and she has never rested. Post-1975, the city was once again retitled as Hồ Chí Minh City. Saigon was birthed from bloodshed and coercion; she was a colonized city from the beginning of her heyday. The city's history of turbulence only makes the stakes higher for collective ownership and personal identity.

The voyeuristic writings on the Orient are reminiscently sensed with the dissemination of the now-iconic 1930s travel posters promoting Indochinese tourism to the West; some of the most famous signages feature Vietnam as the “Pearl of the Orient.” Funded by the satellite French colonial government, the Official Tourist Bureau-created advertisement campaigns showcase varying agricultural, architectural, or jungle landscapes to entice foreigners to visit the natural beauties of the Southeast Asian country. In nearly all of its Vietnam-related posters, there is the image of a modestly dressed woman donning traditional Vietnamese garments. Specifically, the artwork used to elevate tourism into Cochinchina—the French exonym for the southern region of Vietnam—depicts a young Vietnamese woman with her hair tied back, wearing a fuschia *áo dài* (traditional Vietnamese dress) while shading herself with a matching pink umbrella in front of multiple palm trees and a tropical arroyo. Targeted at American and British travelers, the English poster lures the prospective tourist by illustrating Saigon as an oasis that promises “romance, thrill, beauty, and historic lore.”

The personification of a feminized Vietnam continues with the American intervention into the country. In US media, a popular narrative that was typically publicized to their readers was about the rescue that Vietnam sought and the heroic efforts of the Americans to assist their Southeast Asian counterparts. The call to save a woeful Vietnam came with the

hundreds of thousands of men “volunteering”⁵⁵ or being drafted to join the cause. Forced or not, the more US soldiers poured into South Vietnam, the greater the amount of publicity and journalism on Saigon, whether favorable or not. The majority of articles published directly to American readers focused on providing sociopolitical and military updates on the war itself. Being that the conflict in Vietnam was America’s first “living room war,”⁵⁶ there was a devastatingly abundant acquisition of video footage and photographs of the horrific happenings in the Southeast Asian tropics. However, beyond the fighting, the Americans daily documented the Saigonese lifestyle for viewers, especially for parents of those drafted, to better understand the city their sons are now defending. *Life* came to be one of the most influential publications during the Vietnam War as the magazine featured numerous photo essays on the atrocities and controversies playing out, but it also showcased many images of a Saigon that seemed irreverent to the crucial role it had to the war itself. Photos of youthful, slim women wearing bright floral or white *áo dài* were published nearly every week, particularly from the earlier half of the 1960s. The women were seen crossing the busy Saigonese streets or riding a bicycle or motorbike around the city. Nearly always were the women featured with their fellow girlfriends holding each other’s arms; men were seldom seen accompanying these ladies, fabricating a dreamy perception that they are independent,

⁵⁵ During the Vietnam War, nearly two-thirds of enlisted US soldiers had volunteered to fight. However, there have been many historical accounts of young men opting to volunteer instead of getting their draft letter so the prospective soldier could choose the branch of the military to serve in. If men were called from the draft, then they would be assigned to a military branch by the Selective Service System.

⁵⁶ The phrase refers to the 1960s media boom, making television an object of focus within the household unit. The Vietnam War has oftentimes been called the first “televised war,” as this was the first war depicted on screen for the public in real-time. The broadcasting companies’ brutal and transparent depictions of the war atrocities eventually led to the initial implementation of the policies on broadcasting censorship.

single, and eager to be with a man, more appropriately, a white American. The women never look into the camera, erecting another sensation of Orientalist voyeurism.

For instance, on October 27, 1961, the “Story of the Week” tableau for *Life* was titled “The Lovely Land That May Blow Up,”⁵⁷ which featured over a dozen photographs of South Vietnam to offer Americans a glimpse into the war in Southeast Asia and the military interventions the US is committing to assist the South Vietnamese government. Eight years prior to the US draft, the 17-page article displayed the scenic landscapes of the “rich countryside” of the country juxtaposed against the US-led guerilla training the South Vietnamese military was undergoing. On the first page of the feature, the photo of two women donning light-colored *áo dài* walking through the city streets as their tunics softly flow across their bodies against the wind takes up the entire page; their faces are never shown. On the third page, the introduction of the article reads,

In all the Orient, there are no areas more beguiling than the travel-poster land of South Vietnam, rich in handsome people and the traditions of Buddhism. Yet today the figure of the grim-visaged guerilla soldier is almost as commonplace a sight there as pretty girls. For the idyllic, amiable little country has become a terror-ridden battleground in this era’s great global struggle.⁵⁸

The pretty *gái* (girl) draws the reader to the delicate, feminine nature of South Vietnam as well as the supposed duty of the Westerners to protect her. A few pages later, the report presents another pair of photographs of unidentified Vietnamese women describing the “distinctive flair for fashion” they innately have. The second image focuses on the “dazzling smile” of a young Vietnamese woman, assumingly no more than twenty years old, who

⁵⁷ *Life Magazine*. “The Lovely Land That May Blow Up.” October 27, 1961.

⁵⁸ “The Lovely Land That May Blow Up.”

“upholds Vietnamese tradition of beauty.”⁵⁹ At the very end of the multi-page feature, there is the still of four Vietnamese women mournfully kowtowing in a temple for the peaceful afterlife of their murdered relative, Colonel Hoang Thuy Nam (sic), whose body was returned with a missing nose and no internal organs—a descriptor the writers made sure to include.

The “lovely land” referenced in the title is personified through the soft, charming Vietnamese women presented in this sizable feature, all of whom need safeguarding from the “viles” of Communism and war. Throughout the article, the featured women bore a labor just as exceptional as that of their male counterparts; that is to corral a favorable, sympathetic sentiment from their American readers. *Life*’s rhetoric in the depiction of Vietnam is evocative of the Orientalist gaze deployed by the French to boost tourism into Southeast Asia. However, the American framing of a feminized Vietnam that is always adorned in traditional wear, breezily strolling down a French colonial-inspired street, modestly grinning away from the camera inculcates a patronizing sense of responsibility that the US now carries. To train the South Vietnamese men in modern weaponry and guerilla tactics, as seen in the spread, means to defend the very women that freely roam throughout Saigon. Likewise, imbuing and influencing knowledge of western warfare in South Vietnam suggests an ignorant Vietnam that necessitates an intervention—a penetration, on that point. Not only that, the women praying at the temple are not only bowing to the spirits to allow their relative safe passing in the heavenly world, but they are unknowingly submitting their bodies to effectuate the feminine imaginary of South Vietnam. According to this visual narrative, the South Vietnamese cannot protect their own women, the US now carries the burden of executing the

⁵⁹ Ibid.

preservation of Vietnam's beautiful offerings, and that sexualized care comes in many forms, physicalized or not.

The sensual construction of Saigon persists into the post-war era of Vietnam, a period of massive sociocultural and economic renovation for the country. Looking to compete with their Southeast Asian allies and enter the free trade market, the now-socialist Vietnamese government announced that 1990 is the "Year of Tourism," only a couple weeks after the country's Lunar New Year celebrations. Director Duong Van Day (sic) of Saigon Tourist Association, a newly established state-owned company committed to the promotion of tourism specifically in South Vietnam, noted the significance of the year as it was the 100th anniversary of the birth of the man the city is newly named after—Hồ Chí Minh. Despite the reunification of the country and social reform of the city, the southern capital has still kept its sensual aura.

In its "grand rehearsal for the future of the tourist industry,"⁶⁰ Saigon Tourist Association published an extensive guidebook for foreign tourists and business people that not only explains the necessary paperwork to enter post-embargoed Vietnam but highlights the numerous hotels, activities, and sites to visit while in the former southern capital. The 1990 booklet serves to stimulate the economy by promoting tourism in Vietnam and ostensibly painting an innocuous image of the city. In one of its chapters that is dedicated to nightlife, the curators acknowledge Saigon's sizeable network of prostitution and "sexploitation," but they reassure the skeptical reader of the government's ongoing "social

⁶⁰ Wedel, Paul. "Vietnam Has Proclaimed 1990 as the Year of Tourism..." *United Press International*, February 11, 1990.

purification campaign⁶¹.” The writers seem to tread lightly when explaining how the efficiency of the city’s police department has not had significant strides in eradicating all sex work activity. Interestingly, the message is, rather, to embrace what Saigon has to offer and actually encourage tourists to chat harmlessly with “pleasant girls” and to receive a restful sleep by getting an after-hours massage, though one should not immediately proceed with the expectation of sexual pleasure.⁶² Though the rhetoric of the guidebook does not explicitly exploit Vietnamese women, the section includes a comment on how the government is trying to develop “cultural entertainment.” Here, the understanding of amusement is viewing local beauty pageants and public singing competitions that showcase the “very charms of Vietnamese ladies.” The book even includes a large photo of a young woman adorned with a rhinestone crown and red sash naming her “Miss Saigon 1989.” Coincidentally, the booklet was released months after the opening of West End’s Miss Saigon. Upon this tourism initiative, Vice Chairman of the Ho Chi Minh City People’s Committee Nguyen Cong Ai stated that though Saigon has “rediscovered its sense of fun and enjoyment... it cannot be allowed to get out of hand.”⁶³ Perhaps, the booklet and all its articulations of Vietnamese womanly offerings was the government’s method of attempting to purify Saigon’s lascivious image.

Saigon’s reputation has often been shaped by a perception of indulgence and moral ambiguity, where the city is frequently depicted as a hub of sensuality and licentiousness. I illustrate this sentiment by extrapolating on one of the former important streets of Saigonese

⁶¹ As quoted from the booklet, pg. 99

⁶² Booklet, pg. 101

⁶³ “Vietnam Has Proclaimed 1990 as the Year of Tourism...”

partying during the war. From the political genesis of South Vietnam, Saigon was home to hundreds of bars and lounges, and the number has only grown more so today as the city expands its physical reaches with large investments going into the city's outskirts for urbanization.⁶⁴ However, before 1955, there was the famous Catinat Street where most French colonists and Western tourists resided as they visited Vietnam. The street was lined with numerous sidewalk cafés, indoor smoking lounges, lavish hotels, hostess bars, and brothels, making it the “place to be” for both Westerners seeking nighttime entertainment and Saigonese who were looking to party. Catinat Street became Tự Do Street, which is often translated as “Liberty Street,” and the street leads to many French colonial landmarks of Saigon, including the widespread former city hall building. Most important government buildings were within a few blocks of walking distance from each other, or a fifteen-minute taxi ride; it was a highly concentrated area for political and leisurely affairs. Tự Do Street was situated in a very precarious part of the city as it was in the geographical epicenter of where work meets pleasure, and where orthodox beliefs from Catholicism infiltrated the space; the famous Notre Dame Cathedral sits at the very end of the street. The South Vietnamese government imposed a strict eleven o'clock curfew for all city dwellers to be off the streets, but the curfew only aggravated the party scene to further bleed into the daytime, where drinking and partying were no longer hidden acts; singing and shouting were heard alongside, and perhaps, on the beat of the church bells ringing from afternoon mass. Tự Do Street—which can also be colloquially translated as “Do As You Will” Street—created a space that

⁶⁴ “Hong, Jae C., and Aniruddha Ghosal. “In Vietnam, Vibrant Ho Chi Minh City Is a Magnet That Pulls in Millions.” *Associated Press News*, January 24, 2024.

was steeped in transgression, lust, and vice, blurring the lines between public and private morality.

The construction of Tự Do Street was and is marked by an interesting juxtaposition of colonial influences and liberal values, which contributes to a cultural cityscape where notions of allure coexist with conservative societal norms, making Saigon even more naughty in how the city chooses to present itself. These exciting senses are still present today though under a new name. Upon reunification, the Vietnamese government renamed Tự Do to Đồng Khởi, which transliterates to “communal uprising.” The moniker refers to the Đồng Khởi movement that was led by early Việt Minh and communist supporters who stayed in South Vietnam in (successful) hopes of starting an insurrection. In spite of the different denominations and it being one of the busiest streets of Saigon, contemporary Đồng Khởi is still an exuberant party area of Saigon with a thriving nightlife bar scene; the city shuts down the street every weekend evening to host festivals, night markets, and general social gatherings. Perhaps the sentiment is not as hypersexualized as it was before, but the sensibilities and embodiments of pleasure and enticement still pervade the street. The “uprising” that the street’s name now alludes to feels more like a sensual rebellion against the very ideals that may be trying to alter and “fix” Saigon’s salacity.

Bargirl Means Business

In 2015, sociologist Kimberly Kay Hoang published *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work*—one of the first monographs on the global sex industry in Vietnam. Her book details how the country’s

political processes, economic growth, and gender constructions are intrinsically linked to the labor of Saigonese sex workers. Hoang provides a rich ethnographic mapping of the city's red-light establishments, interviewing the workers and consumers of the industry and even going behind the counter at local businesses as a bargirl. A key argument of Hoang's work, she demonstrates how the semi-capitalist Vietnamese economic scheme has led to the potentiality to "renegotiate race-, class-, and gender-based hierarchies"⁶⁵ for all parties involved in the sex industry, particularly for the male clients who frequent these businesses. The feminized conjuring of Vietnam deeply influences the relationship among the Vietnamese bargirls, Viet Kieu visitors, and Asian and Western clients because they all link and transcend the entangled constructions of class, race, and, masculinity.

To explain, when interacting with Western clients, Hoang observes that the bargirls oftentimes "perform" the figure of the poor Southeast Asian peasant—one reminiscent of the depictions as seen in *Miss Saigon*. By the women actively leaning into this identity, this also compels the men to pity the women, which enables the male consumer to embody a masculine superiority and ultimately continues the imperial, racialized notion of the "White Man's Burden."⁶⁶ However, the same cannot be immediately said when considering the Asian clientele. The women enact two different imaginaries of femininity and desire: one for their Vietnamese and Asian customers and another for Vietnamese diasporic men. Hoang details the conventionally submissive and feminized behavior seen by sex workers when interacting with Asian men, such as the serving of drinks, the flirtatious engagement among their patrons,

⁶⁵ Hoang, Kimberly Kay. *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work*. 1st ed. University of California Press, 2015. pg. 24

⁶⁶ Kipling, Rudyard. "The White Man's Burden." The Kipling Society, April 12, 2021.

and the tempting possibility of sexual acts. It is the greater stakes that are involved for Asian and Viet Kieu men that diverge that are most consequential. For businessmen living in the eastern or southeastern sub-continent frequenting these establishments, the consumption and financial expense paid for this service demonstrates the perception of socioeconomic mobility and global elitism of those men; this is especially true as Hoang notes the various dealings that occur within these party settings. For the Vietnamese diasporic men who return to their homeland, the transactions for female companionship and intimacy seen in the hostess bars provide claims to masculinity that are comparable to their “superior” Western counterparts. Paying for these services also allows the Viet Kieu men to embody an escapist sense of masculinity that they are denied in the West as both refugee immigrants and stereotyped effeminate Asian men.

The imperative role and legacy of gendered labor in sociopolitics and cultural dynamics in Vietnam is further investigated by historian Amanda Boczar in *An American Brothel: Sex and Diplomacy during the Vietnam War*. She details the convoluted history and messy implementation of sex work during the Vietnam War by focusing on the analysis of US policy on military sex work that stems directly from French colonialism and providing an assessment of the consequences for Vietnamese women and American-Vietnamese marriages and children. Like Hoang, Boczar argues that sex is solicited as a form of currency in Vietnam and bears large implications for how the West, particularly the US, exoticizes Vietnamese women and imagines the greater nation today. In the context of the Vietnam War, sex and gender were central pawns in military diplomacy and civil interactions, and these pawns are

seen and embodied through the controversial figures of “the bar girl, the bride, and the rape victim.”⁶⁷

What is key to note between Hoang and Boczar is the ostensible recognition of sexual dynamics and their cultural transfers as markers of success and failure, especially within the post-Vietnam War reality. As Boczar records, prostitution was used as a practice of active military recruitment and morale building within the deployed troops, but sex and its services expanded too rapidly for either the American or South Vietnamese governments to contain. The American military’s image was particularly tarnished after the public reveal of the infamous Mỹ Lai massacre, where over 500 Vietnamese people were brutally murdered, and dozens of women and children were raped by American troops. Sexual relations essentially allowed the American military to acquire major influence on how South Vietnam was to be operated, thus, shifting social policies on sex work and cultural understandings of sexualized behavior. Simultaneously, the renegotiated sexual schemes in practice and sexual violence committed by the Americans led to a massive outcry and intense drop in morale from the general American public. The war-era policies regarding sexual services that were used to tempt lust and incite power on a macro scale can be similarly embodied, albeit more intimately, within the notions of sociocultural mobility and the gendered, racialized self.

This is yet another knot to the conundrum of realizing a South Vietnamese-ness. If the history of sexual labor cannot be detached from the identity of South Vietnam, then a node to the affective reality of Saigon is sensed through the sex work industry. Though the sexual acts may not be as explicit as what occurred during the Vietnam War, sex, in its most minor of

⁶⁷ Boczar, Amanda. *An American Brothel: Sex and Diplomacy During the Vietnam War*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2022. p. 19.

forms, is still an important commodity in the contemporary era. In reclaiming agency, Hoang and Boczar iterate the bargirl is to be seen as both sex worker and businesswoman, and I add that the bargirl also bears the burden of being the stand-in embodiment of South Vietnam—one that is built on exoticization, colonialism, and misogyny. There have been many attempts to eliminate or subdue the sex work industry in Saigon, but for better or worse, she still prevails, and so does the transorientalized memory and sensual tangibility of a South Vietnam. The bargirl is concomitantly a living embodiment of the colonial traumas endured by Vietnamese women, a manifestation of male desire and reclaimed female agency, and a personification of a burgeoning global capital. She is, arguably, the past, present, and future of an entangled Saigon, and she dwells in chaotic epicenters of sex and sin in the city. It is through her, indeed through her own sensual capacities, that one can sense South Vietnamese—*to get to South Vietnamese, one must enter *through* her invitation.*

Sensing (Miss) Saigon: Where is she?

So how are we to sense her—Miss Saigon—and by which, how are we to know South Vietnamese? If she (and the musical) are to be seen as transorientalized figures, then we must dive into the areas where red-light districts that are, in themselves, the “metropolises” of Orientalism, sexualization, and feminization. They exude the most “heat,” which not only attracts more customers into these spaces but these red-light districts work together to form a public incubator for bad behavior, naughtiness, and sensual messiness to grow continuously and spread—an appropriate environment for Miss Saigon to thrive in.

Contemporary Saigon, the largest city in Vietnam, is comprised of a series of cosmopolitan districts that all have distinct identities, with District 1 (Quận 1) being the core center. The city is the nation's dominant financial hub, hosting the offices of nearly all of Vietnam's major technology, banking, and investment companies in District 1, as well as the offices of 22 foreign consulates. The estimated population of Saigon in 2024 is 9.8 million, and District 1 has over 200,000 residents, densely packed into an area that is less than three square miles, making it one of the smallest districts of the city. This statistic is not reflective of the sheer amount of people pouring into District 1 on a daily basis for work, school, medical appointments, festivities, and leisure. While there is currently no estimate of how many people pass through District 1, the number could easily be quadrupled from its residential population when considering the intense, chaotic commuter flow that the city is notoriously known for.

District 1 is also the city's main tourist center, hosting hundreds of accommodations, from grimy hostels to local homestays to luxurious five-star resorts. Since the dawn of French colonization, Saigon has been constructed and designed as a city of foreign encounters. The combination of business and tourist endeavors, as well as the pre-established history of sex work in South Vietnam from the Vietnam War, facilitates the gradual emergence of the modern red-light zones in Saigon today. There are various pockets of brothels, massage parlors, and hostess bars dispersed throughout the city, but they are usually clustered in District 1. Today, the district hosts two major red-light areas: the first on the iconic Bùi Viện Street and the second in the recently settled "Little Japan Town" of Saigon. It is within these

respective spaces (and the women who work in them) that Miss Saigon exists. Not only that, it is here where we sense a node, a knot of South Vietnamese-ness.

Bùi Viện

Constantly advertised for tourists to visit, Bùi Viện stands as the most well-known party zone in Saigon. During the Vietnam War, the street was home to many printing shops and pressrooms, which naturally fostered an abundance of journalists and writers to reside either on Bùi Viện or on adjacent streets. While the clients attending brothels and hostess bars were predominantly American soldiers, the businesses rooted themselves near streets with heavy traffic of Western foreigners, such as those who worked for American newspaper and magazine companies. Essentially, the street was nothing more than part of a normal residential neighborhood. It was only after the reunification of the country that Bùi Viện became more of a tourist attraction. As Vietnam began pushing its tourism campaign and coming out of the US embargo, former western residents of Saigon were eager to revisit their previous stomping grounds. With the rise in foreign visitors, there was a greater demand for lodging, restaurants, and entertainment centers that could appeal to all sorts of travelers. By the 1990s, Vietnam had adopted a socialist-oriented market economy, which spurred the beginnings of the pseudo-capitalist frenzy in the country. There was a higher need for variety, especially when it came to accommodating the new middle-class traveler's budget. Booking a night at a small inn run by a Vietnamese family became more attractive than the white marble hotels erected during the French colonial period. Because the street itself is only a two-lane road, large hotels could not be constructed in the area, which allowed for hostels and small bars to open

up by Saigoneers looking to claim new socioeconomic status. By 2000, the street was nicknamed “Phố Tây Ba Lô,” or the “western backpacker district,” directly referencing the types of tourists the street now pulls in. Rather than expanding their business fronts inward to host more customers, the bars pushed out onto the street to save on building costs. As more bars popped up throughout the block, they began competing with each other to garner more customers by attracting guests with diverse amusements, such as guest DJs, beer towers, hookahs, readily-available contraband drugs, and, most famously, the abundance of half-naked hostesses and leather-strapped go-go dancers. This is how the deafening sounds and the thick, smoky atmosphere became synonymous with what is now Bùi Viện Street.

Phố Nhật

While not as commercially or internationally recognized as its boisterous, western-focused counterpart that is Bùi Viện, Phố Nhật is a popular recreational hub that specifically caters to the visiting Asian salarymen. Known in English as “Little Japan Town,” this area of Saigon is hidden from the city’s main streets and made up of dozens of tight alleyways. Reminiscent of Tokyo’s Kabukichō and Golden Gai red-light centers, the enclosed mini-district hosts hundreds of neon lo-fi karaoke bars, massage parlors, “happy-ending” spas, and top-rated Japanese restaurants all within one square kilometer. The *chochin*-lit alleys are much quieter as music and noise rarely bleed out of these establishments, suggesting that there is a more conservative sensibility that permeates through the district. Instead of EDM, the area reverberates with the sweet voices of dozens of young Vietnamese women saying “Konnichiwa” and asking, or rather, swarming the passing men to see if they would like to

sing a song or receive a massage. Because of South Korea's major financial investments and the hefty sociocultural influence of K-pop in Vietnam, the ladies will also greet men with "Ahn-nyeong-ha-se-yo" to gauge where their potential clients are from. The women make up the main labor force of the greater Phố Nhật center. They are usually seen wearing the traditional *áo dài* or tight, short clubwear dresses. Because of the less chaotic sprawl of traffic than what is seen in the backpacker district, the women are almost always wearing platform heels, no shorter than four inches. The fun lies inside the walls of the darkly-lit bars and brothels, instead of it being out on the grimy streets. Pleasure, here, is private and personal; it is not up for public display and is independently procured by the patron.

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Acting as the city's epicenters of party and pleasure, the two red-light zones must be differentiated, as both areas encompass different nodes of Miss Saigon's spectre. Bụi Viên and Phố Nhật symbolize the archetypical tropes of Vietnamese nightlife, and both centers, I contend, are disparate fuels that generate Saigon as a cultural conduit of and for South Vietnam. South Vietnamese-ness is practiced in these zones, and it is also spread from the two areas. The former displays the ostentatious personality of the city, seeking to impress those who come to the Pearl of the Orient in awe of and lust for the exotic. The French colonialists have painted Southeast Asia as a land that lures curious minds to a tropical retreat and new business endeavors, and Saigon is the largest playground for Western foreigners in Indochina. Bụi Viên is the contemporary manifestation of the urge to have a "non-consequential" recreational zone for foreigners to fool around. On the other side of the city, the alleyways of Little Japan Town district embody a naughtiness that prefers to be performed indoors rather

than out on the streets for all to see. Much like the Indochine promotion posters inviting visitors to the “lovely land,” Phố Nhật attracts clients by embracing the similar demure, mystifying qualities that Vietnam had to offer then and continues to provide now. Though Saigon is known for its nightlife and sex work industry, and Bùi Viện may be the most known foreground for Miss Saigon to inhabit publicly, Little Japan Town offers a more undisclosed, bespoke setting for interested customers to interact with her.

Comparing the districts today to songs featured in Boublil’s and Schonberg’s musical, the Dreamland bar where the sexy, titillating number, “The Heat is On in Saigon,” would potentially be housed on Bùi Viện Street; the atmosphere of Phố Nhật is redolent of the near lip-to-lip intimacy as felt in the fantastical duet, “Last Night of the World.” To popular fans of the musical, the two songs may be the most memorable as the photographs from these specific numbers are the ones featured in major publicity campaigns. However, these two songs foreshadow the different frequencies that are embedded into Saigon—that of lust and amour—and the existence of these two promiscuous spaces captures the affective reality of a Miss Saigon entangled in a precarious love affair. She has to perform a duo persona: one who sexually exudes tenderness and another who tenderly percolates a sexiness. Yet another twist to understanding South Vietnamese-ness, the figure of Miss Saigon needs to be understood as two autonomous but kindred beings. Though Bùi Viện was established formally before Phố Nhật, the installation of another major red-light district speaks to the strong need to develop and diversify the options to “hook” (or “hook up” with) Miss Saigon, to feel naughtiness, to sense South Vietnamese-ness. If we are to view Tự Do/Đồng Khởi Street as a precursor to Bùi Viện, and Phố Nhật as an emergence in response to its overly rowdy neighbor, then there may

be more pleasure quarters that transpire in the future, adding to the already oversaturated party and nightlife scene of Saigon. Nonetheless, this is the way for Miss Saigon to survive, to subsist in the everyday; she must multiply and continue the entanglement in order to get through and be sensed through the controversial uproar of transorientalization.

Providing yet another naughty reading and locating the two areas on a map, they are quite reminiscent of a woman's chest; Bùi Viện and Phố Nhật are somewhat emblematic of Miss Saigon's bosom. There are only a few streets—a slight gap—in between them; the cleavage is further filled with other humble bars and streetside establishments (though very loud) that perhaps create a moment of respite for some fresh air from the fun, titillating messiness of the two zones. For foreigners, she is fresh, exciting, and vibrant; for citizens, she is a familiar paramour or a young love that did not necessarily get away but had to retreat back to her safe space; breasts and all, they cannot be detached from the body that is Saigon.

If recognizing and embodying Miss Saigon are aspects of South Vietnamese-ness, then the city's two designated districts serve as spaces for both consumers and citizens to sense her, albeit controversially. In essence, the two areas of Bùi Viện and Phố Nhật function in tandem to create a Miss Saigon, but the two pipelines of the city's nightlife industry have created a split identity of Miss Saigon—she exists in both but is caught in *between* both. It is in the process of transorientalizing, or some might say internal colonization, that Miss Saigon is sensed. On one hand, she also continues to appeal to all of the Western fantasies in which the musical traffics. On the other, she becomes a route to achieving a South Vietnamese sense of masculinity, which is key to highlight in this ongoing discussion about South Vietnamese feminization.

As a foreign client, the rather simple nature of enjoying Saigon's offerings is understandably straightforward and accessible—one goes to either space for sexual leisure that feeds a desire for the exotic and submissive. For a Vietnamese or Viet Kieu person entering these domains, a paradox is faced. I agree with Hoang that the pursuit of the Vietnamese men in these spaces oftentimes concerns matters of superiority over the bargirls, and I add that the men also succumbed into conjuring similar Orientalist desires of their foreign counterparts. Many Vietnamese men frequent these establishments in search of other female attention that is more youthful and sultry than their wives or fiancées at home; perhaps, a fun amenity to their traditional relationships that allows them to escape those domestic responsibilities and burdened realities. These sentiments are no different than the Asian businessmen who walk around Phố Nhật in hopes of finding an establishment to settle for the evening. These businesses do not necessarily discriminate against specific customers, rather, they are cognizant of *what* desires are setting foot into their domain. No matter the case, the bargirl leans into the created imaginations of what sexual labor is colonially understood as in Vietnam to entice their customer. Vietnamese men, I contend, are also zealous victims and followers of colonialism because of their attraction to the Orientalized behaviors of a bargirl. It is the transorientalizing phenomenon that occurs within Vietnamese-to-Vietnamese interactions that entrap a South Vietnamese-ness that is dependent on the Orientalized labor of the Saigonese bargirls as well as the transorientalized Vietnamese yearning for that very same female figure.

There is now a “fractured” sense of Miss Saigon. As much as she is a fun, buoyant being, she is incessantly tethered among her many clients to continue a life of servitude for

the greater continuation of South Vietnam—a Vietnam that is different and only recognizes its difference through her labor. There is also a rupture in how to evaluate a sense of South Vietnamese-ness that is so deeply embedded in Orientalist thought that it cannot be erased so it is now forced to embrace Orientalism. Again, as naughty as this is, it is through these red-light districts and bargirls that we can feel, hear, smell, taste, and touch South Vietnam. The colonial-constructed nightlife industry of Saigon has come to define the city, and the reclamation and adoption of this identity has, too, become an identity-making marker for South Vietnam. The two red-light districts are mere containers of a nostalgic, romanticized Vietnam that cannot dissipate from the land; it can only reconstrue how that sensual romance is to be experienced and embodied.

