

Emergence of Queer Vietnamese America

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My colleague, Teresa, and I had just watched *Girls Like Us*,¹ a documentary about the lives of four teenage girls in South Philadelphia's blue-collar district. These girls started out with aspirations of attending college or at least of finishing high school and finding a job, but by the end of the film, half of the girls had to defer their dreams due to unexpected pregnancies and clashes with their families and boyfriends on gender expectations. Teresa asked of my reaction, and I responded, "Thank goddess I'm a lesbian! If I were straight, I would probably end up like one of these girls."

This conversation led me to think about how differently my lesbian/bisexual/transgender ("queer" for short) Vietnamese friends and I experience life from our straight, Vietnamese female counterparts. Monique Wittig's contention that the "myth of woman" reinforces patriarchy whereas the "lesbian" category fits outside patriarchy² resonated strongly in this instance. Not identifying with "compulsory heterosexuality"³ and patriarchy is a mixed blessing that some of us queers have used to our advantage. This insight stimulated me to write about Vietnamese American queer experiences in response to the heterosexist literature on immigrant adaptation.

Recent studies on immigrant adaptation have demonstrated that the context of reception (e.g., government policies, economic viability of the local economy) is a significant factor in how immigrants are incorporated into the host society.⁴ Particularly important is the role of the ethnic community in providing social capital for immigrants who lack physical and/or human capital to survive and thrive in America.⁵ Studies that focus on social capital emphasize that besides potential access to material resources, emotional and cultural resources that ethnic networks provide play a significant role in facilitating immigrant adaptation.

Despite the multitude of studies on Vietnamese immigrants in the past twenty-seven years, only a few have addressed the lives of queer Vietnamese. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, I explore the lives of otherwise invisible and marginalized Vietnamese queer immigrants. Second, I aim "to queer"⁶ immigrant studies by demonstrating that sexuality, like race, class and gender, is another

interdependent variable that needs to be considered in understanding the process of immigrant adaptation. As Chrys Ingraham suggests, what feminists have argued as gendered processes in society are specifically “heterogendered” processes.⁷ That is, when girls are socialized to become young women, they are specifically socialized to become heterosexual young women.

This paper is based on data from my five years (1996 to 2001) of ethnographic research (participant-observation and interviews) on a social support network of Vietnamese lesbians, bisexual women, and female-to-male transgenders in California called “Ô-Môi”.⁸ I use data from my study of Ô-Môi to show how sexuality interplays with race, class, and gender to configure different patterns of immigrant adaptation for queer Vietnamese, as the group provides an interesting example of how queer immigrants organize our own queer-ethnic networks for social support in the process of psychological and interpersonal development and adjustment. This support network differs from the support in the U.S. queer mainstream and in the Vietnamese American mainstream. I explore how Ô-Môi facilitates queer Vietnamese in the process of becoming not just queer Americans or ethnic Americans but queer ethnic Americans. By discussing different adaptation patterns of Ô-Môi members, the environment which led to the formation of Ô-Môi, and the unique role the group plays in the lives of its queer Vietnamese members, I hope to normalize our experiences by adding our stories to the spectrum of immigrant struggles and triumphs.

Three Cases of Coming Out

Recent research has begun to focus on the different experiences of male and female immigrants. Because boys and girls are socialized differently, it is important to not assume a common childhood experience for immigrant children. Similarly, within the group of female immigrant children, we should not assume that there is a uniform way in which girls grow up to become women. Gay and lesbian literature suggests that heterogender socialization affects the development process differently for queer females versus straight females. Here, I document three types of coming out experiences of Vietnamese immigrant females.

Filial Daughters and Late Bloomers

Michelle was oblivious to her sexual orientation and feelings of sexual attraction all the way until the end of college. She identified as lesbian but explained that she grew up asexual. Not being exposed to lesbianism and never having an interest in boys, she was “the good daughter,” focusing on school and family obligations and not worrying her parents about “boy matters.” She states,

Maybe being an immigrant struggling with poverty and being surrounded by violence tunneled my vision to practical economic and social survival issues [so] that the leisure of contemplating other ways of living never crossed my mind. In any case, not being interested in boys saved me from many anxieties.

Michelle recalled that when she was thinking of going to college, her aunt introduced her to a friend’s daughter who was already in college. The purpose was for Michelle to obtain advice and information about college from this young woman, Lan. When Lan told Michelle of options that Lan could pursue after college, Lan included graduate school. When Lan informed her mother and Michelle’s aunt that she was thinking of obtaining a master’s degree, they were quick to caution Lan about the correlation between higher education and prospects of marriage for women. Michelle recalled,

According to my aunt and Lan’s mother, men would want to marry women of their equal or less, not women who are more accomplished than they. Obtaining a bachelor degree is expected to gain decent employment, and it is to help one find a compatible spouse. In contrast, to work for a higher degree than a bachelor’s degree is to minimize one’s chance of finding a compatible spouse. Lan assured them that a master’s degree was her ultimate educational goal. After that, she planned to settle down and start a family. This statement comforted her mother and my aunt. It was also the concluding message for me from that visit. Fortunately for me, however, being interested in boys, wanting to get married and wanting to have children of my own were never my concerns and priorities. It did not bother me that I might become un-marriageable by pursuing a

higher degree. It was never my fantasy to have Prince Charming sweep me off my feet and to improve my livelihood.

Growing up poor and witnessing her mother and sisters juggling with their “unreliable husbands” taught Michelle that she can only rely on herself to move out of impoverished conditions. Her only way out was education, and she went all the way to obtain a Ph.D. In short, Michelle’s non-heterosexuality and class struggle protected her from heterosexist, patriarchal pressures. For her to succeed in the educational path, however, she had to continue being an asexual and filial daughter. It was not until she graduated from college, found a job and was living on her own that she had time to explore her sexuality.

Other women who came from strict family backgrounds had similar experiences to Michelle’s. They conformed to being the good, filial daughter. Some were oblivious or dismissive of boys’ interests. Others repressed their sexual affinity toward women until later in life (in their thirties) when they had the economic and/or social freedom to explore their desire. Some women even married and had children before they realized that “something is not right.” They were not happy with their husbands and became amorously attracted to their female friends. It was at this juncture that they began to search for others like themselves. Thereupon, they found ÔMôi to validate their otherwise isolated and incongruous desire.

A Gendered Childhood and Adolescence

In contrast to Michelle’s story of being oblivious about her sexual preference, other members in ÔMôi knew from a very young age that they were different, and this difference became a struggle in trying to fit in with everyone else. David, a female-to-male transgender, could trace his experience of feeling different when he was six. It was then that he played with his brother, and they swore to be “blood brothers.” He remembered vividly, “I’m not going to be a blood sister, I said, I was going to be a blood brother.” But everyone around him told him he was a girl. Despite these negations, David was convinced he was a boy, “I know I’m a boy, I was just in the wrong body.” At the time he did not know the terms

“transsexual” or “transgender.” It was not until he was sixteen and watched *Donahue* that he learned the terms and identified himself as “transgender.” I asked if he thought he was gay before that.

[W]hen I became attracted to women, okay, that was when I was wondering, I said, “Am I gay?” But then I said I must be a really twisted gay because I don’t want to be identified as a woman. So I was wondering if I would categorize under “gay” but within the gay there are subs, there are different gays, and that’s what I thought, that must be where I fell under because. . .I am female and I like female, so, I must be gay. But I never said I must be a lesbian. But I never said that word because that’s where I’m different where I’m not happy being the part.

David described how he hated wearing the girl’s uniform, a jumper, to his Catholic school:

[W]hen I would wear it, I always have a jacket and I would wrap it around my waist. And the minute I stepped out of that school ground, I would take it off, that jumper. I would walk home in my shorts, always.

For David, everyday gendered rituals were a setback to his male identification. It became more poignant when he reached puberty.

[W]hen I was a kid, I always know I should have been a boy, so I kept thinking, if I didn’t have the period then, something is wrong with me physically, okay, like a defect then it would explain why I think the way I do. But it didn’t, everything was in its natural biological female course. And so that just depressed me in the sense that I’m thinking, oh, great, you know, was I crazy or mentally disturbed. . .because. . .physically. . . everything was where it supposed to be. . .that’s when I thought it was a tomboyish thing and that I would grow out of it, but I didn’t. There was a period where I was thinking that I must be mentally disturbed.

Having to face the body that he hated every day made life difficult at its most mundane level.

David recalled how going to private school was a torturous experience.

[W]hen you're at home you don't have to think so much about it, but when I was at school, that's where it distinguished between, if you're a boy or a girl. . . I always hated it. . . . I wanted to be put in a public school, you know, because I could wear pants.

David got his wish to wear pants when he lied about graduating from eighth grade to enroll in a public high school. Resisting hegemonic femininity was not easy, however, even at public school. David would get into fights for dressing and acting like a boy. At the age of seventeen, when David learned about transgenderism on *Donahue*, it helped to validate his feeling about himself. However, David was Catholic, and when he became romantically interested in his female friends, he was sure he was facing eternal damnation. David went through years of depression and suicidal ideations. Fortunately, constant family obligations held him back from attempting suicide. He was too busy helping out his siblings and could not find time to end his life. It was then that he met the group Ô-Môi and decided to join because Ô-Môi was supportive of transgenders whereas many other queer organizations were not. David also knew about other transgender groups, but he opted for Ô-Môi because the other groups were predominantly white. David did not have positive interactions with white people whom he saw as culturally insensitive to his needs.

"A Second Time Coming Out"

Unlike David and Michelle who grew up in the U.S. and came out through their absorption of American culture via school and the media, Thanh-Nga grew up in Viet Nam, and her experience with same-sex attraction was much more platonic and less guilt-ridden than David's. She describes her coming out experience in the U.S. as a second time of coming out:

To my family, to the world. It was like a second time coming out for me. Because when I was in Viet Nam, I had a relationship, but I didn't know that was a lesbian relationship. I thought, oh, I just had this special feeling toward this one particular person, and then I have my attraction towards girls that I didn't know. I mean I thought it was just, neat. [laughing] I was odd or something. I didn't have a role model to say it's okay you're a lesbian, you know. . . . I didn't know why I had to write five pages of love letters

everyday. [laughing]. . .I kept writing. I forgot what I was writing about, but I don't know why I would have these infatuations. . . . [I asked if it was ever sexual, and she responded:] Uh, we never got there. I mean I think back then, sex was something like, I didn't know what that means, you know. I didn't have, I didn't see people kissing on the street, so I just know I have this special feeling for this one person.

When Thanh-Nga immigrated to the U.S. at the age of eighteen, she blocked out those memories. I was in the midst of escaping from Viet Nam and coming here. Oh, my god, you have to adjust, and I totally forgot that part of my life. I completely forgot. I totally blanked out. I just knew that I had to survive; I have to acculturate in this country. That's including having boyfriends. And you know, all my, uh, I hung out with these Vietnamese women in my high school, and they all like boys and so, "oh, I guess I should have a boyfriend, too." But, it never felt [laughing] really comfortable for me. It's just something because I wanted to be with my friends, so to have boyfriends, and all of us can hang out together [laughing].

It took Thanh-Nga another twelve years when she took a class that dealt with Asian American lesbians that she made connection to her past.

I think they talk about lesbians, lesbianism in the other courses, too, but I paid no attention to it because I'm not [laughing] Black or Native American. But in Asian American Studies, they had a woman who came over, she's a lesbian, Pilipina lesbian [laughing], came and showed her slides of her wedding to her wife. She talked about the relationship and then she brought in two young girls, women, who were in relationships, who were married, they had rings and stuff. So they talked about their relationship and it was at that moment, it's like a light switch! I was looking at her like, "Ahh! I remember these feelings!" [laughing] I cannot believe it. I was like "Oh, MY GOD! I cannot believe it, I know, I know what they're talking about." It was so exciting. . .I just went, "Wow! Now I know who I am."

