

Gender & Ethnic Studies

From the Waves of Vietnamese Transfeminism: A Brief Bibliography of Vi Khi Nao

Christopher Pham

Part I: Life in Việt Nam – The Coming of a Trans-feminist

Vi Khi Nao would close her eyes to hear the breath of Việt Nam. Its raindrops, during monsoon season, would clash with the streets of roaring motorbikes. The flood of motorbikes would smear the sound of clashing droplets and drown the landscape of Long Khánh in a never-ending, singular roaring. The roars, the urbanization, became deafening and paralyzed the breath of Việt Nam in sameness — in numbness. Vi could not feel herself from the waist down. The only warmth Vi felt was in the company of her parents. Vi would lie in-between them as they drove through the monsoon looking for a nearby hospital.

Born four years after the Fall of Saigon (1975), Vi was raised in Long Khánh, Việt Nam, where she spent most of her early childhood. Much like Vi's youth, Việt Nam was bedridden. The South Vietnamese government's large investment on militarization for the Vietnam War compromised the "[health services] for civilians and [already] limited public health programs were put to a halt."¹ Moreover, both natural and monetary economies were ruined by the war. Herbi-

cides, like Agent Orange, toxically infected and destroyed Việt Nam's environment, agriculture, and food chain—"putting some Vietnamese at increased risk for cancer"² and deleterious health. The U.S. had "extended an existing embargo with North Vietnam to the entire country"³ and it lost its support from China because of political and territorial issues. Any monetary means for the Vietnamese government to restore the destruction of Việt Nam was impossible; the country was staggered economically and politically. Việt Nam could not address the rising debility in public health while trying to overcome its major losses from the war.

Consequently, treating Vi's illness became difficult because "there was no ambulance in Việt Nam."⁴ Her parents would drive hospital-to-hospital to find proper care and treatment for her, only for there to be limited services or full occupancy. And when her parents were able to find a place that was able to treat Vi's paralysis, Vi only had negative associations with her rehabilitation because her "[cardiovascular] health"⁵ declined drastically soon after. The hospital became a symbol of death, taking away not only her health but her dreams as well. All the "tomboy"⁶ activities she

1 Sidel, Victor W. *War and Public Health*. Oxford University Press, 2008, 318.

2 Ibid., 321.

3 Ibid., 323.

4 Nao, Vi. Personal Interview. 28 Feb. 2022.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

wanted to pursue became too physically taxing for her. From being a soccer player, tennis player, or just wanting to be a kid who can climb trees all day, Vi quickly noticed that she could no longer live out those kinds of activities anymore.

Vi's only solace in the hospital were her night calls with her family. "I could hear my siblings making wine, the squishing of grapes and strawberries, with their feet."⁷ Any sound or voice outside the hospital was better than hearing the silence of despair, the moans of agony—the bitter reminders of a broken Việt Nam. Despite Vi's physical disparity among everyone else around her, Vi's hope in herself came through the presence of her mom's perseverance.

When the reunification of 1976 had occurred, the new Vietnamese government began altering the previous social class structure by "forcibly moving people out of the city or financial neglect."⁸ If they were unable to restructure the social class, the Việt Cộng would instead "raise class consciousness by downgrading the middle and upper classes through communication and education programs"⁹ and alter the monetary currency system by integrating their Vietnamese đồng (Vi would recall that she jovially exchanged the new đồng for the old đồng with her cousin not knowing the social implications with money; she was too young to understand).¹⁰ The rhetoric that the Việt Cộng imposed resulted

in Vi's father being displaced from his job with the South Vietnamese government. With no one else to support the family, Vi's mother became the "breadwinner."¹¹

Vi's mother was a seamstress, and although her occupation was "stereotypically feminized"¹² in Việt Nam, her line of work was her passion and was what kept food on the table. However, with the reunification in place, Vi's mother was unable to sustain her business for long. Many Vietnamese seamstresses suffered similarly; their work became taxing, even after long hours of labor, resulting in social, physical, and mental wear.¹³ The seamstress business became an unreliable option to feed three children and a husband; Vi's mother was compelled to leave with her family to America. Thus, they left Việt Nam and arrived at the Philippines' shores.¹⁴ With no reluctance, at the refugee camp, Vi's mother filled the paperwork to leave Việt Nam. Given her preference, wanting to stay as a family, and going with a church program, the application process narrowed their destination, and everything was settled. The family was heading to Iowa.