Conclusion

The peculiar positionality of *Miss Saigon*, while it is not the central focus of this whole dissertation, is of extreme importance to the matter of South Vietnamese-ness. I underscore this because, as wrong as this sounds, it would be an extremely difficult task to discuss a Saigon without its bargirls, hostesses, and sex workers. While there are opportunities to think about bargirls and the spaces they inhabit without the conjuring of *Miss Saigon*, the feeling of American guilt or pity for Vietnam and the constant reminder of an actual “tragedy” would no longer be highlighted, and tragedy, here, is both for South Vietnam and the US. This is not to say that the musical must “live on” to authentically honor the significant labor of the South Vietnamese bargirl or sex worker, but *Miss Saigon* serves as a crystallization of the very convoluted entrapments that South Vietnamese-ness must grapple with in order to prevail, such

as the numerous transorientalizing thoughts, internal colonization, and revolving naughty pleasures deeply embedded within the cleavages, folds, and cracks of Miss Saigon.

Of course, with each remount of *Miss Saigon*, the story of a fallen nation and the failed campaign of American imperialism are cycled through the public conscience; but with every production, it almost acts as an ad campaign for foreigners to visit Saigon today. Not only would the journey to South Vietnam be about visiting a country that has deep historical ties with the US (and potentially making amends for being a colonial figure), but it would provide an opportunity to find out if the heat is “actually” on in Saigon. Is the hot and sweaty sexiness of Dreamland real or has it all cooled off? Is Miss Saigon a thing of the past or has she reinvented herself for the “modern-day GI” that no longer wears military fatigues or even is American?

The great detangling of trying to loosen up the massive knottiness that is the problem of sensing South Vietnamese-ness only provides more knots as it exposes the racist, Orientalist, and misogynistic tropes that South Vietnam is seemingly stuck with should it want to subsist in the “flesh.” She—the nation, the musical, the character, the bargirl, the amour, the memory—is most tangible within these red-light districts, but this is only with the existence and continuation of the fictionalized story and the transorientalizing acts that daily occur in the South Vietnamese capital. Even then, the tangibility is only by the body of the bargirl who leans into the lust and sin that is condemned by traditional Vietnamese sensibility but is allowed and approved (albeit quietly) by the Saigoneses that also enact a sense of naughtiness by frequenting these establishments whether for sex, company, or plain fun. If there existed a possibility for Miss Saigon to “go off script”—by actual text and embodied

action—she would perhaps tell us to lean in and embrace her more fully. It is only by relishing in contradictory pleasure and naughtiness that we can sense a South Vietnamese-ness that is not solely stuck within our imaginaries.

Like the Australian man I mentioned earlier, I, too, want to be able to “enjoy the vibes” of sitting, gazing, and being in a comfortable space that provides me with a sense of entertainment, recreation, and joy. Instead of drinking my usual Tiger beer, I hold a similar red, fruity cocktail, and I only hope that I can do so in a future where I do not want to be negated for going out to the red-light districts. For now, I will continue to visit the Miss Saigon pub to feel a strange, but warm sense of familiarity, comfort, and home. The heat is most certainly still on in Saigon, and I do not (want to) believe Miss Saigon will ever make it dissipate.

Chapter 2: The Party of One: Street Karaoke and Disobedient Leisure

“Karaoke presupposes and is structured around an empty space, a place meant to be filled by a live, not-canned person whose performance will merge with the package, a person who fills sonic and social and historical space, and whose performance becomes larger than life.”⁶⁸
— Deborah Wong

“Karaoke embodies a process of human interactions and practices whereby certain values, meanings, or social realities are created, maintained, and transformed as part of a culture—a particular way of life. By extension, different ways to engage karaoke represent the articulations of different ways of life.”⁶⁹ — Casey Man Kong Lum

“Chú chỉ thích hát ở đây. / I just like singing out here.”⁷⁰ — Anonymous Vietnamese street uncle

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A large, slightly rusted speaker and red plastic chair are strapped down by the use of two seatbelts and sit on the back of a nearly run-down motorbike; the speaker looks newer than the vehicle itself. With only about a foot of space for the driver to sit and an overstuffed bag of cables and food he was holding between his legs, he gracefully maneuvers his motorbike to park on the side of the road. The man stands up, sets his chair on the side, and begins setting up his public karaoke stage. After finding an outlet next to a tree, he plugs his speaker’s cable into it, and the speaker lets off a piercingly sharp squeal. The man walks over to his speakers, turns a few knobs, and then moves his motorbike closer to the sidewalk; perhaps, to help with the shoddy feedback. “Một, hai, ba (one, two, three),” he softly says, as

⁶⁸ Wong, Deborah. “‘I Want the Microphone’: Mass Mediation and Agency in Asian-American Popular Music.” *TDR* 38, no. 3 (1994). p. 162.

⁶⁹ Lum, Casey Man Kong. *In Search of a Voice: Karaoke and the Construction of Identity in Chinese America*. Everyday Communication. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. p. 7.

⁷⁰ Personal conversation, February 24, 2023.

he adjusts the volume and modulation of the speaker and microphone. Now, searching through his phone, he scrolls through his music library and picks a song. All of a sudden, the sounds of saxophones, drums, and synthesizers impressively come blaring out of the mono speaker system, and the man sings his first song of the night of what is to be a karaoke party (of one) out on the streets of Saigon.

The described makeshift street karaoke performances are the focus of this chapter, where I view the very act of doing so as “disobedient leisure”—a sensorial practice of South Vietnameseness. The phrase has two parts; it refers to 1) the cultural desire for a pleasure arrived at via leisurely acts coded as naughty (whether or not they are legally sanctioned or socially respected); and 2) the dissident enactment of the naughty leisure itself. The disobedience, then, is about the refusal to follow the prescribed playbook of typical Saigonese partying, which entails a gathering at a bar or party establishment to drink. With a city that offers so many venues and locales to pleasurably party and sing karaoke, participation in a leisure that is not commoditized or monitored can be thrilling for the Saigonese who want to enjoy the city’s nightlife scene on their own terms. In looking at this specific site and practice of street karaoke, we uniquely understand how it is that this disobedient leisure functions to sense South Vietnameseness.

While the previous chapter explores the greater function of the red-light districts and its bargirls to explore knotty performances of transorientalization, I deliberately move away from the epicenter of Saigonese nightlife; I do this to expand the webbing out to the various pockets of the city that stage these disobedient, naughty karaoke performances. Out on these underkept sidewalks, alleyways, and roads, an abrasive style of karaoke is heard throughout,

and I attest that there is a different sensibility of South Vietnamese-ness enacted upon. In these acts, I suggest that these are critical sites for understanding how performances of naughtiness emblemize South Vietnamese life, even outside of the so-called spaces for karaoke to be performed, and disobedient leisure is a mere extension of that naughtiness.

The inquiries posed in this chapter are about how disobedience is seen, embodied, and performed in a nightlife scene that is inherently naughty and how the refusal to sing karaoke indoors is a unique trait of a South Vietnamese understanding of leisure through naughtiness. Considering Vietnam's socialist-oriented market economy and geopolitical position within the Global South is significant to interpret a Vietnamese sense of leisure. Listed as a developing country, Vietnam's economy continues to defy statistical trends, making it one of the fastest-growing economies of the Global South. The economic shift has greatly manipulated how the interplay among leisure, consumerism, and cultural production are realized and commoditized for the global market. However, for this project, I want to strongly emphasize the process of cultural production in relation to labor, leisure, and consumption rather than that of capitalist production.

I highlight the intersection of Marxist theory and leisure studies because my analysis deals with how leisure is being affectively activated in these street karaoke performances that cannot be thought of without acknowledging the country's economy as well as global capitalism. While the labor economy of any country is central to understanding any interpretation of leisure, my focus here is less on the intricacies of Vietnam's larger economic system, especially in the context of a post-reform and "global" market. Instead, the analysis lies more on how these acts of leisure misbehave with the established Vietnamese practices of

leisure and nightlife itself. I steer the conversation to what these sporadic street karaoke performances prompt, which is simultaneously disruptive of and renovative to South Vietnamese—*a disobedience*. While I recognize the complexities of the reformed Vietnamese economic system and its influence on the “glocal” market, I purposefully do not offer nor try to affix a Marxist critique of these economic structures. Instead, I employ the interpretation of labor and leisure within its Marxist sentiments to discuss the affective happenings in the karaoke scenes in South Vietnam. The leisure I explore in street karaoke in Saigon is not one of salvation or relief inasmuch as it is about the untethering of socioeconomic and cultural influence that karaoke entails. The performance of karaoke is a cultural product of greater Vietnam, but the disobedient leisure of street karaoke disrupts that very process of the creation of a cultural practice as it is not the “appropriate” form of karaoke.

Street karaoke also embodies a sense of misbehavior that goes against the greater naughty/knotty party that is Saigon’s nightlife, which is inherently and complicatedly an attribute to South Vietnamese. As the echoes of the street karaoke music reverberate across the city, so do the attitudes of naughtiness and sentiments of “being bad.” It is not that the man or, rather, “street uncle” does not have a want of a karaoke experience; his actions inevitably perform a disregard for appropriately sanctioned places, whether or not he means to or cares for them. The street uncle is defying the proper uses of time and space within the Saigonese nightlife scene, and that is precisely what is so “disobedient,” so “South Vietnamese.”



Figure 1. An example of a “street karaoke” set up in Saigon.

In what follows, I provide a review of the growing field of karaoke studies and the affective bridges between Filipinx and Vietnamese studies that construct an interesting solidarity of Southeast Asian worldmaking by means of performance. I then examine the standard and legalized practices of karaoke (e.g., enclosed karaoke bars) to draw a specific focus on street karaoke performances and explore how they deviate from the normative protocols. Expanding upon the notion of a naughty/knotty Saigon, I contend that the street karaoke heard, seen, and felt is a practice of South Vietnamese-ness that is to be seen as not separate from the city’s nightlife scene, but deeply rooted within the nightly landscape of Saigon itself. The search for pleasure and enjoyment from a bar is not needed nor is it exclusively about the need to seek the party—in a sense, the practice of partying is a cultural logic for South Vietnamese people. Street karaoke is, thus, an extension and embodiment of

the cultural logic ingrained within the social mappings of Saigon. By taking the practice of karaoke out to the street and beyond the designated bounds of Saigon's typical "party scene," these street revelers "disobey" the spatial logics that attempt to render leisure as a more private and contained act.

Filipinx-Vietnamese Connections: Disobedient Listening to Disobedient Leisure

Although extensive research has been carried out on karaoke that expounds on the colonial and communal workings of singing, listening, and performing in the context of the Filipinx and Filipinx American experience, these theories support a Vietnamese-centered poetic on cultural production regarding karaoke and its connection to the South Vietnamese identity. This is not to say that there has been no study into Vietnam and its karaoke performances, but rather, the scholarship from Filipinx studies' emphases on karaoke as a cultural object primarily deals with issues of identity formation, nation-building, and social sentiments towards the popular musical form that coincides with the sociocultural phenomenon of karaoke that is seen and felt in South Vietnam. I recognize that Filipinx culture is not a direct translation of Vietnamese culture, but I explore South Vietnamese-ness by engaging with the similarities (and differences) that many Southeast Asian nations have to one another (and in relation to imperial East Asia), particularly in the field of cultural studies and, most aptly, karaoke studies. Filipinos and Filipino Americans are often at the center of karaoke case studies as they have been featured on prominent television shows and social media accounts that call attention to their great singing talent. In the world of American

theatrical performance, performers of Filipino descent tend to dominate the representation of Southeast Asians on stage.

For example, Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schonberg's *Miss Saigon*—the only musical that has run on Broadway, London, and Sydney that notably features characters of Vietnamese descent—has yet to cast the lead role of Kim to an actress who actually is Vietnamese; Filipina women have exclusively played Kim. While my analysis does not provide a critique on the issues of heterogeneity amongst the greater Asian American population, it is significant to note the Western patterns of Filipinx-as-Vietnamese portrayals that mainstream commercial theatre companies have instilled. The rendering of ethnic “solidarity” between Filipinx and Vietnamese people was created through, presumably, a matter of accessible actors of a certain talent at the time of casting; it also reinscribes the colonial gaze that clusters all Asian identities as one. More importantly, perhaps the most probable explanation for this casting matter is due to many Vietnamese actors' refusal to play the part of Kim. The character has notoriously been excoriated by theatre critics, ethnic studies scholars, and the Vietnamese diasporic population for its Orientalist depiction of Vietnamese women. Similar to Vietnam, the Philippines have endured various centuries of Western colonization and imperialism, which may contribute to the Filipinx-as-Vietnamese casting dynamic. Additionally, this is not to say that Filipina actresses who have portrayed Kim immediately re-score Orientalist views or assume the Vietnamese identity; it is about exposing the metaphorical thread that has sewn Filipinx and Vietnamese identity together.

My framing of disobedient leisure draws from Christina Bacareza Balance's coinage of "disobedient listening."⁷¹ Balance describes the phrase as a method to move past, through, and beyond the culturally imperialist and colonial notions found within the Filipinx-American musical and sonic world through karaoke. By listening against the visualization, mechanization, and materialization of colonialism, and drawing the turn to the sonic where traces of Filipinxness may be heard, the disobedient listener draws a distinction amongst the discourses of Filipinx sociocultural and racial politics. These aforementioned trails include approaching karaoke as a visual art and as a performative object, and addressing karaoke as an alternative form of sociocultural pedagogy. Balance's call to the attention of ideas, such as contemporary Filipinx music being a derivative of Western music and Filipinx music's mimesis of Western musical tropes, is helpful in reconsidering how the Southeast Asian culture's musical scene is not intrinsically based on Western popular music. Instead, Balance views Filipinx karaoke and its multimodal renditions as a medium to explore how the discourses on Filipinxness are redefined by repoliticizing Western mimicry and reimagining popular music as Filipinx aesthetics. (Rather than flattening the dynamic to mimicry and

Balance notes that disobedient listening is not about disassociating oneself from the identity politics of the Philippines' imperialist relationship with the United States, but refocusing how the Filipinx singer is able to practice a Filipinx aesthetic generatively. The case study of sixteen-year-old Filipinx singing sensation Charice Pempengco asks the reader how Western compassion politics feed into the construction of Filipinx identity as viewed by non-Filipino outsiders. A youthful, light-skinned Filipina with a boisterous voice that is able

⁷¹ Balance, Christine Bacareza. *Tropical Renditions: Making Musical Scenes in Filipino America*. Refiguring American Music. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. p. 21.

to carry out high notes that rival those of prolific pop singers, the songs Pempengco would often sing were those of Black artists, such as Whitney Houston and Beyoncé. Her musical cover repertoire encompasses songs that deal with themes of struggle and survival—issues that Pempengco had to overcome growing up with a single mother whose abusive husband nearly killed in a rural town in the Philippines. Pempengco’s mother also taught her a physical vocabulary of bodily and facial gestures to embody when performing. To Balance, these affective choices of Pempengco to perform strong diva anthems with a specific, codified lexicon develop a Filipinx performance aesthetic. Though it may seem the teenage singer is “performing American,” or rather, mimicking a Black aesthetic, Balance highlights the emphasis on how these acts of retelling and reperforming are intrinsically Filipinx due to the country’s relationship to colonization, oppression, and rule under the US. Filipinx music, identity, and cultural production are, thus, ostensibly connected to the multicultural environment and postcolonial history. In other words, the materialization of Filipinxness is seen, felt, and embodied through the different forms of being, performing, listening, and interpreting.

I emphasize Balance’s work on the disobedient to draw a similarity to the street karaoke performance in Saigon and how they may operate in a larger context of cultural production. To disobediently listen is to acknowledge how the Filipinx body and its performances are consumed and recognized by the West. As Balance notes, in popular discourse, Filipinx culture is seen as a copycat derivative of Western imperialism. However, Balance argues that while “mimicry does not fit within civilization logics and its colonial

idiom,”⁷² mimicry interrupts these mainstream logics and karaoke is, thus, a product of Filipinx culture, which makes karaoke a performing object, or more appropriately, a “tropical rendition.”⁷³ Likewise, I do not view street karaoke performances in Saigon as mere imitative performances of Westernism or, even, normative karaoke. The singing on the streets disrupts the nationalist sociocultural narrative that commodifies karaoke and challenges the dominant ways to enact South Vietnamese-ness that are not based solely on the offerings from the red-light districts or popular nightlife scenes. Rather, it seems as though the street karaoke performed resists the urge to buy into the commoditized practices of leisure within these long-standing establishments, which is a disobedient act in itself.

Karaoke-as-Worldmaking

Research into karaoke is deeply rooted in Asian, Asian American, and diasporic studies. The utilization of “karaoke-as-method” to explore the constructions of Asia and Asian America has gained traction in the academy over the last three decades. Ethnomusicologists and cultural studies scholars alike have led conversations within the field. For instance, ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong denotes the intricacies of mass-mediated music within Southeast Asian communities and how karaoke and live performances serve as a method of transnational distribution of the contestation of cultural authenticity.⁷⁴ Cultural studies scholar Casey Man Kong Lum identifies karaoke as a critical practice to the construction of identity in multicultural Chinese America since karaoke serves as a tool for translation, status, and

⁷² Balance. *Tropical Renditions*. p. 16.

⁷³ Ibid., p.16.

⁷⁴ Wong. “I Want the Microphone.”

escape, especially for ethnic Chinese people who are not Chinese nationals (e.g., the Taiwanese, Singaporeans, Malaysians).⁷⁵ In the case of the Vietnamese American experience, film and media studies scholar Lan Duong explains how the karaoke café is a site of gendered cultural practice and the critical re-use of technology, such as the karaoke machine and televisions, serves as a way to reconnect to the homeland and build a homo-social sense of community amongst Vietnamese men.⁷⁶ These theorizations provide a great premise for karaoke to be seen as “serious work,”⁷⁷ as performance studies scholar Christina Bacareza Balance states. Karaoke is, for many Asian communities, a significant performative embodiment of their culture. As scholars have noted, karaoke is not only a pastime, but it is an established method of nation-building, identity formation, and cultural production.

The focus on Southeast Asia and its diasporas in karaoke studies highlights the significance and gravity that karaoke holds to the identity formation of these transnational communities. Southeast Asia, as a sub-continental region, has been an epicenter for theoretical conversations about postcolonial thought, Western/Chinese imperialism, and sociocultural paradigms of the Global South. The intracultural similarities found within Southeast Asian nations in regard to the geopolitical climates, commercial economies, and ways of living and leisure paint a greater image of how the behaviors, habits, and dispositions are uniquely “tropicalized” to the region. Latinx studies scholars Frances R. Aparicio and Susan Chávez-Silverman note that to “tropicalize...means to trope, to imbue a particular space, geography,

⁷⁵ Lum. *In Search of a Voice*.

⁷⁶ Duong, Lan. “Desire and Design: Technological Display in the Vietnamese American Café and Karaoke Bar.” *Amerasia Journal* 29, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 97–115.

⁷⁷ Balance. p. 56.

group or nation with a set of traits, images, and values.”⁷⁸ Illustrating the geocultural and geopolitical representations of Latinidad—as well as Latinx cultural production—through a postcolonial lens, Latinx culture becomes embedded into the US’s sociocultural mapping. Balance elevates their work to reconceptualize tropicalization to the context of the Philippines. The subtropical climate, the locality of the country within the greater Asian continent, and the US’s colonial gaze on the Philippines lend well to Aparicio’s and Chávez-Silverman’s theory. Following the aforementioned authors’ writings, I use the analytical tools of tropicalization to “foregroun[d] the transformative cultural agency of the subaltern subject”⁷⁹ of Southeast Asia and to illuminate the cultural production of a tropicalized Vietnam in the context of karaoke and performance. By illuminating the intersections of Filipinx, Vietnamese, and tropical Global South studies, this framework offers a landing site to speak about the cultural happenings that are interrelated within domains of orientalized and imperialized nations.

Filipinx studies scholar Luis Pascasio’s scholarship on karaoke is also insightful for how it emphasizes the importance of spatializing street karaoke performances in Saigon. I follow Luis Pascasio’s line of thought on how karaoke operates as a spatializing practice that draws from Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space. Paraphrasing Lefebvre’s words, Pascasio explains how space is ostensibly empty until the space becomes enlivened and constructed by the people animating and stimulating it through specific, socioculturally understood actions and movements. The unique constitution of each space is determined by

⁷⁸ Aparicio, Frances R., and Susana Chávez-Silverman, eds. *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad*. Reencounters with Colonialism—New Perspectives on the Americas. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England for Dartmouth College, 1997. p. 8.

⁷⁹ Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman. *Tropicalizations*. p. 2.

the multicultural characters, multi-temporal essences, and multi-auditory experiences, as Pascasio alludes to. To Pascasio, karaoke is an embodied performance that meets at the intersections of memory, storytelling, music, and community. Choosing a song for the intended space and members in that space is, in itself, a mode of socialization that is inherently sociopolitical because a karaoke performance “is both deliberate and spontaneous, creating cultural affinities in the public spaces of restaurants, bars, and community halls, as well as in the domestic spaces of living rooms, basement, and back porches.”⁸⁰ Karaoke, thus, has become a socially embedded part of Filipinx Americans’ everyday lives and offers a space to escape the postcolonial capitalist entrapments of systemized labor.

Before moving forward, I must note that karaoke is not a unique recreational pastime for South Vietnamese as perhaps how I may make it out to seem; it is most certainly a beloved practice for all Vietnamese people (and East and Southeast Asians). Street karaoke is seen and heard throughout the nation, though there are arguably more of these specific types of performances in Saigon than in any other Vietnamese city. However, there are different stakes involved with designating street karaoke—and this particular type of street karaoke where the individual is simultaneously the singer, manager, audience, and crew—as a contributing trait of South Vietnamese-ness. Similar to the spatializing suggestions of Pascasio, the practices within nightlife and party cultures, such as street karaoke, are what create the South Vietnamese boundary. The city streets not only map out Saigon, but they are imperative blood-like vessels that pump life with each motorbike cruising along, street hawker yelling, and passerby on the sidewalks; the Saigonese night scene is only as fun, lively, and turbulent

⁸⁰ Pascasio, Luis. “Diasporic Performativity in the Practice of Karaoke.” *Ethnic Studies Review* 44, no. 3 (October 1, 2021): 88–113.

as its inhabitants. Karaoke is a fuel for a Vietnamese sense of entertainment and party, but street karaoke is an ignitor of the great, naughty machinery that is the city of Saigon. By posing street karaoke as a South Vietnamese practice that is uniquely sensed in the homeland, we can also separate the powerful function that “regular” karaoke imbues for South Vietnamese immigrants who participate in the joyous singing practice for reasons explored further in my last chapter. It is important to highlight additionally the sociopolitical influences of karaoke and the Vietnamese government’s awareness of this phenomenon to sense the capacity karaoke has on cultural agency and autonomy.

Ethnomusicologist Dale A. Olsen details the history of karaoke in Vietnam in relation to the modern sentiments Vietnamese people, notably South Vietnamese citizens, have toward the “rowdy” and “damaging” singing act.⁸¹ Olsen remarks on the public’s concerns about subversion and morality due to karaoke’s intrinsic linkages to alcohol consumption and sex work. Conservative parents, concerned wives, and other members of society who uphold filial views deem karaoke as a sinful act that is exploitative and essentially “pornographic.” The mediatized outcry in the early 2000s (and that is still ongoing today) on karaoke ultimately led to the then-Minister of Culture and Information Pham Quang Nhi (sic)⁸² being interviewed by a reporter on these concerns. To the protesters’ chagrin, the interview revealed Pham as a frequent karaoke consumer and singer himself while also adding that the very act of karaoke is a “stimulating cultural activism [and is] necessary to the people’s needs for entertainment

⁸¹ Olsen, Dale A. *Popular Music of Vietnam: The Politics of Remembering, the Economics of Forgetting*. Routledge, 2010.

⁸² Olsen incorrectly spells the former Minister of Culture and Information’s name as Pham Quang Nhi; the correct spelling is Pham Quang Nghi, or with diacritics, Phạm Quang Nghi.

but should maintain Vietnamese cultural identity.”⁸³ The Minister also added that the government had already planned to investigate karaoke parlors and shut down any shops that were running any illegal activities at the time of his interview. He then stated that this was “however, just a plan” and never stated a viable date for this governmental proposition to begin actively. Though Olsen states the minister’s concern about “Vietnamese cultural identity” is not clear nor does it ever get defined, the interpretation of karaoke that Pham publicly expresses is pivotal to comprehending the robust grip that karaoke has on the Vietnamese cultural landscape. The act of trying to define any cultural identity is rather elusive, but the statements that have been derived from a member of the socialist government of Vietnam are not one to take lightly. Instead, Pham’s words draw attention to how karaoke is intrinsically linked to modern Vietnamese culture and not simply a fun, boozy amusement to participate in

The sinful nature of karaoke is similarly illuminated in the earlier “Snaky Karaoke”—a 1999 feature published in *Vietnam Economic News* that discusses the “spread of social evils at karaoke clubs [as] worrying [to] concerned authorities.”⁸⁴ The article is most concerned with karaoke establishments and its associations in Hanoi, and deems karaoke as a poor reflection of Vietnamese ideologies of modesty and civility. The state-run magazine highlights how brothels use the guise of a karaoke bar to operate and blames the rise of karaoke establishments for the “failure of many married couples, the unhappiness of quite a few parents, the shameful prostitution of young girls, leading to the wild spread of the social

⁸³ Olsen. *Popular Music of Vietnam*. p. 246.

⁸⁴ Hoang Anh. “Snaky Karaoke.” *Vietnam Economic News*, June 1, 1999. p. 46

disease HIV-AIDS, and the devaluation of certain State employees who frequent these joints.”⁸⁵ It is clear that the views of the magazine (and writer) are aligned with the sociopolitical views of the national rhetoric of the Department of Culture and Information, and writes from the vantage point of a Hanoian pleading to the government to shut down the illegal activities within karaoke bars. Pham had yet to come into office at the time of this publication (he entered as Minister in 2001), and in retrospect, he does not take this public outcry seriously. “Snaky Karaoke” ends by stating how many social researchers situated in Vietnam suggest that “the most important thing is that wives should find essential ways to tie their husbands at home.”

Now, in hindsight, the minister’s position on this matter reveals a significant knot—the cultural desire for this kind of indelicate partying butts up against established imperatives for proper Vietnamese behavior—and this knot is twisted among other ones, thus, exposing more complexities to sensing South Vietnamese-ness. On one hand, we have the desire to stop the growth of the sex work industry and the need to establish more sexual health policies, but it has been well-documented how intricately involved the sex work industry is to Vietnamese economic stimulation in the south.⁸⁶ On the other hand, much of the criticism of partying and karaoke seemingly comes from the northern region and concerns that specific population. Though I cannot strictly deduce that the Vietnamese people in the regional south are as upset by these “snaky” matters as those residing in the north, the media has yet to publish a substantial article about any points of contentions Saigonese people may have.

⁸⁵ Hoang Anh, “Snaky Karaoke,” p. 47.

⁸⁶ See Kimberly Kay Hoang’s *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work* (University of California Press) and Amanda Bozcar’s *An American Brothel: Sex and Diplomacy During the Vietnam War* (Cornell University Press).

A 2020 published article from well-known Vietnamese online travel publication *Journey On Air* titled “How Karaoke Took Over Ho Chi Minh City” details the growth and state of karaoke for tourists. John Davison, the writer of the article, notes speaking to a Saigonese man named Minh, who intriguingly states, “We sing everywhere... We don’t care! Karaoke is for any time.”⁸⁷ As much as karaoke is to be seen as a Vietnamese cultural activity (as the former minister notes), karaoke superficially is more adopted and accepted as a cultural practice in the south. This is perhaps due to Saigon being already seen as this established naughty space that offers many other sinful pleasures, making the act of karaoke no longer recognized as a “bad” thing to do.

Not that it is a “good” practice, but this is where street karaoke steps in as the disobedient relative to the more socially appropriate and standard way of “karaoke-ing.” Street karaoke, in a way, breaks the sociopolitical rules and functions of normalized karaoke, which is by following lyrics on a screen and singing them behind closed doors. However, most traditional Vietnamese houses do not have air conditioning, and there is the common practice of opening the house’s multi-panel front doors and windows to cool down the house. There are many people who sing karaoke at home who are not quiet (nor do they try to be) as the music bleeds out into the city’s streets and alleyways. Though it is a nuisance for neighbors who are trying to relax, nap, or work, many city dwellers do not bat an eye (or ear) to the karaoke. This preference for singing karaoke at home has become a normalized method. Not that street karaoke is a distorted way of performing karaoke, but it becomes a divergent version of doing so; it is the least contained and conceivably the most obnoxious of the

⁸⁷ Davison, John. “How Karaoke Took Over Ho Chi Minh City.” *Journey On Air*, August 8, 2020.

different practices of karaoke I have personally experienced. It simply appears like these street karaoke performers just want to sing and be heard without the necessity of people needing to tune into their performance; they embody that “don’t care” attitude Minh suggests. There is a sense of wanting to disrupt, to pester, to misbehave by willingly choosing to sing outside. Street karaoke is not instinctively bad, but it is knowingly naughty by its original inclination.

The (Naughty) Need To Karaoke in South Vietnam

The most common and standard place to sing karaoke in South Vietnam would be the karaoke bars dispersed throughout the region. Saigon, in particular, is filled with karaoke parlors with a few dozen in each district of the metropolitan city. In September 2022, *Tuoi Tre News* reported that 414 karaoke bars were operating in Saigon alone.⁸⁸ This statistic seems low for the comparatively high number of karaoke facilities in Japan; the country reported there to be a substantial 8,000 registered karaoke establishments in 2023.⁸⁹ It is also important to note the lack of statistical research and formalized data collection in Southeast Asia concerning karaoke regulations⁹⁰; though there is a slight movement toward a formal method of superintendence, there is simply more published data on Japanese karaoke as compared to its other Asian counterparts. This data published by the local Vietnamese newspaper is not the

⁸⁸ Duy Khang, Minh Hoa, and Ai Nhan. “Over 90 Karaoke Parlors Fined for Multiple Violations in Ho Chi Minh City.” *Tuoi Tre News*, September 14, 2022.

⁸⁹ West, Mark D. “The Resolution of Karaoke Disputes: The Calculus of Institutions and Social Capital.” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002): 301–37.

⁹⁰ Another Southeast Asian country known for its karaoke culture is the Philippines. While there is a growing number of published writings on Filipinx and Filipinx American karaoke, most scholars are more focused on qualitative research by exploring the sociopolitical and cultural impetus of karaoke in the Filipinx community rather than providing quantitative data regarding karaoke regulations or governance. There has been a push by the government in the Philippines to enact more national guidelines and taxations for karaoke establishments—similar to what is happening in Vietnam.

most accurate as it does not consider establishments that do not have specific permits to be designated as state-sanctioned karaoke bars and operate under the radar without them. Though there is no definite number, there may well easily be over a thousand karaoke establishments within the city, ranging from the most luxurious to the ones situated out of a typical cityside alley. Additionally, this number does not include the houses that have their own karaoke systems in place, which if included, may push the number of karaoke “facilities” to surpass the ten thousand mark.

Karaoke businesses that undergo the procedure to receive an operating license are immediately designated as an establishment that provides “nightclub services”⁹¹ and obliged to specific safety protocols. This institutes a national guideline for what a karaoke bar should be in Vietnam: one that is enclosed and cannot be heard from outside; is up to par with fire regulations; provides proper ventilation; and limits the amount of people in a room. Many business owners find the process of obtaining a license and the requirement of modifying their space to fit the government preconditions too expensive and later too taxing to upkeep, so many establishments forgo the license and operate illegally. This standardized practice enforced by the government adopts the standard methods of karaoke singing from Japan—the creators of the modern karaoke system and inventors of a new art form—stretching the obedient following across borders.

There are hundreds of restaurants, streetside bars, and cafés that have all the technological needs for a customer to sing karaoke, should they want to, but do not publicize

⁹¹ According to Decree 54/2019/ND-CP, the Ministry of Culture designates karaoke businesses as a service that provides sound, light, music, lyrics, and moving images displayed on a screen (or similar fashion) with the appropriate technology that is for the purposes of singing, pleasure, and business.

karaoke as a leading service. These establishments are not conducting any illegal activities because karaoke is viewed as a supplementary amenity to their primary goods. On rare occasions do police officers place a termination order of karaoke to an unpermitted business; these instances deal more with matters of drug trafficking or failures to pay tax penalties. While these businesses operate beneath the radar of the attainment of licenses, I do not consider these establishments to be exactly disobedient. Establishments that offer karaoke services with no legal permit are copiously dispersed throughout the city; these unauthorized karaoke bars become the typical setting for local Vietnamese citizens to sing at and supersede the state-sanctioned businesses in terms of popularity and accessibility. The high cost of paying for fancier services is a luxury, at best, and no matter what type of establishment it is, the basic commodity that people are seeking when going to a karaoke bar is the *act* of karaoke; the amenities are mere perks. These establishments are already defying governmental protocols by having karaoke services in their businesses, which inherently imbues a spirit of (“obedient”) naughtiness within these bars. While there is, again, no exact count as to how many of these businesses have karaoke services, it has become commonplace to have the feature of karaoke when going out to party establishments. Because of these dive bar-style establishments and how ordinary of a commodity karaoke has become, the offering of karaoke and having the technological system to “serve” karaoke becomes expected out of these businesses. In essence, the service of karaoke has become saturated within the cultural lattice of South Vietnam, making the commoditized site where karaoke resides the obedient subject and not the act itself.

Karaoke establishments, state-recognized or not, are attended and consumed by people from all different backgrounds and classes but are especially popular within the middle or working class. Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo and Kimberly Kay Hoang both note the rapid development of Vietnam's economy at the turn of the twenty-first century and the direct influence the country's growth within the global economy has on the sex and nightlife industry. Nguyen-Vo examines the contradictions in Vietnamese governance in relation to sexual freedom to attest to the government's paradoxical ideologies, practices, and leadership when dealing with neoliberalism and the new market economy.⁹² Expanding on the idea of governing privatized desires, Hoang discusses the multiple niche markets of Vietnam's sex industry and investigates the relationalities amongst financial capital, gendered labor, business dealings, and individual yearnings of both Western and Vietnamese people.⁹³ Both scholars note the crucial component of the *desire* to understand Vietnam's growing global economy, neoliberal market, sexual commercialization, and transnational connections.

Following this concept, I contend that desire is a standard commodity promoted and sold in these karaoke establishments. I utilize Hoang's theory on how desire moves relationally from the macro to meso to micro levels, from the national political economy to moral economies of the niche markets on the ground to individual economies of hopes and dreams. However, I also view desire as a vital element that sustains the existence of these karaoke bars. Desire is not to be thought of as a byproduct, or, instead, a presumptive additive to the service of and within karaoke. Desire, in this case, is not so much about being bought,

⁹² Nguyễn-Võ, Thu-Huong. *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam*. University of Washington Press, 2008.

⁹³ Hoang. *Dealing in Desire*.

but it is through the very desirable act of performing, enjoying, and later purchasing the events happening within the karaoke room that is commoditized; desire is what brings customers into the business and has them coming back.

While I do not deliberately attempt to define the exact desires that are conjured by the singing patrons as these experiences and feelings are unique to the individual, I view desire as an aspiration that is intimately affixed to trauma, violence, nostalgia, and hope. As Pascasio notes in his examinations of Filipinx American karaoke practices, historical trauma from Spanish colonization, and American imperialism is a driving factor to sing karaoke in order to conjure spaces of a “home away from home” and resist performances of Western mimicry.⁹⁴ Balance similarly attests to a listening against the tropes of the mimetic in Filipino American popular music while highlighting the necessary authenticating that the derivative enforces. The yearning for a desire to “be something else” may be seen, heard, and felt across the many transnational karaoke platforms that are deeply connected to Western aggression.

There are many “desires” that circulate within South Vietnamese karaoke spaces. First, there is the desire to be seen and heard—one conjured intimately within the individual. Second, desires that concern economic growth are the desire to achieve a higher class status and the desire to cement business dealings and further reperform class status. Third, there is a desire to access karaoke as a form of naughtiness and mischievousness. Beyond the “fun” nature of this pastime, karaoke works to expose a complicated webbing of desire that illuminates the significance karaoke has on the general Vietnamese public. There is the additional desire to achieve a personal intimacy with the artists whose songs they sing as well

⁹⁴ Pascasio. “Diasporic Performativity in the Practice of Karaoke.” p. 110.

as the styles, statuses, and affects the karaoke singer embodies and chooses to further emulate. These desires should not be thought of as separate from one another, but rather, they all become entangled with each other when the sites and practices of karaoke are commoditized.

By framing desire as a common good that lures customers into the karaoke bars, these establishments are seen as operational sites of pleasure and leisure that are, one part, systematic and the other part, liberatory. A Marxist reading of the function of karaoke mechanizes the procedures emplaced with karaoke singing while simultaneously recognizing the alienated feelings conjured when singing. The product of desire is one that is entangled with questions of how desire is to be thought of, how desire can be attained, and how desire is dealt with in these spaces.

The karaoke bars and the commoditized notion of desire are attached to the middle and working class. To enter into one of the legally recognized bars entails a steeper price to pay for karaoke. Because one would be paying for the enhanced technology, increased safety protocols, cleaner spaces, and, more often than not, services of hostess girls tending to every need of their customers, there is the socioeconomic understanding that one needs to be a “*nhân viên văn phòng*” or “office worker.” The term “office” oftentimes alludes to the educational background of the individual as they would need at least a high school diploma to work. Given the competitive market in Saigon today, most individuals will attend trade school to acquire specialized certificates or university to garner a bachelor's degree to be at the top of a job search. Throughout Vietnam, there is a higher number of Vietnamese men earning the coveted “office positions” due to the varying gendered and patriarchal aspects that are engrained in Vietnamese culture. This also leads to a higher amount of male patrons at the

hostess-attending karaoke bars because this dynamic creates a sexualized desire that is tangible and within reach for many businessmen. Though not explicitly stated by Hoang whether these establishments were legal karaoke bars, these nightlife spaces are fertile grounds for significant business deals. Whether it is a combination of alcohol, singing, food, and partying or not, there is always something to be desired within these bars, both in and out of the economic context and a very specific type of desire that is only made available to the working class.

Additionally, karaoke has become a practice offered for touristic desire and consumption in South Vietnam. Conducting a simple browser search for a general list of “things to do in Saigon” will usually result in hundreds of hits that provide the names of popular karaoke bars to visit. More often than not, these establishments are specifically catered to East Asian and Western tourists because they offer a wider selection of English, Japanese, Korean, and Chinese songs to choose from than the local bars. Not only that, the workers in these bars are able to understand all the aforementioned languages, creating a comfortable environment of leisure for foreigners. The karaoke businesses that commercialize themselves to the tourist market often live within the red-light districts, and the prices are usually double or triple the amount that is charged outside of these areas. Vietnamese clients do occasionally attend these bars, but they are overseas Vietnamese diasporic citizens who consume karaoke similarly to their tourist counterparts, as they can afford these luxuries. Because these tourist-centered bars deal with many foreigners, they are typically legally sanctioned establishments, which creates another opportunity for the Vietnamese government to surveil its people while profiting off of karaoke’s commodities.

These sociopolitically appropriate strategies and standardized practices of exploiting karaoke make non-commoditized street karaoke all the more disruptive. Performing karaoke in public (and for the public) is no strange phenomenon in Saigon; singing karaoke outside seems quite normal in a city that indulges in loud musical street acts, but under the appropriately sanctioned pretenses. Public parks often host karaoke competitions or casual karaoke nights for city dwellers, and many street beggars sing on the sidewalks in hopes of receiving money; Saigon is particularly known for these street performances. In the case of the man I hear and see singing outside, there is no monetary incentivization or consolation prize—at least, not conceivable to the average bystander. There is no signage asking for money nor are there any containers laid out that money could even be placed into; the singing is seemingly not trying to impress or compete with anyone. Whereas most people would sing karaoke at home if they want to sing by themselves, the uncle is consciously aware of *how* he wants to perform—imaginably, by, and only for himself.

Out to the Streets: Disobedient Leisure

So what exactly are these illusory Saigonese street karaoke performances? What unfolds on the streets for it to be so pleurably disruptive or, rather, leisurely disobedient? The warbling sounds of karaoke are ever-present throughout the raucous Saigonese soundscape. There is karaoke being sung and performed at any given time, though the singing popularly commences in the morning as people are starting their mornings and in the early evening as folks are ending the day, or rather, starting their night. These sounds provide a thumping ambiance to the juxtaposing sights of opulent, gold-plated karaoke palaces and

humble cafés roofed over with tin metal sheets operating within blocks of each other.

However, despite the abundance of karaoke establishments, a handful of city dwellers find these spaces to not be to their taste and instead laboriously create stages of their own on the streets by hauling hefty speakers, extremely lengthy wires, and cumbersome plastic chairs.

Again, the act of performing karaoke in public is not unique to any particular road, neighborhood, or city in Vietnam, and these public karaoke performances feel rather normalized and culturally embedded within Saigon—a city of constant clashing noises; there are always passing onlookers, but never a staying audience.

I pull specific ethnographic data from my research trip in Vietnam during 2023 to inform my analysis of street karaoke performances and nightlife ambiance in Saigon. Mainly relying on participant-observer tactics, I provide a narrative illustration of the lively affairs of the city as I perceive them while on the open streets. True to Saigon, there are always many things constantly happening in the city and around me, so I approach my retellings by framing them through the senses of sight and sound. As much as karaoke is a sung practice, the exact site where and how it is sung is key to deciphering the practice of South Vietnamese naughtiness and disobedience.

I elucidate the everyday character of the “street uncle” as the main subject of observation. Vietnamese is a language where context is key to quotidian communication, and every person addresses each other based on their perceived gender, age, and social relationship. There are several ways of calling someone “uncle” in Vietnamese, as the delineation of the uncle’s age and status to the individual’s parents, as well as the dialect spoken, are very important to consider. For instance, I have different ways of naming each

uncle that is on my paternal (*ông, bác, chú*) and maternal (*ông, ông trẻ, bác, cậu*) sides, and these honorific titles get rather muddled once marriages are taken into consideration, especially if people married across generational lines. Beyond my family, even a stranger I meet is to be called an uncle as this is the common title for filially and politely addressing an older man. I do not know this street uncle, which I later detail, but it is someone who feels incredibly familiar to me. Perhaps because he is incredibly resemblant to my own uncles who party and sing karaoke, I view him as an uncle of and for greater Saigon. I do not know him personally, nor have I ever had any conversations with him, so I only theorize about his sensorial experience when he performs street karaoke. I do not mean to urbanize him by using the term street, but there is a casual presence of the older man who sings karaoke with this “effortless yet effortful” charm. By calling him a street uncle, I aim to highlight his role as a neighborhood character and a significant laboring city member (despite, from what it seems, there be the street uncle’s lack of a job)—a public figure who embodies and brings forth a sense of disobedience in his leisure practices to the spaces he sings at and performs in.

Karaoke—as culturally generative and laborious as it may be for minoritarian populations (especially in the case of the Saigonese street uncle)—is a leisurely, purely recreational practice. Leisure and work are natural foils to one another (and leisure is, perhaps, the naughtier one of the pair), but the ingrained sense that unwilling labor must still be done for society to function is what leads the two to be alienated from one another. A handful of works, however, have been published on how leisure and play function from a Marxist viewpoint. For theorist Chris Rojek, Marx alluded to leisure providing an “illusory sense of self-determination for the worker and a specialized market for capitalist

production.”⁹⁵ Laurence M. Hinman expands on the conversation of this interplay and opportunely offers an apt instance of alienated⁹⁶ musical leisure:

The sense of hearing—which may well be most fully satisfied aesthetically in listening to music—has for many today been replaced by the need to have incredibly sophisticated stereo systems, records, and tapes. All too often, such systems far outstrip their owners’ listening ability in those instances where it does not, there is often more concern about *how well* the sound is reproduced than about *what* is being played. The fetishism of equipment and gadgets which pervades many leisure activities today is but the extension of the fetishism of commodities and evidence of another condition under which leisure may be alienated: the domination of private property which transforms leisure activity into mere *having*.⁹⁷

Due to the vulgar consumption that is a byproduct of capitalism, the leisure of hearing and enjoying music is alienated from the working individual. Thus, leisure activity becomes a consumer activity and one done for its own sake, making participating in leisure an alienating process. Though Hinman’s writing on leisure emphasizes the complexities of viewing karaoke as an alienated leisure and a fetishized commodity, the intervention to this argument is by deeming karaoke as a cultural practice. I acknowledge that there are moments of karaoke fetishism and commodification of karaoke that need to be contended with.

The fetishistic qualities in Vietnam may be interpreted in three ways: 1) a fetishization of the karaoke system and its technology; 2) a fetishization of the karaoke bars and spaces;

⁹⁵ Rojek, Chris. *Leisure and Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2000.

⁹⁶ I note that alienation, a key tenet of Marxist thought, occurs and creates an objectification of labor; in other words, the meaning and intent behind work become lost and are out of the control of the laborer. Alienation usually entails the affective feelings of meaninglessness, powerlessness, and estrangement towards the subject’s labor and the fruit of that labor. It is imperative to note the significance of alienation, especially when discussing matters of leisure as it is a contrast to labor, but the technical language behind leisure relations is not explicitly highlighted in Marx’s seminal works, such as the *Grundrisse* or *Das Kapital*.

⁹⁷ Hinman, Laurence M. “Marx’s Theory of Play, Leisure, and Unalienated Praxis.” *SAGE Publications, Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 5, no. 2 (1978): 192–228. p. 197-8.

and 3) a fetishization of the practice itself. “The fetishism of equipment”⁹⁸ is seen through the competitive technology industry, designing higher quality karaoke systems. As the technological aspects of the karaoke machines become more sophisticated, people and businesses will purchase the new systems to either show off their newfound wealth through the accrue of luxury goods or advertise their establishment as having the finest karaoke system. Karaoke bars operating as covers for prostitution rings exploit the very essence of leisure in karaoke. The establishments begin catering more to their growing clientele of businessmen, which constructs a patriarchal, hyper-masculinist sentimentality towards karaoke. The observations of fetishism in karaoke are intensely grounded in the broader commodification of karaoke that is undeniably influenced by the new capitalist-leaning economy of Vietnam.

The street uncle’s setup is by no means grand, luxurious, or sexy. The rusted-over speaker tied to his motorbike and intensely dented microphone are not objects that I would deem to be fetishized. While there may be upkeep that the uncle regularly commits to, there is no determining factor for me to say that he has a strong need to purchase state-of-the-art karaoke systems. Simply put, as long as he is able to perform the act of singing and that performance can be amplified outward, the street uncle’s actions and behaviors do not give any indication of direct concern about social class. Though Hinman’s theory ultimately deals with the (im)possibility of enacting unalienated praxis, I interpret his survey of leisure to be of great significance as it opens a channel to discuss karaoke within the elaborate structure of Vietnam’s contemporary economy and society. Does the street uncle not have a job? If so,

⁹⁸ Hinman. “Marx’s Theory of Play, Leisure, and Unalienated Praxis.” p. 197.

why does it seem like he is never working? Or, perhaps, are we viewing this wrongly and being a street karaoke singer is *the* job? Though I am not able to confirm his occupation at this time, I am not quite sure this is a matter of urgent resolution because the man is doing more for enacting South Vietnamese-ness by being out on the streets and singing karaoke as this lonesome (but presumably enjoyable) party of one.

Similar to his technical instruments, the street uncle has a humble stage; he does not take up any more than about three square meters of public area, considering he only has his motorcycle and a small plastic chair to sit on. Most of the time, the man is sitting just off the center of the sidewalk, ensuring there is no obstruction to the pathway. Spatially, he is not implicitly trying to cause any vexation towards anyone. I have also seen him move a few meters over if people are in need of the space he is occupying (mainly for parking purposes). In this case, the argument of karaoke being a social evil cannot be appropriately utilized as it does not carry the same fetishistic markers and sexualized facets that most angry Vietnamese citizens are noting. While the man singing on the streets may be adding another layer of noise to the already clangorous sonic cacophony of Saigon—and that in itself may be deemed as more of a public annoyance—his karaoke performance is not inherently perverse. The street uncle's singing embodies what Pham previously stated: that karaoke is a necessity to subsist as a Vietnamese person and becomes integrated as a stimulus for Vietnamese cultural production.

Sound, in relation to time, is an important factor in describing these street happenings. Throughout my life, and particularly during this past visit, I have known the streets of Saigon always to be ferociously loud, and it has only grown more intensely. From dawn to dusk, the

city's sounds shift with the sun. The city is already awake before the sun rises with restaurant shop owners and street hawkers as the sounds of giant steel pots are banging in the front patio kitchen and the squeaks of the neon-lit food carts are being pushed to their usual spot. As morning peaks, the day's first rush hour commences with people leaving their homes to go to work and parents dropping off their children to school. Hearing the constant motorcycles rumbling, Vietnamese pop songs blasting, and neighborhood aunties gossiping amongst each other fabricate the general soundscape of Saigon throughout the sunny hours. The sky starts turning orange, and the sounds of thousands more motorbike engines revving as workers leave their offices to go out, children get picked up from school, and people roam the city. A cast of purple clouds appears, signaling the moment the city *truly* wakes up. While the sounds of gas-guzzling transportation and general chatter do not fade, the poundings of bass drops and verberations of poorly sung karaoke start enveloping the city, and add to the already migraine-inducing cacophony of noises. Once the dark night skies blanket over Saigon, the city only grows brighter and louder with restaurants, bars, and nightclubs opening their doors. As midnight nears, the sounds shift with the social currents and grow more concentrated in the city's central partying hubs. At this time and in these districts, the music, singing, screaming, and performances become deafening. I can never hear myself speak, think, let alone, breathe; I can only feel the bass hammering against my chest, and I exhale with the beat. While customers slowly begin closing out their tabs and businesses start turning down the bass of their vibrating speakers, the sounds of stiff straw brooms scraping the concrete ground and glass bottles hitting each other in trash bags grow louder. These sounds then

gently grow faint, and the early morning noises gather once more, creating a cyclical album of Saigonese sound bits that repeat themselves daily.

I textually paint and highlight the sounds beyond karaoke heard throughout Saigon to accentuate the magnitude of the city's soundscape. Similar to the people continually shouting against each other to be heard, the nightlife establishments are battling each other to see who ends up being the most sonorous. Karaoke, though, is an interesting facet because the performances are seen throughout the nightlife spaces, practiced by many, and heard all around the city. The many sounds of karaoke add to the raucous symphony of the city, but for the most part, the singing is trapped within the walls of the establishments. There are businesses that provide karaoke services that bleed sound out to the streets because a front door does not exist to enclose the music; the karaoke, again, becomes enwrapped into the roaring soundscape.

However, there are karaoke performances that occur on the streets that are disobediently adding to the city's land- and soundscape. Unlike their counterparts who sing indoors with a system in place, these street karaoke-goers laboriously haul many pieces of karaoke machinery on the back of the motorbike, somehow balancing all the tech and their own weight. Wherever there are outlets on the sides of the street or near a lamp post, the street karaoke singers set up their audio camp and stay there until they are done with their leisure.

I reside a block away from the western backpacker red-light district in a high-rise building, and I am constantly hearing the city; it often feels as if Saigon herself is always calling out to me and calling me to come out. Like clockwork, every afternoon as the sun is setting over the Saigon River, I hear the same voice of a Vietnamese man, probably in his late

fifties, singing karaoke from my balcony. Presumably, I speculate he is performing from his family's living room, which may be located in one of the narrow alleyways of the city; the tunnel-like pathways act as sonic conduits for sound to travel to the larger public streets.

After a month of hearing him but never precisely catching him in the act, I finally find the man singing while on the back of a random Grab driver's motorbike. As the driver approaches the street of my apartment, the singing grows increasingly louder; I instantly recognize the projecting, booming voice. About a block and a half away from my apartment is a shirtless, beer-bellied older man, or what I call "street uncle,"⁹⁹ in ripped cargo shorts sitting near the very edge of the street on a small red plastic stool, reading the lyrics off his phone. He is stationed next to what I presume is his motorbike that has two large, dated speakers bungie-tied down to the back end of the seat. The speakers are powered by a nearly twenty-meter-long cable that runs from the wall where a public outlet is found. Instead of a television screen, he looks at the lyrics on his phone and sings along. With the numerous trip, fire, and blowout hazards, the man belts a high note—albeit offkey—with all his might as he strains his neck and squints his eyes just as I pass him. As my motorbike moves forward, I can hear the song end, but with no applause or cheer for his exertion, nor any recognition that he was even performing.

Two to three days out of the week, I would work in a small café during the late afternoon hours on the other side of the block from the man and observe the movements surrounding him as he sang. Beat after beat and tune after tune, the few people who ever

⁹⁹ I playfully use the term street uncle to describe the man to differentiate him from an ordinary Saigonese city dweller. In the Vietnamese language, individuals address each other quite formally (at first) and respectfully use the same terms for someone who is a family member, even when meeting a stranger. This is why I call him an "uncle" and use the descriptor of "street" to denote his "rough-and-ready" person he gives off. In a light-hearted sense, he is a man of the people and the streets.

address him are the owners of the *quán nhậu* (casual restaurant bars) that he stations in front of and several (presumably) family members or friends who drive over to sit and sing with him for a short period of time. Typically after an hour of hanging out with him, the street uncle's peers leave, and he continues to sing alone. His karaoke post is situated on Đề Thám Street—a small, but largely utilized street lined with restaurants and bars as it lives right on the outskirts of the backpacker red-light district. I never officially counted, but thousands of people easily pass the uncle on a daily basis, and no one ever stops or says anything. Multiple police officers also pass the singer throughout the day (or, rather, night), and neither do they try to actively engage with him. In a sense, everything is normal, nothing feels strange; this is ordinary life in Saigon. Nevertheless, this uncle singing on the side of the street adds, then, to this “conventional” soundscape. His singing to passing “on-listeners” simultaneously deepens the city’s raucousness, which seems like an agential layering of sound in an already replete field of city noises.

Pointing to the unique undertakings that this peculiar iteration of karaoke socioculturally embodies, the man singing on the side of the road is not necessarily engaging in the same unscrupulous act that certain Vietnamese people are concerned over. Usually, the consumption of alcohol is not heavily involved in the street uncle’s singing nor are there ever any bargirls to be seen within an attainable radius when he performs. The man tends to sing in the late afternoon—the time of leisure—when work is about to end or has ended for many folks, which is near when most establishments would begin blasting shatteringly loud electronic music to entice customers into their businesses.

The desire to claim a portion of a city sidewalk powerfully situates the man as an active, radical performer taking ownership of the public pathways and audibly asserting his music to be heard by the city. In the case of the street uncle singing on the side of the Saigonese road, the performer is passively coercing the public to hear, examine, *feel* him. While the man performs an act of supposed mimicry as he sings the power ballads of popular Vietnamese classics, he enacts another node of disobedient leisure that elicits its significance from being witnessed. The man sings and, yet, it does not seem that he seeks validation that is to be obtained from his singing joys. On the last note of most songs, he audibly takes a deep breath in, simply sets his microphone down, and reaches over for his small rag to wipe the sweat beads off his forehead. The uncle looks around, but not for an audience or applause; there is rarely an audible cheer or clapping within a ten-meter radius. The people on the streets and the businesses surrounding him barely bother to look at him. There have been several instances where the uncle competes for volume against neighboring establishments where their music is playing louder than his. While I have not seen him turn a knob on the speaker, it does sound as if he has placed the volume multiple notches higher when these moments arise. However louder the volume is, it does not garner him any more audience members than those who, I suppose, are unaffected, annoyed citygoers.

I have illustrated what a street karaoke performance requires, but I have yet to comment on the types of songs the street uncle chooses. Whereas Balance details the significance of disobediently listening to the singer's choice of song as these are ways are resisting dominant interpretations as prescribed by the West, I listen in to the street uncle's curation to potentially hear any challenges. On the days I have heard him sing, he tends only

to sing ballads from the bolero genre, which is fascinating due to the genre's significance to the former nation-state.

Vietnamese bolero is a genre popular in South Vietnam from 1954 to 1975, coincidentally the same years from the very birth of the country via the notorious 1954 Geneva Accords. Unrelated to the Spanish style of dance of the same name, the coinage of “bolero” directly originates from the genre of song from nineteenth-century Cuba—certainly a “tropicalized” music genre that has made its way to Southeast Asia. Similarly, Vietnamese bolero is a genre that lyrically deals with themes of love, romance, and nostalgia. The beats are slow, but they build surely and gradually as the song progresses—much like how a heart beats faster as it grows more excited. The repetitive rhumba beats are easy to listen to and soft on the ears, especially for South Vietnamese people as bolero is played at nearly every karaoke party—it is a sound of familiarity. Bolero music has become synonymous with South Vietnam because of its sonic connections to the period of time that was the Vietnam War and the lyrics that oftentimes conjured feelings of trauma, violence, and loss. The genre was eventually deemed as too “suggestive” to the nation-state of South Vietnam that the communist government had staunchly unsanctioned the singing, playing, and performing of any bolero music. Today, the genre is no longer barred by the government, but it has lost its popularity with the younger generations born decades after the ending of the war, so feasibly, it holds a special, heavy weight to the South Vietnamese people who witnessed the war or grew up during the post-war reform era in Saigon.

Karen Tongson notes karaoke's origins and the mechanical dissemination of karaoke systems in global leisure sites to detail how the singing apparatus “required a collision of

entertainment cultures in the wake of both failed and emergent imperialist efforts; it began in a ‘second city,’ a location distinct from the national capital of governance and nightlife (Tokyo), while became a popular pastime that continues to haunt or ‘drag’ urban taste cultures today.”¹⁰⁰ Here, the author is speculating a karaoke-oriented queer aesthetics and the notions of repetition, copy, and echo. While Tongson’s claims are intrinsic to the critique of karaoke’s greater influence, I highlight her exposure to karaoke being a resilient act emerging as a response to mainstream leisure culture. Karaoke “sanctions promiscuous musical repertoires,”¹⁰¹ writes Tongson, and the type of performance that the street uncle engages in is especially provocative in how it defies what has become to be the common global understanding and participation of karaoke. Not only are his stylistic and spatial choice of karaoke refusing to subscribe to perceived karaoke customs by being out on the streets, but so are his ostensibly “promiscuous” and naughty choice of song and genre.

Recognizing the contentious history of bolero and knowing that the street uncle principally chooses to sing music of that genre makes his performances that much more naughty. For him to sing bolero songs aloud in Saigonese streets is his way of reclaiming the South Vietnamese capital for himself and, perhaps, the greater South Vietnamese people. Bolero had only recently gained its legal status to be publically played¹⁰²—nearly fifty years after the Fall of Saigon—which leads me to reflect on how many times he has performed in

¹⁰⁰ Tongson, Karen. “Karaoke, Queer Theory, Queer Performance: Dedicated to José Esteban Muñoz.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, edited by Fred Everett Maus, Sheila Whiteley, Tavia Nyong’o, Tavia Amolo Ochieng’ Nyong’o, and Zoe C. Sherinian, 211–26, 2022. p. 213.

¹⁰¹ Tongson, “Karaoke, Queer Theory, Queer Performance.” p. 218.

¹⁰² Vo, Linh Dan. ““Music Carries the Mark of Time: Vietnamese Bolero Music Is a Bridge between Generations in a Country Still Healing from Its Past.” *Colors x Editorial*, n.d. <https://colorsxstudios.com/editorials/vietnamese-bolero>.

the streets to the nostalgic tunes of bolero. The man seems to be in his early sixties potentially, which then makes me contemplate instead how many decades he has been bottling up the desire to sing these sounds aloud. No matter the age or time, the sheer fact that the street uncle ungrudgingly (albeit out-of-tune) belts out the high notes encaptures the naughtiness that is South Vietnamese via the song choice. What may be a legally allowed but sentimentally vulgar song by the Vietnamese government, the street uncle metaphorically flips an assumingly offensive sonic gesture in their direction. The bolero power ballad may have been written and performed as a coping method for the tragic brutalities that happened during the two long decades of the Vietnam War are re-understood and transformed into lyrical bullets that shoot up into the sky and out into the streets. In no way do I believe he is rendered as a delinquent for his deliberate curation of songs to sing, but he unequivocally is a recalcitrant and defiant man—he confidently is a man of the Saigonese streets.

Conclusion

The city of Saigon has long committed to the perpetuation of karaoke’s “social evils,” which has now enveloped it as a distinct part of Saigonese cultural practice. It is the juxtaposing lack of adornment and vanity in street karaoke that is most impressive and disobedient. If sex, alcohol, and desire are the major cultural commodities of South Vietnam and karaoke stands in as a pipeline to these snaky weavings of corruption, street karaoke enacts a refusal *to* enact these notions. Street karaoke does not become an uncorrupted or sterilized version of karaoke—rather, it is an even more perplexing exhibition of disobedience and saturation of an already-saturated South Vietnamese nightlife and party culture.

The social spaces that street karaoke encroaches on reconfigure and resignify the established practices of partying. Whereas the various Saigonese parties are loud and proud in the red-light quarters and urban nightlife centers, the karaoke occurrences on the streets are strangely and obnoxiously humbling. The repetitive acts of driving out, setting up equipment, and belting out onto the streets—for the sake of leisure—require so much labor to relax and enjoy that it may seem counterintuitive to participate in street karaoke. Nonetheless, the appropriate participation of an outsider is not what is crucial; it is the multifaceted embodiment of disobedience that lives in the street uncle's body, voice, sound system, and street space that is critical to stress. The disobedient leisure allows for a deconventionalized optic of visualizing and sounding South Vietnamese-ness—one that even rattles the cultural affective understanding of delinquency and bad behavior. To claim a stage as one's own can be seen as an egotistical and vain act, and therefore, it is very naughty of the street uncle to claim a whole block. On the other hand, the naughtiness achieved by the man (and other solo street karaoke performers) offers a possibility to sense South Vietnamese-ness in the disparate pockets of Saigon that host these impromptu street karaoke performances. For the public audience, the disobedience is heard by the forceful volume that the singers are performing at and the obstruction of the walkways of the spaces the singers claim. For the street uncle, his disobedience is felt through the assertion of his presence outside where there are no insulated walls, fancy technology, or extravagant decor; he wants to be heard but does not necessarily need to be listened to. The work of the street singers disobediently adheres to the typical party playbook; there is something slightly naughty about the leisurely act of singing outside, and

that slightness is what is most enticing. The party lives on, out of the bars—now, the party bleeds out onto the streets with a disobedient party of one.

Chapter 3: Warm Beer Over Ice: Domestic Partying, Drinking Practices, and the Act of Becoming Drunk

“The problem is no longer getting people to express themselves, but providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. Repressive forces don’t stop people from expressing themselves, but rather, force them to express themselves. What a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, or even rarer, the thing that might be worth saying”¹⁰³ — Gilles Deleuze

“For a quart of ale is a dish for a king.”¹⁰⁴ — William Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*

“Uống nước nhớ nguồn.” (“When drinking water, remember the source.”) — Vietnamese Proverb

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This chapter explores how the communal act of gathering and becoming drunk enacts a unique node of South Vietnamese-ness. Janet Chrzan states that “drinking alcohol is... a deeply cultural act and every society has different rules for use.”¹⁰⁵ I contend that, by looking at the practices of drinking in South Vietnamese households, there are larger implications to the embedded sociopolitics within ingesting beer and becoming non-sober because of the changing and distortions of one’s “nostalgias” and present. The stakes involved in drinking and partying are exponentially heightened when there are the contentions of *who* one is drinking with and *how* one is drinking as the shared consumption of alcohol may relieve strained relationships and enact sentiments of community and kinship. As such, the practice of

¹⁰³ Deleuze, Gilles. *Negotiations*. Translated by Martin Joughin. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997. p. 129.

¹⁰⁴ Shakespeare, William. *The Winter’s Tale*. Folger Shakespeare Library, 1623.

¹⁰⁵ Chrzan, Janet. *Alcohol: Social Drinking in Cultural Context*. London: Routledge, 2013. p. 5.

drinking beer is an important case study in examining the entanglements of temporality, trauma, and personal pleasure that, I contend, are cultural nodes of sensing South Vietnamese-ness.

Excessive drinking, or binge drinking, is not unique to the South Vietnamese people, and this practice is particularly seen in many communities of the Global South. In many Latin American and African countries, research findings show that there are consistent historical relationships between areas with colonial ties and excessive drinking. Haydée Rosovsky details the long lineage of alcohol consumption in Latinx cultures that reflect the consequences of Spanish colonization, industrialization, and economic globalization and recognizes that a ban on alcohol is not possible to mitigate the social issues of binge drinking.¹⁰⁶ Gretchen Pierce and Áurea Toxqui note the strength of Latin America's globalizing economy through the growing production of alcohol as a means of promoting a distinguishable international identity by subverting colonial notions of the region being underdeveloped.¹⁰⁷ Similarly in Southeast Asia, sociologists and global health scientists have noted the prevalent drinking epidemic that exists in the Asian region today, particularly within its youth population, that is causing staggeringly high numbers of early alcoholic liver disease with an average age of sixteen years old of when Vietnamese people begin drinking.¹⁰⁸ What researchers have noted differently about Vietnam's drinking practices as compared to its Southeast Asian counterparts is the significantly higher amount of elders living with family

¹⁰⁶ Rosovsky, Haydée. "Drinking and Pleasure in Latin America." In *Alcohol and Pleasure: A Health Perspective*, 87–100. London: Routledge, 1999.

¹⁰⁷ *Alcohol in Latin America: A Social and Cultural History*. Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2014.

¹⁰⁸ See Martha Lincoln's "Alcohol and drinking cultures in Vietnam: a review," and Sally Casswell's "Development of Alcohol Control Policy in Vietnam: Transnational Corporate Interests at the Policy Table, Global Public Health Largely Absent."

members who drink more than people residing by themselves.¹⁰⁹ Recent research on drinking practices in Vietnam tends to focus on the socioeconomic and health effects on the rural communities and does not heavily investigate the practices of drinking in the urban areas; this is perhaps due to the excessively large data collection pool of the cities.

Though I do not examine the overall drinking scene by conducting a quantitative analysis of alcoholic consumption in Vietnam, it is imperative to note that my focus here is solely on the exploration of how the practice of communal drinking affectively creates a way to sense South Vietnamese-ness. What I explore is certainly not the only method to analyze South Vietnamese drinking practices, but I emphasize here that it is one method of epistemologically conjuring and understanding South Vietnamese-ness by means of drinking. The communal aspect of the practice of drinking is key to this observation, and so is the historical understanding of suffering, coping, and, arguably, disremembering. The act of drinking and partying establishes a renegotiation of South Vietnamese-ness—one that is dependent on the habitual practice of intoxication that instills equal harm and hope.

In what follows, I analyze the embodied act of becoming drunk to demonstrate how South Vietnamese-ness is enacted through the drinking practice. The colloquial phrase people may use when going out is to “get” drunk, which is an action I purposefully choose not to employ. While the perceived impetus of consuming alcohol and partying is to get to the drunken state, I am most interested in the semi-ritualized process of attaining drunkenness and the reactions that emerge within the setting of a Vietnamese house party. I am not only

¹⁰⁹ Knodel, John, and Wiraporn Pothisiri. “Smoking and Drinking Behaviors among Older Adults: A Comparative Analysis of Three Southeast Asian Countries.” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 36, no. 4 (December 2021): 369–86.

interested in the straightforward physiological state but also—reminded of the Deluzian idea of *becoming*—in the more existential exploration of the series of transformations that occur as one becomes drunk and comes out of the drunken state.

Additionally, the title of this chapter is playfully labelled as “Warm Beer Over Ice,” and this phrase holds precedence in how I view the sociocultural contexts and affective movements of becoming drunk through “watering the beer down.” Across the Vietnamese country in public-facing businesses and private spaces, there is the normalized practice of drinking beer with ice. Because canned or bottled drinks are not considered perishable and are relatively shelf-stable, these beverages are seldom seen in coolers, which are considered critical, luxury-level appliances in “developing” countries like Vietnam. The can or bottle of beer could have been refrigerated for hours and is cold by immediate touch, but the yellow liquid is still expected to be poured into a glass mug over a frosty cylindrical block of ice. Beer has inadvertently become an imperative cultural object of greater Vietnam and holds a powerful social role in building community and, perhaps, achieving a sense of euphoria. For many avid beer drinkers elsewhere, such as those in the West, it is rather sacrilegious and contemptible to consume beer with ice. Drawing from my family’s experience, my father certainly does *not* drink his Heineken with ice here in the US. Nonetheless, he participates in the act of drinking beer with ice when he travels back to the homeland; there is no questioning it, nor does he ever request a refrigerated beer (as cold beer is iced beer in the Vietnamese context). It is the *choice* to pursue this practice, as well as the act of becoming drunk, that exposes an affective knot of South Vietnamese-ness.

In sum, this chapter traverses two paths. On the one hand, it explores how the sociopolitical environment of post-war South Vietnam nuances an understanding of the stakes and necessities involved in becoming drunk, and on the other, it explains how the becoming process of sensing South Vietnamese-ness is ostensibly linked (and clinked) to the tropicalized practice of drinking beer with ice. I first extrapolate on the history of beer in Vietnam to highlight how culturally significant and influential the alcoholic beverage is for South Vietnamese people. Then, I explain the Vietnamese term “*nhậu*” (“to drink alcohol”) to propose a South Vietnamese way of sense-making via alcoholic consumption and to examine why and how the practice of partying has become a standard event in South Vietnamese lives. I later demonstrate an act of becoming-drunk by analyzing the bodily and metaphysical occurrences that South Vietnamese men may experience when drinking beer and partying with others. Simultaneously, I describe the entanglements the drunken body experiences through an analytical analogy of the iced beer.

This exploration in this chapter reveals the gendered nature of *nhậu*. Though historians have noted the conflicting archival data claiming Vietnam’s former matriarchal society before Chinese colonization, this remains a popular narrative. For centuries, Vietnam has been a patriarchal and Confucian society where women were restricted in many aspects of quotidian life, such as drinking and partying. Women are certainly able to drink alcohol (such as myself), but I acknowledge that the practice of *nhậu* is primarily done by men. While *nhậu* may affect the sensing of South Vietnamese-ness collectively, it certainly does so in a very distinct way across gendered lines. This is why I foreground here that the discussion of

“becoming-drunk” specifically refers to the men—and not all South Vietnamese people—who are participating in the act of becoming drunk.

The work and case studies that motivate this chapter are from scenarios I have encountered with my own family, as well as the observations from the course of my fieldwork in Saigon. I recognize the implicit biases that are embedded within my analysis because of the intimate relationship I have with my “subjects,” and I do not wish to provide a negative light to the people discussed. Instead, I use these examples as a way to theorize how South Vietnamese bodies and identities subsist in the everyday. The anecdotes and narratives I provide are deeply personal and offer insight into the specific ways in which my family has navigated the complexities of South Vietnamese-ness, but it is important to emphasize that these experiences should not be taken as representative of South Vietnamese-ness as a whole. The diversity within South Vietnamese communities means that cultural practices, values, political ideologies, and experiences can vary widely across different families and generations (such as those who currently reside in South Vietnam but grew up in North Vietnam or elsewhere in Vietnam). My intention is not to generalize or essentialize South Vietnamese culture to that of what my family or I have come to know, but rather I aim to contribute a singular perspective that adds to the broader mosaic of South Vietnamese experiences and histories. Therefore, while these anecdotes provide valuable context for my own analysis, they are situated within the particularities of my personal background and should be understood as one among many possible narratives.

Two Nations, Both Alike in Beer

Research into Vietnamese alcohol and drinking practices has mainly been concerned with the effects that alcoholism has on the public health crises of drunk driving and rising numbers of Vietnamese men being diagnosed with liver and kidney failures, and the socioeconomic landscape of Vietnam and its international trade. Exact levels of alcoholic consumption today are difficult to identify as there has yet to be a survey completed in the 2020s. However, medical and cultural anthropologist Martha Lincoln highlights a World Health Organization (WHO) report that indicates that although there was a slight drop in alcoholic consumption in the 1980s in Vietnam, studies found a 28% net increase in alcohol use in the early 1970s to mid-1990s.¹¹⁰ With Vietnam's new market "socialist-esque" economy, the country saw the birth and rise of the middle-class population. While these surveys did not note the exact social class that their participants would potentially be grouped into, the researchers' areas of focus were concentrated in the rural communities of North and South Vietnam. Because of this, it may add to the notion that alcohol consumption is limited to only the lower class or poor, non-urban villages, which is not the case that I assert. Globally, Vietnam is listed as one of the top consumers of alcohol¹¹¹, and by no means does this statistic only favor the rural populations. Alcohol consumption is, arguably, a national practice seen in all parts of the country, and it is not necessarily an act that Vietnamese people hide.

Despite its foreign creation, beer is the country's most popular alcoholic beverage.

According to a 2018 WHO report, beer accounted for a staggering 91% of all recorded

¹¹⁰ Lincoln, Martha. "Alcohol and Drinking Cultures in Vietnam: A Review." *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 159 (February 1, 2016): 1–8. p. 2.

¹¹¹ Kumar, Santosh, Mukta Gundi, Sagar Atre, Luu Ngoc, Nguyen Thieng, and Anu Rammohan. "Alcohol Consumption Among Adults in Vietnam: Prevalence, Patterns, and Its Determinants," May 19, 2022.

alcohol consumption in Vietnam, with spirits making up the remaining eight percent.¹¹²

Foreign policy researcher Nicholas Chapman notes that “beer has embedded itself within the national consciousness” of Vietnam and is the largest beer consumer in the Southeast Asian subcontinent¹¹³. Oftentimes, this is the only liquor of choice at food and bar establishments, especially as one leaves the urban centers.

Beer is a colonial product, and thus, beer consumption became a colonial project. Before beer, Vietnam’s distilled beverage was mainly rice wine, similar to the surrounding Asian nations, as it was also consumed during traditional festivals and utilized for ritual practice. During the nineteenth century, the general distribution of alcohol was predominantly controlled by Chinese merchants, notably in the southern region of Vietnam. With the French establishing their colonies in Southeast Asia and wanting more autonomy over the greater Vietnamese economy, one of the first markets they infiltrated was the alcohol trade. Though some scholars are not exclusively bound to this specific retelling of the birth of beer, I follow the trajectory that the French heavily influenced the rising capital of beer in Vietnam at this time. Historian Gerard Sasges notes the immense desire of the French to establish Indochinese conglomerates and monopolies so their claim to the land was more legitimized¹¹⁴.

Beer proved to be a lucrative and successful campaign of the French to take over the alcohol industry. The beer distributed in the earlier eras of Indochina was a “pilsner-style

¹¹² Kumar et. al.

¹¹³ Chambers, Paul, and Nithi Nuangjamnong, eds. *Beer in East Asia: A Political Economy*. Taylor & Francis, 2023.

¹¹⁴ Sasges, Gerard. *Imperial Intoxication: Alcohol and the Making of Colonial Indochina*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2019.

lager”¹¹⁵ and was specifically marketed to other French colonialists, military personnel, and civilians. Due to its novelty and high price, the beverage was not consumed by the Vietnamese locals or working population. Beer was not a new drink for the French, but the Vietnamese who could consume the beverage were intrigued by its light, refreshing taste, albeit rather strange due to the hoppy nature of the foamy drink. Considering the country’s humid tropical climate, beer became the preferred alcoholic beverage by the French during the late nineteenth century and later by the colonial-influenced Vietnamese bourgeoisie.

The early stages of the Vietnam War heavily affected the beer industry’s exponential growth today, which is perhaps why beer has become the nation's favorite alcoholic beverage. Before the 1954 Geneva Convention splitting the country into two separate nations, the trendy *bia hoi* (transliterated as “airy beer”) became the preferred way of drinking beer. Westerners know this method as draft beer, and it was the first of its kind in the Southeast Asian continent. Interestingly, *bia hoi* was featured throughout many North Vietnamese bar establishments and never made its way to the southern region until the war ended. The uniquely Hanoian way of drinking this light green-hued beer became a hit as each batch is brewed daily in large kegs, or *bia bom* (transliterated as “beer bomb”), creating a crisper, more refreshing flavor that could sell at lower prices than their canned or bottled counterparts. This type of beer is unpasteurized, which complements the Vietnamese palate as they prefer the milder taste, and makes for easy local distribution. The light alcoholic drink also offers a lower alcohol content (about a three percent average) attracting consumers of all drinking abilities and backgrounds to sample and creates a frenzy for the beer.

¹¹⁵ Chapman, Nicholas. “From Bière to Bia: The Political Economy of the Vietnamese Beer Industry.” In *Beer in East Asia*. Routledge, 2023. p. 140.

As the war ensued, death tolls rose, and rice stocks plummeted, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam forced all alcohol manufacturing companies to halt its rice wine production and switch to producing medicine instead by 1955. Fascinatingly, President Ho Chi Minh purported to enjoy the effervescent beverage and saw the international potential of exporting Vietnamese beer, but more specifically, *bia bom*. A few years later, a beer reform saw the creation of the Hanoi Brewery, and it was because of Ho's comments that North Vietnamese draft beer was able to make its way to the greater South Vietnamese masses by the mid-1960s. Today, there are a handful of Vietnamese beer brands that have emerged since the French colonial period and American imperial era, such as Bia Saigon, Bia Hanoi, and Bia 33, but *bia hơi* remains the de facto "Vietnamese" beer.

The brewings in South Vietnam were not as unique as the operations happening above the demarcation line. Because *bia hơi* arrived during a period when political tensions were escalating daily between the two Vietnamese nations, this type of beer was not popularly consumed by southerners. There are two plausible hypotheses that deal with nationalistic sentiments. On the one hand, the draft beer may have been seen as a propagandistic or chemically tampered product of their war opponents due to its unregulated distribution via kegs. Consuming the beer, whether allegedly or not, could have greater implications, especially as the South Vietnamese and American militaries were starting a purge-like scheme trying to rid the region of the Việt Cộng. On the other, the US Army was notorious for its drug use and transferred thousands of cases of American beer to Vietnam, which, in tandem with the paranoia built within the troops from dealing with guerrilla warfare, ignited extensive alcohol abuse among the soldiers. One of the popular Vietnamese beers at the time, Bia 33,

which originates from Hanoi, was considered by the Americans as “tiger piss”¹¹⁶ due to its dark color and strong yeast-forward scent. In the city proper, most nightlife establishments sold an array of American, European, and Vietnamese beers, though spirits, notably whiskey, were preferred by the Western bar patrons residing in Saigon. This created a surplus of Vietnamese beer and were, thus, distributed to the local South Vietnamese, particularly to those who lived outside of the city.

Among the less expected outcomes of the Vietnam War, they generated a slight sense of “beer regionalism.” Bottled and canned beers were not forbidden objects and were regularly consumed in North Vietnam. Still, *bia hoi* grew to become a cultural object of the nation, pushing ARVN patriots to execrate what is a uniquely Vietnamese product. For many South Vietnamese locals, the only types of beer they drank were only ever bottled up. To consume Western-style draught beer (and not *bia hoi*), the barrels must be refrigerated to be properly poured; this was highly considered a European practice and, thus, a luxury to acquire. Cans were typically seen on US military bases because of the cheap manufacturing costs of aluminum and its lightweight, adequate quality for overseas shipment. Because beer cans were the common vessel in which beer was served (and still are) in South Vietnam, it became the socially accepted and normalized way to drink beer. In a sense, not only were the two Vietnamese nations split in their sociopolitical ideologies, but the disparate materializations of their beer-drinking practices furthered the cultural divide.

Saigon today still remains true to its beer-drinking roots, and most locals continue to indulge in their heavy drinking with bottled or canned beers. There has been a spike of local

¹¹⁶ Nightingale, Keith. “BEER AND COMBAT.” LinkedIn, November 16, 2022.

Vietnamese breweries breaking ground in the southern capital that serve Western-style draft beer, but these establishments are most frequented by foreign expatriates and affluent Vietnamese. Most Vietnamese drinkers prefer malt lagers, similar to the taste profile of what was enjoyed by the French bourgeoisie and later the American GIs. The city's modern beer establishments mirror the aesthetics of American breweries and offer different types of beer that the Vietnamese are not accustomed to, such as hoppy ales, dark stouts, and fruity sours. There are a handful of local shops selling *bia hơi* in Saigon, but the Vietnamese-style draft beer is still most consumed in the North. During my stay in early 2023, I noticed just five establishments advertising their inclusion of *bia hơi* in the city center. My rudimentary observations are certainly not to be seen as a specific appraisal of Saigon's *bia hơi* scene. Even so, the only time I was offered a chance to try *bia hơi* was on this trip by my city-dwelling cousin, who thought it "would be exotic for the both of us." By framing the experience of drinking the green-hued beverage as rather extraneous or novel, his comment further facilitates the perception of *bia hơi* not being rendered as a standard beer drink in the South. The statement continues the long-fermented sentiment that *that* style of draft beer is not exclusively a North Vietnamese beer or drinking practice, but it is an *un-South* Vietnamese practice of drinking beer, both in terms of its aesthetics and its content.

Drinking Down History

In the Vietnamese language, there exists the word "nhậu," a term that does not have an English equivalent to describe the act of drinking. The English phrase "let's get drunk" is, perhaps, the closest to essentializing the word, but it is not only about "getting" drunk. The

basic definition of nhậu means “to consume some sort of alcoholic beverage.” A 1996 dictionary on common Vietnamese vocabulary defines nhậu as “to booze,” implying a casual tone of carousal within the word. One does not solely drink alcohol, but one may “ăn nhậu” (literally, “eat drink”) or “đi nhậu” (literally, “go drink”); essentially, the action of drinking alcohol cannot be done alone, but it only exists when accompanied by other actions and with other people. Communication studies scholar Istvan Lenart argues that the term is understood beyond as a way to go out and drink in the company of others, but nhậu holds effective power in building professional rapport¹¹⁷. Likewise, sociologist Kimberly Kay Hoang denotes the socioeconomic value that nightlife spaces and their communal drinking aspects have to the creation and assurance of business partnerships. To nhậu is as imperative and necessary to relationship building as it is to worldmaking and survival. Nhậu is more than a verb—it is a practice, a lifestyle, an art.

Outside of the influence that nhậu has on financial affairs, there does not need to be a pressing reason to nhậu. Celebration, pleasure, and gratification are inherently encompassed in nhậu, but so is the sense of the frequent and ordinary. People daily go out together with others to share a few rounds of drinks for no other desire than just to gather and be surrounded by the liveliness and excitement of the environment around them. The setting may not be essential at all to some people, but it is receiving the understated energy or “buzz” from being in drunken community with others. There is also no designated space or time to nhậu. While people mainly go out to party and drink in the evening, there is no social norm to nhậu in the dark. Visibility and loudness are central to nhậu as there is a consciousness of spectacle and

¹¹⁷ Lenart, Istvan. “Some Aspects of Effectiveness in Hungarian-Vietnamese Business Communication.” *Scripta Neophilologica Posnaniensia*, 2018, 67–72.

performance. One wants to be seen and heard because nhậu admits a socially acceptable clearance not to be sober. In fact, it is encouraged to test the limits of the body to see how much and how far one can nhậu—the longer, the noisier, the crazier, the better.

Anyone can nhậu, but the social presumption is that men typically participate in this practice. From this point forward, my analysis of nhậu is predominately focused on the drunken and social happenings of South Vietnamese men and the circulating ideas of Vietnamese masculinity. Not a man myself, I hope to provide a feminist perspective on the act of becoming drunk because I do not want to reinscribe the racist narrative of the emasculated, desexualized Asian man; neither do I desire to symbolize the South Vietnamese identity as man. There have been many instances of the Vietnamese identity being presented as female¹¹⁸, which is somewhat contradictory to the Vietnamese custom of following the Confucian family structure of filial piety, designating men and boys as superior to women and girls. However, I argue drunkenness is best discussed via the male body as men are generally the people drinking in order to get drunk. This is not to say that women cannot drink or it is socially unacceptable to drink; rather, it seems as though the female body enters a masculinist space and interrupts the machista energy when women consume alcohol. Boys are taught from an early age that the social act of drinking alcohol is a gendered leisure pursuit. The male body is perceived to have the force of *duong*—a hot, aggressive energy that is found within “men’s blood”—that equates to someone acquiring characteristics of naughtiness, mischief, and violence. Being sexually active is the main relaxant of this male force, with women being

¹¹⁸ Please refer to my discussion of the feminization of South Vietnam and the city of Saigon in the first chapter of this dissertation.

seen as sources of “heat release.” Still, alcohol is said to relieve men of that heat as alcohol provides the much-needed relief and is seen as a coolant of that inner, sporadic vigor.

Women hold key responsibilities to these nhậu “productions” as they are ultimately the “sober managers” of these events. Again, the location and time do not matter to nhậu as much as how the space is set up and the length of time one can nhậu for. For most men (and I focus on those in heterosexual relationships)—particularly those who are married or partnered—the responsibility of care is imbued into their female “better half” by ensuring there is always a replenishment of food on the table, the stock of beer and ice are in abundance, and the greater housekeeping and cleaning even if the party does not occur within their own home. Should anyone have children, the respective mothers and grandmothers are immediately deemed to be the main caretakers. Children may run around and play at these parties, but they are told by their maternal supervisors to “not bother”¹¹⁹ the men who are in the middle of their nhậu session. There is an entire gendered ritual to partying, and Vietnamese men are only able to nhậu comfortably and freely as it is made possible by the incredibly taxing labor that women are socially taught to endure.

For women who want to partake in the drinking act and enjoy the nhậu experience, they must be hyper-aware of their surroundings as women are not allotted the same rights to pleasure, enjoyment, and “free-ness” that men are. From my own experience, I am able to drink beer alongside my uncles and cousins, but there is an underlying expectation that I cannot and should not drink too much. Sensibility and modesty are tropes that I must still

¹¹⁹ This is something I have heard on multiple occasions throughout my life whenever my family nhậu. As a young child, my mother told me not to bother my father when he was drinking; even as an adult, my mother reminds me to disengage with my father if we are in the midst of a heated argument or if he is no longer making coherent sense in his conversations. My aunts and cousins continue to use this rhetoric to this day.

uphold, so I do not have the capacity to experience the same embodied acts of drunkenness that my male family members do; there are limitations to what I can and cannot engage with. I am also constantly surrounded by my young nephews and nieces who look forward to enjoying the party with their visiting aunt, and a sense of filial guilt looms over me because I fear they may sense that I am actively choosing not to be with them to nhậu—a cultural practice that the children are not old enough to comprehend yet fully. I realize this negative feeling is due to the sociocultural coercions of enacting and continuing the cycle of sexist labor, but at the same time, I do not wish to be labeled as more “disobedient” than I already am. By the older maternal figures in my family, I am certainly seen as someone who naughtily defies the typical nhậu-ing pattern that they have set up (or that Vietnamese society has come to practice), but my uncles and male cousins constantly heckle me to come over and drink because they know that I can drink (and they are aware that my father does not care) and they want to see me enter a state of drunkenness as it would certainly be a peculiar spectacle for them to witness. I recognize that I am only able to drink and nhậu because of my American identity, which is perhaps why I feel as if I am always teetering off the balance beams of upsetting or providing what would presumably be an entertaining performance for them. Nonetheless, nhậu becomes to be a masculinist act that is only made possible through the orchestration and organization of the women in their family and community.

But how does the masculinist practice of nhậu then become a sociocultural practice of worldmaking for the South Vietnamese population? Nhậu is not exclusive to South Vietnam; it is a term all Vietnamese recognize. However, I argue that the way in which South Vietnamese people use nhậu affectively produces a different understanding of the exigency of

and to nhậu. Though there is substantial archival data on the significant labor that women expended during the Vietnam War that did not solely involve household duties¹²⁰, the number of men who fought the war via the frontlines is staggering. Going back to *duong* and acknowledging its importance to bodily sustainability during wartime, that intense force now needs to be stored within the body in order to harness it when bloodshed and brutality are called forth. Because *duong* is seen as a force of life for men, it arguably becomes essential to one's survival to keep that energy within. This is why alcohol comes to be an indispensable product for South Vietnamese soldiers as it provides a quick, non-consequential release of *duong* that does not completely “deplete” men of their warm reserve.

My analysis of nhậu, thus, concerns the now because the drinking practice embodies different stakes than it did in the past. The Vietnam War has ended, and so has the nation-state of South Vietnam. The “loss” of the nation is precisely why nhậu heightens to something greater than a mere leisure activity or heat release. That heat has turned into a gas pent-up. Upon reunification of the country and the communist government's campaign of re-education for any anti-communist South Vietnamese sympathizers, the *duong* is once more stored, but this time, it is forever suppressed and coerced to be kept inside with no hope of being released. For if that gas is to leak, the pipeline, or body, may implode on itself, whether internally by oneself or externally by a political aggressor.

Nhậu is no longer an activity for fun; it is a practice in order to endure and subsist for South Vietnamese. What sets nhậu apart from its regional counterparts is the sociopolitical stakes of sensing the former, calmer state of South Vietnam and de-sensing the memories of

¹²⁰ Stur, Heather Marie. *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

war, violence, and death. The partying practice of nhậu is one of transportation and transformation as it is conjured upon the South Vietnamese body and its surroundings. To explain, I draw upon the conversations found in queer and postmodern scholarship on an alternative minoritarian time and space to use as a framework to reconsider post-war South Vietnam temporality and spatial practice.

Temporality is essential to this topic of partying and sense-making because it is through the practice of nhậu that South Vietnamese may conjure a temporal line that disengages with the contemporary societal issues of cultural and political assimilation as well as personal conflicts within the family unit. Theories of queer time, which challenge the normative, linear conceptions of temporality by emphasizing non-conformity, disruption, and alternative timelines, can be fruitfully applied to discussions of minoritarian time, particularly in the context of the Global South, such as on the subject of South Vietnamese-ness. In these geopolitical regions, where colonial histories, economic marginalization, and cultural dissonance often coerce communities into white heteronormative temporalities, queer time offers a framework to understand how marginalized groups navigate and resist dominant temporal structures. As much as the recognition of minoritarian time can be seen as an assertion of agency, it is crucial to acknowledge that even within these discussions of alternative temporalities, issues that are hyper-heteronormative—such as patriarchal family structures, gendered dynamics, household labor, and child care—still play a significant role in shaping how time is experienced and negotiated by these communities. By employing queer time’s focus on alternative life courses, we can better understand how South Vietnamese-ness (and other minoritarian identities) negotiate notions of survival, resistance, and identity within

imposed temporal constraints and global hegemonies. Though I am cognizant that I am drawing upon the oftentimes exploited labor of queer writers who have been actively repressed by the heteronormative phenomenon that is the patriarchy, the scholarship offered by queer scholars is, again, a useful tool for thinking about a South Vietnamese temporality that is resistant to the traditional, mainstream understandings of post-reunification (North and communist) Vietnamese life.

Jack Halberstam defines queer time as “specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance.”¹²¹ Queer time, nonetheless, offers a queering of spatiality that enables a renegotiation of the heteronormative and capitalist ways of worldmaking practices. Halberstam employs David Harvey’s concepts of naturalized and internalized space and time in *The Condition of Postmodernity* and counters his materialist analysis of a worldmaking phenomenon by noting how these spatial practices omit a gendered and sexualized understanding of the domestic space. Additionally, Joseph Roach reminds us that spatial conceptions of conflict and time cannot be thought of without acknowledging the histories of white colonialism and hegemonic racialization¹²². Thinking alongside Halberstam and Roach—while considering Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s, Lauren Berlant’s, and Michael Warner’s suggestions of using queer theory as a critical lens to more broadly reimagine sociopolitical structures— if temporality queered and racialized deviates from the

¹²¹ Halberstam, J. Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subculture Lives*. New York, NY: New York University Press. p. 6

¹²² Roach, Joseph. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. Columbia University Press, 1996.

conventional white heteronormative schedules, then there also exists an alternative, fluid temporality for South Vietnamese people, especially in party settings.

José Esteban Muñoz extends a practical language for discussing a post-war temporal practice, in which his theory on queer futurity offers a reframing of reality via nightlife. Muñoz writes that, “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world,”¹²³ and suggests that queer nightlife and its spatial manifestations create an ephemeral sense of temporal freedom from the dominant quotidian patterns of heteronormative life. Within these hypersocial spaces, such as queer bars, clubs, and parties, they create an inherently collective temporality and potentiality by gathering queer individuals who share different backgrounds, upbringings, and experiences together to foster a supposed shared futurity. Idealistic and hopeful by nature, Muñoz’s critique of a queer utopia as “not merely a temporal stage, like a phase, but also a spatial one,”¹²⁴ hints at the limitations of the present or, rather, a “temporal disorganization, as a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a *then* and a *there* that could be and indeed should be.”¹²⁵

The queering, or reimagining, of South Vietnamese temporality thrives in the crevices of the everyday post-war schedule. Nightlife lends itself to party (and vice versa) because both operate outside the conventional rhythms of domestic schemes and socialist-influenced lifestyles. The South Vietnamese “party” is not so much a Muñozian utopia, freedom from

¹²³ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009. p. 1

¹²⁴ Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia*. p. 99

¹²⁵ Ibid. p. 97

heteronormative temporal lines, but a performance of disremembrance and toxic relief. A forgetting would not be appropriate as I am not arguing about an accidental act, nor is it a failure or neglect of remembering. Instead, it is an active choice to not engage with the past, a refusal of what is sanctioned as a remembrance. Only by conjuring the past in the first place can it be disremembered and gradually ceased. Though Muñoz discusses the “then and there” as an embodiment of an alternative temporality where the future is not a continuation of the presentation but a complete break from it, I borrow his idea of conjuring a “then and there” to suggest an alternative, nostalgic temporality that is radically separate to the present Vietnamese life but informs the South Vietnamese sense of futurity.

Nostalgia is a difficult phenomenon to describe and pinpoint because it is dependent on the individual’s culture, social environment, and past experiences, and it is imperative to discuss because nostalgia is a large determinant in defining South Vietnamese temporality. The term is most often described as a longing for a past that was once experienced or a desire to revisit and experience a former time. However, Svetlana Boym intriguingly details nostalgia as an act of remembering the past to sense a different future—a future that does not exist within the linear temporal plain. She explains nostalgia in three parts,

First, nostalgia is not “antimodern”; it is not necessarily opposed to modernity but coeval with it. Nostalgia and progress are like Jekyll and Hyde: doubles and mirror images of one another... Second, nostalgia appears to be a longing for a place, but it is actually a yearning for a different time... In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress... Third, nostalgia [is] not always retrospective; it can be prospective as well. The fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the

future. The consideration of the future makes us take responsibility for our nostalgic tales.¹²⁶

The stifling feeling that nostalgia embodies because of the conventional and normative delineations of time and space is a similarly complicated sentiment felt by South Vietnamese people. The history of South Vietnam is not a tale of peace or harmony, but depending on where one lands on the temporal line, the memory of a former South Vietnam may prove to be a time of less suppression. With multiple wars having ensued since the genesis of the formal recognition of a southern third of Vietnam, the history of violence (in all its versions) is heavily veneered onto the nostalgic tapestry of South Vietnam; as problematic as it is, violence becomes an oversaturated entity and is regularized into South Vietnamese daily life and its surrounding environments.

Though nostalgia and futurity might seem like contradictory concepts at first glance, nostalgia serves as a resource for utopian imagination and a reclamation of temporality. Boym refers to Michael Kammen's description that "nostalgia... is essentially history without guilt [and] heritage is something that suffuses us with pride rather than shame."¹²⁷ Conjuring memories about the former homeland is not necessarily one concretized by pity or sadness, but it is one of slight respite for South Vietnamese people. It brings a state of clarity, perhaps more color, and offers a more crystallized focus of a "South Vietnam that was," allowing for the arrival of a different kind of truth—a truth that is brought up more akin to what one would imagine is produced via a "state of sobriety," perhaps.

¹²⁶ Boym, Svetlana. "Nostalgia and Its Discontents." *The Hedgehog Review*, The Uses of the Past, 9, no. 2 (Summer 2007). <https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/the-uses-of-the-past/articles/nostalgia-and-its-discontents>.

¹²⁷ Kammen, Michael. *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*. Vintage Publishing, 1993. p. 688

The connotations of sobriety surely deal with matters of seriousness and clearheadedness; within the context of alcohol consumption, sobriety is about nonindulgence, abstinence, and recognizing a sense of moderation. The rhetoric of “recovery” is intertwined with sobriety, especially with the conversations surrounding drug abuse, but if there is a road to recovery toward South Vietnamese futurity, it is one deeply committed to the ease of harmful tensions due to being South Vietnamese in a post-war Vietnamese state. What may seem at first like an oxymoron, the stakes of practicing *nhậu* and partying materialize a South Vietnamese potential for a different sense of sobriety—a supposed clarity and serious sensibility of moving through the world as not simply Vietnamese, but South Vietnamese—albeit, through intoxication. Sobriety, of course, entails the notion of being not drunk, and it is additionally about the involved solemnity and pragmatism of the current reality. In this context, it means waking up sober and realizing the present circumstances in which one is in full control of operating.

For South Vietnamese, part of the sobering or clarity-inducing effect is the acceptance of a silent society. One steeped in trauma and one that does not talk about the Vietnam War because it cannot and must not. There is the underlying code that the Vietnam War and any aspect of the war is not to be spoken about. Throughout the country, for example, there are numerous museums, statues, sites, and festivals that commemorate the war and its honored leaders; the legacy of the events still exists in the daily memory and schedule of the Vietnamese. Annually, the government hosts multiple sponsored events, such as grand parades and lavish firework shows, to celebrate the end of the Vietnam War and the country's reunification on April 30. The day is filled with what is supposed to be exultant, festive

activities, but the celebratory crowd congregating at these functions—particularly those in Saigon who were former ARVN military members—may not be as immediately open to the fun observance of the holiday as their neighbors up north. For instance, I have three surviving uncles who fought for the South Vietnamese army, and none have ever willingly attended any state-sponsored or public event on Reunification Day. Rather, they host their own house party, which is an annual gathering on the federal holiday to *nhậu*, but their parties are not as easily discernible against the folks who are also partying in celebration of the actual day that ended the war. April 30 is certainly a loud, raucous day—not as it was in 1975 (the year of the Fall of Saigon) but the calamity is familiarly sensed. Vietnam today declares April 30 a national holiday where children are given a break from school and several companies may release their workers early during this period; for many families, this means throwing a party (similar to how Americans host Fourth of July celebrations). My three former ARVN uncles *nhậu* with a lot of beer, food, karaoke systems, and overall “good vibes” that circulate in the country on this day. However, my uncle’s party may look no different than the party next door that is also *nhậu-ing*—which perhaps comprises a Vietnamese family with staunch communist ties as their grandfather and uncles were leading members of the People’s Committee—but instead, they are choosing to celebrate Reunification Day as a jubilant holiday. No matter the reason for having the gatherings, both parties have the same beer accompanied by similar food, snacks, and elated feelings of gathering together, but the practice of *nhậu* is disparately felt and is an attempt to sense a clearer realization of their predicament.

I include this anecdote to bear the complexities that are involved in the practice of *nhậu* while extrapolating on the sobering effect I mean to address in this conversation about

drunkenness. Focusing on my uncles, the practicing of nhậu provides them with a beguiling sense of clarity as they meet, break bread, and share multiple beers with one another by making sense of the troubling post-war reality of a captured region, a renamed capital, a fallen Saigon.

The everyday reminds the South Vietnamese person that temporality and space of sobriety are not attainable in the real present but can uniquely be achieved via the “temporal disorganization,” as Muñoz suggests, through nhậu. In other words, a sober state is only felt and embodied by going through the very involved act of becoming-drunk. Within the drunken state, everything feels quite bewildering, and it is in the very process of acquiring that disorientation that is, juxtaposingly, a sobering moment. As much as alcohol dulls the senses, it awakens a liminal, suspended space that disremembers the contemporaneity of the problems, aches, sores, and traumas at hand and buried deep in the body.

A Becoming-Drunk & The Icing of Beer

One night, while out at a “sidewalk bar” I visit often, I sit next to several Vietnamese men on the sidewalk drinking beer and sharing a few dishes together. I typically sit by myself as I quietly immerse myself into Saigon’s nightscape, but this creates fodder for conversation as many people are quick to question why a woman is out at an establishment such as this streetside pub by herself. After exchanging a few words and learning that I was in Vietnam for research, they invited me to join their table for a couple of rounds of beer and nhậu. One of our significant dialogues was about why they were out drinking on a casual Thursday night. A man, or a “street uncle,” mentioned that he likes to nhậu because it “allows a chance to get

away from home,” while another humorously said, “The weather is too hot and there is no food at home.... What else is there to do other than to nhậu?”¹²⁸ My mundane interactions with these men were similar to those I had throughout my time in Vietnam. At the time, the inquiry I routinely posed about why people were out drinking proved to be of little significance. Now, in hindsight, their not being able to name a reason, or better, not needing a cause for drinking, signals how commonplace the practice of nhậu is for Vietnamese people.

To be clear, nhậu does not directly correlate to people always wanting to get drunk. Again, I contend that nhậu is to be thought of as an embodied practice, and it does not encompass a definable goal that is reached or needs to be hit. Certainly, there is the general presumption that the goal of drinking alcohol is to get intoxicated or drunk. Nhậu is not so concerned about reaching a peak as it is about the process of entering a state or the act of *becoming* drunk. As previously stated earlier, the typical phrase spoken aloud when alluding to the desire to party and consume a considerable amount of alcohol is “to get drunk.” Nhậu does not particularly connote the predictable action of getting into a drunken state, but the word insinuates the intention to feel a suspended reality, which I argue is the becoming-drunk. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of “becoming,” and the multiple workings of becoming-drunk are similar in design as the process does not have a final destination or end state.

In the seminal work, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari challenge traditional categories of the metaphysical as static or fixed in favor of a processual ontology. Within their philosophical framework of perceptual semiotics, the

¹²⁸ Personal conversation, March 3, 2023.

concept of “becoming” is a central tenet that challenges preconceived notions of being and embodiment. To define becoming is an arduous feat because the term was not intended to be a simple explanation as it would somewhat reduce itself to that of being. In their words,

A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or at the limit, an identification... Becoming produces nothing other than itself. We fall into a false narrative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes.¹²⁹

In its essence, becoming refers to a transformation, journey, or perhaps, a never-ending project of discovery and unlimited rediscovery. It is not about the “what” something is as much as it is about the “how” something is and something persists. The concept surrounding becoming drunk is similar in asking how a practice such as *nhậu* may heighten or deplete a person’s potential comprehension of a sober state. Another mode of thinking is questioning how South Vietnameseness and its knots are conjured, embodied, and consumed.

To become drunk refers to the process of doing, acting, enacting, but there is not necessarily at arriving at. The arrival would refer to the act of “getting” drunk, which differs to the durational practice of becoming-drunk. Deleuze and Guattari discuss the different becomings that may occur, such as becoming-animal, becoming-woman, and becoming-intense. All of these are concerned with how the trailing subject or matter “foreshadows and anticipates the life that erupts from it... but only to the extent that materiality is not reduced to objects alone but also includes events, processes and relations,”¹³⁰ as philosopher Elizabeth

¹²⁹ Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press, 1987. p. 237-8

¹³⁰ Grosz, Elizabeth. “Deleuze, Ruyer, and Becoming-Brain: The Music of Life’s Temporality.” *Parrhesia* 15 (2012): 1–13. p. 2

Grosz explains. Becoming-drunk is no different and has its own insistentcies. Where we drink, what time we drink, what we drink, and how we drink are key to this becoming, and there needs to be a proper setting of the stage. Getting drunk emphasizes the transition from sobriety (in its normative sense) and drunkenness while becoming-drunk highlights the process of consuming alcohol with the intention of reaching a level of intoxication but does not necessarily need to “hit” a drunken goal; the latter exists through a reflexive connotation that carries a more observational tone and is about appreciating the shift into an altered state of reality. For becoming-drunk, the *reach* is not as important as the *entrance* into drunkenness as well as the *exit* out of intoxication.

Becoming drunk is a sensorial experience, and instead of a dulling of one’s senses when one attains a level of drunkenness, one’s sensing of their surroundings are extremely heightened when intoxicated. The “experience of intoxication [is] a process of passive auscultation that values the subjective perception of time as lived reality,” writes Fernando Matos De Oliveira. A becoming-drunk insinuates a feeling that time is moving differently, and the individual goes along within this altered sense of time, even if that means the individual is not in control of it—temporality is managed and discerned by the alcohol itself, and in this sense, the “iced beer.” The process of becoming drunk works in multiple ways for the South Vietnamese body—one is about how the South Vietnamese body renegotiates its comprehension of reality; another is the reckoning, or the “coming to terms,” with the violent, repressive state of normalized life; and three, for the case of South Vietnamese people, it is a personification of the ever-critical “iced beer in a glass mug.” To put it differently, as much as

becoming-drunk is about the intoxicating journey of reorientalization within the body, it also entails the transformative process of beer-into-body and body-to-beer.

Media studies scholar Jim Drobnick writes of the performativity of alcohol, and argues that alcohol is an “inherently performative substance that is both the product of transformation (fermentation and distillation) and a transforming (intoxicating) beverage for those who consume it.” As much as it alters the drinker, the process of the alcohol distillation is a sensitive series of alterations. Like the creation of beer by germination, the act of drinking begins to grow after a temporary period of dormancy to begin fully fermenting in its given circumstances and develop its flavorful notes from the reality it has been maturing in, like how the body metabolizes over time. As yeast ferments the sugars into beer, the body absorbs alcohol into the bloodstream. Filtering occurs, which leads to the clarification and stabilization of beer, much like the body’s processing of alcohol defines the drunken experience. The final step is bottling the beer when the product is ready for consumption, which is rather emblematic of an eventual return to sobriety or reality. The creation of beer performs drunkenness itself; one, by means of drunken consumption, and, two, by means of attaining a transformative reality—of grain to water and of here to there.

However, the inclusion of ice is imperative to this conversation of drunken transformation and intoxicated personification. According to Elizabeth Leane, Carolyn Philpott, and Matt Delbridge, ice and humans have long “performed with and alongside each other”¹³¹ They describe ice as “hard, solid and weighty, and often associated with stasis (as in cryogenic freezing), ice is simultaneously dynamic: mutable, unstable, mobile and constantly

¹³¹ Philpott, Carolyn, Elizabeth Leane, and Matt Delbridge, eds. *Performing Ice*. Springer International Publishing, 2020. p. 2

in transition between the fluidity of water and the hardness of land.”¹³² Though they are discussing the anthropocene of ice and its relationship to the human environment and performance, it is important to view ice for the matters of this discussion as a dynamic, ever-changing object that deeply affects the surroundings ice is in (as well as the conditions affecting the ice) and is symbolic of an apparatus of perceiving, anticipating, and slowing down of time. When ice melts, it undergoes a visible, tangible, and measurable change from solid to liquid, showing the passing of time. Its ephemerality symbolizes the transient nature of fleeting moments and experiences, and the watching of ice melting may evoke a meditative state where one is acutely aware of temporal movements.

Not only is ice a physical marker of time, but when dropped into a glass mug and poured over with the warm, carbonated beverage of beer, the ice becomes an impediment to the process of becoming drunk. The ice melts into the drink and waters down the beer, making the beverage more flat and less tasteful. The ice slowly fuses itself into the beer itself until it renders itself intangible by touch. As cold as it may be, the beer no longer delivers the same potency of intoxication; the ice’s dissolving modifies the beer so that it provides a source of relief from the toxication—a modest spring that may provide some clarity and moment of hydration from a harmful, taxing practice of poisoning one’s body.

It is particularly important to highlight that ice, in this context of South Vietnamese-ness, is a part of the tropicalized webbing of what Hi’ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart calls “thermal colonization and settler refreshment.”¹³³ She

¹³² Philpott et. al. *Performing Ice*. p. 2

¹³³ Hobart, Hi’ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani. *Cooling the Tropics: Ice, Indigeneity, and Hawaiian Refreshment*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. p. 6.

explains how ice and coldness have exposed the colonial, gendered, and racialized dynamics of contemporary Hawai'i and how temperature continues to function as a complicated point of dispossession and pleasure for Native Hawaiians and Hawai'i locals. Hobart writes that "tracing ice and the cold offers a sensorial experience through line that connects power to pleasure as it traverses the racial and economic terrains of those multiple configurations... This phenomenon is akin to "settler common sense," as [Mark] Rifkin calls it: the lived conditions of settler possibility that appear self-evident."¹³⁴ Ice, then, becomes an indicator and symbol of colonial ideals of progress, assimilation, and civilization that contrasts indigenous Kānaka Maoli practices and epistemologies.

As Hobart suggests, ice is to be seen as a commodity—especially in a tropical climate such as Southeast Asia—as ice is typically purchased and not readily available through the small freezers typical of Vietnamese households, which is quite symbolic of a supposed currency for partying within the domestic spheres. The ice purchased is of a particular phallic shape—a cylindrical build with a substantial hole through the tube-like object and a girth that fits perfectly into the glass mug but still allows space in the cup to be filled with equal parts ice and beer. While one could drink without ice, even when the beer is chilled, most South Vietnamese people prefer to drink beer with ice, creating this habitual practice of adding ice to one's beer mug. As much as beer may be seen as the star of the *nhậu* production, it is ice that is a humble, quiet, but powerful supporting character; without ice, there is no beer consumption, and there is no *nhậu* experience. The ice is assumptively produced with clean water, but there is a common rumor—a rouse to downplay the significance of ice—that

¹³⁴ Hobart. *Cooling the Tropics*. p. 9.

persists of any type of bought cylindrical ice being made from unfiltered water. This is perhaps why the commercialized ice is always sitting in a bucket designated for the nhậu participants, and not for the women and children who drink soft drinks sometimes with a smaller ice block or with no ice at all. The ice not only changes the full taste profile and drunken effects of beer but there is a slight contamination that occurs with the icy inclusion “defiling” the beer.

Leane’s, Philpott’s, and Delbridge’s suggestion of the “liveliness of ice”¹³⁵ is at work here with the melting of the ice providing an intriguing way to reflect on the matters of temporality, subsistence, and sense-making through the object of the iced beer. The beer, by its nature, is meant to issue a feeling of intoxication, but in this context, ice simultaneously diminishes and aids in enhancing the state of drunkenness. Interestingly, Hobart details how icy temperatures signify “a negative value: the movement of energy in the form of heat away from the object (when you touch an object that feels cold, what you are actually feeling is the transfer of energy from your body to that object).”¹³⁶ As much as the ice is polluting the beer, the warm grip surrounding the beer mug simultaneously corrupts the assiduous work of the ice. Thankfully, Vietnamese glass mugs all have handles extended from them, and I suspect this inclusion surely proved extremely convenient and advantageous for those who are religious about their nhậu. Concurrently, it is the tropical climate of South Vietnam itself that is degrading the coldness of the beer as well as the flavor and potency of the yeasty drink. Though it seems as though Vietnam is situated in a well-suited locale for people to enjoy

¹³⁵ Philpott et. al. p. 15.

¹³⁶ Hobart, p. 10.

refreshing, effervescent beverages, the craving and need for, specifically, iced beer creates a thermal dependency and precarity birthed from Western imperialism, which the knot of South Vietnamese is involved with. Viewing the efforts of ice in this manner illuminates the knottiness of the act of becoming drunk; as much as it is an embodied practice, the becoming is realized through the scrutiny of body and beer—only by analyzing both does it execute a becoming drunk. In what follows, I creatively illustrate a representative case of the holistic becoming-drunk with the story of the anonymous South Vietnamese uncle and his *nhậu* experience with his visiting family relatives.¹³⁷

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During a family party on the outskirts of Saigon, there is a man: a typical sixty-something-year-old Vietnamese uncle wearing an untucked collared shirt with cargo shorts. Just as he enters the relative's home, he finds a seat around a thin, round steel table already set with plates of food and other men ready to commence the party. As it is somewhat customary, someone from the host's family grabs the man a can of beer to drink. No questions are asked about what kind of beer he would like—the only option is Tiger beer. The uncle snaps open the can and immediately pours the room-temperature beer into a glass cup filled with ice. Letting the beer sit for a minute, he waits for his first sip after everyone else find a place at the table. The men all gather and they, too, have a cup of iced beer. Together as a group, the men passionately shout, “*một* (one) – *hai* (two) – *ba* (three) – *dô* (transliterated as “cheers”)!” Immediately, they all clink their glasses and take large gulps from their glasses. Some finish

¹³⁷ This is a creative ethnographic retelling of an experience I witnessed of a dear uncle of mine. He has now since passed and so the portion of this dissertation is dedicated to his memory. Funnily enough, I am reminded of what he once shouted at a family party in Saigon, “I’m old and I’m going to die soon. I will never give up beer. Why quit now? I’ve been fine this whole time.”

the glass while others only drink halfway. The amount consumed does not matter so much as does the energy that is sent toward the center of the table after the communal clang.

The night progresses, as does the number of crushed beer cans surrounding the men's feet. The table, once filled with food, is covered with water due to the condensation spewing from the glasses. The man's face is completely flushed from the alcohol and, perhaps, the sticky heat of the summer evening. As the ice melts away into the beer, someone grabs an ice block from a questionably clean bucket with their bare hands and replenishes his mug. Letting the ice stand above the mug's rim, the uncle's drinking mate slowly tops the glass with some beer. Just enough so that the color of the liquid in his mug has somewhat of a golden tinge. Again, the men repeat their routine of yelling, smoking, drinking, joking, and refilling for hours, and the volume only grows as their verbal slurring becomes more apparent. Going back to the uncle, he slowly sways back and forth to keep his balance upright from the struggle of sitting on a small plastic stool all night. With each gentle bodily lean, another small bead of water drips from the table. The man is clearly drunk and tired, but no one stops him, not even his wife. The conversation and drinking finally climax with an almighty "*dô*" for the last time with beer spilling over from their harsh communal clinks. The men sloppily say their goodbyes and individually leave the party premises either by motorbike (scarily enough) or on foot. With his wife walking ahead, the uncle departs and does not look back. What is left behind is a mountainous pile of aluminum cans, a metal table engulfed under a sea of glass mugs, and scattering puddles of water across the concrete patio.

This is what is superficially seen: the uncle goes through the process of achieving a state of intoxication; underlying are the transformations occurring within the body. The South

Vietnamese uncle does not become-drunk by merely physicalizing the ritualistic actions of consuming alcohol. He becomes-drunk by willingly poisoning his body in order to distort his sense of reality. Prior to stepping foot into the home, the uncle is cognizant of his sociopolitical surroundings. Drawing upon his lived experience, he was perhaps only a child when the Fall of Saigon happened and the sounds of the Lunar New Year fireworks are reminiscent of the bombings heard while his mother was trying to put him to sleep at night. While no fireworks are shooting in the neighborhood, the booms heard from setting up the entertainment system speakers are no different to him. There is more of an occasion to *nhậu* because a family member is visiting from the US whom he has not seen in a few years. They are his wife's cousins who fled the country upon the reunification of Vietnam. The sweat on his forehead is comparatively less than his cousin-in-law's as they complain about the unbearable summer humidity, almost as if they have never experienced such weather. "You really are Americans," the uncle jokes.

Upon the first cheering, he notices his cousin-in-law gulping down most of the beer in his mug. Thinking he is a little thirstier than most, his assumptions prove to be wrong as he overhears how beer in Vietnam does not faze him. "It's the ice," the cousin provokes. Our hero—the uncle—attempts to drink at the same pace as the visiting family member. With each sip, his temples pound louder from both the amount of beer consumed and cold temperatures reaching his head. The memory of his childhood home grows more clear as the sensation of pulsating punches on his face grows; this is perhaps because the cousin is describing what his American neighborhood looks like and the grandiose nature of it. He remembers how there was no refrigerator growing up and the excitement when he could purchase a small one to fit

their daily leftovers. The uncle takes another sip. He leans in to listen to the conversations but slowly loses interest in the topics being discussed, which are unsurprisingly about the US. The uncle takes another sip. The ice melts more into the beer, and so does he in his seat. The top of his mug is now mostly clear, and so is his thinking and imagination. He wonders if his cousin-in-law is lying about what the US actually is made out to be, especially as he was very close to fleeing South Vietnam as a child. Maybe he would wear athletic shoes with socks more instead of the silicone slides he dons daily or sit more upright because there is no need to slouch as there are backings on chairs. He thinks perhaps he would not be as dark and tan as he is now; a lighter version of him frightens him as he presumes it would make him look too ill. The uncle takes another sip and stands. Upon reaching the most upright position, the alcohol rushes even more to his head, and he actually feels drunk. Now, he can actually hear the conversations happening around the table. Now, he can freely speak, even if that means talking to himself in his head. Now, he can roam the party without taking more than a couple of steps away from his seat. Now, the uncle feels like himself. This is his sober state.

Hours pass, and the uncle is forced to leave by his wife. He says goodbye to his visiting cousins and even gives them a hug, which he never does, though what seemed like a hug was more of a hovering arm maneuver over the shoulder. The uncle actually does look back, but not with his eyes. He reflects on his fading intoxication upon realizing how pitch black the night sky is outside. He questions, “What if my family and I left Vietnam? Would life be different?” Seemingly, he answers himself with, “I probably would not understand the Vietnam of today, but I would better remember the Vietnam that once was.”

Let us revisit the uncle's gaze throughout the party. What proceeds is not his direct testimony, but instead, it is a critical sensing of *something else*¹³⁸ that is informed by the gaps and omissions that ethnography cannot fill. It is best realized by critically and creatively engaging with the object, the performance, the becoming-drunk. A fabulatory reading allows us to delve into the speculative and affective realms of drunkenness that capture the imaginative, fluid, and subjective dimensions that are intrinsic to this discussion of intoxication. This approach offers a more textured, full-bodied analysis that acknowledges the layers of meaning and experience that cannot be fully documented through observation alone.

