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Week 6: Culture & Identity

Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde highlights Chau Huynh's life and motivation behind her artwork. Valverde gives further insight into how cultural struggles develop, specifically among the Vietnamese American community: "Cultural production, and very importantly, the media outlets that disseminate and validate the works, then, become the focus for shaping the political, cultural, and social landscape for relatively recent immigrant groups like Vietnamese Americans" (Valverde, 92). Stuart Hall's reading tackles defining what cultural identity means as well as how it is relevant to the African diaspora. According to Hall, cultural identity can be defined in two ways: (1) "one true self" or "one people," and (2) "what we really are" or "what we have really become." Valverde argues how "New environment of creation and discontent has allowed new struggles for voice and representation within the Vietnamese American community to emerge" (Valverde, 92). New identities are formed when there are cultural identity conflicts and a divide among communities. Ethnic studies introduce counter-storytelling, which gives a voice to the marginalized whose stories have been silenced by the majoritarian stories (ASA 189D). The importance of the art that is produced amidst these cultural identity struggles is that art expresses the stories that cannot necessarily be put into words.

In *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall suggests that there are two different positions of 'Cultural identity,' examining the diasporic Black community in the Caribbean islands and how they negotiate their identity with their colonial experiences through the production and reproduction cultural signifiers. The first position, 'Collective One Self,' proposes that people's cultural identities are bound to that of a similar, shared ethnic identity/ancestry and their people's collective history. The second position defines 'cultural identity' as marked by the differences and instability — a process of continuous transformation between the past and future. Only in this position does it take account of colonial histories and traumas ingrained in colonized peoples' lived experiences and identity-formation. Ultimately, Hall argues that cultural identity is not the "... mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity…" (Hall, 225) but is rather shaped by the continued interactions of power, history, and culture. Hall criticizes the "...positioned and subjected [black people and black experiences]... in the dominant regimes of representation… constructed as different and Other within the categories of knowledge of the West…" (Hall, 225). Moreover, Hall discusses how dialogue with different cultural 'presences' influence the Carribean identity: African, European, and American. (Hall, 227). This shows how

difference occurs simultaneously with continuity in regards to cultural identity. The first presence is Africa, which Hall calls the "site of the repressed (Hall, 230)." The African presence is felt in many aspects of the Caribbean society, namely its history, culture, music, language, religion, and black population. However, the original 'Africa' has been transformed so much that it can no longer be recovered. Instead, the 'Africa' that must be returned to is what it has become in the New World. The European presence is felt through relationships of power, force, and consent. Finally, the American presence is about the Caribbean's relationship with the New World, which represents the space in which "... creolisations and assimilations [are] negotiated" (Hall, 234).

Despite being about the African diaspora, the reading also applies to the Asian American diaspora's struggles with cultural identity. This article provided concepts that reflect how the Asian American cultural identity has been transformed through negotiations with different presences, colonial experiences, and imagined "returns to the homeland." Though the imagined homeland can't be recovered, it can be felt through other means, namely food, language, religion, and history. Additionally, the position of Asians in America as the 'Other' illustrates how dominant regimes influence the identity-formation of diasporic and colonized people. Furthermore, as shown later in Valverde's reading, Vietnamese Americans' internal conflict regarding controversial art represents the second definition — transformation through the continuous conflict between past and future beliefs.

In *Defying and Redefining Diasporic Art and Media as Seen through Chau Huynh's Creations*, Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde underlined the cultural identity conflict and divide within the Vietnamese American community. Chau Hyunh is a Vietnamese artist that caused an uproar when her artwork *Connections* and *Marriage Quilt* got featured in the F.O.B II: Art Speaks exhibit in 2009. Her art pieces were taken out of context and many associated it with communist propaganda. Radical and extreme political fervors of the Vietnamese American community who wrongfully interpreted her artworks took offense and bullied Hyunh for creating such a horrendous artwork that reminded the community of their lost nation displaced by the communist regime. The exaggerated efforts of anti-communist protestors took the matter in their own hands and rallied to voice out their oppositional sentiments on the controversial art pieces. Chau Hyunh's upbringing was heavily influenced by her father's membership in the communist party. Hyunh was affixed to her familial ties to the communist ideals, but when she migrated here in the United States, after marrying her anti-communist husband to continue her art education, her sheltered upbringing compelled her to break down the divide by utilizing her art platform as a mechanism to bring change and unity to both sides of the political spectrum by creating a *Marriage Quilt*. The quilt integrates the Republic of Vietnam flag (RVN) with the SRV flag. This piece was inspired by: "The idea that people from different backgrounds could come together and try to understand each other (Valverde, 93)." The flag is later dubbed the "Unity Flag" by James Du. Nguoi Viet Daily News picked up Chau Hyunh's story and got featured in a special