Thanh-Nga's sexuality became clear when she was able to relate with the lesbian Filipinas in her class. Because of that connection, Thanh-Nga continued to make connections with other queer Asian lesbians. When she found out that there was a Vietnamese queer network, she quickly joined and became active in organizing its many group activities. Thanh-Nga explained how she came out to her family:

I came out on my third year of college, I was thirty. So, it's a good age to come out because I don't have family pressure. You know, like you're too old to get married [laughing] and you're still young [enough] to do more things but the family pretty much kinda leaves you alone. When you're thirty and not living at home. When you're coming out, it's just so perfect for me because I was like, I was so clear.

Passing the expected age of marriage ability, being financially independent, and living on her own made it easier for Thanh-Nga to come out to her family. This rings true for other Ô-Môi members in their thirties and above. Their families do not ask them anymore about marriage or boyfriends. There seems to be an implicit "don't ask, don't tell" agreement, where their families would welcome their partners as their "good friends" without ever confronting the issue of their daughters/sisters/nieces being queer.

Ties with one's family and oftentimes one's ethnic community can play important roles in facilitating the immigration adaptation. However, as we see from these three cases, family obligations and restrictions and living in an ethnic enclave can also impede these queer females' coming out processes. At the beginning stages for many queer Vietnamese females, focusing on school and being the filial child protected them from having to confront their non-heterosexuality because the family structure expects them to remain asexual. In some cases, some of these young females benefited from the homosocial form of friendships that they were encouraged to have. For others who felt that they were in the wrong body or that they should not have homoerotic feelings for their female friends, coming out to oneself was a very isolating experience. Although protected and supported by their family and ethnic community from the larger racist society, many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender immigrants do not feel "completely at home." For many Vietnamese queers, it becomes imperative to find a supportive

group that will accept differing gender identification and/or sexual preference. Given the prevalence of homophobia and heterosexism in the Vietnamese community, finding a support group is a second stage of coming to terms with oneself and of “coming home.” I discuss next how Ô-Môi came into being.

Creating Our Own Community

“Ô-môi” is a tropical fruit in Viet Nam, and because of how it is consumed, it is also a slang term for lesbians.⁹ This slang term was popularly used to refer to lesbians in the late 1960s to mid 1970s in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), Viet Nam. About twenty years after the fall of Saigon and the mass exodus of Vietnamese to the U.S., the term “ô-môi” re-emerged in Southern California as the name for a newly found support network of Vietnamese lesbians, bisexual women, and female-to-male transgenders. In the summer of 1995, a group of Vietnamese American queer females decided to adopt the Vietnamese slang word “Ô-Môi” as the name for their volunteer support group. Following the U.S. tradition in politics of reclaiming history, this group of queer females reclaimed not only a Vietnamese history that included queers, but also a cultural heritage that is specifically Vietnamese, thus dispelling the myth that homosexuality is a Western phenomenon or that Vietnamese queers are non-existent.

Originally, Ô-Môi was conceived as a queer Vietnamese women’s group, a sister organization to the Gay Vietnamese Alliance (GVA), a gay male Vietnamese group, because the founding members were friends with the founders of GVA. Both founding members wanted a separate women’s group because they saw queer men and queer women as having different issues and concerns. The women also did not want to deal with the sexism from the men. When two members of this emerging group came out as transgender, however, the group decided to include transgenders in its membership. This inclusion raised subsequent problems for the group in terms of its common bond as a women’s group when it now included transgenders who identify as “straight men.” Nonetheless, the group was able to establish their commonality as marginalized queer female Vietnamese attracted to women.