The man is not so much fixated on the matters of the table or his cousin-in-law's life as much as his sightline is always on the glass mug. His awareness of space and time is dependent on the changing states of the drink before him. He starts with an empty mug—a reference to his neutral state, his daily being, his hollowness. The first item that enters the mug is a block of ice, a penetrative chill, a freezing over of the void. Then, a snappish opening of the can is heard, and outpours the warm, yeasty beverage—dissolving the ice, infusing its remains with the beer. The beer is no longer pure; it becomes tainted with the dirt in the ice, and the taste is immediately watered down, but is it even appropriate to think of purity with a fermented, malty drink? Each sip offers a replenishment. As the ice further melts, a clear band of liquid sits atop the golden beverage. The uncle is refreshed after having a bit of his drink; what is not clear is if the proceeding sigh of the uncle is from the crispness

¹³⁸ Saidiya Hartman uses the phrase to describe how the sharing of experiences and feelings that the women in her life have lived through enable her to “hear *something else*” in the archival data and documents she researches. Though she is using the phrase to explore Black existence, I am influenced and inspired by Hartman's ability to hear *something else* as I, too, feel *something else* when I extrapolate and theorize on South Vietnamese performance.

of the beer or the flavorless relish of having some water after a full night of consuming only alcohol.

The table becomes wetter from all the condensation around the table, and the droplets from the condensation meet the uncle's thighs. He takes this moment to realize he might be overheating and begins fanning himself. As much as the uncle is getting cooled down by drinking the icy beverage, the beer only makes his chest feel hotter. The uncle's now scarlet-colored chest has several sweat beads dripping from his neck downwards, but the perspiration begins on his forehead from the sticky humidity of the day's weather. His senses blur, not just from the beer, but from the memories seeping through each sip, mingling with the present. The heat, noise, laughter, and distant echoes of a past life all meld into one continuous flow. Much like the beer and ice that mix within his glass, there is a flow that provides a sense of muteness from the clamor as well as clarity from the ruckus from his daily life and responsibilities.

As the uncle takes another slow slip from his beer mug, he feels the duality of his state: both grounded in the physical discomfort of the tropical heat and yet drifting in the intangible space where his memories, dreams, and the numbing effects of the alcohol intersect. The edges of his world soften; time loses its rigid structure, temporal lines are more flexible, and what remains is a suspended moment where the boundaries between past and present, self and other, right now and later on, blur. He is not just drunk; rather he is inhabiting a different reality, one that may ground him as he is actively poisoning his body with the near-dozen cans of beer consumed. Each gulp brings with it a surge of nostalgia, a longing for a past homeland that is irretrievably lost yet hauntingly close. The past floods

back to him—not as it was, but as he wishes to remember it, tinged with both the clarity and distortion that nostalgia often brings. The uncle senses the warmth of the alcohol coursing through his veins as well as the juxtaposing cooling temperatures from the ice down his throat. As the sounds of the conversations regarding his cousin-in-law’s experiences start to fade and his back muscles begin to grow tired of holding his body upright all evening on a tiny stool barely catching his butt, the uncle silently reflects on a life that could have been should the war have favored the South. The act of drinking—with its repetitive toasts and communal shouts of “*dô*”—becomes a ritualistic reenactment of these memories, a way to momentarily reclaim a time when life felt both antithetically simpler and more complex, when each moment carried the weight of personal survival with the potential promise of transformative renewal.

Yet as the alcohol deepens its hold, something else begins to stir—a sense of a South Vietnamese future that is as elusive as it is compelling for his ways to speak once more to his lost family members, to be able to *nhậu* with them just as he is doing so here at this, and to potentially learn from them of what to do differently so that the future holds more prospects for South Vietnamese to exist. Even if he is not actively engaging in the lively conversations around the metal table, he is participating in the discussion through the silent but dynamic observances of the other men around the table drinking with him. In this haze of intoxication, the uncle is sensing in his body the growing pulsings at his temples as he now has lost count of the amount of beer he has consumed. The drunkenness brings forth a sense of freedom, a fleeting yet powerful feeling of clearheadedness that the future is still open, still full of potential, a future that may be defined by the uncle, for the uncle. It is not yet

inscribed, even in the face of the constraints and losses that have shaped his life or in the political script that the post-reunification Vietnamese government continuously recites. In this state of strange sobriety, the uncle is not just reliving memories or escaping the present; he is also imagining a different reality—a new beginning where the past and present might finally reconcile from the occurrences of past killings and violence, where the struggles of his childhood seeing the sites of war with his own eyes might give way to a more peaceful existence, where the Vietnam of today might somehow align with the South Vietnam of his memories.

But this state is fleeting as this is—after all—an ongoing process, a becoming. As he stands to leave, the world around him sharpens once again. The mountain of beer cans only grew that much more as his wife helps to sweep up the cans towards the center of the party space to put them into garbage bags. The weight of reality settles back on his shoulders, and the sounds that were dampened are now increased to his neutral volume—the party does not necessarily end in his imagination, but the party now fades. The uncle is left to navigate the darkened streets with his drunken mind and body that has been slipping among temporal and spatialized plains and is only now starting to come back to the ordinary. Leaving behind the remnants of his inner journey, he walks home, but his steps are uneven, so his wife holds onto him even as he pushes her grasp away. Like the question previously noted, he ponders as he nears his home, “Would life be different?”

Conclusion

Drunkenness, as we have seen, serves as a state and site where cultural identities are both expressed and negotiated. Whether through the ritualistic consumption of beer in social settings or the greatly entangled and embodied performance of sobriety through intoxication, South Vietnamese people engage with cultural scripts that deal with the issues of temporality, nostalgia, and futurity that govern how drunkenness is perceived. These performances, or acts of becoming drunk, while dismissed as mere expressions of an altered state, work to reveal underlying social dynamics that shape and are shaped by the practice of *nhậu*.

The exploration of the nuanced process of a becoming-drunk emphasizes the cultural significance of drinking and partying to South Vietnamese-ness. It becomes evident that intoxication is not merely a physiological state but a complex practice of being able to feel a contradictory sense of clearheadedness amidst the raucous noise, nostalgic memories, and embodied violence that comprises South Vietnam. The experience of becoming drunk disrupts conventional perceptions of the post-war Vietnamese temporality to allow for a temporary suspension of the everyday and an entry into a liminal, “drunken-yet-sobering” state where the sensing of the present is blurred, but the past and future are conjured in ways that call upon nostalgia to inform a futurity of South Vietnamese-ness that may continue to resist the national envelopment to greater Vietnamese-ness. Linking South Vietnamese-ness to the drunken body and the motif of the iced beer serves as a means to understanding why the practices of partying hold complex though essential sociopolitical stakes for the continuation and sense-making of the South Vietnamese identity. In this way, this chapter lays the groundwork for further exploration into how the cultural dimensions of drunkenness and acts

of becoming drunk influence and are influenced by broader historical events of violence and societal structures that work to silence bodies and erase memories.

Chapter 4: Drunken Hope, Drunk In Dreams: Transnational Performances of Party and Community in Orange County's Little Saigon

“But Little Saigon as strategic hamlet is not just physical real estate. It is also mnemonic real estate, for according to the informal terms of the American compact, the more wealth minorities amass, the more property they buy, the more clout they accumulate, and the more visible they become, the more other Americans will positively recognize and remember them. Belong would substitute for longing; membership would make up for disremembering.”¹³⁹ — Viet Thanh Nguyen

“Refugees didn’t just escape a place. They had to escape a thousand memories until they’d put enough time and distance between them and their misery to wake to a better day.”¹⁴⁰ — Nadia Hashimi

“i live next to a cute little vietnamese family and they have a party every weekend, which they recently invited me to and im kinda excited for. honestly i hear them and they always sound like theyre having the best time... can someone tell me how the fuck they keep going? my liver would be fucking wrecked.”¹⁴¹ — Anonymous Facebook user

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In this final chapter, I transport the focus of the dissertation from the performances of party seen and embodied in the Vietnamese motherland to examine how South Vietnamese-ness is renegotiated and re-interpreted across the Pacific in the special Little Saigon community in Orange County, California. Drawing from and inspired by the case studies noted in the previous chapters—such as Saigon’s red-light districts, the icon of the bar girl, the significance of street karaoke, and the act of becoming-drunk—I utilize the theoretical frameworks established to explore how they function within the largest

¹³⁹ Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. Harvard University Press, 2016. p. 41

¹⁴⁰ Hashimi, Nadia. *When the Moon Is Low*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2016. p. 298

¹⁴¹ Facebook comment in the “Subtle Viet Traits” group, March 2023.

Vietnamese diaspora of the US and a diasporic community that notably maintains its deep sociopolitical allegiance to the former South Vietnamese nation-state. Though I do not necessarily look at how karaoke or drunkenness are found in and later “translated” to the diaspora, I am most interested in how these subtleties of naughtiness and pleasure from the previously explored performances are uniquely re-realized and re-sensed in Little Saigon. The act of partying in Little Saigon is not so much about the strict following of the aforementioned Saigonese affairs, but rather, I explore how the embodied lexicon of partying in the motherland constructs and, thus, *instructs* what I term a “diasporized party playbook” for finding enjoyment and pleasure, and it embodies what Ramón Rivera-Servera calls “quotidian utopias.”¹⁴² I analyze the businesses found in Little Saigon, as well as the “every week” practice of the quintessential house party, which I argue are key performances of party found within the metaphorical playbook. At the same time, I illustrate how the refugee immigrant community has ubiquitously created a new motherland for second-generation South Vietnamese immigrants to find community and reference in the future (and, hopefully, continuously edit and revise for the generations to come).

In what follows, I draw upon auto-ethnographic observations of three different parties: 1) the 2024 Lunar New Year festival events in Little Saigon; 2) the South Vietnamese-style café-bar; and 3) the household family party.¹⁴³ I argue that these spaces embody distinct nodes of *ham chơi* (“to play in excess”) and festive celebration that carry over from South Vietnam,

¹⁴² Rivera-Servera, Ramón H. *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics*. University of Michigan Press, 2012.

¹⁴³ I specifically use data collected from November 1, 2023, to February 28, 2024 to frame my analysis on partying during the busy holiday season, as this is when many social events and family gatherings occur. The specific holidays during this time that are often celebrated by Vietnamese-American families are Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year’s Eve, and Lunar New Year (Tết). It is also during this period that many families and loved ones visit each other and prevalently interact with the Little Saigon community.

which provides a legend of how to feel as if one is partying in Saigon from day to night, public to private, speeches to songs. At the same time, the diasporic party recognizes its spatial differences, compelling the diaspora to practice and enact a type of naughtiness that works against assimilation from the contemporary Vietnamese and American governments to provide a greater sense of pleasure and South Vietnamese-ness. I also include personal conversations with South Vietnamese immigrants from varying generations as well as my own experience being in these spaces as a family member and visitor to Little Saigon. While I recognize the limitations that this chapter brings forth as I narrowly focus on one South Vietnamese diasporic community that concerns a larger global diasporic network, my chosen approach serves to nuance our understanding of South Vietnamese worldmaking. By using a performance studies lens and writing from the vantage point of someone who carries the embodied cultural knowledge of South Vietnamese partying in both motherland and beyond, I provide unique insights into the affective experiences of the diaspora that constitute the transnational sensations of South Vietnamese-ness.

The concepts of hopes and dreams are two I purposefully save for this chapter investigating Little Saigon. Hope is a significant concept in minoritarian and diasporic studies as it is because of hope that catalyzes the creation of a thriving diaspora. This is not to say that the analysis of hope is not suitable for the happenings in the homeland. However, in a post-war era of South Vietnamese remembrance with the entanglements of nostalgic longing, there are greater stakes involved for a diaspora that holds dearly onto the claims of hope. Hope becomes the currency that generates a cultural stock by which hope is expended and utilized to create the conjured diasporic community. As theorized by Ernst Bloch, hope is active and

linked directly to praxis, and hope is not passive but embodies an engaged anticipatory consciousness that mobilizes change and progression.¹⁴⁴ That practical action of hope is enacted by constructing a nostalgic South Vietnam, a home away from home. I agree with Gabriel Marcel that hope should be distinguished from optimism, which the latter entails a sense of superficiality. “Optimism remains strictly in the province of the ‘I myself,’”¹⁴⁵ Marcel notes, and hope encompasses an expectation or transcendence that should be in company with others.

Ideas of hope can be found in Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “Third Space,”¹⁴⁶ which provides a helpful method of thinking about the transnational knot of South Vietnamese-ness despite the heavy critique of Bhabha’s work itself. The hybrid zone that is neither colonizer nor original culture, where cultural meanings are negotiated and transformed, emphasizes the potential for new identities within, for, and by the diaspora. The Third Space, or “site of enunciation,” as Bhabha suggests, conjures new cultural articulations and disrupts the binary oppositions of the us-and-them and inside-and-outside for an “in-between.” For South Vietnamese immigrants, a Third Space is perhaps one that can act as a mediator between the (re)creation of a former Saigon and the (re)presentation of a Saigon that could have been. Little Saigon simultaneously is and is not one’s homeland by Bhabha’s technicality. The diasporic commune acts not only as a site of resistance, as Karin Aguilar-San Juan and Phuong Tran Nguyen propound; it is a liminal space that manifests a sense of remembrance

¹⁴⁴ Bloch, Ernst. *The Principle of Hope*. Translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight. MIT Press, 1995.

¹⁴⁵ Marcel, Gabriel. “Sketch of a Phenomenology and Metaphysics of Hope.” In *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysics of Hope*, 3rd Edition. New York: Harper & Row, 1965. p. 34

¹⁴⁶ Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. 2nd Edition. London: Routledge, 1994.

and regrowth through the proxy of hope. It is important to remind ourselves that these hopeful feelings are deeply cemented within the treacherous path of displacement, bloodshed, and sacrifice. These mixed emotions and knotted tensions are what Paul Gilroy terms the “diasporic consciousness.”¹⁴⁷ The version of Saigon seen in Orange County is not a mere example of mimicry or reproduction. The diasporic community of Little Saigon is a reconceptualization of the sociopolitical contours that make up a South Vietnamese evocative of the anti-communist rhetoric and robust alliance with the American government. Aguilar-San Juan writes,

The construction of Vietnamese America is a gesture to the symbolic or perceived aspects of community and place often embedded in complex ideological narratives, such as the notion of Little Saigon as the capital not just of Vietnamese America, but of the Vietnamese “free world.” Although analytically the material and discursive aspects of community and place are separate, in reality these aspects are closely interwoven and interdependent.¹⁴⁸

Here, in Little Saigon, the hybrid nature of South Vietnamese, or more so, cultural fluidity, as Bhabha suggests, fluctuates among the patriotic ties and nostalgic memory of the homeland, the allegiance to the West, and the hope for a continuation of a community over which they have full sociocultural manipulation.

The concept of the hybrid has faced reproach for presupposing a pre-existing, essentialist site of origin. Because the framework of hybridity is often imagined as the result of the merging of two absolute entities, the notion overlooks the inherent fluidity and

¹⁴⁷ Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*. Reissue Edition. Harvard University Press, 1993.

¹⁴⁸ Aguilar-San Juan, Karin Aguilar-San. *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009. p. 2.

constructed nature of identity. Similar to this project, I occasionally grapple with—and at times inadvertently reinforce—the idea of an essential South Vietnamese identity that needs to be preserved, rediscovered, or transmitted. What I emphasize in my argument is that the practices of partying and so-called naughtiness are not merely inherited traits, but rather, they are cultural expressions that have been actively invented and constructed as a means of sustaining South Vietnamese identity and affect. The practices did not arise spontaneously; they are embedded in specific historical and sociocultural contexts. Nevertheless, I assert that the practice of party should be understood as expressions of an immutable essence that has simply been hybridized from an original purity.

There are additional criticisms of this concept due to the ambiguity and ethics of hybridity of the possibilities of a third space. Critics have argued that the confusion of whether the third space is a tangible, experiential, or existential place proves challenging to apply this concept in practical terms, albeit through a lens of pessimism.¹⁴⁹ The intentionality behind a non-violent and inclusive approach to resistance is questionable because, essentially, the hybrid practices should not coerce people to sacrifice their cultural identities. In Little Saigon, this actually exposes the complexities of the looming right-wing politics that have resulted from the assimilationist impetus to adopt American imperialist ideologies.

The Vietnamese “free world” that Aguilar-San Juan notes is a community “behind the Orange Curtain”¹⁵⁰ that openly supports conservative-leaning policies. For instance, 2016 was

¹⁴⁹ See Junyoung Park’s “Postcolonial Pessimisms and Alternative Spatial Practices: Critical Interpretation of the concept of the Third Space through the Case of Fatahillah Square, Indonesia,” Fetsen Kalua’s “Homi Bhabha’s Third Space and African identity,” and Leela Gandhi’s *Postcolonial Theory* (Columbia University Press).

¹⁵⁰ Coined during the early formalizations of Orange County in the latter half of twentieth century, the phrase is a play on the “Iron Curtain” and refers to the conservative, homogenous characteristics that separate Orange County from other liberal-leaning counties in California, such as neighboring Los Angeles County.

a significant presidential election year as the voting results would either allow former President Donald Trump another term or bring forth then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to take the helm of the Oval Office. As the Republican Party nominee, it was no surprise that Trump leaned heavily into conservative rhetoric, but the influential grip he garnered on the campaign trail radicalized many American populations in middle or suburban America. Orange County has notoriously voted red since its genesis, though there has been a slight shift in residents voting for more progressive politicians in recent years (but the growth has since stopped in 2024).¹⁵¹ However, despite his anti-immigration laws and calls to deport Vietnamese immigrants that would upset a sizeable immigrant community, Trump was able to corral many Vietnamese Americans—particularly those living in Orange County’s Little Saigon—to vote for him. This support has grown to intense fervor with dozens of Trump banner postings throughout the community’s main streets and dedicated pro-Trump speeches at local cultural events. In 2022, I attended one of the Asian Garden Night Market events hosted annually in front of Phước Lộc Thọ—a shopping center in Little Saigon that is the cultural emblem equivalent to New York’s Empire State Building. Besides the dozens of food vendors and pop-up shops featured at the night market, there was live entertainment featuring local singers, dance crews, and bands. Though not a presidential election year, there were several pro-Trump statements from one of the evening’s emcees; interestingly, he was the designated Vietnamese-language host for the night. Offstage and to the side stood a table under a white tent asking folks to pledge their vote to Trump for the 2024 primary elections stocked with Vietnamese-language pamphlets explaining Trump’s future agenda.

¹⁵¹ Schallhorn, Kaitlyn. “Orange County Voter Registration Data Shows GOP Gaining Ground.” *The Orange County Register*, July 21, 2024.

I do not mean to veer away from the main exploration of the South Vietnamese sense-making by means of partying, but it is imperative to expose the political convolutions of a diasporic community that considerably enjoys partying because this is, yet, another naughty knot to transnational South Vietnamese-ness. Unlike the mother nation that had to politically submit to the communist government upon the Fall of Saigon, the founding members of Little Saigon refused to acquiesce. However, in their non-compliance and unacceptance of the Vietnamese communist party, they accept a method of governance that bolsters anti-communist rhetoric. This innately reinforces US imperialism and underpins the country's invasion into Southeast Asia; they, the Americans, were fighting to save the Vietnamese people and the existence of Little Saigon proves their point of the (South) Vietnamese needing to be rescued. While this may not be the persona the community exudes, it is one that is subjacent to the Little Saigoneses' notions of hopes and dreams. The extra sense of naughtiness enwrapped against this complication is Little Saigon's refutation of the "American savior" attitude via a refusal to become "fully" American by constructing and sustaining the new and reformed capital for the South Vietnamese diaspora. As Phuong Tran Nguyen suggests that "refugees are ultimately wanderers in search of a government that will respect and protect their human rights,"¹⁵² I contend that the creation of a Little Saigon serves as the former refugees' hopeful way of searching and fabricating that special government—one that will not support the killing of their own blood as well as one that will also not abandon each other during times of desperation. The knottiness of South Vietnamese sociopolitics, hope, futurity, and cultural identity form asynchronously together and become an act of "bad behavior" as

¹⁵² Nguyen, Phuong Tran. *Becoming Refugee American: The Politics of Rescue in Little Saigon*. Asian American Experience. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017. p. 3

the diasporic community repudiates both the now-guardian of contemporary Vietnamese citizens and then-liberator of South Vietnamese death.

Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities"¹⁵³ is often utilized when theorizing about diasporic communities, and Little Saigon shares similar sentiments in that the community members are never to know each other intimately, but the image of the cultural communion persists in all. Those Andersonian imaginative renderings and print capitalism are brought to life via the duo English-Vietnamese-named streets in Westminster, California, and the Vietnamese language-only signages plastered on the side of bus stops and plaza marquees. For example, *Đại lộ Trần Hưng Đạo*, known as Bolsa Avenue for many—one of the main Westminster streets claimed and renamed by the Vietnamese immigrant-led state legislature—is the name of major roads in Vietnamese cities across the nation. The boulevard is named after thirteenth-century Vietnamese royal prince Trần Hưng Đạo, a revered military commander who directed Vietnam to victory from two large-scale Mongol invasions led by the notorious Khublai Khan. Trần Hưng Đạo is seen as a national hero by the Vietnamese people because of the prince's multiple successes in pushing out the Chinese, who are considered to be Vietnam's longest-standing rivals. Upon the reunification of Vietnam, many streets in Saigon were retitled to honor top Vietnamese communist generals and politicians, such as Lê Duẩn, Tôn Đức Thắng, and Võ Nguyên Giáp—all leaders who are also seen as national heroes by supporters and citizens of the former DRV.

I provide this anecdote of the Bolsa Avenue renaming because it encapsulates the knot of diasporic identity and homeland nostalgia. In such a way, because the nation and its people

¹⁵³ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 2018.

were never “saved,” there are no proclaimed South Vietnamese governmental or military heroes. Trần Hưng Đạo’s patriotism for his country and ability to drive out significant violent aggressors are characteristics of high value for the South Vietnamese. The prince stands in as someone the South Vietnamese feel is adequate to admire publicly because he holds no linkages to communism, and, more pertinently, the symbolism of resistance he embodies aligns with contemporary South Vietnamese ideals. Just as Trần Hưng Đạo dispelled the Mongol army from a military takeover, the sentiment of power through dismissal is felt by constructing a diaspora that expels North Vietnamese and communist sympathizers. The Vietnamese royal figure becomes a crucial personage that South Vietnamese immigrants can latch onto without the vulnerable reminder of the Vietnam War, but with the fervent recapture of a Vietnam that they once experienced. As Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen suggests, “the act of remembering is a means of bring the past alive, and an imaginative way of dealing with loss... For refugees, memory acquires a particular power and poignancy, since the country that they remember is now lost to them.”¹⁵⁴ It is the closest to an encounter of being back on a nostalgic, pre-1975 South Vietnamese street without having to walk down an actual “memory lane” that has vanished.

Anderson suggests this “deep, horizontal comradeship”¹⁵⁵ needed to create the sense of solidarity needed to form and sustain Little Saigon, which I agree with to a certain extent. However, the South Vietnamese diasporic community, I assert, must simultaneously subsist off the horizontal plane. The cultural and emotional boundaries of Little Saigon were built by

¹⁵⁴ Nguyen, Nathalie Huynh Chau. *Memory Is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora*. Praeger, 2009. p. 5.

¹⁵⁵ Anderson. *Imagined Communities*. p. 283.

the first wave of refugee immigrants in the 1970s, and these original members have dictated the appropriate narratives of belonging and community. As more Vietnamese-Americans move into the enclave who have little to no South Vietnamese roots or know their mother language, horizontal comradeship needs to include more notions of a pan-Vietnamese identity and, in that sense, lose some aspects of their South Vietnamese commemoration. What is important to note is that filial piety still holds strong in Vietnamese households. With many people solely following the original rhetoric of the sociopolitical constitution of Little Saigon out of respect for their elders' words, it proves challenging to enact a comradeship inclusive of all Vietnamese diasporic voices, especially of those who did not flee South Vietnam or attach themselves to the South Vietnamese identity. To these people, the remembrance may read as an ostracizing act that drives Little Saigon and its people further away from contemporary Vietnam, making the gap between the cultural motherland even wider. Similar to how Christian Collet and Hiroko Furuya navigate the ways that Little Saigons around the world are finding place and agency fifty years after the war, the diasporic community has become more of an "imagined political community"—one that embodies a "long-distance" South Vietnamese nationalism, moving the community framework from "enclave" to "place" to now "nation," affirming the territorial significant of naming an area as Little Saigon.¹⁵⁶

I contend that the community seen, felt, and embodied in Little Saigon rejects the post-reunification ontological construction of Vietnam today. The South Vietnamese identity arguably exists more so outside of contemporary Vietnam, and this is because of the staunch

¹⁵⁶ Collet, Christian, and Hiroko Furuya. "Enclave, Place, or Nation?: Defining Little Saigon in the Midst of Incorporation, Transnationalism, and Long Distance Activism." *Amerasia Journal* 36, no. 3 (January 2010): 1–27.

sociopolitical affiliations that Little Saigon has to the remembrance of its former homeland. Though I want to move away from the narrative of South Vietnam being a “lost nation,” it proves challenging because this is still a popular opinion within Little Saigon. The mourning involves multiple losses. In terms of global sociopolitics, the forced forfeiture of South Vietnam to its communist opponents showcased the instability and weakness of the South Vietnamese government that failed to protect its citizens; this, of course, led to one of the largest refugee crises of the twentieth century (and human history). There are still many South Vietnamese (and North Vietnamese) people who remember a geographically undivided Vietnam, and so their nation had already vanished as people recognized that a civil war would come to fruition, forever changing the sociocultural atmosphere of Vietnam. For South Vietnamese citizens, the eventual loss of the nation-state felt like a doubling-down of sorrow and catastrophe. Then came the loss of personal and familial trust. Hundreds of thousands of loved ones were tortured and murdered in the hands of their own blood, which for many were not only by their Vietnamese neighbor but their blood family and kin.

Additionally, the loss of one’s national and cultural identity is sensed disparately across the generations. Those who fled their homeland right as the war was ending or after the events of the Fall of Saigon only knew of their South Vietnamese national identity. It was only by crossing the borderlines and waterways that their identity shifted from South Vietnamese to “refugee,” which the latter oftentimes became the more heavily used identity marker by the West. The “1.5 generation”¹⁵⁷—immigrants who come from a young age (or are born in refugee camps abroad), retain some memories of their homeland, and can typically speak and

¹⁵⁷ The University of California. *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight and New Beginnings*. Edited by Suheng Chen. Temple University Press, 2006.

understand their mother language—and their connections to South Vietnam are of a fractured past. Their formative years are generally within their settled community, and the memories of the homeland may be blurry or skewed for many. For second-generation Vietnamese Americans, such as myself, the national identity of the country they reside in takes precedence, and there is no archive of memory to gather about South Vietnam. The memories of South Vietnam are filtered down by the elders and parents of those from the first- or 1.5-generation, which does not inherently make them “natural” memories for the second generation, where the individual remembers the event or item and the sensations for themselves. YẾN Lê Espiritu suggests the phenomenon of “postmemory” in young Vietnamese Americans’ conjurings of memories of a war that they did not experience firsthand. I view them as “embodied memories” to accentuate the significance of performance and embodiment in this discussion. “The post-war generation’s practice of looking to their present conditions in order to understand their parents past corroborates one of the strongest and most enduring premises of Walter Benjamin’s conception of history: the belief that it is not history that enables us to understand the present but, conversely, the present that enables us to understand the past,”¹⁵⁸ writes Lê Espiritu. These intangible sights, sounds, scents, and dreams of the past are passed down from the parents’ and family’s histories that encode the cultural conscience of the second generation and provide an understanding of South Vietnamese-ness; it may not be easy to articulate verbally but South Vietnamese-ness lives within the body seemingly straightforward, though still challenging to formulate in reality.

¹⁵⁸ Lê Espiritu, YẾN. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees*. University of California Press, 2014. p. 170.

According to Jonathan Boyarin, “memory is not only constantly disintegrating and disappearing but constantly being created and elaborated,”¹⁵⁹ suggesting that there can be a transference of feelings, thoughts, and sensations across lineages, creating a well of “embodied memories” to gather from. By no means does this affective movement of memory mean an automatic passing of all matters South Vietnamese to the next generation. However, Boyarin notes that “the nation, then, works ‘through the body,’”¹⁶⁰ and the South Vietnamese nation is memorialized—not to be confused by the nation being in existence—through the diasporic body that resides in a foreign nation. This differentiates the South Vietnamese body living in Vietnam under post-reunification governance because that body is rendered as a Vietnamese national. The South Vietnamese body abroad is neither “today’s Vietnamese,” nor should it be labeled as a “South Vietnamese of the past.” The South Vietnamese diasporic body is a nation suspended and a memory politicized for sociocultural survival and dissimulation from mainstream post-war Vietnamese communism as well as anti-immigrant American rhetoric. Boyarin further states,

Memory cannot be strictly individual, inasmuch as it is symbolic and hence intersubjective. Nor can it be literally collective, since it is not superorganic but embodied. The conundrum disappears as soon as we remember that what we are trying to understand is not really a relation between body and group via culture. What we are faced with—what we are living—is the constitution of both group “membership” and individual “identity” out of a dynamically chosen selection of memories, and the constant reshaping, reinvention, and reinforcement of those memories as members contest and create the boundaries and links among themselves.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Boyarin, Jonathan. “Space, Time, and the Politics of Memory.” In *Remapping: The Politics of TimeSpace*, edited by Jonathan Boyarin, 1–37. University of Minnesota Press, 1994. p. 22.