New Year edition of the newspaper. A picture of Hyunh's *Connections* was printed on page 194 of the newspaper. *Connections* consist of three pedicure basins painted yellow with three red stripes, much like the RVN flag. The installation is named *Connections* because the basins represent Vietnamese working in the nail salons and the cords to the socket symbolize the connections back to Vietnam through sending money back to their families, specifically remittances. Doan Trong Nguyen, one of the protestors, saw the artwork as offensive and a "dirty" depiction and representation of the South Vietnamese Flag. He specifically blamed Nguoi Viet Daily for publishing such propaganda and their company should be boycotted (Valverde, 99).

Art galleries and exhibitions in California received a similar sentiment for merely showcasing the thriving Vietnamese American art scene. Anti-communist members of the community politicized every symbols, color, or images (Valverde, 100). A collective sentiment of the protestors is deeply rooted in fear of having a unified history; for them, it is imperative to preserve the history of South Vietnamese as a lost nation. Hence, given this reason, people are hyper-aware of any work, act, or behavior that may perpetuate communist ideals (Valverde, 100). Artists' and supporters' goal is to strive for political unity and a path towards healing and strengthening a nation. Many curators defended their exhibits as a vehicle for an open dialogue and a recognition space for a burgeoning Vietnamese American art (Valverde, 96). Geoff Dorn and Beth Gate held an exhibit at the Pacific Bridge Gallery showcasing David Thomas a Vietnam war veteran whose artwork consists of forty collage, digital imaging, and oil pastel works of Ho Chi Minh's image. In response to the backlash and protest to an installation focusing on Ho Chi Minh's image, Dorn states that "Abstract art presents dialogue around these issues in a way that only art can do." In regards to the cultural identity divide, Duong and Le explain the purpose of the exhibit, "For too long, the Vietnamese community has defined politically to mean either 'anti-communist' or 'pro-communist,' with the former being the only acceptable label in this 'community' (Duong and Le, 2009)." However, despite defensive explanations to anti-communists members, their protests often led to violence. Truong Van Tran hung a North Vietnamese Flag along with a portrait of Ho Chi Minh in his Hi Tek videotape. He believes that it is his right to put such symbolic materials on his store walls. Many were angry while some beat him up until the police intervened.

The underlying premise of the chapter hits on the attachment of the Vietnamese American community in holding into a post-memory of their lost homeland. To preserve a history, political and social tensions form a paradigm of disagreements that only propels violence and hatred. Though we cannot truly define why anti-communists are compelled to angle media and artworks as perpetrators of communist ideals, artists and exhibitors are making strides in highlighting the importance of art as a platform in redefining histories. In the study of the Asian

American diaspora, moments and news like these serves as a critical contribution in examining closely disparities in our limited understanding of our ever-changing history.

In bringing both readings from this week together, the Stuart Hall reading, Hall states, "Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think," which can be directly tied back to the cultural identity conflict among the Vietnamese Americans highlighted in the Valverde reading. Identity is, in fact, not transparent at all and very problematic given the divide it can bring to communities when there is a disagreement in what people believe should be the "single cultural identity." Relating the readings to the concept of the Asian diaspora, Valverde expresses how "The controversy around Chau's installation and the Nguoi Viet Daily shows the continued efforts of certain Vietnamese Americans to produce their own reality away from the home country" (Valverde, 100). The reading outlined the Vietnamese American community with conflicting feelings of displacement, which includes multiple ideas of home and choice, or lack of choice, of a home. 'Producing their own reality away from the home country' is leading to the creation of new, shared hybrid cultures. By relating it to our own personal experiences, we can examine the pan-Asian identity in America and question if there is a divide among the community. For example, we can discuss how the model minority myth affects the Asian-American community and what cultural identity conflicts this myth may be creating among the Asian-Americans that may not necessarily fall under the model minority narrative.

References

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Kieu-Linh Valverde. "Defying and Redefining Diasporic Art and Media as Seen through Chau Huynh's Creations." Transnationalizing Viet Nam.

Stuart Hall. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora.