Birds of Paradise Lost Translation and Close Reading Activity

1.) In the following passages from Andrew Lam's "Love Leather," what does the contextual and fluid use of the word *"minh"* signify? For Mr. and Mrs. Le, what does the English language fail to encapsulate? How might Mr. Le's identification of the porousness of borders gesture towards a transmission/transference of meaning between language use in the country of origin and in the country of exile? How might negotiations between English and Vietnamese correspond to Mr. and Mrs. Le's negotiations of diasporic/transnational belonging and cultural hybridity?

"One day, at the bottom of a page [of her husband's notebook,] [Mrs. Le] found her husband's meditation on the Vietnamese word *minh*, which both she and Mr. Le were fond of using.

It's a difficult word to explain. *'Minh oi'* literally means, 'oh body.' What it intends: 'my dear husband,' or 'my dear wife,' depending on who the speaker is. How to explain the usage of this word to Steven? The self, when loved, is shared, no longer singular, the self a bridge to another. *'Minh'* can be 'you,' *'minh'* can be 'me,' *'minh'* can be 'us,' all depending on the context— your body is mine is yours is ours, as long as we exist in an intimate circle. Also consider: *'Nha minh'*: 'Our house,' or 'our family.' You and I, through love, and its consequences, are connected in a way that bonds beyond sex, beyond shared flesh—a communion of souls."

When she read this passage, Mrs. Le was moved to tears and resolved not to read Mr. Le's notebook again. America—what a shock to the system! This whole subculture, its obsession with sex and youth and physical attributes … was all very perverse to her" (6).

"The image that will become the New World is that of a mysterious and vast garden. In it flowers bloom from a myriad of dreams and far-flung desires, its soil made fertile by love and its endless foibles. The descending sun washes the world in a fiery orange light; the air wavers. Farther out, the crowd stares, their blurred faces aglow with expectations. Mr. Le didn't see it before, but he sees it now: how far he has traveled. His dream has taken him farther from his homeland in a way that the jumbo jet plane never could. How everything has changed, as if the skin, once broken, will in some way remain forever open to the larger world, just as the borders, once crossed, remain forever porous to the traveler. In the kitchen his wife is moving about, the dishes clang and clatter, and the air smells of fish sauce and ground pepper. A cool breeze through the living room sways the curtains, and behind them the high-rises of San Francisco appear and disappear. *'Minh oi,'* yells Mrs. Le lovingly, 'time for supper' (19).

2.) In Andrew Lam's "Bright Clouds over the Mekong," why is it significant that instances of Vietnamese language use are either embedded within—or trigger— Kathy's traumatic memories about her husband's murder? Why do some instances of Vietnamese use go untranslated? How do instances of Vietnamese language use correspond to the two personas that Kathy has embodied? Are these two identities beyond reconciliation? Through her utterance of *"Viet Cong o dau?"* in the present, how is Kathy rhetorically revising her own traumatic narrative?

"She had seen him a long time ago, from the vantage point of the dead. Smeared with her cousin's blood and wounded herself, partially hidden under her cousin's body, she lay very still among the wavering rice blades, her conical hat shading her face. Above her GIs milled about, their walkie-talkies buzzed and crackled, their boots sloshed mud.

Through nearly shut eyes, she watched.

A tall officer stood above her husband, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. '*Viet Cong*—Charlie—where? *VC dau? Dau?*' he asked. '*Hong biet! Hong biet o dau,'* her husband answered loudly, shaking his head like an epileptic. She studied his face. It was badly bruised, lips split and bleeding.

Her husband stole glances at his rusted scythe nearby, though his wrists were bound. One of the soldiers, a freckled, red-faced teenager, prudently kicked the scythe away. Her husband made fists with his bound hands, every muscle on his torso tensed and rippled as he muttered to himself: '*Song tao tra thu. Chet thanh ma tao tru*'—'Live, I'll take revenge. Dead, as a ghost I'll haunt you' (140).

"'Viet Cong o dau?' She said it out loud now, staring at Harrison's tall silhouette at the bay window. But her voice was not manly, nor was it chased with sarcasm or vehemence. It was plaintive, hoarse. 'Damn you, stupid, stupid Jay Harrison, bastard,' she said and pressed hard on both sides of her nose, under her eyes, so that she would stop crying. 'Stupid,' she said. 'Stupid me! Stupid men!' She lowered her car window and the cold air rushed in. But whose death was she crying for? Her long dead husband's? Or Lan's?

Lan, the young widow, would have thrown the whole thing in the soup with glee and not trembled like cowardly, tongue-tied Kathy Nguyen. Lan, as she cleaned her husband's body for the funeral years ago, had envisioned Harrison's death. But how could that peasant girl, in her wildest imagination, conceive for herself this other life, this other possibility?

She looked up. She ached for him … She should go back inside then. But it would be like crossing yet another ocean—the stories they would have to tell each other, the things they must confess, the ghosts they must appease and confront together . . . and apart" (157-8).