¹⁶⁰ Boyarin. “Space, Time, and the Politics of Memory.” p. 25.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. p. 26.

The array of memories that the South Vietnamese diaspora selects is staunchly curated so that the narrative that persists is that of a nation lost. The prominent existential dilemma is that, no matter the generation, all South Vietnamese people living outside of Vietnam are considered to be *Việt kiều* or “overseas Vietnamese,” where one’s identity is not tightly tied to a nation but tethered to a grand, open void. While there are the presumptions that *Việt kiều* are mostly South Vietnamese refugee immigrants and their descendants (without ever naming the cause of their exit), the term has now expanded to include all Vietnamese people who live outside of Vietnam. Further, this is why the claims of a Little Saigon hold that much more urgency, especially for the South Vietnamese who fled the country. The creation and continuance of a Little Saigon serves as the socio-intellectual generator and cultural capital of a regenerated South Vietnam. It is within Little Saigon that *Việt kiều* families and individuals can (re)attach their South Vietnamese identity to their uniquely constructed, semi-tangible nation.

Similar to how Diana Taylor explains the modes of cultural transmission and the mutually influential interactions between the archive and repertoire, sharing memories from an older generation of South Vietnamese is a means of transmitting knowledge and accruing cultural autonomy for the legacy of South Vietnam to prevail communally.¹⁶² Taylor views the archive as a site of power at the expense of the acknowledgment of the repertoire. In Little Saigon, the distinctions of what archived materials count are blurred as many objects—such as historical documents, clothing, film collections, and personal diaries—perished, destroyed, or were lost on their journey out of the Southeast Asian country. At the time of the

¹⁶² Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

establishment of the diasporic community as well as the continuing growth of the “new” Saigon, the archive came to consist of similar records, clothing, collections, and journals, but these tangible objects were created and constituted outside of the homeland. For example, in Orange County’s Little Saigon, the documents proving the residents’ immigration and naturalization to the US now precede their lost identification papers from South Vietnam. A new diary is perhaps started, and this diary eclipses the writings they formerly wrote because the foreign ink and visibly written text exceed the previously written thoughts. It is within the repertoire where transnational South Vietnamese—ness—one that is cognizant of a past Saigon and present Little Saigon—is sensed and perpetuated. The embodied performances I specifically analyze are those found within the South Vietnamese practice of party as I argue that it is within the party that South Vietnamese immigrants of all generations may communally sense a piece of the homeland that becomes the common embodied lexicon shared amongst each other.

For many Little Saigon residents, traveling to Vietnam is financially and emotionally challenging, and I argue that partying becomes an imperative cultural practice that invokes South Vietnamese—ness that allows a closeness to the homeland. For South Vietnamese immigrants in Orange County who may or may not have any lived experiences or relationships with a pre-1975 Saigon, participation in the communal acts of drinking, singing karaoke, and partying with other South Vietnamese immigrants is an embodied entryway to the “imagined community.” The Little Saigonese structures featured all over Westminster and Garden Grove, and the living room space filled with food, beer, cognac, microphones, and playing cards are the fertile grounds to sense a South Vietnamese—ness adjacent to that sensed

across the Pacific. Never does it outrival the feeling of partying in the homeland, but it provides pleasurable satisfaction that recompenses the inability to experience South Vietnam again. For second-generation immigrants, partying can be seen as a cultural practice to connect themselves to the homeland that has been passed down via the previous generations. Simultaneously, the specific partying acts in the diaspora enact a South Vietnamese-ness that leans into the familiar naughtiness sensed in the homeland and recognized by the parents and elders of the 1.5- and second-generation.

I forward the Vietnamese phrase “*ham chôi*,” which simply means “likes to play” to better explain and analyze the naughty sentiments behind the partying that happens in Little Saigon. *Ham chôi* is a naughty term itself because it encompasses many meanings at the same time. While “to play” reduces the phrase to have a rather adolescent undertone, *ham chôi* is used similarly to an adjective in English to describe someone who willingly seeks out and indulges in pleasure. Fun is inherently embedded within the word, but it is a type of fun that is not implicitly “clean” or virtuous. *Ham chôi* embodies a sensuality that is cognizant of its own defiance and provocation but needs not be sexual; it is about not following the rules just enough so that there exists a comfortable sense of trouble that can and should be aroused. Vietnamese-American and former refugee storyteller V. Châu’s poem “Ham Chôi” attempts to define the phrase to explore refugeedom, queerness, and Vietnamese immigrant identity.¹⁶³ Châu writes,

Ham Chôi is the craving for play
a feeling akin to the delight of a child

¹⁶³ *Ham chôi* is not intrinsically a term that denotes queerness, but there are underlying sexual tones within the word itself that offer a way of thinking through a Vietnamese sense of queerness, particularly when discussing matters of pleasure, rebellion, and excess.

around a sprinkler on a hot summer's day
But *Ham Choi* isn't so simply childlike joy; there is subtext;
Ham Choi is an accusation of pretense;
A desire to put on a show.
Ham Choi is **a question**.
An interrogation asking: **"Who do you think you are?"**
Ham Choi reminds you to **know your place**[...] ¹⁶⁴
Ham Choi is the insistence on liberty
A State of being
A being which is free. ¹⁶⁵

Typically, one does not call themselves *ham choi* as labeling someone as such is seen and felt as a negative critique of one's character and lifestyle. Parents and elders quickly use this term to describe their younger family members as misbehaved or unruly children. Because the sensations and actions of play are intrinsically embedded within the term, there is the connotation that one does not want to work and not feel restricted in life, deeming them as insubordinate. *Ham choi* is not so much about actively rejecting work as it is about knowing their lives are not centered and do not function around work. The party is what drives the individual. *Choi* literally means "to play" in the Vietnamese language, but *ham* may be defined as "greedy" or "extra." Châu notes the phrase's slight feeling of lavishness and excess; I view this as not quite having to assert the aggressive need to have fun, but rather *ham choi* embodies an understanding of *how* to have an amplified sense of fun and carefreeness. In a sense, the embodied notions required for enacting *ham choi* assist in bridging a transnational understanding of partying.

¹⁶⁴ The emphasis was added by the author of the original version of the poem.

¹⁶⁵ Châu, V. "'Ham Choi': A Poem About the Intersection of Queerness, Refugeedom, and Third Cultural Perspective." *Public Allies: Everyone Leads* (blog), June 20, 2021.

The Vietnamese phrase has particularly been adopted and reclaimed by the diasporic community as a unique identity marker for second-generation South Vietnamese who work to separate themselves from their Vietnamese peers in the homeland. By no means is the term exclusively utilized by South Vietnamese. With Saigon's extravagant partying habits and vibrant nightlife spaces, the *ham choi* lifestyle is intrinsically woven into the cultural landscape of the southern capital. However, I draw attention to the significance of how the term is uniquely realized in the diaspora, especially as the diasporic community does not have the same nightlife infrastructure as Saigon's. In conservative-leaning Orange County, there is no major or dominant nightlife scene compared to Los Angeles' party neighborhoods, such as West Hollywood, Silver Lake, Long Beach, or Downtown Los Angeles. Unlike the ear-deafening sounds and booming sights in South Vietnam's capital, Little Saigon mirrors its county's docile and reserved vibes. Many bar and nightclub establishments in the area close before or at midnight all days of the week, and most businesses work to contain all music and noise from the establishment within closed doors. While the public streets and sites may not have the same nodes of *ham choi* as those found in Saigon, the playful sentiments in Little Saigon are found within the similar actions of gathering, drinking, and singing inside these establishments. Additionally, acquiring a sizeable house on private property holds vital importance because the enclosed structure allows these party actions and naughty behaviors to ensue and be contained.

I explain this to signal the nuances of understanding that although there is an extra-daily want to party, there is also a South Vietnamese need to have fun and feel free. The knottiness of the South Vietnamese immigrant experience that entails trauma, separation,

desperation, and violence receives a slight moment of respite when there is a celebration to be had. The call to “let loose” takes different meanings as it is not only about temporarily letting go of the present stressors or allowing the body to feel a sense of lightness, but it is about being able to loosen up the South Vietnamese diasporic knot via party. This particular knot entangles the varying struggles of the different generations and their vast degrees of connection and allegiance to South Vietnam; this is why it is extremely complicated to discuss the transnational South Vietnamese identity as “motherland separation” further expands among and separates the generations. For first- or 1.5-generation immigrants, they may view South Vietnam as their motherland, and this may not be the same for succeeding generations. For second-generation South Vietnamese (and those of future generations), the ties to a cultural motherland are not as easily defined. While one should not necessarily need to exist over the other, this often happens due to assimilationist practices within Vietnamese diasporic families to integrate more so into US culture, which can deem someone as more culturally “American.” Nonetheless, this should not negate one’s connections to a culture they have been fully immersed in since birth—the culture, here, being that of (South) Vietnamese-ness. Though I cannot speak on behalf of all Vietnamese immigrants, I, too, feel caught in this knot, and it is most felt when traveling to the actual country; I may speak “good” Vietnamese, but I will never be a “true” Vietnamese citizen in their perspective (and rightfully so in many ways). This study involves observing three distinct “parties,” each comprising members from different immigrant generations mingling with one another, in order to analyze the embedded codes of diasporic partying that are being transferred from citizens of the motherland to former South Vietnamese refugees to second-generation South Vietnamese immigrants. This

is not meant to declare that there are only three types of parties; rather, these three are regularly found, sensed, realized, and practiced in Little Saigon and its constituents.

The Funeral Procession: A Party of Melancholia

Spread along the popular Bolsa Avenue in Westminster, California, with colorful banners and extravagant floats, the city hosted the 2024 Tết Parade, celebrating the arrival of spring and a time of rebirth. In what is perhaps the most auspicious animal of the Vietnamese zodiac cycle, the dragon was welcomed in mid-February to the streets and homes of Little Saigon. According to centuries-long folklore, it is believed that the Vietnamese people are direct descendants of the mythical creature, marking 2024 as a year of novelty and nostalgia, where families embrace the meeting of new spirits as well as the return of loved ones. Given that this was my first time commemorating the Lunar New Year with my extended family in Little Saigon, this was an appropriate way to contextualize the complicated emotions I felt being at the parade.

My extended family (aunt, uncle, and two younger cousins from my maternal side) and I were situated near the beginning of the parade at the intersection of Bolsa Avenue and Magnolia Street, within 70 meters of the parade's main stage and half a block away from Phước Lộc Thọ. The day was beautiful and sunny, with clear, blue skies and a slight breeze running through the street. The wind helped to complement the hundreds of colorful flags proudly flying above the plaza buildings. There was a mixture of flags featured, such as the dragon-themed banners to the dynastic Vietnamese five-color square with ragged edges. What overwhelmed the streets—and particularly caught my attention—were the thousands of South

Vietnamese and American flags lined across the blocks, zigzagging their way down to Bishop Place. Though unsure of what to expect from the parade's opening act, I certainly did not anticipate large groups of high school students dressed in JROTC uniforms to commence the celebrations. The parade's pre-opening festivities were very militaristic, which began with a local San Diego high school drill team performing, then moved on to include an army-like Reveille of the respective star-spangled and three-striped banners accompanied by Garden Grove High School's marching band and color guards. Most performers, with the exception of the students in JROTC and the marching band, and public audience members were dressed in the traditional Vietnamese *áo dài*. I broke the protocol by wearing a jacket and jeans to the celebration, which ended up being a point of intriguing contention for many of my family members as they were shocked to learn that I do not have any *áo dài* of my own. What followed next were the lively lion dance routines on the Westminster streets. It was performed by beginner-level dancers and musicians first and transitioned to intricately choreographed dances that involved difficult lifts and jumps from the advanced performers.

After the lion dance ended and moved down the street from where we were, the parade officially began. What I believed was the start of the parade turned out to be a series of long speeches from Orange County council members, Vietnamese community leaders, and children, interspersed with the occasional short singing or dancing performances from the children. The parade finally commences after the near-hour-long addresses, and the first exhibition seen is, once more, the South Vietnamese three-striped flag, held up by nearly a dozen people. Following directly behind are a dozen more people carrying the US flag; these individuals seem to be high school students, juxtaposing the older Vietnamese people leading

the youth. The first ensuite of groups and vehicles pass, which includes the JROTC team earlier mentioned, the Vietnamese-identifying politicians of Westminster, and a dark, armored tank-like truck with a white police officer and K-9 dog popping out of the top, waving to the people of the city; immense cheers all around for these parade participants. The militarized portion of the parade slowly fades into the main portion of the parade: the displays of dragon puppets and floats, as well as the many marches and banners presented by predominately Vietnamese American students, musicians, dancers, martial artists, pageant queens, California public education representatives, and district leaders. A profound moment was the inaugural inclusion of Viet Rainbow of Orange County (VROC)—a grassroots organization that is dedicated to the promotion of healing, equity, and justice for LGBTQ+ Vietnamese Americans—in the 2024 parade. As its members and affiliates proudly waved the various queer-identifying flags and their handmade queer-themed dragon puppets, there was an evident drop in energy and applause from the crowd that I stood near despite VROC being the last community organization of the parade. In the midst of a sea of militaristic green and khaki floats, the sparkling rainbow *áo dài* were refreshing to see. Rounding out the daytime festivities were the presentations of the parade’s sponsors and another round of performances and displays of US military troops. One of the very last vehicles of the parade towed a military-grade helicopter with the paramedic red cross symbol and South Vietnamese flag printed on both sides. One of the designated emcees was clear in stating that the helicopter—which was presented by the Association of Vietnamese American Allied Veterans and Descendants—was “not used in the Vietnam War,” and instead, it symbolized the brotherhood and alliance among the American, South Vietnamese, and Korean veterans.

Having celebrated Tết in South Vietnam last year in 2023, this was a stark contrast to the grandiose traditional dances seen, extravagant firecrackers popped, live singing heard, and hip-hop and pop performances observed in the Lunar New Year celebration of Saigon's District 1. The contemporary Vietnamese government has its fair share of displays of the military, but there was far less military or police presence than what was seen on Bolsa Avenue. Certainly debatable, there was more of a sense of fun and frivolity than the happenings in Little Saigon. I do not want my words (and bias) to negate my overall experience at the Orange County festivities; however, I cannot but compare the strong sentiments of solemnity and remembrance that are fabricated and designed into the Little Saigon parade to the overwhelming feelings of excitement and merriment from the Tết events in Vietnam. Interestingly enough, many parade-goers and all the emcees were joyously cheered as former members of the ARVN and US military, current American soldiers, and California police officers marched down the road. The phrase "Chúc mừng năm mới" was exclaimed throughout the day by everyone, and there was a great fervor sensed when cheering on the new year to the veterans who fought for the diaspora's safety and survival in both South Vietnam and the US. It was in those acclamations to one another that the party was enacted.

The party in the streets of Little Saigon is certainly not the same as those found in Saigon, nor do I think it should be because the festival holds different stakes for a community birthed from war and bloodshed. As much as Tết is seen as a time of celebration, the fact that Tết can even be appreciated and celebrated is something that the members of Little Saigon do not take for granted. The very act of life is certainly a call for celebration, and the party is

crucial for the diasporic community's sustainability. Tết is a formal version of the party—where people are expected to don traditional wear, attend the festivities, and (re)instill the centrality of community. To fully take over multiple blocks and streets to celebrate what is an imperative cultural holiday is illustrative of the immense acts of resistance and survival to be able to see another year. Though it is a temporary claim to Bolsa Avenue, it is, nevertheless, a public assertion that not only can Vietnamese culture thrive overseas, but it is also a loud statement that the South Vietnamese identity will not be lost despite the long crossings over oceans and borders.

There is a conventional belief that parties should be considered “celebratory” events, but there is no rule that they must bring a sense of elation. Take the instance of the funeral or memorial service. For T. O'Rourke, Brian H. Spitzberg, and Annegret F. Hannawa, the difference between “funeral” and “memorial service” is the presence of the body; the former generally includes the body while the latter involves the body's absence.¹⁶⁶ It is indubitably an emotionally sad event to wish a loved one goodbye (and I acknowledge that there are times when deaths are joyous occasions), but funerals act as a way to commemorate the life someone once had and to recount the moments shared with the person or being who passed. In the case of South Vietnam, it is particularly tricky because the body is arguably both absent (a nation no longer here) and present (via the lives of the South Vietnamese abroad and their embodied memories). Perhaps, here it is more appropriate to call this a melancholic party as it evokes a deep, pensive sadness in its participants that transforms into a less woeful feeling and brings forth a sense of hope and a celebration of having that hope. The funeral definition

¹⁶⁶ O'Rourke, T., Brian H. Spitzberg, and Annegret F. Hannawa. “The Good Funeral: Toward an Understanding of Funeral Participation and Satisfaction.” *Death Studies* 35 (2011): 729–50.

offered by O'Rourke, Spitzberg, and Hannawa is dependent on the religiosity of Christian belief, but the usage of the term funeral appropriately allows a reclamation (or resurrection, if I may) of the South Vietnamese national body. The metaphorical body is visibly evident via the floats moving through the streets with the different generations of South Vietnamese gathering together. All the while, there certainly is the element of memorialization of South Vietnam throughout this event because of the reality of having this parade outside of the motherland itself. The practice of having this parade is a proclamation to the former South Vietnam noting that we—in Little Saigon—have never forgotten our roots and we remember the homeland by paying tribute through the celebratory display of festivities.

The South Vietnamese body (or nation) is also seen via the object that is numerous mentioned—the South Vietnamese flag itself. Originally designed by South Vietnamese artist Lê Văn Đệ, the golden banner with three horizontal red stripes is simple in its design. There are several meanings that historians have noted—such as how the triple bands have the Chinese divination sign of heaven—and the symbolism behind the choice of three lines is interesting because it denotes the three geographical and cultural regions of Vietnam: North, Central, and South. In essence, the flag does not only bear significance for the South Vietnamese people in sociopolitical recognition, but it is also the cultural cognizance that there are three very distinct regions that have the prospects of coming together as one unified front. At the same time, a less idyllic post-war reading of the flag depicts the bands as three deep crimson slashes across the yellow body¹⁶⁷. Horizontally laid, there seem to be three

¹⁶⁷ I use “yellow body” as a descriptor of the Vietnamese skin tone. I do not mean to make it a political statement by calling the Vietnamese identity “yellow” in the ways that Asian American scholars have used color to discuss matters of race and ethnicity.

blood-filled streams running across the swampy grounds; vertically hung, the bloody waterways dribble down to a scarlet pool imbued with drops of violence, fear, sacrifice, and death. The flag is surely a contested one for many Vietnamese people because the display of the flag is banned in the Southeast Asian country, both in person and online. Similarly, the post-war Vietnamese flag that depicts a singular yellow star in the center of a red banner is not at all appreciated or socially permitted to be displayed. Though there is no official ban on the one-star flag, there is an unspoken rule among members of the community not to showcase the Vietnamese banner in any public or business setting. Befittingly named the “Heritage and Freedom Flag,” the South Vietnamese ensign is a symbol of that ever-important distinctive heritage of being South Vietnamese as well as the freedom that is represented by being able to wave the banner. The procession of the flags is, thus, an important practice of celebrating that cultural agency over what is a greatly convoluted situation of remembering a former death and honoring the life of the present and ahead.

No funeral ends without a gathering of invited attendees to break bread together and provide a lasting moment of embrace in Vietnamese families; Tết is no different. If the annual Lunar New Year parade in Little Saigon is to be viewed as a funeral procession, then the party extends to the festivities that follow with the street vendors providing food and drinks to their guests and the public members greeting each other as they make their way through the lively environment. I acknowledge the capitalist aspect of having to buy an arrangement to sense partaking in a communal feast, but in the case of Tết, the exchange and expenditure of money are extremely important practices, especially in one’s accrual of good fortune for the new

year.¹⁶⁸ There are many disparate beliefs regarding money spent on Lunar New Year, but one that I have been aware of for years (and one my family follows) is that there should not be any unnecessary purchases during the Tết holiday, but the money one spends or gives away on these days is to be seen as wealth that will come back another day in, hopefully and potentially, tenfold. Thinking alongside a funeral service, there is typically the donation of gifts to the mourning family; monetary offerings are one kind of donation that may be presented, but in this metaphorical case, the vibrant exchanges of conversation and community are just as bountiful to give away and receive. As mentioned, if we are to think of hope as a form of cultural diasporic currency, then the members interacting with one another to form an actual community instill a sense of hope for more gatherings as such to occur.

The American military invitation to the party is notable in its show of political alliance and mournful solidarity with the procession. It would be quite wrong not to invite the US military to the parade as they are key stakeholders in the construction of Little Saigon, and it would be underhandedly discourteous should they not provide a sign of lamentation and sorrow for a population that they actively hurt, violated, and murdered. Despite the display of military regalia being a firm reminder of the very cause of why the Little Saigonese residents are displaced from South Vietnam, their presence is significant for the continuation of the celebration itself. While I cannot comment on how Vietnam may have been should the US not have interfered in the country's political affairs, I contend that should the US (and other Western countries) not have allowed Vietnamese refugees in, then there would be no

¹⁶⁸ There is the traditional practice of providing and accruing “lì xì,” or red envelopes containing money. Typically, elders provide to the younger generation (particularly children or unmarried people), and people who are working give away envelopes to both younger and elderly people (the latter as a way to thank them for their past labors).

celebration, no parade, no party. The perpetuities of South Vietnam and its remembrance and Little Saigon and its existence are tautly tethered to the US, whether the diasporic community agrees to it or not. For the most part, there is an informal unanimity that the American military is openly welcome to the party as an active celebrator and pallbearer; that is contingent on as long as Little Saigon continues to uphold its allegiance to the US.

The party is portentous in the appropriate ways that culture and traditions call for, but it is one that serves as a greater performance of remembrance and a momentous act of honoring the events that have led to the creation of the new homeland, the safe haven, the new Saigon. The annual festivities of Tết are a party-like act of recalling the foundational themes that Little Saigon was cemented on, which are those of community, nostalgia, and resistance.

The Renovated House: Whose Party Is It Anyway?

I acknowledge that there are varying traditions and different customs that each household carries with them as they host parties, and the South Vietnamese are no different. While I would like to comment on the different house parties that I have been to around Orange County, I spotlight the party events from one particular aunt and uncle's house. Perhaps the choice is biased, but my aunt is one who is very close to my mother as they migrated from Vietnam to the US together in the late 1980s via refugee sponsorship. However, among the entire family that I have grown to know, her house is often the most frequented of everyone else's. On the outside, the house appears to be an unassuming one-story home with light blue painted panels and a substantially-sized front parking lot. Stepping inside the house, it immediately opens to an empty, but spacious living room. The connecting

kitchen is quite small for what is deemed as the “party house.” When one walks further inside and around the house, the realization hits—“Oh, *they party hard.*”

The living room extends to the backside of the house, where it becomes a fully enclosed, air-conditioned, and marble-tiled recreational room with five large folding tables and dozens of stools stacked against the wall, ready to be set up at a moment’s notice. The room has its own television, but it is not meant for movie viewing. Instead, it is directly connected to the karaoke system to display the necessary lyrics and the input can be toggled to view the party from the live-feed camera that sits at the top corners of the room. A small disco ball dangles above the music area, which sits two large soundboards, several large speakers, three subwoofers, and four wireless microphones. The situation is further complicated by the fact that her husband is also a performer in one of the local Vietnamese cover bands in Little Saigon, so the room also acts as a storage unit for the different musical instruments, such as two acoustic guitars, an electric guitar, a tambourine, an electronic drum kit, and multiple sets of bongo drums.

Right outside the party room is an outdoor kitchen, which makes sense since no food is ever cooked on the indoor stove. The makeshift kitchen reminds me of the countryside kitchens of rural Vietnam where the gas range is set up on the ground and enclosed by the layering of sheet metal. Similarly, my uncle constructed the kitchen himself using wooden planks bought at the local hardware store, and the cooking area is roofed by screwing metal panels down with a blue tarp on top to soften the noise should rain hit it. The kitchen is more functional than the one indoors with a sizeable gas range, a deep fryer, multiple restaurant-

sized stock pots and woks, a commercial-grade washing basin, and a full pantry that almost looks like a small Southeast Asian grocery store.

When asked why my aunt and uncle—Cô Mai and Chú Khánh¹⁶⁹—decided to include these two rooms, they gave interestingly similar answers that revolved around the capability of having parties. My aunt stated that she, “doesn’t want to cook inside the house and ‘stink it up.’ The inside kitchen is for heating up food or keeping the food warm. The outside kitchen helps us feed the village without having to clean up that much.”¹⁷⁰ My uncle commented that “the room gives [them] more excuses to party and *nhậu*. I spent a lot of money on this, so I have to put it to good use.”¹⁷¹ Their two sons—who at the time were in college and live at home—told me that they could not have strong opinions about the interesting additions to the house as they are in their bedrooms for most of the family events, but it “gives [their] parents fewer excuses to call them out of their rooms since they’re too distracted with singing and dancing.”¹⁷²

Cô Mai and Chú Khánh work lay jobs, following the regular eight-hour shift on the weekdays. My aunt works at a local pharmaceutical factory on the packaging line, and my uncle works as a general handyman for a manufacturing company. They are true blue-collar, middle-class people, and they certainly believe in the “work hard, play hard” motto. With the two most utilized rooms of the house, the extensions were actually built illegally as they were

¹⁶⁹ Pseudonyms. In Vietnamese, “cô” means paternal aunt and “chú” means paternal uncle. Though I know these two particular aunt and uncle from my mother’s side, they have insisted on me using those titles when addressing them.

¹⁷⁰ Personal conversation, February 9, 2024.

¹⁷¹ Personal conversation, February 9, 2024.

¹⁷² Personal conversation, February 10, 2024.

not able to acquire any state paperwork or county permits to approve their proposal. As of mid-2024, the official blueprints of the house still do not include these enclosures. Should the government learn of this, they would not only have to pay a fine, but they would need to demolish the two structures as my aunt and uncle are both aware that the rooms do not follow the typical California regulations for home renovation projects. I asked my uncle if he was afraid of all of this happening, and he responded with a passionate “Not at all! Why would I be? Let them come for me! This is harmless as compared to the other things people build and put into their houses.”¹⁷³

Their “sacrifices” are deeply felt by the other family members as it is because of the naughtiness and misbehaviors that have designated them as the main party house. My aunt and uncle are living embodiments of *ham choi*, especially in the eyes of my other family members who love to party. While most live in Westminster, Garden Grove, or Santa Ana, there are a handful of uncles and aunts who live in the Corona and Chino outskirts (both outside of Orange County) and willingly drive over an hour into Little Saigon just to have a family dinner together at Cô Mai’s and Chú Khánh’s house.

Dinner does not only entail gathering around a table and breaking bread with one another; it is also about enjoying each other’s company by partying. To have a meal in Vietnamese is to “*ăn cơm*,” or literally to “eat rice.” The phrase is regularly used by all Vietnamese households. However, in my family, the saying gets somewhat distorted in definition as *ăn cơm* during the weekend evening essentially means to *nhậu*. On an average Friday or Saturday night, there are approximately ten to twenty people dining at Cô Mai’s and

¹⁷³ Personal conversation, February 10, 2024.

Chú Khánh's house. The dinner meet-ups have become a normal part of their weekly routine, and no considerable planning takes place anymore. It is just understood that all food will be ready by 6:30 PM, beer is located in the designated refrigerator¹⁷⁴, and paper plates and utensils are all set in the storage corner of the party room. My aunt is always quite surprised that I ask her about preferred arrival times and how I should assist her in preparing for the party. She is quick to remind me that "it's not a party... it's just dinner."¹⁷⁵

On an average Friday evening, for what is simply "dinner," Chú Khánh usually tunes his guitars and conducts a speaker and mic check by 6 PM. *Chả giò* (fried spring rolls), *tôm chiên* (fried breaded shrimp), and *cháo gà* (rice porridge with chicken) are the typical Vietnamese offerings chez Cô Mai. The other family members that drive in usually bring other complementary shareable dishes, such as sashimi platters, salads, *chè* (tapioca dessert), or American-style pizza for the children. Once the hand turns to the half past hour on the clock, my uncle begins to play his curated playlist of Vietnamese bolero music.

Similar to the gatherings in Vietnam, the parties at my aunt's and uncle's are no different in gender separation. The men are usually at one table while the women are at the other. It is no secret that I drink and, unlike the other women in the house, I do not have any children to take care of, so I am always asked to join the men's table.

Anecdotally, my aunts and uncles are all first- or 1.5-generation Vietnamese immigrants; second-generation Vietnamese Americans usually sit at another table, male and

¹⁷⁴ My aunt and uncle have three refrigerators (one inside the house with a pull-out freezer and two in the garage) and two freezer chests. There are also two wine coolers stacked on top of each other located in the under-utilized living room.

¹⁷⁵ Personal conversation, February 17, 2024.

female together. The understanding is that the “children”¹⁷⁶ will talk to each other in English while the “adults” converse in Vietnamese as this may promote conversations more naturally. The moment when someone begins to age out of the “kid’s table” and starts to drink is when things get confusing because there is no designated “English-speaking adult” table, or at least, not at my family’s parties. When I am in Little Saigon interacting with this side of my family, I am the eldest of the American-born Vietnamese children. While I cannot confirm this, it seems that most of my second-generation cousins prefer to speak to their parents in English (and their parents speak back in English as well). I am lucky and privileged to say that I can speak and understand Vietnamese, so I am able to move around (though I usually sit with my uncles) and mingle easily; however, my cousins (the sons of Cô Mai and Chú Khánh)—who are well over the age of twenty-one but do not know Vietnamese well enough to speak comfortably on their own—opt not to when there is a party at home, hence why they are always in their bedrooms after they are done with their meal, for example.