Since its inception, Ô-Môi has from three to forty members participating in any one event or meeting. Activities range from planning meetings, to rap group meetings, movie outings, dinner or

lunch, potlucks, clubbing, camping trips, fundraising banquets, and marching and participating in the Pride Parade and Pride Festival. Depending on members' interests, initiatives, schedules and resources, Ô-Môi fluctuates from periods of high activities to one activity a year. Although members live throughout Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside, San Diego and Ventura counties, the majority reside in Los Angeles and Orange counties; hence, activities concentrate in these two regions. For meetings, the venue is usually a member's house. For other queer related activities like clubbing, the venues tend to be in the West Hollywood, Long Beach and Silver Lake areas. During the past five years, Ô-Môi has no longer held regular planning meetings and rap group meetings. Instead, "meetings" occur on the Internet via an Ô-Môi listserv. Unlike previous recruitment and maintenance of membership via word of mouth, Ô-Môi's recruitment now occurs online where women from other states can also partake in the e-mail list forum.

Currently, the majority of members are lesbians, only 15 percent identify as bisexual and three are transgenders. Eighty-four percent are college-educated, 80 percent are students or employed professionals in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties moving from their immigrant working-class background towards a middle-class status. However, there is a significant 9 percent who are in the lower manual and service sectors and 3 percent are immigrant entrepreneurs. Because of their occupations, time and financial limitations, these 12 percent are struggling to stay involved with group activities that often require time and money that they do not have.

The Contexts of the Emergence of Ô-Môi

To understand how Ô-Môi emerged, we need to first understand how Little Saigon, "the capital of Vietnamese America," emerged and what the context of the mainstream queer community was.

Emergence of a (Straight) Vietnamese American Community

Before 1975, there were only about a thousand Vietnamese residing in the U.S., most of them as students, workers, and diplomats. There was no Vietnamese American community anywhere in the U.S. then.

However, the aftermath of the “Vietnam War” brought in continuous waves of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants to the U.S. Gradually, Vietnamese American enclaves emerged across the nation, concentrating in major metropolitan areas; the largest enclave is in Little Saigon¹⁰ in Orange County, California, where the Vietnamese population is 135,548 or 12 percent of the entire U.S. Vietnamese population.¹¹

When the first wave of 1975 Vietnamese refugees arrived in the U.S., the government’s plan was to disperse the Vietnamese people across the nation to not overburden any one community and to prevent ethnic ghettos. However, the immigrants’ desire to be with their own kind and to rebuild “home” spurred secondary migration to spark the development of ethnic enclaves. Orange County, located near Camp Pendleton where refugees were processed before being allowed to integrate into U.S. society, became an obvious space for Vietnamese refugee concentration. It became the prime location for resettlement and community development also because of its warmer weather, economic opportunities, a nearby Chinatown in Los Angeles, a generous welfare system, and cheaper housing than in Los Angeles.¹² As stores and restaurants developed and expanded to accommodate the special needs of this new, English-limited Vietnamese population, they attracted more newly arrived refugees. By the late 1980s, Little Saigon became a magnet for thousands of Vietnamese to visit or resettle. Today, Little Saigon exists as the largest Vietnamese community outside Viet Nam. Like other Asian ethnic enclaves, Little Saigon emerged in response to the needs of its members. Facing racism and hostility from the host society, the Vietnamese community acts as a buffer for its members in cultural maintenance and as an adaptation facilitator in practical resource assistance and valuable information relay. At a glance, Little Saigon seems to be self-sufficient in providing a host of services to its members, from financial to legal, to medical, to religious, to recreational and political. Yet, when one scans through the list of Vietnamese associations in the Vietnamese phonebook, not one is for queer Vietnamese (as of 2001). This is not to reflect the non-existence of queer Vietnamese, but to show that the heterosexist and/or homophobic ethnic community, as well as internalized homophobia, prevents informal queer networks from going public. Recently, however, these queer organizations have come out to reflect the specific needs of a

sector of the Vietnamese population that has the critical mass to make the founding and continuation of these queer Vietnamese organizations possible.

The Culturally Insensitive, White Queer Mainstream

Parallel to the absence of Vietnamese queer organizations listed in Vietnamese American phonebooks, no listing of queer Vietnamese organizations in mainstream gay/lesbian phonebooks exists. For many of the Vietnamese and Asian queer women and female-to-male transgenders I interviewed, to attend a mainstream queer organization is to attend a white queer organization. When they first attempt to contact queer organizations to seek support, they find that the support often excludes their race and ethnic concerns. As Ngoc-Trang puts it:

I know a lot other group support but, like for Caucasian or some other group, they very much Americanized, they don't think about culture that really form a person. The culture, especially Asian culture, it's very tight. You know, they have a family tie, in culture very tight, and they feel obligated with their root.

She continues to say that ÔMôi is the pioneer to bridge the gap between the homophobic, straight Vietnamese community and the queer, "white" (meaning "culturally insensitive") community.

Ô-Môi members feel that having the same ethnic cultural background means a better understanding and sympathy regarding family issues. Phi-Anh explains, "I wanted some support because I know I can't really open up to my parents, my family and friends. You guys were a resource for me."

As co-ethnics, members can understand each others' plights in trying to acculturate to American society and at the same time trying to maintain one's cultural practices and values. Most members explain that they participate in Ô-Môi because they do not have to explain themselves culturally. White queers do not understand the familial obligations of Vietnamese culture and expect Vietnamese queers to be more independent. Kim-Tuyet elaborates,

Well, you guys kinda know the Vietnamese background. . . so you understand and have sympathy for me if I can't go out late or stuff that my parents don't want me to say or do.

[I asked if she had to explain to non-Vietnamese friends, and she answered yes.] Well, they'll tell me "it's your life, why don't you control it rather than let your parents control it." And I don't want to have to go through that.

Similarly, Ben elucidates, "In an Asian queer group, people understand where I come from when I talk about family problems. With the general white, queer group, I would have to spend a significant amount of time just explaining myself. So, I prefer being with others like me."

In short, the position of Vietnamese queers as a sexual and ethnic minority has led to a unique set of ethnic and queer needs and politics, which Ô-Môi was founded to support. One of the three co-founders of Ô-Môi states:

I wanted to be part of a network of women, especially women who challenged mainstream white America [on racism] as well as Vietnamese America [on heterosexism and homophobia]. And I wanted a space just for us, where we didn't have to worry about accommodating whites/males/straight people. I wanted to be a part of a group of queer Vietnamese women [and FTM] who were creating a community that would validate, empower, and support each other.

Types of Support

"Support" comes in many different forms. I discuss here the types of support Ô-Môi provides for its members.

Affirmation by Mere Presence

The rare and often negative glimpses of lesbians and the invisibility of Asian lesbians in mainstream media impress upon the public the idea that we do not exist or are unhappy deviants. The presence of other queer Vietnamese keeps members from feeling isolated and alone. Hoa-Trinh describes this feeling:

Just being together. Just being there. Just existing is enough reason. Just being in the same room even though there are no official functions. You know, concrete evidence that

someone, outside of my brain, is like myself. They exist and they feel that towards me, and I feel that towards them. And all those positive energies get shared. And then you can feel you have a reason to exist, or that you can relate to something outside of yourself. And relating to all Ô-Môi members outside of myself brings me back to myself. So, it comes full circle; it's a cycle. Yeah, shared existence.

The presence of other Vietnamese queers validates one's experiences and dissolves the alienating experience one originally had of being an oddity or deviant, especially where homosexuality is perceived as a Western disease. It helps to normalize one's feelings because now there are others like oneself.

Ethnic Bonding and Validation

The Vietnamese queer women and transgender men in Ô-Môi were not content with just any queer support organization, they wanted it to be specifically Vietnamese-focused because of their unique experiences as refugees. As an ethnic group in exile, many Vietnamese feel an even greater need to hold onto their culture because they have "no homeland left" in which to practice their customs and traditions. Many Ô-Môi members expressed that they preferred Ô-Môi to Los Angeles Asian Pacific Islander Sisters (LAAPIS), an Asian panethnic queer women's group, because Ô-Môi speaks to their need for affirmation as Vietnamese. As David puts it:

I came here when I was four but yet whenever I hear stories and things going on in Vietnam, it is very *strong* for me. Like when I hear Vietnamese people telling about their stories, I actually get watery eyes. I actually feel, I feel for them, even though I don't know them. I didn't even have to go through any of that experience but I just knowing, I just feel a bond so that's the one thing that hooks me.

Another member, Trinh, further explains that joining Ô-Môi was important for her because she needed a space that confirms both her ethnicity and her queer identity. To her, they are inseparable:

I grew up Vietnamese, I eat Vietnamese food, I listen to Vietnamese music, my parents are Vietnamese, my group celebrates Vietnamese holidays. I read about Vietnam ALL the time, every chance I get so that I can learn and study where I came from and who I

am even though I'm in America. I can't identify with McDonald's and Coke. I can probably identify with "nuoc mam" [Vietnamese fish sauce].

Both David and Trinh's sentiments reflect other members' feelings. These are the reasons they joined Ô-Môi and what drove them to distinguish Ô-Môi as separate from other queer organizations.

Authenticating Vietnamese Queerness

Knowing that there are other queer Vietnamese out there provides a source of affirmation. When My-Le came out to her parents, they told her that she had become Americanized. In Vietnam, she would not be gay. As her main source of ethnic authentication, her parents drew a dichotomy between being Vietnamese and being queer. Hence, My-Le always felt her Vietnamese and queer worlds were in conflict. Finding Ô-Môi, however, helped to authenticate her ethnic identity. Ô-Môi helped make the bridge for her; she can claim both queerness and Vietnamese-ness because now there are other Vietnamese queers to validate her. Particularly because her Vietnamese-language proficiency is limited, My-Le also feels insecure about her Vietnamese identity. But having met a diverse group of Vietnamese queers with varied Vietnamese proficiency, My-Le can now see her "inadequacy" as a normal part of the Vietnamese American experiences.

Language Bonding and Needs

Like other Vietnamese American organizations, Ô-Môi is a reflection of the growing need and desperation of Vietnamese immigrants and their descendants to not lose their ethnic culture and language. It is an assertion by refugee people of their pride in their ethnic heritage and their nationalism. Many Ô-Môi members have expressed their desire to reconnect with their culture and relearn their mother tongue as some of the main reasons why they joined Ô-Môi. Because the majority of members are not fluent in Vietnamese and only a handful are proficient, those who know more emerge as experts and become teachers to those who are earnest to learn Vietnamese culture, language, and history.

For those who do not speak proficient Vietnamese, Ô-Môi becomes an especially important network for them to relearn Vietnamese. They can make friends and perhaps find lovers who speak their native tongue that would make them feel "more Vietnamese." For example, My-Linh shares with the

group that one day she would like to make love in Vietnamese. Audrey concurs with this desire to be in touch with one's culture at this most intimate level. As Hue-Lan puts it:

Because the language is a strong sense of identity. . . . You speak English, you might be American. You speak Vietnamese, you become more Vietnamese. Even if I don't, you know, even if I'm learning Vietnamese as a first-generation American, every time I speak Vietnamese, I become more Vietnamese. So, it changes me. I can't stay the same if I speak Vietnamese more fluently. Something will change inside. . . .that can change the way I think and feel about things.

Furthermore, Hue-Lan believes that being able to retain one's Vietnamese language proficiency as a queer Vietnamese would mean being able to validate and assert both an ethnic and queer identity:

It also makes me proud to be queer, too. You know, because I know I'm Vietnamese and I know I'm queer but I speak English only. So now I am Vietnamese *and* I speak Vietnamese language *and* I am queer, so, in a way, it's all coming together, for myself.

The moment I say "I," I know who I am. That's what it's done for me.

Speaking Vietnamese and being queer at the same time is a great symbolic act of liberation for many members who lead double lives, where they can only be queer around non-Vietnamese queer friends and be Vietnamese and straight-passing around straight Vietnamese. Ô-Môi provides a space for them to be both. Being able to speak Vietnamese among queers is one way of affirming both identities that are marginalized by mainstream societies.

Ô-Môi's original members founded the group with a desire to create a support network and on an assumption that people who are of Vietnamese heritage, were born female, and orient toward a queer gendered sexuality do have certain things in common that will bond them as a group. All members whom I interviewed expressed great appreciation for the existence of Ô-Môi. Thu-Vân, one of the group co-founders, reported that she knew a few lesbians but they did not know each other, she thought it would be a good idea to create a space that gives people an opportunity to come together. Ô-Môi meetings, gatherings, and discussions thus serve as a space for queer females of Vietnamese-heritage to

coalesce and bond. Ô-Môi becomes a space that normalizes both their ethnic and queer statuses that the larger U.S. society, the predominantly white queer community, and the Vietnamese American community marginalize or render invisible. In this process of sharing and validating their experiences, they learn the common experiences of becoming Vietnamese American, of becoming lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, and of becoming queer Vietnamese American.

Conclusion

The examples provided in this paper suggest that Vietnamese American lesbians, bisexual women, and female-to-male transgenders have different struggles in the process of adaptation to the U.S. I highlight how immigrant lives are heterosexualized and traditionally gendered and how immigrant studies that account for variegated genders and sexualities will be richer in understanding the diverse immigrant experiences. By focusing on the experiences of queer Vietnamese immigrants, I demonstrate how the mainstream ethnic network and processes are heterogendered and that networks such as Ô-Môi provide an alternative for Vietnamese queer immigrants. In the case of Ô-Môi, this particular Vietnamese American queer network is a specialized type of social capital that plays a vital role in the processes of social and psychological adjustments of immigrants by affirming and asserting both their ethnic and queer identities. The new path for Vietnamese queer immigrants in the U.S. is to pave its own road by borrowing adaptive strategies from both worlds. In other words, the existence of such queer ethnic organizations indicates that the route of immigrant adaptation for Vietnamese queers is not to assimilate to queer mainstream America nor is it to conform to heterosexist Vietnamese America. Ô-Môi helps in creating a new, emerging queer Vietnamese America.

Notes

(put after headnote) I would like to thank Ô-Môi members for their support in my research. For purposes of confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for all members.

1. Jane C. Wagner and Tina DeFelicantonio, *Girls Like Us*, 16 mm, 57 min., Women Make Movies, New York, 1997.
2. Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).
3. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale and David M. Halperin, eds., *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 227-254.

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4. Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); P.D. Starr and A.E. Roberts, "Community Structure and Vietnamese Refugee Adaptation: The Significance of Context," *International Migration Review* 16 (1982), 595-609.
 5. Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston III, *Growing up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* (New York: Russell Sage, 1999); Min Zhou and Alejandro Portes, *Chinatown: The Socioeconomic Potential of an Urban Enclave* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).
 6. Part of the mission of Queer Theory is to center sexuality as part of our analysis of social life. For more, please see Steven Seidman's "Introduction," in Steven Seidman, ed., *Queer Theory/Sociology* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 1-29.
 7. Chrys Ingraham, "The Heterosexual Imaginary: Feminist Sociology and Theories of Gender," in Steven Seidman, ed., *Queer Theory/Sociology* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 168-193.
 8. "Ô-Môi" is a Vietnamese slang word for lesbian. It is also a name of a tropical fruit in Viet Nam. The Ô-Môi fruit looks like a huge tamarind with small compartments where the flesh and nectar are encased. To eat it, one must part the flesh of each case to suck out the juice.
 9. Please see the previous endnote for an explanation. Another explanation for the usage of this term was that it sounded almost similar to the French term "homo" as in "homosexuelle." This parallels the story where the Vietnamese vernacular adopts the term "B.D." ["Bay-day"] from the French word "berdache" to refer to gay men.
 10. I am referring to just the 1.2-mile business district but also the network of business clusters and residential concentrations.
 11. The 2000 U.S. Census tabulates Vietnamese population at 1,122,528.
 12. Gina Masequesmay, "Little Saigon: An Exploratory Study of an Ethnic Community," Senior thesis, Pomona College, 1991.