Unlike the many stories of Vietnamese women, Vi and Vi's mother were survivors of the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Many Vietnamese women who tried to escape with their families failed. Many were captured alongside their family, forced to watch their children be murdered, and, afterwards,

7 Ibid.

8 Labbé, Danielle. "Review: The Price of War: Urbanization in Vietnam, 1954–1985 by Nigel Thrift and Dean Forbes, Land Politics and Livelihoods on the Margins of Hanoi, 1920–2010 by Danielle Labbé | Journal of Vietnamese Studies | University of California Press." University of California Press, University of California Press, 1 Aug. 2017, 68.

9 Sidel, Victor W. War and Public Health. Oxford University Press, 2008, 324.

10 Nao, Vi. Personal Interview. 28 Feb. 2022.

11 Ibid.

12 Mariño, Natalia. Gendered Narratives of Work, Depletion and Reversal – The Case of Home-Based Seamstresses in Hanoi. Tuft University, June 2020, 28.

13 Ibid., 29–36.

14 Nao, Vi. Personal Interview. 28 Feb. 2022.

raped by pirates.¹⁵ Although Vi's mother was subject to no one, she could have been those Vietnamese women who never made it to America. The brutal consequences of patriarchy—whether it be from the scale of sexism or rape—haunt the Vietnamese and Vietnamese diaspora to this day whereby “Confucian and neo-Confucian ideals explicitly make relationship within families to be homologous for the relations between the rule and the ruled in society.”¹⁶ However, as a survivor, Vi's mother is not only a reminder of the treacheries of the patriarchal past, but she is also a shareholder of the future possibilities for Vietnamese women like Vi. As a mother, she became the kernel of hope for Vi and gave her the strength to live out her illness. Having inherited her mother's freewheeling spirit, Vi, as a tomboy, would be able to embrace both her femininity and masculinity simultaneously and go beyond the limiting scopes of gender. Vi, as a Vietnamese American, would become a trans-feminist.

Part II: Life in Iowa – The Coming of a Writer

Unlike the hot humid weather in Việt Nam, Iowa was not “friendly to Vietnamese skin.”¹⁷ It was beyond freezing. Life in Iowa, for Vi, was a matter of putting on as many layers as possible before the cold could bite her skin. At the very least, for Vi's mother, chicken was cheap because of the geographical differences between the U.S. and Việt Nam. It was a rare sight to see for Vi's family, having lived in Việt Nam for so long. Subsequently, Vi's mother would buy as much chicken as she possibly could despite

Vi's distaste for it (according to Vi, fish will always have a special place in her heart when it comes to food).¹⁸

Entering her adolescence, Vi would continue, with her family, to head to the church program they had sought for because it was the only community they had. There were hardly any Vietnamese people in Iowa, and so, the only thing the Vietnamese community had was each other to relate to each other's experiences—everyone else was racist.¹⁹ One of Vi's earliest memories was being a scapegoat for stealing her classmate's umbrella, who was White. Everyone agreed with her classmate. They believed that Vi had stolen her classmate's umbrella and forever saw her to be untrustworthy. Clueless, Vi was confused about what she did and, having just come to America, could not speak English very well. Even if she did speak, they would shut her opinion down immediately; they rendered her silent either way.

From then on, Vi and her family would have to grow up in the cold bitterness of Iowa—with its racism and misogyny—and thicken their skin. Iowa was not friendly to Vietnamese skin. Although Vi and her family came to America for opportunity, they were met with the same treatment as they had in Long Khánh: persecution. The only difference, in this case, was they were persecuted as refugees. Like Việt Nam, America had its own systemic discriminatory roots that fed into their ideological racism. Preceding Vi's immigration to the country, “Asian woman had been reduced to one-dimensional caricatures in Western representation”²⁰ via film and literature.

15 Nguyen, Nathalie Huynh Chau. “Refugee Journeys: The Stories of Vietnamese Women.” *Agora* 55, no. 3 (2020): 34-37.

16 Duong, Lan P. *Treacherous Subjects*. Temple University Press, 2012, 15.

17 Nao, Vi. Personal Interview. 28 Feb. 2022.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Espiritu, Yen Le. *Asian American Women and Men*. 2nd ed., Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, 105.