The beer is cold here—no ice or glass mug required—and this is probably why everyone tends to get tipsy quicker. To a certain extent, I believe this is warranted because everyone wants to break through the small talk and sing karaoke, particularly the ladies opposite of me. With more beer bottles clinking, family members entering through the door, fish sauce spilling, and laughter filling the air, the dinner “party” commences.

My uncle turns on the karaoke screen to illuminate the neon-colored lyrics and accompanying bootleg visuals. The first beat of the song plays, and everyone jolts as they are

¹⁷⁶ “Children” simply means the children of the elder family members and does not immediately denote a minor age. There is even a joke spread amongst the second-generation Vietnamese community that “we can never leave the kid’s table because our parents haven’t told us that we could move.”

caught off guard by how loud it was originally programmed. As the host, Chú Khánh sings the opening song with his eyes closed and Heineken beer in hand. An aunt pulls out her phone, opens her Facebook app, and begins livestreaming Chú Khánh's performance. With her phone up near her face, she walks around the room and narrates everything she sees, "Today is another dinner at Mai's house. We are eating delicious food that Mai cooked and the other dishes that everyone brought with them.... Everyone say hi... Okay, in, in—one, two, three, cheers!" On Chú Khánh's last sung word, everyone cheers as he sits down and someone else takes over the mic. This pattern repeats, and there seems to be an untold, but clear understanding of who is going next with no interruption of flow.

About a couple hours into the evening gathering, the uncles slowly stand up and gently begin moving the dining tables and stools. They clear the space to set up their "stage." Chú Khánh grabs his acoustic guitar, and three other uncles prepare their instruments—one on drums, another with the tambourines, and the last getting the mic stand propped up to his preferred height. In what seems to be such a choreographed and timed transition, the last karaoke singer finishes their song, and a drum barrel is struck. "Here we go! One, two, three..." exclaims an uncle, and the music heard is no different than the recorded Vietnamese bolero beats heard a few seconds ago. However, it is about having the ability to play the music aloud, embody the rhythms, and belt the lyrics that make this karaoke session a momentous, extraordinary one.

Unlike the Saigonese streets, karaoke has to be performed behind closed doors. Many businesses in Little Saigon have designated karaoke nights, but there is a heightened sense of pleasure in having the ability to perform and move with less public judgment (though I

believe the harshest commentary spoken of someone's singing is always from a family member). One could argue that the ongoing livestream expands the performance out to the greater public, that is, the Internet, but beyond singing talent, it is about the option to sing and to sing what one pleases. Similar to the street uncle of the precursory chapter, the songs chosen by my family in the US are those of a past lover, a past life, a past homeland. It is through these songs that connect my uncles and aunts to the Vietnam they remember, the Vietnam that once was.

When I spoke to a few of my younger cousins about how they felt when seeing their parents sing karaoke every week, I sensed feelings of awkwardness. Presumably, it is from me asking them a strange question, but also they have not had a substantial conversation with anyone; they have been attached to their phone screens since arrival. A fourteen-year-old cousin said that she “thinks it’s cute,” noting how she enjoys seeing her parents dance together, though she finds it embarrassing to know that they dance “in that [ballroom] style.”¹⁷⁷ The form of dance my younger cousin is mentioning is that of a slow, swaying cha-cha-cha pattern—one that nicely accompanies the Vietnamese bolero beats. Being that the dance style embodies a sensuality that may be quite jarring for children to see in their parents who are not the most sensuous in their everyday behaviors, I admittedly chuckled hearing her say this as I thought about my own parents. Another cousin, who is twenty years old, first laughed at my question and replied by saying that he has no strong opinions, but he “just doesn’t like the music because [he] hears it everywhere... And the music is kind of depressing

¹⁷⁷ Personal conversation, February 10, 2024.

to listen to.”¹⁷⁸ I asked him if he understood the lyrics, to which he shook his head and said, “It just feels sad.”

That melancholy dejection of the joyous act of karaoke and drunken, pleasurable partying that my cousin brings about is yet another complicated aspect of the *Việt kiều* party, which is the deciphering of who and what the party is for. We take into account the traumas, forced migrations, and border crossings experienced by first-generation Vietnamese immigrants, and the party is centered around the themes of life, survival, and nostalgia with its plentiful beer cases and pompous singing; it is a recreational necessity to move forward. For the Vietnamese Americans who do not share any memory or embodied knowledge of refugeedom and have similar opinions to those of my cousins, the party is a family gathering and imperative for community-building and connection—yes—but it may feel rather trite or exasperating; it becomes a necessary recreational activity that demands a filial sense of mandatory participation. There are hopes for the house party to be the practice, the continuous “thing” that bridges the generations together, but it may be pushing the generational divide further. However, I sense that the party's imposed style and orchestration need to be revamped and refreshed for the second generation to take the reins fully.

The music is not too annoying, and the conversations and fun activities are not too clamorous; it is just no longer relatable, which leads to a feeling of deterrence. The inherited party textbook requires a review by the people it will eventually be passed down to. We cannot keep partying like pre-1975 Saigon in twenty-first century Little Saigon—the spirit of *ham chôi* is getting too knotted in its naughtiness.

¹⁷⁸ Personal conversation, February 10, 2024.

The Party Reinterpreted & the Bargirl Revisited

We transition to Garden Grove, another city adjacent to Westminster that hosts many Vietnamese-owned businesses and is considered to make up the grand sprawl of Little Saigon. Casual partying occurs daily on the city's historic Main Street, which is lined with bars, restaurants, and nightlife establishments. Near the middle of the block sits Aum Beer House, one of the popular businesses on the block as well as one of the loudest at night. I first learned of this restaurant (though calling the establishment a restaurant is quite an understatement) in 2022 from a dear Filipino-Pasifika friend who loves everything Vietnamese-related to alcohol and food. From our first night out together, there have been more excursions to Aum. This is not necessarily because we absolutely loved the food or drinks (though they are delicious), but it was the lively atmosphere and hyper-sensorial experience Aum offered that got both of us hooked to come back for more. Though the name suggests it is a mere brewery, Aum Beer House is—at any and all times—a coffee and boba shop, a Vietnamese fusion cuisine restaurant, a craft beer garden, a cocktail bar, a smoking lounge, and a nightclub. What people may suggest is an identity crisis of a business is quite the opposite. The organized cacophony of different offerings of food, drinks, and pleasures is reminiscent of the act of sitting along the sidewalks of Saigon's chaotic streets, where all sorts of delights are offered to the customer every few minutes by different street vendors. I specifically focus on Aum Beer House as compared to other Little Saigon establishments because the business encapsulates a fascinating, uniquely diasporic node of *ham choi* that is, I assert, intrinsic to sensing South Vietnamese-ness.

Upon arrival at Aum, there is a luxuriously grand waiting area with large rustic branches for chandeliers lining the roof of what appears to be a romantic foyer, adjoining two separate exhibits in a modern art museum. The high-arched lobby expands into a dimly lit, industrial-style-inspired dining room with a faux brick wall on one side, followed by a giant, modern black-and-white octopus mural. Opposite the long neon-lit bar are large panels of blacked-out windows adorned with hanging incandescent tear-shaped bulbs. One of the glass panels pushes out to the gated outdoor lounge area, where customers can smoke freely without standing outside on the streets. In what is supposed to be an area to get a moment of respite from the hot and moist stuffiness inside, the smells of lit cigarettes, fruity vapes, and marijuana instead take over the slender outdoor space. It is from stepping outside that I can make out the scents of spilled beer, flaming shots, and shaken coconut pandan cocktails that permeate the restaurant. At the very end of the business, at its back wall, sits a platform stage with all the machinery and technology needed for a DJ to play, a live band to perform, or a sports bar-esque broadcast of international soccer matches—whatever the evening calls for. Aum has dozens of meters-long skinny wooden beams, which create a similar ambiance to a bamboo tranquility garden. What juxtaposes the conjuring of serenity is the wall-shaking bass drops felt along the wooden tables that vibrate with the beats of EDM remixes of Vietnamese- and Asian-American music (no bolero here). The music-inducing quivers enhance my dining experience as the pungent smells of garlic noodles, crab ceviche, and fish sauce pervade upwards from the dishes our table ordered. Eventually, the scents of freshly sprayed cologne and perfume evade our table as more people pass the main dining room area to head to the bar to order drinks.

Most of Aum's clientele are of East or Southeast Asian descent. I have been to Aum several times and seldom see a non-Asian person dining or drinking at the restaurant. On any given night, there are usually more women at Aum than men—typical of a heteronormative club setting. Though the party atmosphere is evidently built into the overall ambiance of the business, there is no dress code nor an underlying rule that one must “dress up.” Most men opt for a simple T-shirt (sometimes the occasional collared shirt), jeans, a pair of sneakers, and a pristine baseball cap. As for women, several choose to wear body-con dresses with high heels and a full face of makeup. Other women dress more casually, donning a sweater and jeans, as if they are just dropping in for a cup of coffee. I personally have dressed up and down for a night out at Aum, and I have never felt out of place. Despite the sizeable bar that overwhelms the space, I have never felt pressured to order an alcoholic beverage, and neither have my dining companions.

Though I have been to Aum several times now, I still find it challenging to describe the business. By chance, I have spoken with seven different customers who have all frequented Aum more than once and three Aum servers—all of which identified as Vietnamese-American, specifically second-generation *Việt kiều*. These dine-in customers are men and women who I newly befriended each time I came to Aum indicated that they, too, feel as if there is no right or simplistic way of labeling the establishment, but noted the accessibility that indirectly produces the ability to party. One woman, Anna Tran,¹⁷⁹ explained that she enjoys how Aum has a “little bit of everything for everyone, which makes it easy for [us] to go out and have fun... I don't like to drink, but my friends do, so I can still have a

¹⁷⁹ Pseudonym.

good drink in hand, even if it's just a boba tea.”¹⁸⁰ Her friend, Vanessa Nguyen,¹⁸¹ remarked how Aum “has become a spot for us [Vietnamese] girls to party. We just want food, drinks, and music... but we don't want to go out to a nightclub, and we don't need to dance... That's so hard to find outside of [this space].”¹⁸² Certainly, there is the intangible offering of a pleasure that is equally comfortable and entertaining for these women. Another customer, Daniel Le,¹⁸³ expressed the “overall good, fun vibes” of Aum, which needs “no label... who cares?”¹⁸⁴ Le stated that going out to Aum reminded him of hopping around and partying in Saigon's red light districts when he traveled to Vietnam earlier in 2023, which he somewhat drunkenly noted was “way crazier than the things happening in here... Aum's a good girl.”

The feminized personification of Aum by intoxicated Le is intriguing in that it continues to promote the feminine imaginary of Vietnamese nightlife spaces, but also that the establishment is somehow more “obedient” than businesses found in Saigon. While he was the only customer who specifically mentioned that he had visited the motherland, he brings forth the idea that establishments outside of Saigon are, perhaps, less naughty or sinful in their presentations. The conjurings that immediately come to mind when imagining a contemporary, trendy restaurant in the US are definitely not what we see in the quintessential, hole-in-the-wall phở shop. On the other hand, a nightclub or cocktail bar would not have an extensive dining menu to offer guests as food is rarely served at those establishments. In

¹⁸⁰ Personal conversation, November 3, 2023.

¹⁸¹ Pseudonym.

¹⁸² Personal conversation, November 3, 2023.

¹⁸³ Pseudonym.

¹⁸⁴ Personal conversation, November 3, 2023.

Saigon, most popular nightclubs, beer clubs, and cocktail lounges extend the possibility of ordering food; I have yet to see one with no food options. Aum, in a sense, is following the rules of the playbook of what is provided in Vietnam. Possibly, what Le was suggesting was that the Garden Grove establishment was not as thunderously boisterous or salacious as clubs and bars in Saigon.

Every so often, Aum hosts specific themed events, which often include the presence of hostesses and bargirls working the event. These women are usually Vietnamese-Americans (and always Asian-American) and are hired on an ad-hoc basis, and their labor is akin to the work seen by the Saigonese bargirls. The hostesses at Aum are expected to serve their guests, but they are equally allowed to take shots, dance, and sit with customers, albeit most people at Aum are not white or foreigners. The guests are, again, usually second-generation Vietnamese immigrants who range anywhere from early twenties to late forties and are quite Westernized, or more appropriately, “Americanized” in their lifestyle. The bargirls working at these events at Aum do not perform the same aggressive prowess to arouse their clients or make any physical advances to men (and vice versa). They serve somewhat as stage dressing to create a more sensual environment similar to that of a nightclub, but more so, they are complementary to the sexy “vibes” discerned in Saigonese nightlife. The women usually dress in revealing bra tops and tight high-waisted shorts— and frequently are more revealing than the bargirls seen in Vietnam—with heavy makeup and long, curly hair. From what I was able to observe during my visits to Aum, I never saw any attempt by the male customers to try to flirt with the bargirls. Instead, Diana Vo,¹⁸⁵ an Aum server-turned-hostess that evening, told me that the

¹⁸⁵ Pseudonym.

“men like to compliment on how I look, but I don’t ever feel gross or icky from their comments... I always thank them... I worked hard to look this cute!”¹⁸⁶ We bonded over talking about her recent trip to Vietnam a month ago, and during her break, I asked her if she considers herself to be a bargirl. Vo stated that she “doesn’t feel like a sex worker... But am I sometimes objectified by men? Sure... It’s like the girls in Vietnam. I’m just in America doing it.”

What Vo forwards is an East-West dichotomy of accepted presentations of sexualization, sensuality, and party. Though the rhetoric of Saigon still revolves around the idea of it being a “sin city,” the traditions of female modesty and docility are still greatly indoctrinated onto girls from an early age. As discussed in my previous chapter, the bargirl is—controversially—an exception to this rule because they have fortuitously become a cultural icon of Saigon. In the US, and particularly in California, it is more socially accepted for women to embrace their feminine sexuality; the Golden State’s air of prejudicial judgment is not as thickly staunch as that inhaled in Vietnam. This may be why the beer house portrays that aforementioned “good girl” image and is picked up by Le—Aum is not breaking any rules; she is actually going in accordance with them.

It is precisely this intense juggling of sociocultural code-bending that uniquely touches upon the naughtiness of Aum Beer House and how it functions for second-generation Vietnamese Americans. The restaurant itself is inherently naughty as it resists the conventionalisms of a Vietnamese immigrant mom-and-pop restaurant to be seen as a Vietnamese space of cultural production. The business also plays around with the gentrified

¹⁸⁶ Personal conversation, January 20, 2024.

tropes of a hipster Asian-fusion establishment because it is, essentially, all of them simultaneously at once. Aum offers the party ambiance and cravings that are adjacent to those sensed in Saigon for it to be a unique selling point to separate itself from other US nightlife establishments, but it still embodies a recognizable flavor and homey spice that allures the Vietnamese American customer back for more. Aum is just naughty enough that one can go out, get drunk (or not), and enact *ham choi* that is not strictly tethered to the “traditional” codes of partying at home with family, and Aum is just decent enough to be listed on the sociocultural party map of Little Saigon.

Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to nuance our understanding of transnational South Vietnamese worldmaking by focusing on the imperative act of partying and how it is the common embodied language utilized by the diaspora to sense the homeland. To party in Little Saigon is not about strictly adhering to Saigonese customs; rather, it is about how the embodied codes and comprehension of celebration in Vietnam construct a metaphorical party playbook for the diaspora to follow for generations more. Beyond the conversations surrounding how Little Saigon (and other major diasporic communities) are constructed for thousands of second-generation South Vietnamese immigrants as a new cultural motherland, it is imperative to elevate our understanding as to what may produce a culturally suspended identity. As more generations of South Vietnamese immigrants are born, they will continue to be reimagined and repurposed to fit their future envisionment of hopes and dreams. Little Saigon—as both a tangible community and hopeful imaginary— is the ultimate party of

parties, and its continuation and instructions are constantly being rewritten. Although first invented by the first wave of refugees, Little Saigon was built to be resilient, but malleable enough to redefine what South Vietnam means to its future constituents as well as how the lost nation should be respectfully remembered.

To an interesting antithetical thought, there is a seriousness of partying that we must recognize. For South Vietnamese diasporic citizens, this is a method of reconnecting with the motherland and tapping into a well of memories of a less complicated time; it is also a way of fabricating a homeland that is cognizant of its predecessors' sacrifices but further negotiates the identity that Little Saigon is to perform. The grounds for doing this constructive work are by way of the party. The party is not only a site to foster identity formation and cultural (re)constitution, but it is about providing the framework for how to navigate and negotiate one's cultural belonging to a Vietnamese identity that is globally visible, but not politically accepted in the diaspora. A way to separate oneself from being a Vietnamese immigrant versus a South Vietnamese immigrant is by privileging the party as a worldmaking, cultural-bridging practice that thrives off the naughtiness of a cycle of defiance, resistance, and celebration.

What about other Vietnamese people? Do they not party at all? Are they simply left out with no invitation? Are South Vietnamese people so obnoxious and facetious to claim partying for themselves? To answer it simply—it is absolutely fair to assume that all Vietnamese people party (or, at least, I hope everyone does), but this is not merely about the mundane act of partying; it is about understanding the cultural significance embedded in these celebrations. Partying, in this context, becomes a rich, informative site of identity formation, a

performative space where cultural values, histories, and communal bonds are both celebrated and contested. Each region and community brings its own flavor and spices to the act of party, shaped by their relationship to history, social dynamics, and local traditions. The South Vietnamese approach and method of partying, with its particular exuberance and defiance, may be seen as a response to specific post-war sociopolitical circumstances—a way to assert identity and resilience in the face of changing and assimilatory times.

Conclusion

Giật Lại - A Recoiling

On February 5, 1968, *The Washington Post* published a headline stating “Saigon Bar Girl Carries On.” The found clipping provides no more than three sentences and proclaims the story of how “three Vietnamese bar girls braved martial law and the Vietcong [sic] to serve drinks today at the only bar open in Saigon” with one of the bar girls—twenty-year-old Miss Hong—stating that she “gets too lonely sitting home all day with [her] sister.”¹⁸⁷ While the copy of the article does not provide any more sizeable information than what I note, it is particularly provocative to publish this seemingly dispassionate and insolent story when the outskirts of Saigon and the greater South Vietnamese region were under attack across several cities and towns killing over forty-five thousand people by the end of the excursion.

About a week before the publication of this article, the first phase of the infamous Tết Offensive (*Sự kiện Tết Mậu Thân* in Vietnamese) commenced, where the North Vietnamese forces launched a surprise attack against multiple military and civilian control centers throughout South Vietnam during the Lunar New Year holiday celebration. The North Vietnamese government specifically chose this date as they knew many ARVN soldiers would be off-duty due to the Tết holiday. What was supposed to be a time of celebration and a short respite from war and violence, this major military escalation led to one of the most deadly

¹⁸⁷ *The Washington Post, Times Herald* (1959-1973). “Saigon Bar Girl Carries On.” February 6, 1968.

operations of the Vietnam War up to that point. Within the city of Saigon alone, over five thousand people were murdered during the initial Tết operational period.¹⁸⁸

Miss Hong proves to be a fascinating heroine in this narrative. Upon the first attacks from the Tết Offensive, the capital of South Vietnam shut down the majority of its businesses and facilities in preparation for a potential invasion into Saigon. An intense sense of panic and fear was distilled onto many South Vietnamese civilians (and ARVN and US soldiers alike), especially as there was no procedure for informing people of when other attacks were to occur, so many Saigonese residents were afraid to venture out into the streets, and rightfully so. *The Washington Post* somewhat insists she had nothing better to do than to go back out to work at the Palace Bar and serve the loyal patrons, which dozens of American GIs and Western journalists assumingly populated the lounge floors. Miss Hong “carries on,” as the title suggests, but what exactly is she continuing or maintaining? Is *The Post* seemingly referring to the extenuating gendered labor that Miss Hong must persist in order to keep her clients happy and, thus, maintain that the nation is defended? Or, perhaps, the author of the article (who remains anonymous) is signaling the beginnings of a return to a state of normalcy for South Vietnam because the icon of the nation herself—the bargirl—is, perhaps, the bravest fighter, survivor, *partyer* of them all?

I recognize I will never be able to answer this conundrum of why *The Post* decidedly chose to publish this article—as well as why no matter how far and wide I search, I cannot seem to find the other following statements to this report—but it is compelling to read that the labor of the bargirl did not go unseen and that any story of South Vietnamese bargirls would

¹⁸⁸ Willbanks, James H. *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

make international news. Though quite disparate, *The Post* journalist's writings remind me of the words spoken by British journalist Thomas Fowler (played by acclaimed actor Michael Caine) from the 2002 film *The Quiet American*,

They say you come to Vietnam, and you understand a lot in a few minutes, but the rest has got to be lived. The smell. That's the first thing that hits you—promising everything in exchange for your soul. And the heat. Your shirt is straight away a rag. You can hardly remember your name or what you came to escape from. But at night, there's a breeze. The river is beautiful. You could be forgiven for thinking there was no war, that the gunshots were fireworks, that only pleasure matters. A pipe of opium, or the touch of a girl who might tell you she loves you. And then, something happens, as you knew it would. And nothing can ever be the same again.¹⁸⁹

The character of Fowler is not in South Vietnam during 1968, but he is instead in the region circa 1952—a time prior to the events of the Geneva Conference that split Vietnam into two nations. As the main male protagonist of the film who eventually falls in love with a young South Vietnamese maiden, he naturally gets the first say in describing Vietnam to the global audience. Soft, gentle, and mysterious, yet sweaty, smoky, and musky—it is almost as if the suggested understanding of Vietnam that Fowler forwards is one reminiscent of a tropical whorehouse where one can always expect a well-executed climax, with or without any vindication of violence. It is important to highlight that Phuong (sic), Fowler's love interest, was described as a former dancer at *The Arc-en-Ciel* in the novel—yet another laborer of the night.

The film is based on Graham Greene's 1955 novel of the same name, and the book was published two decades before the Fall of Saigon.¹⁹⁰ Green provides near-psychic illustrations

¹⁸⁹ *The Quiet American*. Miramax Films, 2002.

¹⁹⁰ Greene, Graham. *The Quiet American*. United Kingdom: William Heinemann London, 1955.

of a brutal American imperialist state as well as a delicate, easily manipulated, explosive Vietnamese population that has arguably dictated the global imaginary of Vietnam, even before people could learn where the Southeast Asian nation was on a map. A confusing contradiction, but it is through Greene's orientalizing gaze that he somewhat analyzes the complicated situation in Vietnam accurately. It was certainly the description of Vietnam that eventually *The Post* also came to accept and adopt.

Both journalists—the anonymous and the fictionalized—discuss South Vietnam through the titillating environment of Saigon and its pleasurable sites of fun, leisure, entertainment, and maybe some sex. Whether that be at the hostess bar, in the club lounge, on the slivering waterways, or on city rooftops, the descriptions allude to an effervescent sense of femininity, passion, party, and naughtiness. An intriguing feeling of subversive liveliness and vitality is noticed through these short statements on Saigonese happenings. It seems never clear what is actually occurring in Saigon, but there is always an experience “to be lived,” as Fowler considers.

From the outsider's orientalizing gaze of experiencing a sense of Saigonese naughtiness then, I leap to an insider's quotidian experience of the contemporary, invigorating events of the city's naughtiness today—one that implies significant exploitations of pleasure and sensuality. The parties have grown to include generations of (South) Vietnamese who have no living memory of the Vietnam War, as well as those from the diaspora. Much of the recent focus on talking about Saigonese partying and pleasure has been on the queer underground revolution of the city. In May 2023, Vietnamese-American writer Dan Q. Dao of *Paper Magazine* interestingly divulges the queer party happenings in Saigon and captures

interesting statements from partygoers about Saigon's nightlife in relation to queerness. Dao notes how "nightlife started as [a] gate to freedom"¹⁹¹ for one queer Vietnamese artist. Another person describes their enthralling party experience by detailing how they partied until the late hours of the morning, debriefing the events over breakfast, and never feeling tired when they go out. There are now recurring parties that are playfully themed for what the parties will tangibly provide as well as what the partygoer should affectively feel and embody, such as VAPCUCDA (or *Vấp Cục Đá*)—referring to "tripping over a rock" and metaphorically feeling as if one's head is spinning or inducing a sense of falling over—and Gái Nhảy—the term describes the "dancing girls" (also commonly known as strippers in the West) that are featured at the event as well as the designation of the event being for Vietnamese lesbians.

In what seems like a massive leap from examining the past events of the Vietnam War through a reading of South Vietnamese feminization to discussing the growing queer nightlife scene of Saigon, it is a purposeful jump to see how far the city (and greater region of South Vietnam) has also sprung since the early days of the Vietnam War of reportages solely on warfare to what is now coming out of today's Saigon. In an interesting entanglement and upon further investigation, these three stories—as featured in *The Washington Post*, *The Quiet American*, and *Paper Magazine*—actually enmesh with one another. The "Palace Bar"—the establishment that *The Post* noted was Miss Hong's workplace—refers to the bar of the former Continental Palace (now the Continental Hotel) that sits alongside the Saigon River, which is presumingly the river Fowler is acknowledging. During my time in South Vietnam in

¹⁹¹ Dao, Dan Q. "Inside The Queer Revolution of Saigon's Nightlife Underground." *Paper Magazine*.

2023, I went to one of the clubbing events hosted by VAPCUCDA, and the bar was, too, situated alongside the Saigon River, albeit a couple blocks down from the Continental Hotel. I remember stepping out of the venue at three o'clock in the morning, and I could see the bright lights from the Continental Hotel's roofing which still upholds its 1880 French Indochinese architectural styling.

Not necessarily within that evening (or morning) did I begin connecting the metaphorical dots of this search for the “thing” that defines South Vietnamese-ness; but it was within the repetitive practice of being out at night, getting a cup of *cà phê sữa đá* (iced coffee with condensed milk) at ten at night, waiting for my Grab driver to drop me off home, and waking up with a slight, pulsing hangover that I began to meditate on the naughty traits of knotty Saigon. The practice of partying lives on today and it is reminiscent of the parties of the past, but the party continues to shift to fit the needs of Saigonese people in the present. Before, the party was more submissive and muted; now, the party is quite pompous and overwhelmingly loud. The party is a practice, site, act, embodiment, and reverberation of survival, resistance, kinship, and community. The party is naughty in how it enacts itself, and the party is knotty in the ways in which South Vietnamese must explain the important relationship they—we—have to party.

As I write this concluding section of my dissertation, I timestamp my process by noting how the historical events I have chosen to scrutinize are eerily re-emerging across the world as the pursuit for more power and property enact heinously terrorizing campaigns that remind us that we have yet to abandon the oppressive crusades of colonization and imperialism fully. In a time of hyper-globalization, I cannot help but imagine what the future

lies for the millions of displaced migrants and soon-to-be refugees in desperate need of safe grounds. I recognize I am incredibly privileged to be in the position of comfortably writing in my home about the atrocities of wars without ever experiencing any of what my parents, family members, and ancestors had to endure during the repetitive cycles of violence. What further complicates this is my discussion on the jovial matters of partying, drinking, singing, and gathering may superficially deflate the actual traumas experienced and continuously embodied by many South Vietnamese people.

Upon further reflection, what this project has ultimately afforded me is a way to recuperate and renegotiate my connection to my cultural heritage and identity that I continue to have a love-hate relationship with, whether it be between South Vietnam/Vietnam, Southeast Asia/greater Asia, Asia/America, homeland/diaspora, family/me, and them/us. This is not to say that I actually “hate” my culture, but I am left thinking about why it has been so difficult for me to accept certain aspects of myself; I have come to make sense of my own identity and surroundings by explaining how I am “not this” or “not that,” but it is never quite a “yes that is it.” I am reminded of Muñoz’s recognition of a depressive racial performativity of “feeling brown, feeling down” that may be conjured for minoritarian subjects that are in relation to antinormativity. “Brown feelings are not individualized affective particularity; they more nearly express this ‘displaceable attentiveness,’ which is to say a larger collective mapping of self and other,”¹⁹² writes Muñoz. Though he discusses brownness via the Latina identity and body, his work is suggestive of ways of thinking alongside why other

¹⁹² Muñoz, José Esteban. “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 675–88. p. 679.

minoritarian identities, such as South Vietnamese people, have these complicated identities of cultural understanding and what feels to be these wrongly wired “circuits of belonging.”¹⁹³

My way of understanding South Vietnamese-ness via the party is not the only method, but it is one that has made South Vietnamese-ness make sense to me. It is a practice and perspective that has been bestowed on me by the processes that I believe my family also makes sense of their (re)connection to South Vietnamese-ness. By exploring the parties in the South Vietnamese red-light districts, streets, and houses as well as the parties of South Vietnamese immigrants, we reflect on how cultures that may seem quite slippery to hold are not as lubricious to grasp onto when we privilege the performance and practice of party. The party-as-method contributes to the greater field of performance studies as it enriches the understanding of how everyday social rituals and practices function as ways of sense-making and identity formation. Partying often takes up real and liminal spaces, and this allows for further investigations of alternative temporalities, actions, and feelings for making sense of minoritarian life, making them ripe for case studies on transgression and conformity. It is through the frameworks and understandings offered through theorizing alongside the twisting concept of naughtiness and knottiness that these uniquely South Vietnamese parties as acts of subversion and resistance to greater Vietnamese assimilation as well as larger Western homogeneity.

As I continue onward to further my pursuit of making sense of enacting my cultural heritage, I ask for one more clink...

Một... (1)

¹⁹³ Muñoz. “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down.” p. 680.

Hai... (2)

Ba... (3)

Vô! (Cheers!)

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