Asian women were perceived as “exotic ‘others’—sensuous, promiscuous, but untrustworthy.”²¹ In the case of Vi being blamed for stealing her classmate’s umbrella, this racist ideology was implanted prematurely in the cultural fabric of America. White kids, like their parents, were susceptible to discriminate because everyone else had believed in it. These acts of discrimination, disseminated by mass media, were mere reification of U.S. sovereignty justified by law. In other words, Vietnamese Americans have been discriminated against in America because U.S. law had indoctrinated such actions.

As refugees, Vietnamese people serve to be “limit figures”²² to everyone else as a means to define citizenship. Limit figures distinguish those deserving of rights and those not deserving of rights.²³ The U.S., by othering Vietnamese refugees as alien, denies them of their right, and, in turn, validates White citizenship. This denial, whether it be in a form of violence like racism, is necessary for U.S. sovereignty because it establishes a value of citizenship or the limit figure to be Vietnamese refugees.²⁴ Hence, citizenship will always be skewed precisely because its “social value requires rejecting the Other.”²⁵ Yet, the U.S. refuses this idea since it is hinged on universalism and democracy—but ultimately sovereignty. The U.S. will find any way to justify their losses. In the case of the Vietnam War, despite the many Vietnamese refugees suffering, the U.S. used mass media

to cover their tracks.²⁶ They painted an illusion of “melodrama... to formalize a dominant refugee aesthetic, reifying forces of good and evil and infantilizing and feminizing Vietnamese as victims needing rescue from a heroic, re-masculinizing America.”²⁷ The U.S., implicated in rhetoric, has promoted racism and patriarchy despite denying it. Ultimately, this denial overlooks the consequences of sexism and racism. As a Vietnamese American woman, Vi was inevitably swept up by the U.S. empire.

Now in her 20’s, Vi had obtained a bachelor’s degree in Spanish and Visual Arts. However, since there has been a continual shift in modernization and globalization, the job market continued to shift their preference for STEM careers. While her chances of getting a job were thin, she needed one to pay her loans. Eventually, she landed a job for one of those “standardized test” companies (because of her contract to keep her role confidential, she could not articulate more about her job).²⁸ Her job consisted of grading standardized tests. “The job was mundane, you spent your whole waking hours grading and grading and grading...”²⁹ With nothing better to do, Vi decided to bring her books to prevent her from “dying of boredom.”³⁰

One day she brought *Wuthering Heights* to read. The very next day she brought *War and Peace* to read. Then *Don Quixote*... Within a few months, she had devoured more than fifteen books.

21 Ibid., 105.

22 Nguyen, Marguerite. *America’s Vietnam*. Temple University Press, 2018, 132.

23 Cacho, Lisa Marie. *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*. NYU Press, 2012, 4.

24 Ibid., 14.

25 Ibid., 17.

26 Espiritu, Yen Le. “The ‘We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose’ Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the ‘Fall of Saigon.’” *American Quarterly*, no. 2, Project Muse, 2006, pp. 329–30.

27 Nguyen, Marguerite. *America’s Vietnam*. Temple University Press, 2018, 135.

28 Nao, Vi. Personal Interview. 28 Feb. 2022.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

Not only did her literacy rate improve drastically, but it was the highest among her co-workers.³¹ To some extent, she did feel empowered by her high literacy. Her steadfast ability to grade papers quickly gave her the time and luxury to think and continue reading more; books provided her a place to escape to. Literature provided her a place to consider the possibilities of what the world could be. Inspired by the many authors she read, she wanted to become a writer. But in order to become one, she would first need to be financially stable and work even harder to achieve that.

Despite being more motivated to work, the workplace did not care about Vi's ideas or vocation. They took advantage of her high literacy and decided to pile more work on her.³² And despite having to do more work, Vi became more of a stepping stone for others to get their promotion. "It was extremely demoralizing," Vi recalled, "you work so hard only for the other guy, who neglected his work, to get a promotion."³³ As a Vietnamese American woman, the workplace had oppressed her because they saw that she was more capable than anyone in that workplace. Her co-workers, instead of recognizing her ability, saw it as an opportunity to give themselves less work. And so, they falsely labeled her as illiterate because of her accent, they spoke slowly so she could understand, and they complained so that she did more work.³⁴ They treated Vi as an "alien, and thus rights-deprived,"³⁵ in order to be righteous. At large, Vi being discriminated against racially and sexually by her coworkers "increased the ability of capital to

control [her]; it also allowed employers to use the cheapness of Asian labor to undermine and discipline the white small producers and white workers."³⁶

Even with the workplace dragging her down, Vi continued to persevere. Dedicating time outside of work to apply for graduate school, Vi got into the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) program at Brown University in both fiction and poetry—which had an acceptance rate lower than 0.1%.³⁷ Having been fortunate to be accepted by a MFA program, Vi would pursue a career in writing.

Today, Vi Khi Nao is a queer cross-genre writer from Long Khánh, Vietnam and teaching at the Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA) of Willamette University. Her works include fictional and poetic texts such as *Swimming with Dead Stars*, *Fish in Exile*, and *A Bell Curve Is A Pregnant Straight Line*. She is also part of a collective called She Who Has No Master(s) (SWHNM(s)), a project which intends to nurture a community of writers and poets who are Vietnamese (gender-fluid) women and Vietnamese diasporic (gender-fluid) women. As one of her students, when she was a scholar-in-residence at the University of Colorado-Boulder, I am proud to be mentored by her and hope to continue writing for future generations to hear the stories Vietnamese transfeminism. Thank you for writing—Vi.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Espiritu, Yen Le. *Asian American Women and Men*. 2nd ed., Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, 133.

36 Ibid., 133.

37 Nao, Vi. Personal Interview. 28 Feb. 2022.

WORKS CITED

- Cacho, Lisa Marie. *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*. NYU Press, 2012.
- Chow, Esther Ngan-Ling. "The Feminist Movement: Where Are All the Asian American Women?" *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, University of Hawai'i Press, 1992, doi:<https://www.jstor.org/stable/42772039>.
- Duong, Lan P. *Treacherous Subjects*. Temple University Press, 2012.
- Espiritu, Yen Le. *Asian American Women and Men*. 2nd ed., Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.
- . "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon.'" *American Quarterly*, no. 2, Project Muse, 2006, pp. 329–52. Crossref, doi:10.1353/aq.2006.0042.
- Fong, Lina. "Asian-American Women: An Understudied Minority." *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, Western Michigan University, 1997, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/jrlsasw24&id=91&collection=journals&index=>.
- Labbé, Danielle. "Review: The Price of War: Urbanization in Vietnam, 1954–1985 by Nigel Thrift and Dean Forbes, Land Politics and Livelihoods on the Margins of Hanoi, 1920–2010 by Danielle Labbé | *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* | University of California Press." University of California Press, University of California Press, 1 Aug. 2017, <https://online.ucpress.edu/jvs/article-abstract/12/3/67/60549/Review-The-Price-of-War-Urbanization-in-Vietnam?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.
- Mariño, Natalia. *Gendered Narratives of Work, Depletion and Reversal – The Case of Home-Based Seamstresses in Hanoi*. Tuft University, June 2020, <https://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=9008944&fileId=9008946>.
- Nao, Vi. Personal Interview. 28 Feb. 2022.
- Nguyen, Marguerite. *America's Vietnam*. Temple University Press, 2018.
- Nguyen, Nathalie Huynh Chau. "Refugee Journeys: The Stories of Vietnamese Women." *Agora* 55, no. 3 (2020): 34–37. <https://colorado.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/refugee-journeys-stories-vietnamese-women/docview/2599127785/se-2?accountid=14503>.
- Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *Nothing Ever Dies*. Harvard University Press, 2016.
- Noh, Eliza Sun. "Suicide among Asian American Women: Influences of Racism and Sexism on Suicide Subjectification." Order No. 3082346, University of California, Berkeley, 2002. <https://colorado.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/suicide-among-asian-american-women-influences/docview/304706214/se-2?accountid=14503>.
- Sidel, Victor W. *War and Public Health*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Žhchlińska, Monika. "Heroines of Compassion and National Consolers: The Vietnam Women's Memorial Foundation and the Politics of Memory." *Journal of American Studies*, Cambridge University Press, Nov. 2021, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875821001213>.