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Bound by Water: Inquiry, Trauma, and Genre in Vietnamese American Literature

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

in

Literature

by

Jade Tiffany Hidle

Committee in charge:

Professor Shelley Streeby, Chair

Professor Yen Le Espiritu

Professor Jin-Kyung Lee

Professor Luis Martin-Cabrera

Professor Meg Wesling

2014

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2014

DEDICATION

For my mother and my siblings

and

in memory of Sarah Jo Mayville

## EPIGRAPH

It is said that the sea is history.

*Saidiya Hartman*

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Chapter 1, in part, was published in *International Journal of Comic Art*, Spring 2013. The dissertation author was the primary investigator and author of this paper.

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“Remembering in Red and Yellow: History, Memory, and Second-Generation Vietnamese American identity in GB Tran’s *VIETNAMERICA*.” *International Journal of Comic Art*. 15.1 (2013): 408-18.

“My Grandmother Was a Vietnamese Prostitute.” *Beside the City of Angels: An Anthology of Long Beach Poetry*. Ed. Paul Kareem Tayyar. Huntington Beach, CA: World Parade Books, 2011. 54.

“A Review of Irene Vilar’s *Impossible Motherhood: Testimony of an Abortion Addict*.” *Ethnic Studies Review*. Michigan: Albion College, 2010. 133-35.

“A Review of Wenying Xu’s *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature*.” *Watermark*. Long Beach: CSULB, 2009. 147-52.

“Pass Me the Wooden Leg: The Body, the Gaze, and the Performative Nature of Gender in Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Good Country People.’” *Watermark*. Long Beach: CSULB, 2007. 100-24.

## FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Literatures in English

Studies in Multiethnic American Literature, 1861-Present  
Professor Shelley Streeby

Studies in Vietnamese American Cultural Productions, 1975-Present  
Professor Yen Le Espiritu

Studies in Speculative and Supernatural Fiction  
Professors Shelley Streeby and Lisa Lampert-Weissig

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Bound by Water: Inquiry, Trauma, and Genre in Vietnamese American Literature

by

Jade Tiffany Hidle

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California, San Diego, 2014

Professor Shelley Streeby, Chair

This dissertation treats contemporary Vietnamese American literature as responses to common inquiries about history and identity stemming from U.S.-centric, myopic, and racialized narratives about the U.S.-Viet Nam War that serve to assuage lingering American guilt and eclipse Vietnamese American perspectives. These inquiries include “Where are you from?” and “What was the war like?” The works studied here

represent various literary genres—comic books, cookbooks, memoirs, and novels—that offer diverse, distinct forms for negotiating ambivalent Vietnamese American identities, namely through the expression of trauma. This dissertation focuses on how each genre allows articulations of trauma by bending time and space to rewrite dominant histories of the U.S.-Viet Nam War as “over” or “ended.” As argued in the following chapters, contemporary multi-genre Vietnamese American literature stresses that the war is not over, as its traumas resurface and are inherited by the second generation; the texts discussed highlight the ebbs and flows of forming and broadening conceptions of fluid identities that are labeled and fixed as “Vietnamese American.” This dissertation, then, focuses on works that use their respective genres to negotiate identities in terms of long-standing racialized stereotypes of the model minority and, in contrast, the threatening perpetual foreigner; each chapter further examines issues of diversifying the representation of Vietnamese Americans in dialogue with the figures of the refugee, commodified culinary tour guides, multiracial children, as well as transgender and gender fluid individuals. In order, the chapters in this dissertation will focus on the following texts: GB Tran’s graphic memoir *VIETNAMERICA*; four cookbooks by Luke Nguyen, Charles Phan, Nhut Huynh, and Ann Le; life narratives by Kien Nguyen and myself; and the genre-bending, queer narratives of *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam* by Andrew X. Pham and lê thi diem thúy’s *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. An investigation of how the literary form enhances the delivery of content that challenges U.S.-serving historical discourses and epistemologies of racial identity, this dissertation stands as an effort to expand not only the possibilities of response, but also the terrain of inquiry.

## INTRODUCTION

“Did the people of Vietnam/use lanterns of stone?/Did they hold ceremonies/to reverence the opening of buds?/Were they inclined to quiet laughter?/Did they use one and ivory,/jade and silver, for ornament?/Had they an epic poem?/Did they distinguish between speech and singing? [...] There is an echo yet/of their speech which was like a song./It was reported their singing resembled the flight of moths in moonlight./Who can say? It is silent now.”

—Denise Levertov, “What Were They Like?” (1971)

Published in 1971 when the U.S. war in Viet Nam was already a highly publicized and widely regarded military and moral failure, Denise Levertov’s often-anthologized poem “What Were They Like?” condemns the war by posing questions that lament the loss of an enigmatic yet nostalgically rendered Viet Nam.<sup>1</sup> Levertov’s use of the poetic device apostrophe is historically and politically charged. She inquires about Vietnamese culture, yet does not directly ask Vietnamese people who are the focus of the poem but also its marked absence; rather, her questions are posed almost rhetorically, as unanswerable, so as to contemplate and eulogize Vietnamese culture without engaging with it or its people. And, in the final lines of the poem, Levertov describes what presence the Vietnamese have as merely an ethereal echo that “resembled the flight of moths in moonlight”—an image indistinguishable and fleeting. Her final question and answer—“Who can say? It is silent now.”—further forecloses the possibility of Vietnamese voice. Levertov’s poem reflects the tendency in U.S.-propagated narratives of the war in Viet Nam to revolve around American guilt and perceptions of Viet Nam

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<sup>1</sup> I purposefully use the two-word spelling to capture the way in which the name looks and sounds to me. This is, along the same lines of Lan P. Duong’s distinction, not to suggest that this spelling is more “authentic” (16), but rather to differentiate my discussion of the country from many of my sources that use the one-word spelling “Vietnam” that is common to U.S. discourses about the war in Viet Nam. Likewise, I refer to “The Vietnam War” as “the U.S.-Viet Nam War” to distinguish it from the civil war in Viet Nam, thereby decentering the U.S.’s eclipsing claim to wars in Viet Nam. Also, I have only used the diacritics on words that employed those accent marks in the original publication, as well as to designate tones in speech.

that serve to assuage that guilt. Narratives such as “What Were They Like?” are not about the Vietnamese.

This dissertation intervenes in that U.S.-centric narrative tradition by answering Levertov’s final question of “Who can say?” not with her imposed silence, but with the voices of Vietnamese American authors who respond to inquiries about their histories, cultures, and identities through different genres of literature. By examining how Vietnamese American authors reconfigure the conventions of different literary genres, this dissertation shows that not only do the works attest to the varying and expanding forms of expression among those who are not “silent” as Levertov suggests, but also how their appropriation of these genres bend notions of time, space, and the representations of Vietnamese people to debunk the interlocutor’s assumptions about history, identity, and culture. Important to this aspect of contesting the larger U.S.-centric historical narrative of which Levertov’s poem is part, this dissertation focuses not on the Vietnamese voices of the past, but of the here and now. The majority of the works examined in this dissertation were published in the last ten years, indicating the expanding body of Vietnamese American literature and also speaking to how the second generation answers the questions of how history can be told.

This dissertation foregrounds second-generation Vietnamese American works because the notion of inquiries posed as unanswerable and/or to an absent, yet present, character has had a significant impact on my life as a second-generation Vietnamese American and my understanding of how and why stories are told. My life has been a string of experiences in which others attempt to index me in the skeletal histories of what they know about Viet Nam, which is more often than not limited to U.S.-propagated

narratives about the war there. It is in these inquiries, however earnest, that I feel I am forced to put myself and my family's history on display. People ask general questions ("Do you speak the language?", "Can you cook phở? And how do say 'phở'?", "Have you been to Viet Nam? What's it like there?", "Did your family see people die" or "Did they kill any U.S. soldiers?"), and once a U.S. veteran of the war in Viet Nam looked at me, his eyes softened, told me in a voice tinged with regret that the Vietnamese were a "simple people," and asked me how my family felt about the war. Because I'm mixed, people ask more specific questions such as "Was your father a soldier?" (Translation: "Was your mother a prostitute?") In many cases, these questions probe at traumas that stem from, and persist long after, the war. Subsequently, the choice of manner of response to these questions becomes a mediation of traumas—those of the interviewee, their families, and often many others—as trauma is a connective web. As questions are central to how I, and many Vietnamese American authors, negotiate our traumas, our histories, and our identities, each chapter focuses on different types of questions and how different genres of response allow the authors to reframe the initial inquiry.

The first chapter centers on GB Tran's graphic memoir *VIETNAMERICA* (2011) and how the comic book genre addresses questions of how his family negotiated their identities under French colonial rule, the Communist regime, and immigration as refugees to the U.S. Following that, the second chapter zeroes in on questions about Vietnamese culinary culture and how numerous diasporic Vietnamese cookbooks worldwide utilize alimentary language in the cookbook genre to show the complexity of ongoing Vietnamese history-making. The third chapter concentrates on debunking the assumption that Vietnamese American families adhere to a Confucian-influenced

patriarchal structure by looking at queerness and alternative kinships in the genre-bending narratives of Andrew X. Pham's "memoir" *Catfish and Mandala* (1999) and Lê thi diem thúy's "novel" *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003). Lastly, this dissertation concludes with a chapter that places Kien Nguyen's 2001 memoir *The Unwanted* in conversation with vignettes of my own life narratives to discuss questions of miscegenation and how autobiographical narratives respond to the related tropes of the G.I.-prostitute affair and the tragic mixed-race offspring narrative.

Before delving into how these works utilize genre conventions to complicate the very questions they address, it is important to provide context for where these questions come from. The overarching purpose of my dissertation is to analyze how each of the Vietnamese American works listed above flesh out the reductive U.S.-centric historical narrative of the U.S.'s war in Viet Nam. Building upon Viet Thanh Nguyen and Yen Lê Espiritu's point that, although studies of Vietnamese American cultural productions should not be limited to the frame of the U.S. war in Viet Nam, the war must be acknowledged for its influence, I argue that Vietnamese American works decenter the U.S. from the history of Viet Nam by expanding timelines that include periods before and after the war, oscillating between these periods to destabilize linear notions of "before" and "after" altogether. By extension, I focus on works that are, though diverse, unified in their efforts to show that the "war" did not end with the Fall of Sai Gon, but continued upon immigration to the U.S. and the ensuing discrimination, poverty, violence, mental health issues, and physical illnesses, including ailments stemming from exposure to Agent Orange (*New America Media*). Concentrating on second-generation works is significant because, as Linda Trinh Vo has pointed out, there are a dearth of studies of

Southeast Asian literary works in Asian American studies. Within the representations of Vietnamese, most studies focus on first or 1.5-generation individuals. While those works are no doubt essential to tracing the histories of diasporic Vietnamese, the field of Vietnamese literary studies should not remain limited to those who were born in Viet Nam, as doing so tends to cleave the space and time of homeland and diaspora. As Lan P. Duong points out, a “coterporal focus on the homeland and the diaspora dispels the notion that the latter is an inauthentic representation of the former” (15-16). To pursue this coterporal approach, I purposefully do not treat second-generation Vietnamese American works as “inauthentic” but, rather, as legitimate articulations of an ever-shifting terrain of Vietnamese American identities, especially in regard to how they represent inherited memories and experiences of Viet Nam and the war as it continues long after its supposed “end.”

This dissertation aims to address the lack of studies dedicated to Vietnamese American works specifically, rather than mentioning them marginally in relation to other Asian American texts. According to Espiritu, it is imperative that Vietnamese Americans are treated as distinct from other Asian American groups because the impetus of their diaspora stems from a specific war and one whose highly publicized representation has cast Vietnamese into a particular refugee mold—born out of crisis, to be saved, namely through assimilation into the model minority. Yen Lê Espiritu, in “The We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose Syndrome,” refers to the “good refugee” whose “success” upon immigrating to the U.S. allows the nation to assert itself as benevolent savior to Vietnamese refugees and that the genocidal imperial project in Viet Nam is reconstructed as a justified war. Ultimately, the U.S., according to Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong, “conjure[s]

triumph from defeat” (158). Historically speaking, the model minority figure renders invisible the centuries of violent processes of excluding Asians in the U.S., suggesting that one becomes a model minority through choice or inherent nature, rather than due to social conditions. As Nhi T. Lieu explains, this “good refugee” or “model minority” discourse serves three purposes: convincing U.S. Americans of the moral justification of rescue of refugees, obscuring class and ethnic differences, leaving Southeast Asians outside of Civil Rights movement (18), and neglecting the problems that working-class Viets faced (20-1). Viet T. Nguyen, in *Race and Resistance*, adds that at a more ideological level manifesting in literary study, “the American nation is reaffirmed through model minority discourse, which absolves the nations of its responsibility for the individual’s fate” (148). In light of this, Nguyen argues that audiences, including Asian American literary scholars, need to overcome reading Vietnamese American literature through the bifurcated lenses of model minority or, on the reverse, the resistant “bad subject.” What Nguyen aims to do is see these two identifications as “mutually interdependent”(144). It is in this effort that my project intends to explore the ways in which Vietnamese American works reorient time and space in order to narrate history and their identities within it in more complex ways.

Rewriting time and space is imbricated in a larger system of imperialism. According to Amy Kaplan, “the traditional understanding of imperialism is a one-way imposition of power in distant colonies” (1), thereby constructing a sense of nationhood that separates the home of the U.S. from the constructions of Viet Nam and Vietnamese, even those living in the U.S., as foreign and alien. Implicit in this spatial distancing and construction of borders that are traversable by the U.S. is the idea of American

exceptionalism, which emphasizes that the U.S. is the most advanced on a linear timeline in regard to its military might and moral superiority over colonized, savage others—in this case, the Vietnamese.

Fixing Vietnamese bodies in such a spatio-temporal framework concretely manifests in anthropological documents, as well as popular film and photography. In the 1930s, American journalist Virginia Thompson cited French colonial administrator Paul Giran when she deemed the Vietnamese to be “primitive,” “lazy,” “dishonest,” “unclean,” and “somnolent” (Bradley 46). The temporal framework that this racial optic constructs would implicitly shape and justify later political moves, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s proposal to remove Viet Nam from French control to be placed under a trusteeship, regulated by the U.S.’s so-called more progressive, empathetic, and benevolent colonialism that had proven to be “successful” in the Philippines (Bradley and Young 25). And, of course, the aerial nature of the war, if not genocide, that the U.S. dictated in Viet Nam operated under the assumption, and further sharpened the idea, that “the people on the ground are entirely abstract” (Tanaka 1).

More recently, Marita Sturken asserts that Hollywood films serve to quell U.S. guilt and anxieties about the war at the expense of the Vietnamese (89). Films such as *Full Metal Jacket*, and *Apocalypse Now* depict Viet Nam as a primitive, violent jungle with equally savage inhabitants that robbed American soldiers of their lives; such depictions locate the Vietnamese as spatially distant and temporally undeveloped. This erases Vietnamese and Vietnamese American perspectives in historical narratives, as these U.S.-centric “war is hell” filmic narratives “foreground the painful experience of the American Vietnam veteran in such a way that the Vietnamese people, both civilians

and veterans, are forgotten” (8). To use Lisa Yoneyama’s term, this “amnesic forgetting” of the Vietnamese serves the U.S. in its continuing imperialist projects worldwide. Attempting to efface the destructive consequences of the Viet Nam War allows for the U.S. to cast itself in the light of benevolent savior, projecting American exceptionalism through past and future.

Fundamental to this dissertation, then, is the mission to combat forgetting by reconceiving of history, not as a linear continuum of progress, but more as a Benjaminian angel of history, simultaneously moving forward and looking back to recognize what is effaced through histories that are “narratives of the victors,” opening up a space in which to read Vietnamese Americans’ perspectives of history. History, as Briggs et al put it, should not merely be “just another way to teach young people to love their country” (644-5), but a palimpsestic terrain in which conflicting narratives can be negotiated. This is not to assume that the Vietnamese Americans’ perspectives can simply be reclaimed and inserted into a historical timeline to complete it, but rather to allow for multiple histories that are not necessarily fixed. The shifting and subjective qualities of traumatic memories elucidate the ways in which history should be told from various, often dissonant, vantage points rather than one dominant, myopic narrative.

Trauma is most commonly acknowledged as a branch of Sigmund Freud’s concept of melancholia. In contrast to mourning as a finite period of grieving loss, melancholia is ongoing and often unconscious (Freud 245). Recent studies move away from Freud’s treatment of melancholia as a form of mental illness to consider trauma as a social process. As such time and space are reconceived in that the past is alive in the present and testimonies of trauma can challenge dominant power structures that efface

key perspectives in narratives of history. Though Freudian psychoanalysis undergirds analyses of trauma, the now well-established field of trauma studies orients the primary facets of trauma—memory, forgetting, silence—within historically, socially, and politically specific contexts. While the definition of “trauma” elasticizes to include experiences domestic and global, a large body of trauma studies revolves around experiences of war. Trauma studies have increased after 9/11 (Brunner 185), and recent trauma studies scholarship often crosses and links periods of war and/or studies history through the lens of 9/11 trauma studies.<sup>2</sup> Many trauma studies focus on World War II and the Holocaust. For instance, Dominick LaCapra’s *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* and *History and Memory After Auschwitz* are oft-cited studies of how war engenders traumas that continually need to be reckoned with.

In recent years, the centrality of the Holocaust to trauma studies has been criticized for what Karyn Ball calls “institutional favoritism” (14).<sup>3</sup> This means that the myopic, Eurocentric lens for studying trauma dictated how history was remembered in “official” spaces, such as museums.<sup>4</sup> Michael Rothberg adds that, by the turn of the millennium, trauma studies remained Euro-American-centric, so he promotes decolonial trauma studies that address ongoing issues of “genocide and neo-imperial war” (226).<sup>5</sup>

The tension that Rothberg illuminates is evident in trauma studies of the U.S. war in Viet

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<sup>2</sup> Jenny Edkins’ *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (2003) is an example of cross-war trauma studies, as Edkins discusses WWII, Viet Nam, Kosovo, and 9/11.

<sup>3</sup> Karyn Ball’s “Trauma and Its Institutional Destinies” provides a thorough genealogy of the evolution of trauma studies from the ‘80s to 2000.

<sup>4</sup> See Christina Schwenkel’s “Exhibiting War, Reconciling Pasts: Photographic Representation and Transnational Commemoration in Contemporary Vietnam” for an analysis of how the War Remnants Museum in Sai Gon presents a contrasting “official” memory of the war.

<sup>5</sup> Rothberg’s “Decolonizing Trauma Studies” analyzes trauma in several postcolonial novels.

Nam, in that much of the scholarship centers on the impact of the war on U.S. veterans.<sup>6</sup> However, because technology allowed for the widespread dissemination of images during the U.S.-Viet Nam War, the historical, social, and political context is distinct from other war-based trauma studies as it became a “national trauma.” As such, the war requires an “understanding popular culture” through which U.S. soldiers and the public witnessed the trauma of the war (Ball 9) and that omitted and colored Vietnamese viewpoints.

In keeping with Rothberg’s decolonizing efforts, I emphasize in this dissertation that trauma studies of the U.S.-Viet Nam War era must include the testimonies of the Vietnamese, and not just those who experienced it firsthand, but also the second-generation writers discussed here who have inherited traumas of the war. Marianne Hirsch elaborates that “post-memory” is the inheritance of pain by those who did not experience the initial trauma firsthand. Such a weighty inheritance, according to Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, revolved around the question, “Is trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?” (7). As second-generation Vietnamese Americans’ inheritance of trauma involves survival of a war that appears spatially and temporally distant, at least when measured on a linear scale, their memories of trauma operate according to what Jenny Edkins calls “trauma time,” or a temporality that “encircles” (16). The encircling of trauma time corrals others into the experience of it. Caruth asserts that “one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another” (8). As such, memory can be collective, connecting people across time and space. Vietnamese American works are often dealing with memories that exceed the temporal boundaries of an individual life, binding the authors

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<sup>6</sup> Judith Herman’s work is often cited in such studies.

to their family members as well as to their audiences. In regard to the author-audience relationship, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* address both witnessing and listening to testimonies of trauma. Felman and Laub's study highlights the "response-ability" (202) of the listener and thereby stressing the importance of the participatory relationship between testifier and listener (57). This implicates trauma as literature to be read as dynamic and ongoing (xiv-xv). Felman and Laub state, "The literature of testimony [...] is not simply a statement, but a performative engagement between consciousness and history" (114). That is to say that the ways in which authors and their readers interact through the text bear implications for how existing historical narratives are reinforced and/or resisted. As a characteristic of trauma is often its "inexpressibility" (Edkins 15), the dynamic relationship between author and audience is underscored because the author must find ways to represent the ultimately unrepresentable. Literature, then, emerges as a territory in which representation (showing) and epistemology (knowing) come into question. Caruth states that literature is the site at which we can encounter "the complex relation between knowing and not knowing" (3). This epistemological implication prompts the exploration of *how* we know and articulate "the" history of the war and "the" identity as Vietnamese Americans. Ball points out that traumatic memories debunk the notion of "authentic" experience as they shift and change, and, in doing so, emphasize processes and modes of representation as bearers of cultural significance. That is to say, "memory-images and narratives provide both the content and impetus of political and moral claims about historical oppression in the past and present" (8). Thus, examining Vietnamese American cultural productions, including visual and written texts, casts

existing representations of the U.S.-Viet Nam War and Vietnamese people in a new light, one that provides testimony to traumas that have largely been effaced from dominant, U.S.-propagated narratives of history.

This dissertation will focus on how second-generation Vietnamese authors' choose specific genres of literature and/or cultural production and reconfigure the conventions of those genres as ways of connecting audiences, Vietnamese or otherwise, and as a means of reworking histories. More specifically, Vietnamese American writers and artists prompt audiences to practice a "new mode of reading and listening that both the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand" (Caruth 9). Prompting audiences to consider an alternative reading praxis is important because, as Isabelle Thuy Pelaud points out, U.S. readers and publishers have a history of treating Vietnamese American authors as "anthropological informants" who serve to fulfill their curiosity and lingering guilt about the Viet Nam War, pigeonholing these writers and treating even fiction writers as autobiographers. With this in mind, I will attend to how the Vietnamese American writers I have chosen utilize both autobiography and other genres to respond to such an expectation.

The works that I will be analyzing include memoirs, novels, comic books, and cookbooks; each genre involves a different mode of representing time and space, history and memory, and embodied Vietnamese American identities articulated through trauma. In each of the chapters, which discuss different genres, I will attend to the politicization of genre in the relatively new body of Vietnamese American literature. Looking at works that break from popular audience expectation and reception, which are rooted in U.S.-centric perspectives of the Viet Nam War, I elucidate the ways in which Vietnamese

American artists and writers have contributed to changing not only history, but the literary canon—questioning the *hows* and *whys* of its formation. Essentially, by examining the link between *how* and *why*, this dissertation aims to show how form and content work in concert to deliver historical and implicitly political messages. In doing so, I focus on how second-generation Vietnamese Americans (along with some 1.5-generation writers and some diasporic Vietnamese writers living in other countries) use different literary genres and their respective conventions to answer the repeated inquiries with which they have been confronted. I show the ways in which the genre, the *how*, presents different possibilities of response and distinct methods for mediating time and space, history and memory, in order to form and articulate identities that do not conform to the U.S.-centric model minority narrative, that create vistas for conceiving of, and living, more complex Vietnamese American identities.

To address *how* and *why*, I want to look at the ways in which the burgeoning number of second-generation Vietnamese American works in the past decade or so have been marketed and distributed within certain genres—ultimately, a process of labeling by which authors and narratives are both included and excluded. “Including” Vietnamese American works under the marketable, legible genre categorization of “autobiography” in the name of multiculturalism can be what Omi and Winant call hegemonic in that it is an attempt to incorporate the opposition (15). David Palumbo-Liu elaborates on this politics of inclusion by arguing that “including” marginalized peoples in the canon in the name of diversity assumes that “actual differences in the goals, identities, material existences and political representations of constituent groups are relegated to a transcended past, evacuated from the present” (10). Palumbo-Liu’s point is relevant to my project in that he

implies that canon formation is a process of constructing history as linear—the assumption that once a minority literature is included, then we have somehow overcome the issues of racism, colonialism, sexism, homophobia, etc. that marginalized it in the first place. Similarly, Lisa Lowe emphasizes that the heterogeneity of identities represented in Asian American works resist canonization in that “if subjected to a canonical function, [they] dialectically return a critique of that function” (54).

This dissertation is interested in perusing how Vietnamese American works experiment with different genres, modes of representation that allow for bending of time and space to illustrate the perpetuity of traumas through visual histories, foodways, sexuality, and multiracialism. The following chapters will each focus on primary contemporary Vietnamese American literary texts or cultural productions, contextualized with other works. The primary works include GB Tran’s graphic memoir *VIETNAMERICA* (2011); various cookbooks written in the past five years by diasporic Vietnamese chefs, including Vietnamese Americans Ann Le and Charles Phan, Vietnamese Australians Luke Nguyen and Nhut Huynh, and Vietnamese French Jacqueline Pham; the genre-bending narratives of Andrew X. Pham’s “memoir” *Catfish and Mandala* (1999) and lê thi diem thúy’s “novel” *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003); and Kien Nguyen’s memoir *The Unwanted* (2001),

One of the most common questions posed to Vietnamese Americans is “What is Vietnam like?” or, if the individual was born here, “Have you been to Vietnam?” These questions relegate Vietnamese Americans to the space of Viet Nam and more often than not the time period of the U.S. war there, which ultimately positions them as foreigners. Such questions raise the issue of how to represent Vietnamese American identities as

crossing the borders of the spatio-temporal constructs undergirding those inquiries. In that spirit, the first chapter explores how GB Tran's graphic memoir *VIETNAMERICA* reveals the space- and time-blurring relationships that second-generation Vietnamese Americans have with Viet Nam, which complicate those aforementioned questions, and likewise show that the complexity of refugee experiences debunk reductive "model minority" narratives. Rather than writing a traditional autobiographical memoir to inform audiences of these issues of immigration and identity, Tran chose to present his story in the comic book form. This genre, I argue, underscores refugee identity as representation, rather than fixed truth.

Autobiographical comics have been recognized as changing audience's expectations of what kinds of narratives can be told through comics, becoming a "social process" (Beatty 228). Whereas Beatty focuses on the genre-specific social process of anchoring the typically fantastical premises of comics in historical realities, Tran's social process involves speaking back against the racialization of Vietnamese in canonical Vietnam War comics, such as Marvel's *Nam* (1986-1993) and Don Lomax's *Vietnam Journal*, in which Vietnamese have been rendered as faceless, nameless. Moreover, the conventions of the comic book genre are conducive to visually representing the trauma of colonialism and genocidal warfare, including the subsequent labeling, and legibility, of Tran's family as refugee bodies.

The first of the comic book genre conventions I will be examining is "sequential art": I analyze the spatio-temporal implications of Will Eisner's oft-quoted definition of the comic. Scott McCloud has questioned when readers understand and how they know what precedes and follows an image (Carrier 106-07). In the context of Tran's narration

of his family's flight from Viet Nam to the United States, this question of sequence becomes a politically charged inquiry. By situating the moment of gaining U.S. citizenship in a longer history that stretches back to French colonialism and traces the life in America to follow, Tran probes issues of immigration and processes of constructing and narrating nationhood. Technically speaking, Tran uses splash pages, or full-page illustrations, to disrupt the "sequential" flow of the comic, prompting readers to navigate the text in unconventional ways and ultimately reconsider their conceptions of space and time. Likewise, Tran's construction of space within and across the gutters (the space in between the panels of a comic) bears epistemological implications for understanding narrative, both literary and historical.

As defined by Pascal Lefèvre, diegetic space is "the fictive space in which the characters live and act" (157). While Lefèvre focuses on diegetic space primarily as an artistic technique, I interpret this as an epistemological rupture, in that it asks us to suspend our disbelief, to consider other possibilities for conceiving of, and narrating, heterogeneous histories of immigration and diaspora. Lefèvre himself points out that, artistically speaking, the inconsistencies in the artistic rendering of diegetic space are noticeable to us, but not the characters; in other words, we must step outside of ourselves as reader to acknowledge the spatial constructions that are realities for the characters (158)—an all-too resonant point given contemporary debates about immigration in the U.S. that reduce immigrants to the stereotypes. Additionally, because the diegetic space is limited to the confines of a panel in a comic book, we become aware of what is seen and unseen (157), prompting readers to reflect on not just what we do and don't know, but how knowledge is constructed and disseminated.

Tran utilizes the visual conventions of the comic genre to address these issues. For one, he politicizes color, primarily through overlaying motifs of the U.S., North Vietnamese, and South Vietnamese flags to visualize the competing identifications for Vietnamese Americans, not only between the U.S. and Viet Nam, but between North and South Viet Nam, which often get neglected in representations. Further, the black pages in *VIETNAMERICA* illustrate continuous processes of remembering—in this case, those memories that cannot be articulated in a legible language, whether verbal or visual. I also intend to use recent pedagogical scholarship on teaching comic books as a means to think through how Tran calls for audiences to engage in a multisensory experience in order to rethink how they read, both in practice and ideology.

Expounding upon the comic book genre's inherent ability to engage the reader in a multisensory fashion to inhabit and reconceive of histories, the second chapter understands cookbooks as a literary genre that calls for the audience to actively participate in the reading process as tours of the histories with which Vietnamese culinary culture is flavored. This chapter intends to look at the ways in which diasporic Vietnamese respond to questions that correlate their identities with food, as in "Do you eat dog?" or "How do you pronounce 'phở'?" along with exclamations of "I love phở" as some sort of attempt at cross-cultural understanding, particularly as phở restaurants have become increasingly more popular. In the last few years, an outpouring of Vietnamese cookbooks testify to how global the diaspora has been and the various ways in which the chef-authors use foodways as a means of mediating traumas and negotiating and articulating their diasporic Vietnamese identities. The primary cookbooks that this chapter will examine include Luke Nguyen's 2011 *My Vietnam: Stories and Recipes*,

Nhut Huynh's 2009 *Little Vietnam*, Charles Phan's 2012 *Vietnamese Home Cooking*, and Ann Le's 2011 *The Little Saigon Cookbook: Vietnamese Cuisine and Culture in Southern California's Little Saigon*.

Building upon Cathy Caruth's point that an important facet of trauma is the repetition of acts of survival, I examine how these chef-authors elucidate the ways in which surviving trauma involves not only the physiological sustenance of food, but also a discursive survival of the multisensory narrative negotiation of cultural and national identity through foodways. Cooking, eating, and sharing recipes as modes of survival become politicized when placed in the context of Mimi Nguyen calls "the gift of freedom," meaning Vietnamese Americans' perpetual indebtedness to the U.S. nation-state for "saving" them. Though not all of the authors I address live in the U.S. (Nguyen and Huynh reside in Australia), each of them do, in various capacities, take the reader on culinary tours of Viet Nam, functioning as a means of thanking, or repaying, their host countries for saving them from Viet Nam. As tour guides who have a dynamic relationship with their audiences in this participatory genre, the authors evince the struggle to strike a marketable, appetizing balance between "authentic Vietnamese" and "model minority" immigrant, in terms of simultaneously reinforcing and resisting the long-standing stereotypes of Vietnamese foodways as foreign and exotic, if not repulsive to the Western palette. For second-generation Le and Nguyen in particular, this means oscillating between insider and outsider status—a liminal space of conflict and marginalization, but also a third space that presents possibilities for identification.

Along their tours, the authors depict Viet Nam through a nostalgic lens, which at once serves to give the Western reader what he/she may want to see as a way to assuage

guilt over images of Viet Nam as war-torn while also serving as a way in which the authors attempt to conceive of and articulate their own diasporic Vietnamese identities. The nostalgia with which the food is verbally and visually represented often manifests through narratives or images of women, emphasizing the matrilineal oral storytelling through which food-based knowledge is transmitted. Translating these oral histories into written, marketable forms is a source of conflict for the authors, spotlighting memory-making as a process and the epistemological implications of revising histories of the U.S.-Viet Nam War through a grammar of consumption. As the authors' recipes are drawn from relatives across space and time, the cookbooks foreground the transnationality of food, not only in the concrete distribution of resources and the cross-pollination of culinary food practices, but also in terms of the construction of culture and identity, especially as they are negotiated in transnational activist efforts to combat food, contamination, hunger, and death in Viet Nam. Ultimately, the authors map different opportunities for diasporic Vietnamese to "go back home."

Whereas the previous chapter explored transnationalism through culinary avenues, the third chapter focuses on transnationalism by investigating the racialized familial metaphors on which conceptions of the nation are based. This chapter addresses a crisis of representation: How can mixed-race Vietnamese Americans represent the complex social realities of discrimination against their identities and the histories with which they are inextricably tethered because they are mixed and Vietnamese, without perpetuating the pathologizing and patronizingly elegiac discourses that have been used to write *about* them? By looking at autobiographical narratives by multiracial Vietnamese children, this chapter explores how representations of multiraciality challenges

assumptions that racial mixing stems from sexual relationships between white American soldiers and Vietnamese prostitutes, the latter of whom are often portrayed as traitors to the monoracial national family. Hollywood-influenced G.I.-prostitute narratives have propelled inquiries about mixed-race Vietnamese Americans' parentage, such as "What are you?" or, more pointedly, "Was your father a soldier?" Vietnamese Americans have been prompted to offer up the life stories to explain their origins and identities that fall outside of racialized expectations of what "Vietnamese" and "American" phenotypically are supposed to look like. The memoir genre has functioned as a means of satisfying such curiosity about race, nationality, and parentage. It is important to look at the extent to which Vietnamese American autobiographical works reaffirm and/or resist the racialized and sexualized assumptions underlying this particular exchange of questions and answers. To illustrate the range and ambivalence of possible answers to questions revolving around multiraciality, I use this chapter to draw into conversation Kien Nguyen's memoir *The Unwanted* and my own life narratives.

Nguyen's memoir informs audiences of the violent discrimination he experiences as a mixed-race child in Viet Nam to the supposed safe haven of the U.S. This U.S.-serving narrative is reinforced by the cover, which features a photograph of the author as a child "passing" as Vietnamese and needing to be "saved," as well as the supplementary material the publisher included in the appendices of the text—interviews that emphasize how difficult Viet Nam was and how great the U.S. is in terms of being more inclusive and evolved in its professed tenets of equality, diversity, etc. With this text, the U.S. "wins" the war. This text is important to show how Vietnamese American works were marketed and rendered legible to U.S. audiences. It is also salient to address how such

celebrations of multiraciality and model minority rhetoric are part of the ongoing negotiation of Vietnamese American identities and histories. At the same time, I also want to show that this narrative is more complex than the publisher might have readers believe.

One of the underlying complexities that I want to highlight is the biopolitical state that Nguyen depicts in Viet Nam. This shows how nationhood is based on notions of monoracial purity. According to Ann Laura Stoler, the exclusion and disenfranchisement of mixed-race individuals not only has a long history in Southeast Asia, but numerous writers and scholars have address the politics of miscegenation and passing in the U.S. as well. Even though Nguyen casts the U.S. in an auspicious light, in Kaplan's framework the space of empire and monoracial nationhood is not as far away as the U.S. nation-state would have us believe. The amnesty the U.S. offered mixed-race children born of U.S. soldiers and Vietnamese women through Operation Babylift and the Amerasian Homecoming Act was part of an ongoing construction of the U.S.'s benevolence in its self-serving historical narratives, yet showed that the two nations, despite their polarized constructions of nationhood, were inextricably bound.

Nguyen, however, does not address how discrimination and pressure to "pass" continue after immigration to the U.S. To illustrate such continuities of discrimination and passing, I also incorporate into this chapter vignettes of my non-fiction own work about growing up mixed in Los Angeles to show parallels and departures from Nguyen's widely-read representation of multiracial Vietnamese American experience. The primary reason for this is to show that this ongoing process of remembering Vietnamese American histories and identities is to show that scholarship does not have to be only

critique, but should also encompass creative works that continue to diversify what “Vietnamese American” means and how it is articulated. These creative viewpoints also illustrate differences in gender and generation, as my experiences as a second-generation female, in contrast to Nguyen’s 1.5-generation male perspective, delve into issues that Nguyen does and cannot. As it is difficult for me to relate to Nguyen because of some of these differences in subject position, I decided to tell stories because that is what writers often do when presented with unclear ways of conceiving the world and its histories (Briggs, McCormick, Way 628). Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong draws attention to the empowering capacities of telling life narratives, especially when they have not yet been shared with an audience.

A significant portion of the chapter will explore why Nguyen’s text is marketed as a memoir and why I refer to my own work as life narratives so as to acknowledge the various politicized implications of autobiographical genres. I will draw upon theories of how narrating lived experience bears the capacities for both reinforcing and resisting what “has hitherto been hidden from history” (Scott 365). Theorists relevant to this discussion include Joan Scott, Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson. Using these theorists to work through the relationship between Nguyen’s work and my own, it is imperative to not simply look at *what* narratives are told, but *how* they are narrated and *why* they are “included” by classification into genres, marketed, and received in both popular and critical forums, and therefore how such categorizations influence formations of Vietnamese American identities.

To provide a larger context, this chapter’s discussion of multiracial Vietnamese American narratives will also refer to Tammie Lee Nguyen’s recent documentary about

the adopted Vietnamese children from Operation Baby Lift, in which the now-adult mixed-race individuals discuss their struggles with Orientalist discrimination, alienation, and/or pressure to conform to white American subjects, as well as Aimee Phan's short story "We Should Never Meet" in which a half-White Vietnamese orphan negotiates her identity and sense of family through gang involvement.

Just as the last chapter aspires to diversify representations of Vietnamese Americans in terms of race, the fourth and final chapter of this dissertation examines cross-genre representations of different sexual orientations, thereby broadening possible answers to questions of what "Vietnamese American" means and ways of writing and reading such answers. More specifically, Andrew X. Pham's memoir *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage through the Memory and Landscape of Vietnam* and lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We are All Looking For* suggest that representations of queerness can complicate the very notion of genre itself. These texts do so by portraying how queer trauma reorients readers' understandings of narrative structure and linear temporalities of life-death, as both texts' queer figures are deceased siblings.

Building upon theories of queer times and spaces proposed by Judith Halberstam, Jose Esteban Munoz, and David Eng, as well as more focused studies of Asian American sexuality specifically, I argue that Pham's depiction of Chi, his transgendered sister, presents a queer temporality that not only expands notions of future beyond heterosexual reproduction, but also empowers LGBT individuals living in the Vietnamese culture that, as recent new stories have indicated, continues to suppress alternate sexualities and ways of living. The episodic structure of the book—a non-conventional representation of time—also hinges upon the ways in which Chi occupies time and space in the narrative,

thereby opening up discussion of how Pham broadens expectations of travelogues and memoirs (the book has been marketed as both).

Within this discussion, I intend to further explore the memoir's issues of queer diaspora, as defined by David Eng, particularly in regard to the formation of alternative kinships that are also central to the shifting notions of "family" for the protagonist in lê thi diem thúy's novel, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. lê's protagonist also suffers the loss of her brother, yet the queerness in this novel manifests in how the family reconstitutes itself in the wake of the boy's death. The nameless protagonist immigrates to the U.S. with her father and "uncles," whom she meets and bonds with in their shared experience of being boat people. In this way, the text presents Vietnamese American bodies and families living on not through blood, but through water. Additionally, the mother arrives in the narrative much later, and the labor in which both parents engage shifts traditional gender roles, queering (re)production, and the young protagonist, in identifying more with her father, describes her own body in queer terms.

Queering Vietnamese American familial structures implicitly questions past and future by addressing concerns about reproduction in perpetuating genealogical bloodlines. The central, however sometimes unspoken, anxiety about reproduction underscores the tension between life and death for those who have suffered much loss. The ghostly presences of siblings in both texts blur the temporal and spatial division between life and death. As per Avery Gordon's notion that there exists "shape described by absence" (6) Chi-Minh's and lê's brother character resonate as spectral, haunting presences that contest dominant historical discourse's foreclosure of the body's presence, testimony, and memory even after death. Acknowledging these siblings as ghosts that are

“social figures” (8) allows for a remembering of the war, and what followed, that includes the intangible, the unknowable. Gordon’s theoretical framework of haunting opens up possibilities for reading the body outside of empiricism in order to narrate epistemologies and histories outside of linear notions of time and space, as well as the binary of life/death on which the biological propagation of familial lines hinges.

What I hope to achieve in this dissertation is to broaden expectations of Vietnamese American literature and to stress that readers’ relationships to texts are complicit in perpetuating and/or reconceiving politicized narratives that shape our collective understanding of cross-cultural histories and futures. As everyday questions and answers inspired the respective focal points for each of these paragraphs, this dissertation will hopefully illustrate that not only are there a variety of meaningful ways to adapt genre conventions to supplement the delivery of the multitude of possible answers in conversations Vietnamese Americans have, but also that we can collectively rethink the very questions themselves—their origins, erasures, and potential for opening up new dialogues. I hope this dissertation will contribute a voice to the ever-widening conversation of the variegated meanings of what it means to be “Vietnamese American,” and that Vietnamese American literary, cultural, and scholarly productions will continue to proliferate.

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## CHAPTER ONE

Remembering in Red and Yellow: Trauma and the Comic Book Genre in GB Tran's

### *VIETNAMERICA*

In 2011, New York-based graphic artist GB Tran released his graphic memoir *VIETNAMERICA: A Family's Journey*. Tran is the first in his family to be born in the United States, and the memoir narrates his experiences of gaining interest in his parents' homeland and eventually travelling with them to Viet Nam, where memories of his family's past inextricably tether to his own story.

As Tran's *VIETNAMERICA* is the first comic about Viet Nam written by a second-generation Vietnamese American, I immediately became interested in this text that bridges my cultural identity and my card-carrying nerd status. Shortly after the book's release, I contacted Tran for an interview that was subsequently published by the Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network (DVAN)'s website, [diacritics.org](http://diacritics.org). For the purposes of this chapter, I will highlight excerpts from the interview that address my central interest and concern for analysis—that is, how and why Tran chose the comic book genre to narrate his family's intertwined traumatic memories. Examining Tran's use of the genre's conventions, along with his contributions to it, elucidates the meanings of how and why Vietnamese Americans answer common questions that implicitly relegate them to the space of Viet Nam (even if they were born here) and to the time of the U.S. war there, such as “What is Vietnam like?”

Tran's choice to present his story in the comic book form is in part aligned with the genre's increasing scholarly attention and teaching appeal in recent years.<sup>7</sup> He comments on his personal connection to, and the possibilities of, the genre:

Ever since I was a kid reading my older brother's *Transformers* and *Uncanny X-Men's*, comics have been a constant presence in my life. They've entertained, educated, and expanded my mind for decades, so there's always been a huge desire to contribute to the 'comic book culture.' A part of me thinks it's fantastic—and long overdue—that graphic novels are more widely respected as a versatile, engaging literary medium by the American audience.

Some readers might find the comic book genre to trivialize the traumas stemming from French colonialism and U.S. war in Viet Nam or to condescend to Vietnamese and U.S. audiences alike by rendering the Tran family's perspectives in cartoonish form. However, Tran's comments above and my own analysis of the text position *VIETNAMERICA* as part of an ever-developing tradition of comics functioning as what Bart Beaty calls a "social process" in which they actively change audiences' expectations of what the genre can narrate.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For college-level classes, see Stephen E. Tabachnick's *Teaching the Graphic Novel*. Katie Monnin's book by the same name and Ryan Novak's *Teaching Graphic Novels in the Classroom: Building Literacy and Comprehension* are useful for teaching graphic novels in high schools, though many of the suggested assignments can be adapted to meet college-level course objectives. Comic book artists Jessica Abel and Matt Madden have also published a book that is useful for teaching students how to make their own comics, *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures: Making Comics, Manga, Graphic Novels, and Beyond*.

<sup>8</sup> From here on, when I refer to the genre, I will be using "comic book" and "graphic memoir" interchangeably. Innumerable scholars have debated the distinctions between these two terms, but Generally comics refers to the mass-market production of sequential art, defined by Eisner and further elaborated upon by McCloud, whereas the graphic novel is a more specialized form of the medium to tell a self-contained, rather than serialized, narrative. However, even writers from outside the genre contend Eisner and McCloud's foundational definitions of the genre, notably Samuel Delaney. In addressing this debate and others surrounding the same issue, Charles Hatfield, in "Defining Comics in the Classroom; or, the Pros and Cons of Unfixability," has concluded that, as definitions of such abstract terms are subjective, pinpointing one definition of the genre is merely an argumentative exercise and that what is more fruitful are examining the qualities of the works, in terms of both content and form, whether you refer to them as comic books or graphic novels. For the purposes of this chapter, I defer to the author and artist, GB Tran, on his perspective on the terminology debate: "There's a part of me that takes issue with the need to make 'comics' sound more sophisticated by calling them 'graphic novels' in the first place. Maybe it's just

In addition to broadening audiences' perceptions of *what* the comic book genre can narrate, it is important to examine *how* the medium enables Tran to represent trauma in ways that other genres foreclose or limit. Tran told me, "Comics can be an individual experience to each reader depending on how they process the constant interplay of words and images, and definitely is a different language of expression than film or prose" (Tran). In terms of prose, many scholars of trauma studies have posited that "language fails to adequately convey trauma" (Gilmore 158). Film adds the visual component to articulating trauma, but, as Nima Naghbi points out in her comparison of Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir *Persepolis* and its animated film adaptation, the genre of comics is more interactive than film because "there is only one direction in which the audience can look: at the screen in front of them; there are no empty spaces, or gutters, where the viewer can let her eyes travel or her imagination roam" (165). The limitations of film in a Vietnamese context are even more pronounced, given the marginalization and one-dimensional representations of Vietnamese people in Hollywood films, as mentioned in the introduction and previous chapter.

The audience-engaging gutters to which Naghbi refers are particularly conducive to representing qualities of trauma. Often associated with Freud's conception of melancholia, trauma is different from mourning in that it is without end. In trauma, "the past is neither fixed or complete" as it is with mourning (Eng and Kazanjian 3); indeed, the past is "alive in the present" as it resurfaces even after attempts at repression (4). As traumas of the past are continually re-experienced in the present, dealing with loss

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semantics, but I consider them to be broad interchangeable terms; similar branches from the same storytelling tree." Therefore, I refer to *VIETNAMERICA* as both a comic and graphic memoir.

becomes a “creative process” (3). In this way, the structure—and I would add, construction—of the graphic text is the form of trauma’s repression and reappearance, which, in Cathy Caruth’s words, is the “bearer of a historical truth” (20), this truth being to resituate history as a history of trauma (15). Such a reframing of history is to stress that “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (Caruth 24). One of the functions of the gutter space is to show this interconnectedness of traumas, to illustrate that “there is no adequately authoritative angle of vision” (Gilmore 159). The “gutter medium,” as Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Maus* Art Spiegelman asserts, “enables multiple and even contradictory interpretations of the narrative” (165). For one, these multiple angles include the perspectives of a couple of generations of Tran’s family members, in addition to Tran’s own point of view. Tran’s story is inextricably tied to that of his family’s, which often interrupts the narrative as “traumatic memories constantly encroach on the present” (Naghibi 168), and this connection positions him as witness to his family’s traumas and his own. Moreover, the audience’s identification with Tran as autobiographical protagonist, in turn, positions readers as witnesses to trauma.

These layered processes of witnessing bear a “pedagogical dimension” (Gilmore 158) in that new representations of trauma, like Tran’s comic, call for readers to develop new praxes of reading. Cultivating awareness of how we read also bears epistemological implications, essentially *how* we know what we know, giving Tran’s book weight in terms of asking audiences to reassess what they think they know about the U.S.-Viet Nam War and Vietnamese Americans. It is for these pedagogical and epistemological implications that this chapter focuses on *how* Tran utilizes comic book conventions to

place the reader in the non-linear time and space of trauma. Building primarily on Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, I will think through *how* Tran's use of the genre enables him to depict border-blurring conceptions of space and non-linear temporalities as a way to non-didactically educate the readers on the histories of the U.S.-Viet Nam War and its descendants.

To delve into *how* Tran uses the comic book genre to do so, I will first examine the ways in which Tran visually moves readers between different points of view. Tran opens his visual narrative by acknowledging the militarized optics in popular, U.S.-centric, collective memory of the U.S.-Viet Nam War and the ways in which it has abstracted Vietnamese people, reducing them to anonymous dehumanized objects. As I will discuss, this abstraction has informed, and has been reinforced by, dominant historical and popular visual (including cinematic and graphic) narratives about the U.S.-Viet Nam War. I will argue that Tran, through the comic book form's specific coupling of the visual and the verbal, reframes these narratives that typically minimize the Vietnamese perspective in order to center and diversify it. Throughout the text, Tran shifts the reader's perspective by changing panel framing and orientation. These shifts enable readers to occupy different generations of Vietnamese perspectives both in terms of space (geographically and physically immediacy to characters) and time (past and present). Doing so visually calls for the reader to adopt a different reading praxis, one that prompts U.S. readers to cultivate a deeper awareness of how visual abstraction shapes (racialized) memories of history. This awareness is meta-cognitive in the sense that the comic book genre inherently draws attention to abstraction because, as McCloud

and Eisner stress, the visuals are representations that underscore the symbolic quality of meaning making.

I will extend my discussion of the self-reflexive aspects of meaning-making in the comic book format by discussing how the recurring synesthetic qualities of Tran's multi-sensory negotiation of his cultural, linguistic, and generational conflicts as a second-generation Vietnamese American engage the bodies of readers in a manner unique to the comic book genre. Primarily through graphic lettering, Tran's synesthetic (seeing of sounds, for instance) effects emerge as self-reflexive commentaries on processes of personal and collective memory, as well as the epistemology, of the U.S.-Viet Nam War, not only for second generation Vietnamese Americans, but also for U.S. readers in general.

Then, I will analyze further how the audience's reading praxis is challenged through Tran's employment of comic conventions, namely splash pages, gutter space, and transitions. Tran's construction of space within and across the gutters bears epistemological implications for understanding narrative, both literary and historical. Most important to this section of the chapter is the discussion of how some gutters are expanded into splash pages, or full-page illustrations, to disrupt the "sequential" flow of the comic, prompting readers to navigate the text in unconventional ways and ultimately reconsider their conceptions of space and time. These splash pages, I will argue, testify to the unspeakability of the traumas within the narrative. It is in these pages that Tran employs color as a tool to highlight the iterations of trauma, its repetitions with a difference. I will discuss how Tran plays with our mind's processing of the color spectrum to highlight hues that are politically and culturally significant to the history of

Viet Nam, as well as second-generation Vietnamese Americans varying levels of identification with it. As I will discuss, his use of black, too, represents those memories that cannot be articulated in a legible language, whether verbal or visual.

Because Tran's text involves the connection between how we read and our understanding of history, ourselves, and others, it makes sense to extend my discussion of *VIETNAMERICA* to include pedagogical theories and methods of (re)teaching the history of the U.S.-Viet Nam War through comic books. To close this chapter, I will highlight some pertinent methods for teaching multiple literacies with a graphic text such as Tran's, particularly in terms of how the intersection of the visual and verbal components of a graphic text open up new ways of understanding race and culture. Given that I teach at a community college with a large student population of military veterans where issues of militarization and war are commonly raised in discussions about literature, I will also share some of my experiences with teaching Vietnamese American comics, as well other Vietnamese American comic book artists' experiences in the classroom. Doing so will help to address the ways in which Vietnamese American graphic texts can challenge and broaden students' understandings of histories and tethered matters of war and immigration. Ultimately, exploring ways of teaching graphic texts such as Tran's open up ways of thinking about how we read and tell stories.

### Part One: Arrivals and Departures

Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* is widely regarded as the go-to text for examining the practical functions and cognitive implications of the comic book genre. As his study, itself drawn in comic book form, draws to a close, McCloud emphasizes to the

reader the importance of taking the genre seriously, of dissecting cartoonish images to get to the heart of what it says about the human condition and our acts of reading. Among these philosophical musings, he writes, “We all live in a state of profound isolation. No other human being can ever know it’s like to be you from the inside (McCloud 194), but “comics ha[ve] harnessed the power to command viewer involvement and identification” (204). The potential to dismantle the barriers of perception that isolate individuals and social groups from one another strikes a particularly resonant chord in the context of a Vietnamese American comic book.

The potential for a Vietnamese American visual text such as a comic book is underscored by the isolation of Vietnamese American perspectives both in terms of Viet Nam’s history with the U.S. and in visual narratives about that history. In regard to historical representations, or lack thereof, of Vietnamese perspectives, Jodi Kim points that when the U.S.-Viet Nam War is placed in the context of a continuation of the U.S.’s Cold War rhetoric, not only are Vietnamese allies and enemies conflated, but the Vietnamese are corralled into a pan-Asian discourse (198-9). Such racialized othering persists in the social conditions in which many Vietnamese live upon immigrating to the U.S. Through multiple waves of diaspora, Vietnamese are dispersed all over the country, scattered through various sponsorship and adoption programs. Even in larger enclaves, such as that in Southern California, Vietnamese Americans “were practically forced into quarantine economically and culturally” (Klein 148). Facing high unemployment rates (in 1981, after the second major wave of immigration, 40% of men and 60% of women were unemployed), many Vietnamese took manual labor jobs” (149). In addition to these socioeconomic hardships, Vietnamese faced discrimination. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud reports

that the majority of Americans opposed Vietnamese immigration (13), and that they were the targets of racist campaigns by the Ku Klux Klan, which deemed them “gooks”<sup>9</sup> to be exterminated (14).

These histories of marginalization of Vietnamese Americans were reinforced by visual representations. Kim points out that the construction of memory evinced by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial are “structured by the forgetting of the Vietnamese people” (202). Just as the memorial does, the media’s coverage of the U.S.’s war in Viet Nam foregrounds the perspective of the U.S. soldier at the expense of the Vietnamese.<sup>10</sup> In addition to being the nation’s first televised war (Kim 196), U.S. Americans’ collective visual memory of Viet Nam and the Vietnamese is anchored in what Norman Klein, in *The History of Forgetting*, refers to as an imago, an idealized image seeded in collective memory, particularly traumatic events involving erasure of details. Klein explains, “we see in our mind’s eye the war in Vietnam primarily as two photographs: a general shooting a man in the head; a naked girl running toward the camera after being napalmed”(4). This is “idealized” because visually depicting Vietnamese people as perpetrators or victims of violence casts the U.S. soldier in the light of benevolent hero. The icons, as McCloud would call them, in the visual history of the U.S.-Viet Nam War, then, are filtered through the lens of the U.S.’s militarized perspective. In *Militarizing Culture*, Roberto J. Gonzalez stresses the military-industrial complex’s permeation of U.S. culture, to the extent that art, academia, and even “intimate social relationships—

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<sup>9</sup> Jodi Kim explains that the term “gook” was also used against Koreans during the U.S. involvement in the Korean War, the term actually a misinterpretation of a Korean word.

<sup>10</sup> Marita Sturken’s *Tangled Memories* further discusses this issue of privileging U.S. veterans over the Vietnamese in specific examples in cinema, monuments, and popular, collective memory at large.

between parent and child, between family and community, between civilian and soldier” (19, 28) are colored by militarized memory. For the purposes of the ensuing discussion, I would add to this list of relationships that between author and audience, especially when the former is a Vietnamese American.

Throughout the U.S.’s visual history of Viet Nam and people of Vietnamese heritage, U.S. Americans have been trained to view them through an aerial optics that renders Vietnamese people invisible, homogenous masses, or abstract targets. During the war, U.S. military planes dropped a total of 10 million tons of bombs (Kim 196) and 19 million gallons of defoliant in South Viet Nam alone (Young157), which continues to disfigure children born in the country today. Despite the fact that Vietnamese casualties number up to approximately four million as a result of years of strategic bombings (157), the U.S. perspective of the war continues to be informed by the aerial nature of the warfare in that “the people on the ground are entirely abstract” (Tanaka 1). Such an abstraction is rooted in a sense of time and space that views the Vietnamese as spatially distant (small on the ground in this “foreign” land) but also operating on a different scale of time. That is, they are viewed as mere blips on an evolutionary timelines, perceived as temporally backwards, or primitive, and easily (and often deemed as deservingly) extinguished by a plane and all of the “advanced” and “civilized” technological might that the aircraft represents.

Decades of comic books and graphic novels and memoirs have performed similar abstraction and stereotyping of Vietnamese people to make the history of the U.S. war in Viet Nam into a national memory more manageable than a reality that belies the U.S.’s professed values of democracy, equality, and freedom. For instance, from the Marvel

universe, the series *The 'Nam* (1986-1993) reduces Vietnamese people to silhouettes, conical rice hats, and “quails” for hunting, except for those who are there to sell U.S. soldiers something, whether souvenirs or sex. Similarly, the first volume in the series *Vietnam Journal* by Don Lomax, one of the contributing writers to *The 'Nam*, limits its portrayal of the Vietnamese to two poles: on the one end, an abandoned baby being saved by a heroic U.S. soldier, on the other a prostitute servicing soldiers. These visual depictions perpetuate the militarized view, the aerial vantage point, by reducing Vietnamese people to caricatures in debt and service to the U.S. military.

Annette Matton points out that *The 'Nam* was consistent in propagating the revisionist histories of the '80s that attempted to justify U.S. actions in Viet Nam, regardless of the beginning of the series' attempts to adhere to its promises of delivering the “truth” about war through realistic elements of military jargon and real-time serializations, or departures into fantastical elements of sending superheroes such as Thor, Iron Man, and Captain America to “win” the war in Viet Nam. Matton's evidence from her reading of the series primarily hinges upon the visual depictions of the Vietnamese. Not only do Mike Golden's illustrations depict Vietnamese as “thin, weak, and frail” in contrast to the “handsome, muscular, and strong” U.S. American soldiers, but the art positions readers in the perspective of the protagonist Ed Marks, a U.S. infantryman who sees the Vietnamese as savages lurking in the shadows. Even when the Vietnamese are invisible in the panels, Matton notes, “the enemy is both devious and everywhere” (158). Interestingly, Matton sheds light on how, as the sales of the series began to suffer, the artists and writers began to target younger readers, who would then of

course be ingesting these skeletal, stereotypical representations of Vietnamese during the 1980s, as the Vietnamese American population continued to grow.

This is not to say that all U.S. soldier-centered comic book representations have merely reinforced the invisibility and racist stereotyping of the Vietnamese. Published in 2000, the late Will Eisner's war collection, *Last Day in Vietnam*, contains a short strip, aptly titled "The Periphery," that interrupts the previous narrative that focuses on U.S. soldiers. This short strip features an unnamed native Vietnamese tour guide who draws attention to the peripheral status of the Vietnamese. Upon his self-introduction, he draws attention to the "irony" of Sai Gon: journalists "sunning on the hotel terrace" while the war rages on. The Vietnamese narrator sarcastically states that these journalists "have a clear overview because as observers they're dispassionate...No??...It is like reporting a football match...no???" (Eisner 39). Here, Eisner's Vietnamese narrator critiques the journalists' removed, yet influential, role in constructing the narrative and visual history of the war in Viet Nam with which most U.S. American readers are familiar. At the end of the four-page strip, the narrator points out the journalists who find bodies of dead Vietnamese claim the story of the war: "It is his war now!" (42). What is interesting about Eisner's "The Periphery" is that the U.S. American journalists are the figures seen en masse, as the Vietnamese typically are; Eisner uses the visual element of the comic book to place the reader in the perspective of the Vietnamese. He further humanizes the Vietnamese by including a couple of photographs of everyday life on the streets of Sai Gon—people are smiling and riding bikes—which momentarily breaks the Vietnamese out of the mold of photographs cast into polarized types of enemy or victim.

Notably, too, Jason Aaron's more recent 2007 graphic novel *The Other Side* attempts to humanize the Vietnamese and present a fuller history of the war by oscillating between U.S. American and Vietnamese perspectives. Every few pages, Aaron shifts perspective from U.S. American to Vietnamese soldiers, placing both countries' soldiers in the contexts of familial obligations, struggles, and bonds, among other issues that arise during war, beyond the battles themselves. The comic's illustrator, Cameron Stewart, diversifies the representations of both U.S. American and Vietnamese characters, distinguishing them with acnes, wrinkles, skin color, even tendencies to drool while speaking. As I will explore in further depth later in my discussion of *VIETNAMERICA*, Stewart and Aaron's diversified representations of Vietnamese people in particular work to criticize their abstraction in visual histories. In fact, *The Other Side* is quite cognizant of going against the grain of this racialized tradition, as one character, a U.S. infantryman, looks at issues of war comics, including Superman #216 in which the superhero parachutes into Viet Nam, and remarks, "I used to love these things. Now, though, man, now they're just part of the lie. Domino theories, communist insurgents, the glory of killing and dying...that's all bullshit they made up to sell comic books" (42). Aaron makes a telling choice of having this meta-comic critique end abruptly when a sniper kills the soldier so disillusioned with the dissonance between the war depicted in comics and as it manifests in his own experience. In this pivotal moment, Aaron draws attention to the injustice that comic books' glorified versions of war commit to both Vietnamese and Americans alike. By doing so, Aaron presents graphic novels as a serious platform with which to critique reductive histories threaded through the comic book genre.

With the exception of more inclusive texts such as Eisner's and Aaron's, the majority of Viet Nam War-based texts perpetuate the aerial optics and militarized memory that abstracts the Vietnamese, reinforcing long-standing stereotypes of Asian Americans. According to Anne Cong-Huyen and Caroline Kyungah Hong, graphic mediums have a history of propagating stereotypes of "corporeal, cultural, and social difference" (86), including that of "yellow peril, the perpetual foreigner, and the model minority" (80). With this racialized aspect of the history of Asian Americans in comic books, it is important to consider how such stereotypes inform Tran's methods of representing himself and his family. Some scholars champion the idea that Asian American comic book artists challenge these historically informed, long-standing stereotypes. For instance, Tammy Horn claims that graphic novels can "replace negative images with positive, or perhaps they fill in voids where there were zero images" (Horn 92). Horn seems to suggest, then, that Asian American representation is simply a deficit to be filled. Similarly, Derek Parker Royal claims that Asian American can "problematize [their] ethnic representation [...] by particularizing the general, thereby undermining any attempts at subjective erasure through universalization" (69). Royal's hope is that rendering ethnic minorities in comic book form, by nature of the genre, helps readers to identify with the characters.

However, I would argue that the effect of the comic book genre is not so simple a solution to the racism undergirding visual representations of Vietnamese Americans, especially because of the history of the aforementioned militarized, aerial optics. I find it significant to discuss how, by choosing the comic form, Tran addresses the issue of abstraction with another manner of abstraction. As McCloud points out in his seminal

*Understanding Comics*, the comic book genre inherently comments on abstraction of individuals. The cartoonish reduction of a realistic face to two dots and a line moves from specific to universal (46), calling upon the reader to perceive the meaning of the image more quickly and ultimately identify with the rendered figure (49). This universality grants the ability to see ourselves in images of what we previously perceived as mere objects (33). Objects, then, become extensions of ourselves (39-40). Similarly, Eisner posits that the expressive anatomy of figures in comics—facial expressions and body language that are universally recognized as certain emotions or ideas—“give the reader much more of an insight into a character’s lifestyle—to make a sociological observation” (Eisner 110). However, caution should be exercised in assuming “sociological observation” can be translated into universal interpretations, as the former can be compounded by histories of racism and sexism. In other words, “sociological observation” can also mean readers project social prejudice on the image. Things are not simply universal, so the ways in which the comic book genre draws readers’ attention to *how* they see things underscores processes, and the significance of, the construction of epistemology: “the questions of what we can know and how it can be known” (Cohn 57).

As Will Eisner states that it is the comic book artist’s responsibility to present a visual perception of time and space that shows the experience “as it may be seen from the reader’s eyes” (Eisner 40), Tran implicitly must confront the spatio-temporal framework through which U.S. American readers have been trained to see Vietnamese people and their experiences and identities. Tran does so on the first page of his book, as he acknowledges how emblematic the airplane has been in Americans’ and his own seeing and remembering of Viet Nam. The first image at the top of the cover is a plane, and the

first image in the memoir is a borderless panel dominated by a blood-, communist-red sky—a space marred by, colored with, violence—as an airplane flies across it, about to leave the page. In the subsequent panel, Tran illustrates the burning city of Sai Gon beneath this red sky, and the bottom panel takes the reader inside the aforementioned airplane, where we see the partial faces of U.S. military pilots, their mouths open in distress, as they fly away from the burning city and red sky in the background. Though these U.S. American pilots are the first people readers see, and their airborne position is the viewpoint from which we first see Viet Nam, Tran does not reinforce a continued aerial perspective, in which Vietnamese would be reduced to abstracted nameless, faceless sub-humans.

On the contrary, Tran invites readers in with this familiar perspective, risking the appearance of reinstating the militarized memory of the war, yet he tempers this perspective by layering over the panels' dialogue bubbles of his mother's voice. These two dialogue bubbles, though, are not what readers would typically expect to see in a traditional comic. The borders of the bubbles are porous, fading from their white into the blood-red of the sky. And the lettering is done in a handwritten style, more intimate. The dialogue bubbles are disembodied, as Tran's mother is not visually represented in the panels. Though her voice may seem far off in this way, her dialogue here is addressed to "you," a person yet to be identified, and so it feels like she is speaking to the reader when she asks, "You know what your father was doing at your age?". So, although the aerial, militarized optics of Tran's opening page recall the abstraction of Vietnamese, the intimacy of his mother's voice drowns out that of the airplane engines, the bombs, the

yelling of U.S. military pilots. Her voice calls “you” into a story of the U.S.-Viet Nam War that is at once familiar in collective memory, yet different, closer.

More than that, Tran transitions from the exterior aerial perspective to Tran’s family inside the plane, each panel on the next page, zooming closer to their faces. Then, the panels transition to the Trans in the narrative’s present as they are preparing to land on the first visit to Viet Nam since fleeing thirty years earlier, when the opening panels took place. Within a mere few panels, Tran orients the reader within the U.S.’s collective militarized, media-based memory of the war in Viet Nam, only to disorient this point of view by swiftly shuttling between U.S. and Vietnamese faces, interior and exterior, departure and arrival, past and present. Opening the narrative with panels that visually present such quick pivots in perspective challenges readers to retrain their eyes—ways of seeing and reading histories/memories of Viet Nam. This is the clash between “personal and cultural memory” where learning and understanding can occur (Brunner 188). If Tran were to attempt to do so in a traditional written text, the shifts in perspective would be frenetic; however, in the visual format of the comic, the shifts are more immediately, spatially, and visually processed, allowing the reader to consider multiple experiences of a traumatic event like war and the ensuing diaspora.

Salient to the diasporic element of the trauma of the war is how Tran’s juxtaposition of plane-based images of both arrival and departure reframe the beginning of the text as an ending. To elucidate, I draw upon Cathy Caruth’s examination of Sigmund Freud’s reframing of the Jewish diaspora as a history of trauma that begins with a departure (13). This bears on temporality in the sense that “the future is no longer continuous with the past but is united with it through a profound discontinuity” (Caruth

14). More concretely, Nima Naghibi points out that exilic or diasporic graphic narratives often locate trauma in a space of transition, such as that of being suspended in a “space in-between departures and arrivals” (166). Along the same lines, Tran links his arrival in Viet Nam with his parents’ departure from the same country. Thus, the narrative structure is not linear, but a palimpsest of dissonances—his arrival and their departure laid on top of one another to show that one cannot be experienced without the other, that trauma is relived through the plane. Just as Eisner points out that comics illustrate Albert Einstein’s theory that “time is not absolute but relative to the position of the observer” (Eisner 26), Tran’s purposeful shifts in different spatial positions elasticize time in that the Tran family experiences one moment as a tangling of both past and present. And, by putting the reader in their point of view, Tran asks the audience to consider such non-linear conceptions of time so as to acknowledge the ways in which the trauma of war manifests in the present, even for those second-generation individuals who did not experience its events firsthand. By tethering himself to his parents and to the reader, Tran revises the image of the airplane to transform from a symbol of destruction to an emblem of possible connection, of linking different points in time and space. To cement this revised meaning of the emblematic airplane, one of Tran’s later splash pages features an airplane connecting collages of images from the U.S. and Viet Nam, the past and the present. This connection is particularly resonant given that many Vietnamese American families suffered the inability to communicate with, let alone visit, their relatives and friends in Viet Nam because of the U.S.-imposed embargo that was not lifted until 1994. As a second-generation Vietnamese American, Tran is in a specific historical position to have

the ability to travel to Viet Nam. It is because he is of the second generation that he is able to tell such a story.

Another important effect of this connectivity achieved through visual narration is that Tran combats erasures of Vietnamese people that have been committed in the aforementioned (and brief) visual history of the U.S.-Viet Nam War. Rather than seeing Vietnamese from above or afar, readers inhabit the subject position of multiple Vietnamese characters, diverse in perspective, in Tran's various shifts in point-of-view over the panel transitions, becoming more of a participant than an observer of the author's experiences, shuttling through space to be inside/outside of the experiences of Viet Nam. The position of the observer often shifts quickly and drastically, employing what McCloud refers to as subject-to-subject transitions. One on page, the first two small panels position the reader with GB in a gathering of family members whose dialogue bubbles and chopsticks offering food occlude the view of the scene as a whole. The reader is a part of the family. The third panel takes the reader inside GB's stomach where food in Viet Nam is wreaking havoc on his digestive system, personified as drunken partygoers dancing and vomiting under a banner that reads, "Vietnamania." In the next panel, we are far from GB, as he holds his mouth emerging from the outhouse in the background, while the foreground presents his family members in the home's outdoor courtyard where they joke *about* him, further distancing us from him, whose internal organs we were exploring just the panel before. The final panel, not contained by borders, lifts the reader to an elevated position from which we can see the family exiting their property gates and the home's position within the surrounding town.

Though vacillations in point of view in traditional texts can sometimes be confusing, in the comic book format, the visual transporting of the reader is subtle and navigable. The various positions that the comic book genre enables the reader to occupy, even within just a few panels, attests to the genre's ability to bend commonplace understandings of time and space to allow readers to inhabit alternative perspectives that offer insight into more complex histories and the lives of the people involved. Tran punctuates this point with an image of a map of Southeast Asia, implicitly aerial in nature, with the difference that Viet Nam is not open, "empty" landscape, but one filled with people, faces contorted in agony and desperation (158). With images like this, Tran forces American readers to recognize that Viet Nam is no longer merely a war or a country, but a people.

### Part Two: The Synesthesia of Trauma

Not only does Tran's text combat the historical abstractions of Vietnamese bodies by shifting positions of subject and object and humanizing and diversifying Vietnamese people, but he also uses comic book conventions to reorient the audience's bodily experiences of reading the text. The reader is, in essence, called upon to inhabit Tran's sensory experiences. He does so primarily through the graphic treatment of lettering that creates a synesthetic effect; this synesthetic experience of reading the text implicitly draws attention to how we experience, remember, know—all processes that, once reoriented, allow us to open up conceptions of histories, including that of the U.S.-Viet Nam War.

In *VIETNAMERICA*, nearly each voice is indicated with a distinct font. Through this graphic treatment of the lettering, readers see “the implication of sound” and mood (Eisner 4), synesthetically experiencing Tran’s proximity to his memories and those of his parents. Tran deploys multiple fonts in the text—handwriting, typewriter font for radio reports about the war, bracketed French translations, and, perhaps most synesthetically, half-erased words and occluded speech balloons seen/heard while eavesdropping, overhearing, and/or misunderstanding. In these latter instances, Tran achieves what Marianne Hirsch credits to Art Spiegelman’s work when she writes that his graphic memoir grants trauma an aesthetic, one that evokes what is *not* there, in which “not seeing becomes visible and even audible” (187). For example, in a strip of panels that depicts Tran’s introduction to his relatives in Viet Nam (12), Tran’s mother’s speech balloons progressively dominate panel space until Tran’s face is drawn as contorted in being pressed between them—the dialogue balloons exceeding the boundaries of the panel itself, incapable of being read in full. While the Vietnamese language never appears in the written text of *VIETNAMERICA*, it is in the panels depicting Viet Nam where Vietnamese is visually invoked as the predominant language being spoken—a language that Tran visually represents as overwhelming and difficult to understand, as in another series of panels wherein Tran depicts a phở vendor who struggles to understand his pronunciation of the soup’s name, the lettering of the word “phở” repeating over and over again throughout the panels. Tran’s visual depictions of his difficulties with speaking Vietnamese evoke “a certain loss of self implicit in the speaking of another’s language” (Caruth 49), that being suspended between languages can be a trauma in and of itself (23). Such linguistic trauma persists in the friction it

generates between Tran and his parents. Tran admits how, throughout his life, he used his fluency in English to condescend to his parents (99). As a child, he contests his mother's explanation of why she named him Gia-Bao, begging to change his name to "something easier"; as an adolescent, he mocks his mother's mixing of "l" and "r" sounds, mimicking her pronunciation of "co-worker" as "co-walker." Though Tran's inability to speak or accept the Vietnamese language is visually pronounced in these panels, this does not necessarily have to be reduced to a loss. Second-generation occupation of a space between languages "opens as a future possibility the telling of another history" (Caruth 52). This possibility lies in the readers' ability to identify with Tran's experiences through the synesthetic quality of the lettering—the seeing of sound, the feeling of the visual.

In addition to the graphic treatment of lettering, readers are also able to identify with Tran as the protagonist through his orientation of panels. Eisner writes that in Western culture, readers tacitly cooperate with the sequential artist by following their training of reading from left to right and top to bottom (41). For the most part, Tran's panels are assembled according to this Western reading convention. What is interesting, though, is that recent scholarship points out how the graphic novel form destabilizes this Western reading convention, as their emphasis on the visual offers multiple reading paths (Cohn 52). The points at which the panel sequence does not follow this order are purposeful in getting the reader to show cross-generational and cross-cultural identifications between characters and with the audience. The left-to-right reading praxis is shaken as Tran illustrates his disorientation on his first visit to Sai Gon (50-1). This disorienting panel assemblage repeats when his parents first arrive in Viet Nam and are

overwhelmed by the changes to their home country as a result of globalization (mushrooming Hilton hotels and McDonald's), population changes, and political acts of renaming streets (202-03). Viet Nam is no longer the country that exists in their memories. This cultural shock, whether in GB's introduction to his parents' homeland, or in his parents' return to it, is portrayed synesthetically, as he fills the images with motion, sound, and odor lines. The fact that these visual representations of the experience are crammed together without the usual panel borders or linear, left-to-right arrangement culminates in overwhelming sensory experience—the shock of the bustling cityscape of Sai Gon can be heard, smelled, and felt through Tran's drawings. Tran's visual representation of this recurrence of cultural shock does not show sequential time as we expect it to. On one level, the time of those moments becomes "tangled" by breaking up what would be one panel, one moment, into several that are not arranged in left-to-right reading sequence or linear time (McCloud 96-7). On a larger temporal level, the recurrence of the disorientation from GB's parents' experience to his own shows that time cycles across spans of years. In this way, "Time and space are one in the same" (McCloud 100). The space on the page—the use, or rather the subversion, of panel sequence—shows us how time gets suspended and confused in the disorientation of the experience of culture shock. And, experiencing the space of Sai Gon, Viet Nam, links time cyclically between GB and his parents, as well as his parents' ever-present memories of Viet Nam of the past. The simultaneous similarities and differences, these oscillations between generations, acquire political resonance when examined in terms of Tran's purposeful use of color.

### Part Three: Politicizing the Color Spectrum

Tran's use of colors throughout the text connects time, in terms of generations, and spaces, in terms of the panels within the text, as well as geopolitical spaces. The colors of the North and South Vietnamese flags—yellow and red—periodically recur throughout the memoir in the spark of a lighter's flame, in the feverish glow of an afternoon sky, on clothing, in bowls of steaming food. These colors accent beacons of red and yellow on pages that are otherwise monochromatic gray or blue, dark in hue and somber in tone. These subtle inclusions of the colors visually allude to memories of the homeland Tran's parents left behind. More explicitly, Tran uses a trio of yellow, red, and blue splash pages that repeat communist propaganda artwork in the latter half of the text when he learns of his paternal grandfather's involvement in Ho Chi Minh's anti-colonial revolutionary movement—what would become known as the Communist Party of Northern Viet Nam. The first in this trio of splash pages depicts Communist flag-clad fists punching into pieces the bombs bearing the names of three imperialist powers Viet Nam faced in history—Japan, France, and the U.S.; a line of identical revolutionaries marches in red and yellow across the bottom of the page. The second foregrounds Tran's grandfather in blue, against a backdrop of red and yellow figures fighting, then being sheltered under the bust of Ho Chi Minh. The last in the trio depicts Vietnamese living harmoniously after defeating the French, the word "Independence" emblazoned in yellow across the bottom of the page. The narrative bubbles floating across this trio splash pages tell the story of Tran's grandfather, individuating him from the identical communist faces represented in the propaganda-style pieces. These bubbles, interestingly positioned to be

read from top to bottom rather than left to right, provide a more specific verbal narrative than that the visuals tell.

At first glance, these images seem to be mere visual repetitions of Communist rhetoric and a linear recapitulation of Tran's grandfather's life aligned with that of the Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary movement. However, the deeper meanings about identification and the reckoning with history, memory, trauma, and war can be accessed when considering the conventions of the comic book genre. In his discussion of color, McCloud points out that the additive primaries—red, blue, and yellow—combine to form a “pure white light” in the eye, but also “in various combinations, could reproduce every color in the visible spectrum” (186). This is significant because Tran uses these primary colors to set them apart from the otherwise muted palette, if not monochromatic quality, of the narrative panels. He chooses to show these memories in the form of primary colors so evocative of political propaganda, not only in Viet Nam, but in the U.S. as well, where, McCloud reminds, U.S. American comics picked these primary colors to convey strength (188). This is not to draw reductive parallels between the U.S. and Viet Nam through color, but to underscore the importance of ongoing negotiations of political affiliation. Tran's choice to invoke the flags' colors is important to visually articulating the struggles for national identification, both in the context of war between North and South Viet Nam, as well as Viet Nam and the U.S. In her study of the geopolitical space of Little Saigon in Westminster, California, Nhi T. Lieu points out how, in the 1980s, South Vietnamese immigrants were expected to adhere to capitalism as anticommunist rhetoric got wrapped up in U.S. conservatism (23), forcing Vietnamese Americans into a neoliberal subject position of individual responsibility, even though the reality was that

many had to rely on the state (24): “the Republican Party has wooed Vietnamese American citizens since the Reagan era” (55). Second-generation Vietnamese Americans face the added challenge of distinguishing the two regions and their politics, all while forming their own politics. Becoming “American” doesn’t just simply happen; national affiliations are not resolute. This blurred line between “Vietnamese” and “American” is especially complicated considering transnational globalization between the U.S. and Viet Nam, which will be discussed further in the following chapter.

An illustration that speaks to this second-generation effort is Tran’s use of the Vietnamese flags’ colors to visually re-map the United States (97) in a manner that, in Diana Taylor’s words, “stretches the spatial and temporal framework to recognize the interconnectedness of seemingly separate geographical and political areas and the degree to which our past continues to haunt our present” (277). In it, Tran colors the states where he and his siblings live—California, New York, and Florida—in yellow, while his parents’ home state of Arizona shines solid red. The map’s legend calls this red state the “Parent’s Republic of Vietnam” while he and his siblings’ yellow states are the “Federation of Free States.” The brown, borderless states between the Tran family’s two coasts are labeled “The Great Generational Divide,” while the surrounding oceans (interestingly, Canada and Mexico are removed from Tran’s remapping) are, in their colorlessness, the “Sea of Cultural Loss.” Tran’s re-mapping of the U.S. illustrates continued struggles for national identification between generations, and emphasizes the haunting persistence of struggles for Vietnamese to unify, even within the borders of the U.S. In this way, Tran implicitly re-orientes the maps that inform our conceptions of borders—of what is “American” and what is “foreign”—in a way that blurs the boundary

between Viet Nam and the U.S., one that has perpetrated war-era divisions and hierarchies between Vietnamese and Americans.

Gutter space alternates white to black, sometimes even just from page to page, seeming to indicate changes in time of day, not even necessarily time in years, or spaces (home to battleground, for instance), ultimately to evoke the mood—the uncertainty and unpredictability of lives mired in war and to show these are all parts of it. The synesthetic effect of seeing silence, the silence of trauma, also manifests in black splash pages that primarily transition between Viet Nam and the U.S. and/or the past and the present. Some of these black splash pages between sections feature a floating panel that edges us into the next part of the book, sometimes a glimpse of what won't be fully revealed until the end of that section. This enigmatic visual foreshadowing creates the effect of a delayed reveal; the reader must wait to find out what it means and where it is positioned in the narrative as a whole. The effect of the delay is akin to an experience of trauma in that latency is “not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never fully be known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself” (Caruth 17). The darkness of the black pages is not about forgetting or occluding what happened, but is to highlight the yet-to-be-contextualized floating image as a trace—a visual in the future tense of the narrative, yet in the narrator's past. In other words, this visual delay draws attention to the folding of time and the fact that these sections of interwoven familial traumas cannot, should not, be read along a linear timeline, but in an “encircling [of] the trauma” (Edkins 15). That is to say that many sections in *VIETNAMERICA* end with the image with which it began, but the closing version of the image places it in the context of a larger visual. So, the reader circles the trauma by returning the bookended image, but with a different

understanding of what it means. There is repetition, but the repeated experience brings newness, freshness, with it, as trauma often does in prompting the traumatized to discover new ways to view the memories and to cope with them.

Tran further represents the latency of trauma on larger structural level, not just the structure of the sections, but of the book as a whole. The last section of black splash pages is at the end of the book: a series of them appears at the moment in the narrative when Tran's family flees from a chaotic, burning Sai Gon on the eve of its Communist takeover. This event, on a linear timeline, would occur immediately before and during the events depicted in the opening panels of the book, in which the family is fleeing from Sai Gon via U.S. military plane. Tran splices this event into the "beginning" and "end" of the book to delay fulfillment of readerly curiosity about what happened in that traumatic war-torn event. However, the delayed return to that moment still does not offer the gratification readers might typically seek in wanting to *see* what happens. What Tran chooses to show readers in these pages is that "to know more [is] to show less" (Gilmore 160). In this last section of black pages, the first features a slant of light from which a leaf emerges. This leaf blows across the next couple of pages, showing movement by directing us across the pages, offering some sense of sound and motion—the combination upon which McCloud asserts the visual representation of time relies (116). However, the last couple of pages no longer depict that leaf, unmooring us from movement, spatially and temporally. In the case of these black splash pages, motion and space are imperceptible, sound is silent. Time is suspended.

The absence of these spatio-temporal compasses negates the shape that the pages with panels are given, as well as the relationships between them. This eliminates the

“action” that readers would expect from this point in the narrative, filled with bombs, engines, screams, and everything else movies and other comics have taught us to expect from a war scene. The choice not to draw something witnessed “thereby expands the repertoire of trauma’s representation to omission, silence, and a depiction of the void” (161). By choosing to depict these moments with black splash pages, Tran indicates that those memories cannot be articulated in a legible language, whether verbal or visual. In such narrative spaces, these black splash pages should not be considered “empty” or “blank.” Moreover, these splash pages’ darkness represents the unspeakable, the unseen, the unknowable—an epistemological rupture and ineffability indicative of trauma, felt even by the second generation that did not experience the traumatic events of war firsthand. This is what Marianne Hirsch, in her study of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, calls “postmemory”—“the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated” (22).<sup>11</sup> In illustrating the inheritance of trauma through postmemory, Tran’s text shows that wars cannot be marked as “ended” on a linear timeline. The disruption of what Eisner referred to as the “sequential” flow of the comic form prompts readers to navigate the text in unconventional ways and ultimately reconsider their conceptions of space and time. Unmoored from these spatio-temporal markers, readers are compelled to pause, listen, and look.

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<sup>11</sup> In *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, film historian E. Ann Kaplan discusses a similar process that she calls “intergenerational trauma.”

This act of witnessing illustrates how the witness becomes a participant in the “creation of the knowledge” of the trauma (Felman and Laub 57-8). The dynamic process of testifying and witnessing trauma involves both parties’ encounter with what Felman and Laub call “strangeness” (7), as in Tran’s purposefully placed disorienting black splash pages. Whereas Felman and Laub suggest that the witness is a “blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (37), I contend that the witness is not a “blank screen.” On the contrary, the witness brings to the process of witnessing their preconceived notions about the testifier and the history surrounding the traumas to which he/she testifies. This becomes a matter of assessing readers’ (witnesses’) epistemological foundations and the assumptions by which their reading practices operate. Tran refuses to perform the role of “anthropological informant” to draw our attention to the power of a haunting, a present absence, or a ghost that Avery Gordon calls a “social figure,” drawing us into a “structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition” (Gordon 8). Using Gordon’s concepts to think through why Tran chose black pages at this expected “climax” of his narrative, readers can take the opportunity to step back and consider how their expectations stem from what Gordon treats as a culture of empiricism and “technologies of hypervisibility” (16). The reader cannot take the televised representations of the U.S. war in Viet Nam or the ensuing pop cultural texts about that period as a matter of fact through which Tran’s text is funneled or, rather, rejected when it does not fit that mold. As Felman and Laub stress, “the empirical context needs not just to be *known*, but to be *read*” (xv). Tran’s destabilization of conventional reading

practices of narratives about the U.S.-Viet Nam War show that knowledge is based on how we read rather than what we (think we) know.

Readers might initially be frustrated with Tran's refusal to narrate these moments in a traditionally legible way. Indeed, David Ulin, the reviewer from *The Los Angeles Times*, criticized the graphic memoir for being "uncomfortably open-ended." Yet, that "open-endedness" is exactly what Spiegelman argues grants the comic book genre the ability to invite multiple interpretations, to prompt dialogue. The lack of understanding or knowing can serve as a "link between cultures" in that "it is in the event of this incomprehension and in our departure from sense and understanding that our own witnessing may indeed begin to take place" (Caruth 56). In terms of dialoguing about culture, the open-endedness is purposeful: the discomfort the reader may feel is part of the discomfort felt by those who are perpetually reckoning with traumas and negotiating identities in their wake. This so-called "open-endedness" forces readers to feel the uncertainty of the fact that history and identity (whether Vietnamese, American, and/or Vietnamese American) are always in the making, always in flux.

When Ulin states that the "open-endedness" results from Tran leaving his experiences "in the background" of his family's story and being "unable to achieve the reconciliation to which the book aspires," it is important to note cultural differences in understanding selfhood. Ulin assumes that a memoir must center on an individual when clearly, as evinced by Tran's text, family is not separable from the self. In her discussion of the memoir form, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson highlight a "doubling of the 'self'" or a multiplicity of selves and voices, echoing Caruth's point, referred to earlier, that trauma involves interconnected narratives. In terms of the graphic memoir form in

particular, and like Tran's *VIETNAMERICA*, this plurality of voices manifests in the ventriloquism of family members' voices in speech balloons. D'Amore stresses that in graphic memoir, "the narratives of others and their relation to the autobiographer play an integral role in the primary narrative" (217). With this capacity of the genre in mind, Ulin's critique does not account for the purposeful ways in which form and content coincide in memoir; his comments about *VIETNAMERICA* seem to fall in line with the history of U.S. readers expecting Vietnamese American readers to provide narratives that function as answers, answers that subscribe to U.S.-centric historical narratives of individualism and resolution.

In sum, the value of approaching this text as a history of trauma that requires continual creative ways of reckoning with the resurfacing traumas, rather than a history expected to tie itself up in a narrative bow, opens up *VIETNAMERICA*'s potential for opening up dialogues for cultural understanding. What kind of witness do we want to be? Why are we expecting the "anthropological informant"? Which (hi)stories are yet to be told? What do you remember and how will you do it? What silences will you keep and which will you attempt to speak? Who do you want to hear you?

The questions above can be fruitful paths for students to explore not only what (hi)stories get told, but how and why they do. These are questions that can't be answered easily, or maybe ever, but it is these kinds of questions that teaching should be based on, rather than "answer-driven traditional schooling" (Thomas xv), and the graphic novel allows educators and students to revel in the possibilities of such open-ended questions. As Felman and Laub suggest, "It is the teacher's task to recontextualize the crisis and to put it back into perspective, to relate the present to the past and to the future and to thus

reintegrate the crisis in a transformed frame of meaning” (54). In this way, Tran’s treatment of trauma can be fruitful for offering students the opportunity to interrogate histories and knowledge, their construction—a metaeducational opportunity. What follows is an intervention into current scholarly discussion about teaching graphic texts in the classroom, and how and why such pedagogical methodologies can serve to integrate a text such as *VIETNAMERICA* into a student-centered, college-level curriculum.

#### Part Four: Pedagogies and Methodologies

Teaching a graphic novel in my college-level composition and literature classes usually starts with questions. When assigned a book like *MAUS* or *Persepolis*, my students flip through the pages and often ask, “Why are we reading a kid’s book?” Their perception of a comic book quickly changes once they delve into the weighty material of those texts, but I invite those initial questions, those commonly held misconceptions of the comic book genre, because they open up a dialogue about how and why I teach what I teach and how and why they learn. Sparking dialogue about reasons and methods for teaching comics in the classroom is significant to this chapter because the interconnected issues of content and form that I raised with *VIETNAMERICA* are, I feel, conducive to addressing major facets of a successful student-centered classroom.<sup>12</sup> Paramount among these theoretical and practical pedagogical objectives is the tenet that “[t]he teacher is not responsible for passing on to students the norms of the culture, but to help students gain the skills to identify, analyze, evaluate, and act upon those norms—particularly if that action calls for change” (Thomas xv). Not only is change central to the processes of

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<sup>12</sup> The student-centered educational movement that is often referred to as “critical pedagogy.”

argumentation—to change thoughts and/or actions—but change is the trajectory to which *VIETNAMERICA* aspires: changing students’ understanding of history, race, family, among other aforementioned topics and others that reach beyond the bounds of this chapter.

In addition to opening up dialogue with students, teaching comics can and should be expanded into a larger scholarly and pedagogical discourse. The reason for this is that the majority of scholarship I have read neglects concrete teaching strategies—that is, the scholarship about college-level instruction of graphic novels is primarily theoretical, while the practical material is directed toward K-12 educators. This discursive gap should be bridged. The larger educational goals addressed above are not possible without teachers sharing practical classroom activities. So, in this last section, I draw some of my own classroom practices in conversation with those of other educators who *do* address concrete teaching strategies as a point of fusion from which, hopefully, additional work, in scholarship and in the classroom, can be done to utilize the genre of the comic book for all of its educational potential. Teaching comics has broadened my reading and teaching practices immeasurably. And, comics help students enjoy reading, which is a relief because they are often very vocal about how they usually do not enjoy reading.

Both in terms of studying comics and creating their own, students can examine the relationship between content and form in the graphic novel genre to understand history as, not simply a linear progression of facts, but “to expose flaws, evasions, and rearrangements that explain how we may have inherited a social environment that endlessly replays a narrative or compromise that should prompt our opposition even as such a reaction is already anticipated and diffused by that very environment” (Brunner

193). Because graphic texts like *VIETNAMERICA* prompt readers to question how they have been trained to see history and, by extension, to reevaluate reading practices in order to account for more diverse historical perspectives, “comics can effectively *draw* our attention to some of the most pressing cultural issues facing us today” (Royal 79).

Contemporary issues that *VIETNAMERICA* can broach for students include the global rhetoric, both visual and verbal, with which current wars are being narrated, as well as the more specific issue of Asian American representation in visual and/or verbal mediums.

In regard to the latter topic’s integration into the college-level classroom, Tran’s text could be placed in conversation with the increasing number of Asian American comics. *Shattered: The Asian American Comics Anthology*, though a bit haphazardly organized, offers a diverse array of styles and storylines that draw attention to what the brief introduction calls the five major stereotypes Asian Americans face. The anthology’s prefatory mission statement is to “reimagine one of five archetypes frequently associated with Asians in media and popular culture: The Brute, the Brain, the Temptress, the Alien, and the Manipulator.” The works are divided into five chapters that correspond with these identified stereotypes. While *Secret Identities* addresses stereotypes explicitly, other graphic novels such as Adrian Tomine’s *Shortcomings*, Mariko and Jillian Tamaki’s *Skim*, and John Pham’s two-volume *Sublife* work do not present a specific or didactic agenda. They present graphic works of art and literature that do not explicitly address issues of Asian American history and identity but, in doing so, call for the conversation about their works to not be constrained by those expectations and themes.

I have personally taught John Pham in my community college composition and literature courses. The prefatory lesson I offer students prior to their reading of Pham’s

work includes not only instruction on many of the genre-specific key terms and concepts from Eisner and McCloud that I employed in the discussion above, but also a note on the different effects that fictional and autobiographical graphic texts bear upon the reader. This is important because while Pham's *Sublife* series is primarily fictional in its rendering of alien heads ballooning in outer space and two neo-Nazi lovers training their dog to attack African Americans, the only excerpt that was anthologized in the 2012 edition of *Best American Comics* was Pham's autobiographical strip, "St. Ambrose," which is about his experiences of revisiting the Catholic school and confronting memories of the fun, corrupt, and just plain strange occurrences that he and his classmates witnessed there. Teaching this short strip is an exercise in ambivalence because, though I talk with my students about the implications of imposing autobiographical expectations, Pham's autobiographical piece is what has garnered him the most attention and acclaim. However, Pham's autobiographical text does not subscribe to the common expectations for Vietnamese Americans to write about war. Instead, Pham tackles the traumas of becoming disillusioned with religion, losing childhood friends, and struggling financially to pursue his art. He visually articulates these traumas by reframing the borders of panels depicting childhood memories in various triangular shapes, what my students have said resemble shards of glass. These panels are not arranged in a left-to-right, top-to-bottom traditional Western reading structure; rather, these shards of memories are presented in radial (dis)assemblage and the points of these triangular panels do not intersect or overlap. As my students have pointed out in their analyses of "St. Ambrose," these panels initially appear like puzzle pieces that should fit together, but do not, just as memories often tend to do in their fragmented

manifestations. In this way, the form supplements the content in a way that prompts meta-cognitive discussion of paths of reading, remembering, and knowing. The fragmentation, non-linearity, and dissonance of such processes allows students to come to the understanding that autobiographical works do not merely serve the purpose of offering a finite answer a question, but, through the epistemological capacities of the comic book form, can investigate the bases of such questions.

Conventions of the comic book form, when approached from unconventional and innovative ways, can serve as fruitful roots for concrete teaching strategies in the college classroom. In my classes, I have removed either the caption text or the image from a panel of a comic and ask the students to fill in the open space. Sharing what they produce stimulates discussion of the ways in which the meaning of the panel varies according to the changing text-to-image relationship. This brief in-class exercise can also draw attention to the assumptions invoked by the text or image students are given and how it informs what they decide to draw or write. Their choice to have their self-penned image or text pushes them to decide whether they will reinforce or resist such assumptions; the critical thinking that goes into that choice weighs heavily, of course, in the context of race, war, and history, as with a text like *VIETNAMERICA*.

The comic book form's innate capacity to resist proscribed ideologies can also be taught by asking students to write and draw a panel from an assigned comic from a different point-of-view. Professors Mandaville and Avila present a compelling addition to this exercise when they suggest drawing a comic of yourself reacting to a text, or to draw comics that convey a particular sensory experience in three different ways (250). A creative task like this enables students to consider alternative (hi)stories and can further

be made relevant when placed in conversation with, for example, various news outlets' perspectives on the same topic. In teaching Vietnamese American graphic texts in my classes, exercises such as this have been most productive with the high population of veteran students on my campus. As many of them express disillusionment with their military service, they often focus on the humanitarian aspects of their active duty, and have been intrigued to read texts from the perspective of Vietnamese civilian survivors of a war that is, my veteran students confirm, often addressed in their training for combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> Based on my veteran students' feedback on the Vietnamese American texts I have taught, to both see and read, to witness, the experiences of war from the perspectives of civilian survivors of "the other side" has been eye-opening in providing the important educational opportunity to have a choice outside of the militarized point of view (Gonzalez 49). This extends to non-veteran students too, as Gonzalez stresses that U.S. civilians are trained to see the world through a militarized optics. For these students, these exercises in the thematic potential of the comic book form can "explod[e] the myth of war as entertainment" (Gonzalez 177), seeing as how many of my younger students have "experienced" war through film and/or video games.

Race is never a simple topic to broach in the classroom, even at the college level. When I ask students to visualize a character in a strictly word-based text, such as Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," for instance, they nearly always limit the discussions of their mental images to her clothing, much more comfortable discussing issues of class and gender than of race. However, once the racialized element of the character surfaces in the discussion,

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<sup>13</sup> The U.S.'s war in Viet Nam is used as point of reference several times in the current U.S. military counter-insurgency manual, both as a tactical model for how to (not) deal with guerilla combatants and as an intended point of departure for military morale.

whether prompted by me or another student who is willing to be frank, the conversation mushrooms into students' personal experiences with discrimination (as victim and perpetrator) and unofficial segregation. In the North San Diego County school where I teach, though, Asian Americans rarely factor into these discussions about race, as the Asian American student population is small. Recently, during one of my most unsettling moments in integrating Vietnamese American texts into the classroom, students laughed when I taught them how to pronounce a Vietnamese word that appeared in the text. This reaction, of course, prompted a discussion about why they assumed that to be funny, the extent to which they could perceive Asians as Americans, and the influence my mixed appearance had on their surprise at my ability to speak an Asian language. Central to the discussion of these topics was the phenotypical Asian visage that existed in students' collective mind's eye and its dictation of otherness.

In light of how the visual informed students' perception of Vietnamese Americans going into their reading of the text, I feel it would be important the next time around to consider M.G. Aune's approach to teaching the issue of abstraction I discussed earlier in the chapter in the context of *VIETNAMERICA*. Aune shares her experiences teaching graphic travel narratives that depict people from other cultures. She asks her students to reflect, in writing and through discussion, on the extent to which they are able to identify with these simplified renderings of faces—essentially, if McCloud's theory about “amplification through simplification” holds up when confronting issues involving markers of racial and cultural difference. When her students were unable to connect with a veiled woman, Aune finds it interesting to utilize abstraction, and the immediate

impression visual cues make, as a manner of “rais[ing] important issues about identity and help[ing] sensitize us to the dynamics of othering” (228).

Allowing students to represent themselves through comic book form has also been fruitful for bridging gaps that othering creates, even in the classroom. Not only have my students chosen to write-illustrate strips about immigration, racial and sexual discrimination, depression, homelessness, addiction, and other forms of their own traumas, but educators like Vietnamese American comic book artist Thi Bui<sup>14</sup> have compiled and sold her students’ comic projects as fund raisers for the school.<sup>15</sup> Bui’s students are all English language learners who exemplify the comic book form’s potential to facilitate the development of multiliteracies, which includes the multiplicity of social discourses as well as the various literacies shaped by multimodal technologies.<sup>16</sup> By acquiring a fluency and literacy through a creative form rather than a regimen of memorization and punishment that can be so demoralizing, students can also begin to trust their own voices and their ways of knowing—a trust that is often whittled away in being marginalized (Greene qtd. in Thomas xiii). Since this chapter is ultimately about the possibilities of genre, students, as well as teachers, can invigorate the classroom knowing that they can contribute to the genre. Educator and comics-advocate P.L.

Thomas stresses, “An embracing of multiliteracies in the literacy curriculum recognizes

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<sup>14</sup> The first chapter of Thi Bui’s graphic memoir, *The Best We Could Do*, was sold in limited release under the title “Labor.” Narrating the birth of her first child, Bui’s chapter mingles her first moments of motherhood with contemplations on her family and exile from the Viet Nam—layering the meanings of motherhood and origin, as well as the future.

<sup>15</sup> The volume is titled *We Are Oakland International* and utilized the fundraising website Kickstarter to successfully reach their monetary goal.

<sup>16</sup> For more on teaching comic books in an ELA classroom, refer to Katie Monnin’s *Teaching Graphic Novels: Practical Strategies for the Secondary ELA Classroom* and P.L. Thomas’s “A Case for Comics and Graphic Novels: Taking Multiliteracies Seriously” in *Challenging Genres: Comics and Graphic Novels*.

the symbiotic relationship between the evolution of genre and the readers/writers interacting with those genres” (xx). Students who read and write comics to feel that they are part of what Filipino American author Carlos Bulosan called the “living growing thing” of literature, but can also experience each others’ lives and points of view. They can—and have, in my experiences of assigning comic strip projects—learn how sharing their experiences can help them cope with the various traumas embedded therein. Self-expression can become a mode of survival by overcoming alienation and the comic book in the classroom can emerge, ideally, as a culturally connective tissue.

The possibility of connection brings me back to Tran. In one of my interviews with him, spoke to his hopes that *VIETNAMERICA*, and the graphic novel genre in general, will connect readers across generations and cultures, across time and space. Discussing his family’s reactions to his book that reveals so many of their private stories, Tran said,

In the beginning, my mom was hesitant and my dad was very resistant. They didn’t raise their children on stories of how they got from A to Z, all the hard decisions they had to make, the family/friends/lives they left behind, etc. And now here I was, a son that had never expressed interest in their personal history, snooping around for family stories to make into a comic. [...] Ultimately, my hope is it makes us more empathetic towards each other and knocks down some barriers. [...] Preserving their journey in *VIETNAMERICA* has helped connect the dots for their children—their legacy of sacrifices—and I feel helps reverse the trend of growing apart as I, my siblings, and cousins reach the ages our parents were during this tumultuous period in history. They grew up with war as a constant backdrop, and when they became ‘adults’, they were uprooted and replanted in a completely new land. Not having the luxury of maturing gradually, like their parents’ generation or their kids, I think exaggerated the generational gap that *VIETNAMERICA* tries to bridge. Now that they’re holding the finished book in their hands, I think they’re happy in their own way: my mom’s telling her friends to buy it, and my Dad grunts approvingly.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### Transnational Tastes: Trauma and Survival in Diasporic Vietnamese Cookbooks

During the eleventh and most recent season of the popular cooking competition show *Top Chef*, a white, Colorado-native cheftestant, Travis Masar, dubbed himself “Captain Vietnam.” In the episode of the same name, Masar claimed that he was an expert in Vietnamese cuisine because of his travels through the country, but also because his boyfriend, whom he described in fetishized language, is of Vietnamese descent. In claiming Vietnamese culinary culture as his own, Masar attempted to secure a foothold in the competition by marketing himself as a specialist in presently “trendy” yet relatively unfamiliar Vietnamese cuisine, as evinced by the judges’ and other contestants’ simultaneous interest in and admitted ignorance of it. Ironically Masar repeatedly failed to cook and serve Vietnamese dishes to appease the panel of judges’ sharp palettes. In the episode in which Travis named himself “Captain Vietnam,” he made a tomato-based soup that one of the judges critiqued for tasting more Italian than Vietnamese. The previous episode documented a similar kitchen folly, as he prepared a Vietnamese-style appetizer intended to showcase the aromatics of lemongrass, but neglected to add it.

As his self-proclaimed expertise rang hollow, it became clear that Masar’s exoticization of, and claim to, both Vietnamese cuisine and male bodies for their “consumability” speak more to the current trends of fashioning Vietnamese culinary culture as consumable, pleasurable, and marketable. In addition to Masar’s botched navigation of the alimentary terrain of Vietnamese cuisine on *Top Chef*, Viet Nam has appeared as the culinary backdrop to the popular network television show *The Bachelor*, during which the throng of hair-twirling bachelorettes laughingly picked at street food

before being treated to private dinners at five-star restaurants (where servers were mere anonymous props) and shrilly exclaimed, “I love Vietnam!” These reality shows’ food-based invocations of Viet Nam depict the country as a dehistoricized, commodified hedonistic playground. The message is that Viet Nam is full of pleasures, all for sale. Through representations of food, Viet Nam is now increasingly portrayed as a site of pleasure rather than the pain of the war that once saturated the media.<sup>17</sup>

Traditionally, foodways studies have encapsulated “the network of behaviors, traditions, and beliefs concerning food, and involves all the activities surrounding a food item and its consumption, including the procurement, preservation, preparation, presentation, and performance of that food” (Long 8). Rooted in this definition, foodways methodologies were largely anthropological until Roland Barthes’ shift of attention to “the grammar of food” (31)—in other words, its symbolic meanings.<sup>18</sup> More recently, Asian American food studies have acknowledged the shortcomings of both anthropological and Barthesian symbolic readings of food, deepening the discussion to approaching them as a “metacritique of how to construct memory and national identity” (Mannur 29).<sup>19</sup> This means that the discourses of food draw attention to the ways in

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<sup>17</sup> Among numerous scholars who have studied Viet Nam as the first U.S. war immersively covered by the media, Rick Berg, in “Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology,” points out that Viet Nam has “for the U.S. always been more a war than a country” (41). Berg’s article is collected in Linda Dittmar and Gene Marchaud’s *From Hanoi to Hollywood*.

<sup>18</sup> Roland Barthes’ “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption” addressed the symbolic meanings of food as “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior” (Barthes 29). Barthes analyzed the significations of food—what he called “the grammar of food”—in terms of menus, diets, and preparation, including the time invested, style, and level of perceived refinement—for example, brown bread perceived as being more tasteful to the upper class than white bread (31).

<sup>19</sup> *Eating Asian America* points out that the current trajectory of food studies is a multidisciplinary approach. Notably, the 2013 reader features over twenty studies of Asian American foodways—Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, South Asian—but only one chapter addresses a Vietnamese American culinary text, that being Truong’s novel.

which histories and identities are remembered because memories are inherently anchored in the multisensory acts of cooking and eating. To illustrate how food discourse emerges as a way in which identity and memory are negotiated, some of the most common questions and remarks my family and I have encountered include “You’re Vietnamese? I love phở!” and “Have you ever eaten dog?” Such questions instigate conversations in which food functions as a marker of identity and speaks to how Viet Nam exists in collective U.S. memory. This process of racialization has often made me feel ambivalent. Just as in larger Asian American history, food has been “a source of disgust and embarrassment (think dog eating) [but] at the same time [...] can engender ethnic pride” (Mannur 149). Though Vietnamese food flavors many of my most formative childhood memories and eating it makes me feel connected to the past and family and home, I am always conscious of people’s common misconceptions of the culinary culture in which I was raised, compelling me to make concessions and guard myself against long-standing, food-articulated stereotypes.

While studies in Asian American foodways have a long and continuing history,<sup>20</sup> those addressing Vietnamese American culinary literature in specific are limited to Monique Truong’s novel, *The Book of Salt* and Bich Minh Nguyen’s memoir, *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*.<sup>21</sup> Despite the fact that diasporic Vietnamese have published an

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<sup>20</sup> One of the most recent publications about Asian American foodways, the 2013 *Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader*, dedicates only one of its chapters to Vietnamese American culinary culture.

<sup>21</sup> Denise Cruz’s “‘Love is Not a Bowl of Quinces’: Food, Desire, and the Queer Asian Body in Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt*” extends a little further beyond merely conducting a literary analysis of Truong’s novel to address the representation of Vietnamese American chef Hung Huynh on the reality show *Top Chef*. Cruz argues that both the novel and Huynh’s representation treat food as a vehicle for articulating both racial difference and model minority assimilation. Huynh’s competitiveness was initially portrayed as cold and calculating, but later as a sign of his work ethic and his filial honoring of his immigrant family.

increasing number of cookbooks in the past few years, there is not yet a substantial analysis of them. In what follows, I aim to contribute to the existing scholarship by not only analyzing the neglected body of diasporic Vietnamese cookbooks, but also by treating cookbooks as a literary genre rather than anthropological evidence.

Diasporic Vietnamese cookbooks should be treated as a literature because the texts discussed in this chapter are framed by the chefs' autobiographical narratives and each recipe is contextualized with personal anecdotes. These narrative elements, coupled with the publishers' packaging of the texts, establish a writer-reader, chef-patron relationship that warrants further analysis. That is to say that the cookbooks symbolically and discursively walk the audience through a path from experiencing Viet Nam as painful to pleasurable, and they do not necessarily have to do so by cooking through the book recipe by recipe, but through the literary and aesthetic experience of reading the text and viewing the visuals. In essence, readers who display the cookbooks as badges of their culinary sophistication, as portals to pleasure, are complicit in the anthropological gaze that has characterized the field of food studies until relatively recently. Such optics reinforce politicized historical narratives about the U.S.-Viet Nam War and the relationship between diasporic Vietnamese and their countries of arrival. Thus, it is important to treat cookbooks as a literary genre in order to excavate the implications these narratives harbor, to examine the significance of what they have chosen to include in representing themselves through food. To do so, I will attend to how these narrative components of the texts serve to authenticate the authors as culinary tour guides to Vietnamese culture, as well as position the reader as a tourist who can enjoy Viet Nam

through aestheticized, pleasurable, entertaining representations of the country and its food, rather than through the typical lens of war, colored with pain, trauma, and guilt.

I approach diasporic Vietnamese cookbooks as metacritical in the sense that they interrogate processes of memory-making about Viet Nam, forming diasporic Vietnamese identities<sup>22</sup> and *how* they are represented, and the epistemological implications of revising histories of the Viet Nam War through food-based metaphors of the body and consumption. This latter issue is particularly self-reflexive in that it underscores the relationship between author and audience and how that dynamic rapport charged with histories of racism and violence influences the ways in which traumas are articulated and identities expressed, down to the intimate and habitual rituals of cooking and eating. The examination of the discursive function and effect of cookbooks as a literary arm of foodways calls for discussion of the audience/eater, the author/chef, and *how* the latter communicates with the former.

Seeking texts that would reach a significant audience in order to discuss the meanings of the writer-reader relationship, I chose these particular cookbooks because of their wide availability in mainstream bookstores, as well as their high reviews on what has now become most people's bookstore, Amazon.com. Among numerous diasporic Vietnamese cookbooks that have been released in the past few years, I have chosen to focus on four primary texts: Luke Nguyen's 2011 *My Vietnam: Stories and Recipes*, Nhut Huynh's 2009 *Little Vietnam*, Charles Phan's 2012 *Vietnamese Home Cooking*, and Ann Le's 2011 *The Little Saigon Cookbook: Vietnamese Cuisine and Culture in*

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<sup>22</sup> In my research, I found that many scholars refer to diasporic Vietnamese individuals as "Viet Kieu," roughly translating to exiled Vietnamese. I refrain from employing this terminology because of the negative connotations (of being a traitor, culturally and politically), and often pejorative uses, in the Vietnamese language. I opt to use "diasporic Vietnamese" or "overseas Vietnamese."

*Southern California's Little Saigon*. The packaging of Phan and Nguyen's cookbooks is especially eye-catching as their large, elaborate bindings and their high resolution food photography earn them covers-facing-out shelving in bookstores. Such displays are a marketable draw, too, because of the branding of Phan and Nguyen's names as heavyweights in the culinary marketplace. Phan earned acclaim from food critics for his Vietnamese restaurant called The Slanted Door, which is one of his seven establishments; and Nguyen has had a Cooking Channel show *Luke Nguyen's Vietnam*, as well as three other popular cookbooks including *Secrets of The Red Lantern*, which features recipes served at his award-winning Vietnamese restaurant of the same name in Sydney, Australia. Although Le and Huynh do not appear to have as much selling power, I purposefully chose the former because Le's highly rated book focuses on Little Saigon, California, as a specific site of Vietnamese American culinary culture, and I selected Huynh's text because I wanted to compare and contrast it to the bigger sellers. Most importantly, what these cookbooks have in common is that they all include the aforementioned autobiographical, anecdotal narrative frames.

The autobiographical components of the texts often echo one another, which provides insight into what is considered legible and marketable for diasporic Vietnamese chef-authors. However, the texts' differences speak to diasporic Vietnamese individuals' diversity that is often effaced in popular narratives about Viet Nam and its people. First, the authors vary in terms of their generation, either 1.5- or second-generation. While the three major waves of Vietnamese diaspora show variations in class, education, and

ethnicity,<sup>23</sup> I attend to the broader distinction between 1.5-generation (those who left Viet Nam as young children) and second-generation (those who were born outside of Viet Nam) to focus on how the authors remember or inherit memories of Viet Nam through food. Doing so not only highlights their ambivalence in oscillating between representing themselves as outsiders and insiders to Vietnamese culinary culture, but also speaks to their specific historical position of growing up outside of Viet Nam that allows them to exercise the financial privilege and political initiative to “return” to Viet Nam where they cull the material for their respective cookbooks.

However, I do not intend for this chapter to limit the conversation to a linear return to Viet Nam. To do so would be to reinforce national boundaries between the country of departure (Viet Nam) and the country of arrival (the U.S. or Australia). Nguyen and Huynh are Vietnamese Australian, whereas Phan and Le focus on Vietnamese culinary culture in California. My choice of these authors not only speaks to the global nature of the Vietnamese diaspora, but also serves to decenter the U.S. as primary country of arrival in discourses about the Vietnamese diaspora. It is also important to decenter the dyadic and linear polarity between homeland and the country of arrival by looking at “the lateral networks that are not immediately evident” (Mannur 9), in this case the transnational inter-Asian histories that food makes evident and that are

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<sup>23</sup> Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde’s *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora* and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud’s *this is all i choose to tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature* clearly and concisely outlines the characteristics of each wave of the Vietnamese diaspora: the first wave typically involved those who were associated with the military in some capacity and thus fled for fear of communist backlash at the end of the war; the second wave is often referred to as “the boat people,” many of whom were ethnic Chinese, and who experienced life in refugee camps; the third wave includes those who left Viet Nam between 1979 and 1996 often through U.S.-instituted programs such as the Orderly Departure Program, the Amerasian Homecoming Act, and the UN-sponsored Resettlement Opportunities for Vietnamese Returnees Program.

discussed in the cookbooks. These texts are a compelling avenue through which “a vast cross-section of people from diverse backgrounds, classes, generations, and genders participat[e] in transnational processes” (Valverde 2). Huynh and Phan are ethnic Chinese, which they often discuss in their respective cookbooks, and many of the recipes are attributed to the influence of other Asian countries, as well as European culinary traditions. The transnational histories and ethnic diversity of Viet Nam belie reductive notions of “authenticity” and origin, both of which will be discussed in further depth later in this chapter.

In essence, this chapter aspires to focus on the transnational relationships represented in the cookbooks. Transnationalism as an analytic has been debated for its political implications and field-specificity (Briggs 625) and is often deployed in polarized definitions and seen as either critiquing or reinforcing nationalism (626). That is to say that “[a]s much as it belongs to the world of free trade agreements and export processing zones, transnationalism belongs to genealogies of anti-imperial and decolonizing thought” (628). In their recent tracing of this history of the term as a category of analysis, Briggs, McCormick and Way conclude that transnationalism has multiple possibilities and histories (627) by calling the nation itself into question (628). I build upon their recent commentary on transnationalism, as I deploy the term to address the ways in which it unlocks possibilities for connection, such as the exchange of cultural media, activism, and sheer contact; at the same time, I found my analysis on the critiques of the ways in which transnationalism stifles such connections through racialized historical narrations, ongoing war, and socio-economic exploitation. Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde defines transnationalism as the processes by which diasporic Vietnamese go through and

around the geopolitical borders of the nation-state to connect the “societies of origin and settlement” (20). The possibility of doing so was enhanced by President Clinton’s lifting of the embargo with Viet Nam in 1994 allowing for travel, business, and ease of sending money and goods back to family (Pelaud 17-18). Subsequently, transnational Vietnamese identity has further been enabled by the ensuing boom of Vietnamese music and media circulated globally (Pelaud 18). Despite the increase in transnational flows of cultural mediums, there still remains conflict, as much of diasporic Vietnamese media is anticommunist (68), causing a political and cultural disconnect between Viet Nam and the diaspora, and thus ambivalence in identities (66). While studies of transnational processes have primarily focused on music and technology,<sup>24</sup> this chapter spotlights cookbooks as integral to understanding Vietnamese transnationalism because people engage with food on a daily basis and food resources travel through avenues of globalization, highlighting the geopolitical and socioeconomic realities undergirding more abstract notions of transnationalism in terms of culture and identity. Among foodways, cookbooks are most inherently transnational, in that they bring the cuisine of Viet Nam into readers’ homes across the globe and, by extension, draw upon resources—ingredients and culinary histories specific to the readers’ location—that cross borders through globalization and cross-pollinate through time. Cookbooks show how the transnational manifests in domestic spaces (Briggs 640) and the ways in which the texts’

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<sup>24</sup> Lieu’s book focuses on the transnational exchanges, both ideological and material, in Paris by Night music and variety shows, in addition to Vietnamese representations in beauty pageants. Valverde’s study adds on to the discussion of transnationalism in Paris by Night music, but also virtual communities in online forums, Chau Huynh’s visual art and media, and vice-mayor Madison Nguyen’s political scandal in the U.S.

uses of body as metaphor becomes a global discourse with which diasporic Vietnamese articulate connections with Viet Nam (Briggs 631).

The body metaphors deployed in cookbooks are salient to the pleasures that audiences seek and experiences through the genre. Cookbooks engage eater-readers in ways that fiction and traditional memoir do not. In the previous chapter, I explored how the inherent synesthetic quality of the comic book genre engages readers in the ambivalent negotiation of Vietnamese American histories and identities. More so than comics, cookbooks elicit the audience's participation, not just their observation, through the engagement of their physical bodies, including "utilizing the senses of taste, smell, touch, and vision, [which] offers a deeper, more integrated level of experience" (Long 21). The sensuousness of food is a way of understanding relationship between self and the world, and thus space and time (Holtzman 365). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett names this phenomenon "culinary tourism" and calls it a "sensory space-time convergence" (xiii). This is to say that spatially distant culinary cultures, and their intertwined temporalities, coalesce through the act of reading, cooking, and eating from a cookbook. In her outlining of culinary tourism as a methodological framework, Lucy M. Long calls the use of a cookbook a "touristic act" by which food, rather than country, becomes the destination (11). In this way, "we do not have to literally leave home to 'travel'" (Long 1). What's more, cookbooks become a mode of commodified pleasure, as they are not necessary for nutrition, but are more often than not a source of entertainment shaped by mobility, individualism, affluence, and consumerism (Long 13). In *Tours of Vietnam: War, Travel Guides, and Memory*, Scott Laderman points out that tourism, discursive or concrete, speaks not only to the growth of U.S. consumer culture, but is

based in U.S. militarization in Viet Nam (10). Physically, tourists in Viet Nam walk some of the paths that the U.S. military forces paved (10), and, discursively, tourists follow the paths paved in their minds by mass media representations of Viet Nam (9). These pleasures in which culinary tourists to Viet Nam indulge, then, do not come without the weighty cost of being complicit in its histories of violence, loss, and trauma.

Although their joining of space-times offer the consumer-reader a sense of “solidarity with peoples distant in time and space” (Wilson 263), cookbooks also perpetuate a form of “cultural food colonialism” because they use “the ethnic Other as a resource” (Heldke 329), as well as “co-opt, borrow from freely and out of context, and use as the raw materials for their own efforts at creation and discovery” (328). Diasporic Vietnamese cookbooks “shrink Vietnam into dimensions that can fit in a knapsack or on a bookshelf. The reader can manage and contain her exposure to the country, its people, and its culture” (Phillips 66). Though eating the food of a country appears to be an amplified experience of the culture, the culinary tourism offered by cookbooks can actually mute, minimize, and abstract the culture. The pursuit of simultaneous intimacy and distance from the “ethnic” source of the cuisine that the cookbook represents is considerably meaningful in the context of Vietnamese cookbooks.

As showcased in cookbooks, representations of Vietnamese food, even in culinary tourism, foreground ambivalence about Viet Nam and its histories—a simultaneous appeal and aversion. Michel de Certeau once asserted that the culinary is “the reconstruction through gestures, tastes, and combinations, of a silent legend as if, by dint of merely living in it with my hands and body, I would succeed in restoring the alchemy of such a history” (69). The bodily inhabitation of history through food bears significant

weight given the dispersion of Vietnamese through French colonialism and the U.S. war in Viet Nam. As Isabelle Thuy Pelaud points out, Vietnamese literature often suggests that fears and traumas are passed down through the body (88). Because colonial histories of Viet Nam involve so much death and loss, cookbooks' invocation of a multi-sensory experience can at once allow the reader to feel they are empathetically indulging in the pain of history through food, but also experience a sense of renewed life so as to assuage the audience's lingering guilt, no matter the degree of immediacy or sense of complicity in the atrocities that happened in Viet Nam—to mourn and heal through food, to find pleasure. In short, cookbooks promise to render those histories more manageable.

The process of translating the grammar of Vietnamese food from pain to pleasure is bound in the embodied articulations of trauma. In *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*, Nguyen maintains that the U.S., along with other countries granting passage to Vietnamese refugees, bestowed the gift of freedom—"all the good and beautiful things the gift claims as its consequence— the right to have rights, the choice of life direction, the improvement of body and mind, the opportunity to prosper" to save them from "a spectral future of their nonexistence, under communism, under terror" (2). Consequently, Vietnamese across the globe are bound by "the debt that follows" (2) and "extends endlessly" (9). Because the Vietnamese are perceived as perpetually "indebted" for being "saved"—essentially, from themselves—"duration and deferral take on deep resonance" (9) because the "gift cannot be returned straightaway lest its significance be undone" (8). As a result, the children of Vietnamese refugees, the second generation, inherit this sense of indebtedness years after the war had its so-called "end," so by analyzing their traumas associated with this sense of being born into debt, it

becomes evident that the war is not “ended” for these Vietnamese chef-authors, even for those who did not experience the war firsthand. These authors demonstrate a double indebtedness—one for being “saved” refugees, but also for the ability to be entrepreneurs (Phan and Nguyen own acclaimed restaurants) and to be able to travel as citizens of the U.S. and Australia and, as such, are protected from Viet Nam. The underlying freedom to which they are indebted here, too, is that these authors had a *choice* to return/visit.

By writing cookbooks and basing their livelihood on food, they fulfill their debt, their obligation, by giving the audience the gift of life, of survival—food. The recompense is tantamount—gifts of life parallel that of death (Nguyen 8)—in the sense that Vietnamese refugees were given life and so they must return that life-nurturing force to repay their debt. Cathy Caruth points out the oft-overlooked aspect of trauma: the “enigma of survival” (58). Food, of course, is “inextricably linked to survival (Ho 10). In the case of cookbooks, surviving trauma refers not only to the physiological sustenance and the comfort (Mannur 213) that food provides, but also the maintenance of ties to homeland and managing ethnic, national, social, and spiritual identities through the cultural practice of food—the survival of culture and selfhood.

According to Caruth, one of the traumatic elements of survival is the “inherent necessity of repetition” (63), and in no cultural practice is repetition more evident—and necessary—than in cooking, eating, sharing, teaching food. In “Quieting Noisy Bellies: Moving, Eating, and Being in the Vietnamese Diaspora,” Delores B. Phillips states that the tabling of food prepared under the guidance of cookbooks is the repeated staging of national identity and cultural affiliation (47). These attempts to reconcile debt by offering food-based survival tactics as articulations of trauma are featured most prominently in the

four cookbooks I have chosen to discuss, primarily because each of them is framed with both visual and verbal personal narratives. As I will argue in this chapter, these autobiographical narratives that contextualize the recipes share commonalities, yet also bear marked differences, that are fruitful for generating discussion about how the consumer is instructed to become a cook, as well as how the complicated notion of racial and cultural authenticity and identity factors into that audience-author relationship. These visual and textual narratives are also salient to discussing the traumas tethered to war, immigration, and racial discrimination, focusing on what is deemed marketable in Vietnamese culinary culture, what is appetizing and distasteful to audiences, and the political, racial, and cultural undercurrents of that palette. This chapter will focus on how food bears diasporic Vietnamese traumas revolving around war, displacement, immigration, hunger, and death.

In this chapter, I will first address the ways in which the chef-authors verbally and visually map, and serve as guide for, tours of Vietnamese culinary culture. As self-appointed tour guides, the authors represent themselves as “authentic” brokers of Vietnamese food and culture, yet also have to make themselves accessible enough for the cookbooks to be marketable to a non-Vietnamese audiences, using the genre of the cookbook to negotiate their identities as a delicate balance on the line of authentic/accessible, of painful/pleasurable. This section will also focus on how second-generation overseas Vietnamese perpetually negotiate their positions as insider and outsider to Vietnamese culinary culture. Within their autobiographical narratives, I will argue, their representations of trauma stemming from war, displacement, diaspora, and discrimination function to secure their authenticity while also attempting to negotiate

their diasporic identities by reckoning with ever-surfacing traumas. The subsequent section will address the gendered aspects of how culinary knowledge is traced and transmitted, raising issues of how food discourses and practices are often feminized. The final section will consider foodways as a form of repaying a different kind of debt through “resistance” (Mannur 7) and explore how these cookbooks act as stimulus for protest and activism about the food-related social injustices and material realities in Viet Nam to which their texts attest.

This chapter will explore these inquiries in the efforts of showing how food links Vietnamese across space and time. As Michel de Certeau states, alimentary practices include tradition and innovation, past and present (67). The future is also implicated in these cookbooks because they operate under the inherent hope that the practices therein will be carried on. In order to conceive of a future, we must revisit the past.

### Part One: Culinary Tours of Time and Space

As mentioned in the introduction, diasporic Vietnamese works are written and/or read in ways that serve to make Western audiences comfortable with the history of imperialism in Viet Nam. Wilson points out that the packaging and marketing of foodways products often “help to assuage guilt about success and fears of having compromised one’s values in order to achieve it,” attempting to “persuade the consumer that the world can be saved [...] through high-minded forms of consumption” (Wilson 254). Attempts to alleviate the lingering guilt over the U.S. War in Viet Nam can be seen through the presentation of the cookbooks themselves. Nguyen’s *My Vietnam* is packaged in a particularly extravagant manner, with gold embossment on the cover and hundreds of

full-page color photos on matte pages. Similarly, Phan's book is laid out in an artfully simplistic style of haute cuisine with an embossed cover. Le and Huynh's books invite the reader through the layout of their respective books; Le's is interspersed with maps and instructional photos, while Huynh writes with an abundance of conversational asides and exclamation points, alongside candid, vacation-like photos of himself in Viet Nam. Vietnamese culinary culture is presented to the audience as a utopian space to tour and enjoy its culinary culture, and for the author to return to an idealized homeland that he/she is proud to present to the audience (Phillips 49). Approaching the cookbooks as a form of culinary tourism and cultural food colonialism, it is important to attend to how nostalgia colors both the audience's expectations and readings of the texts, as well as the authors' articulation of inherited traumas. Nostalgia for an ideal Viet Nam, though shared, functions differently for audience and author, but those perceptions are in conversation with one another.

In terms of the audience's nostalgic perceptions of Viet Nam, Heldke states that this is essentially "nostalgia for imperialism" (330). This nostalgic desire is somewhat fulfilled by the authors' assertions of authenticity, their alignment of their identities and Viet Nam—to exercise an insider status, so to speak. Long stresses that the "tourist gaze [...] attends to difference, seeking objects that contrast with familiar experience" (Long 4), and that authenticity is a notion constructed to satisfy the viewer (5). Creating a sense of authenticity in these Vietnamese texts appears to hinge upon using a typically non-narrative based genre, outside of usually moving from appetizer to dessert recipes, to construct a narrative that transforms the unfamiliar into the familiar. Pierre Bourdieu referred to the process of making the unfamiliar familiar as "cultural capital" (Heldke

331). Cultural capital enriches the reader and, with that dynamic in place, the author must manage a tenuous balance between authenticity—the intrigue of the “unfamiliar”—while also presenting him/herself as accessible—familiar enough to be accepted into the reader-tourist’s home, the latter of which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The cookbooks offer practical methods for presenting their authenticity as bearers of Vietnamese culinary and cultural knowledge. As Long breaks down, asserting authenticity primarily involves naming and translations (identification of items) and explication (explanation of ingredients, manner of cooking, context for eating, history and symbolism of the item, anecdotes about recipes—given a “native perspective”) (Long 38-41). Doing so implicitly recognizes the authors’ own otherness, in anticipating the audience’s view—or, rather, lack of knowledge—of their “foreign” foodways. Each of the four books I am discussing in this chapter provides English translations for the names of each Vietnamese dish, in addition to glossaries for ingredients and equipment specific to Vietnamese cuisine. Phan’s book in particular features a detailed pictorial glossary and regularly intersperses photographic differentiations of types of noodles (12-13), for instance, as well as full-page photographs that illustrate the step-by-step processes of certain cooking techniques (80-1). The cooks’ “insider” knowledge that cinches their “authenticity” is not limited to ingredients and equipment in Viet Nam, but also includes Vietnamese spaces in other parts of the world. Phan frequently instructs the reader on how to navigate Asian markets for certain ingredients and cooking tools, which asserts his sense of belonging to that space which is marked as “foreign” territory, even within the U.S. (99).

Similarly, Le uses touristic language to guide the reader through the “foreign” space of the enclave of Little Saigon in Southern California. She opens by locating “the largest population of Vietnamese outside of Vietnam” between Disneyland and downtown Los Angeles. In positioning the space of Little Saigon in these terms, Le at once treats it as a site of authenticity (the sheer number of Vietnamese people, a sort of second Viet Nam or Viet Nam junior) as well as another commercial tourist destination. The latter treatment is emphasized by the structure of the book, which literally takes the reader through a geographical tour of Little Saigon; chapters are demarcated according to physical boundaries—Bolsa Avenue, the Asian Garden Mall, specific soup shops and bakeries, etc. Le cautions the reader that “[e]ntering the markets of Little Saigon is like stepping into another country” (29). Although Little Saigon was built around the “desire to carve a geopolitical, social, and cultural space that is distinct from other Asians” as a form of resistance (Lieu 26), Le presents this distinct space as a tourist location that stands in as a safer, more easily accessed “mini” Viet Nam. She points out that it nostalgically hearkens back to a pre-war Viet Nam, as she mentions that the name of the area was chosen to reflect its overseas counterpart as it existed before it was re-named after Communist leader Ho Chi Minh, as a means of “keeping the old Saigon of Vietnam alive in their hearts” (xiii).

Though she employs tourism-oriented language to discuss her hometown, Le evinces ambivalence regarding the role Little Saigon plays in the tourism industry. There seems to be a push and pull between tourism for outsiders and social welfare for locals. This conflict is articulated through quantitative, monetary language:

Restaurants outside the Little Saigon community are about 50 to 75 percent more expensive than those in Little Saigon. Many wonder how long Little Saigon's low prices can last. As the Vietnamese people have prospered, they can afford to pay more, but they certainly do not want to. Such issues remain in debate, as the Vietnamese community questions how to approach tourism and build business for the future. (54)

The community's ability to financially thrive as a tourist enterprise necessitates marketing to a largely non-Vietnamese consumer audience, yet those efforts are complicated by the area's history of internal social welfare. Le explains, "in the early days of Little Saigon, the residents depended on the grocers to feed them cheaply, [...] but also [...] to save money and eventually step away from welfare programs. Times are much better in Little Saigon now, though, and many people's fortunes have turned around" (35). Regardless, Le notes that those gestures toward social welfare in the diasporic Vietnamese American community in Little Saigon continue in new restaurants' custom of offering cheap or free goods to residents (50). Despite efforts to peddle Little Saigon as a tourist attraction, Le's own tour guide-like language included, the practices of the food establishments within the community suggest that it is a geopolitical space that works to sustain and protect itself. Thus, the geopolitical boundaries are negotiated through food.

### Part Two: Serving up the "Authentic"

In addition to the aforementioned practical demonstrations of authenticity, the cookbook authors insert their cultural insights that often read as pre-packaged and mass-marketable. It is important to keep in mind, though, that on the surface authenticity can appear to be a reinforcement of the aforementioned culinary tourism, but can at the same

time suggest a refusal to perpetuate such discourses of difference (Ku 8). For instance, interludes between Nguyen's chapters foreground Confucian-like sayings and Le's highlighted text boxes, many of which offer elementary bits of cultural information such as Vietnamese respect their elders "so you should give up your seat on a bus or your place in line to an elderly person" (19). Phan likewise incorporates Vietnamese sayings within his recipe prefaces, such as "There's an expression in Vietnamese that says if you don't know how to eat a whole fish, you have a dumb tongue—too dumb to sort out the bones from the delicate flesh" (118). What is significant about these proverbial tenets is that the authors seem to suggest that subscribing to their messages, in conjunction with cooking the dishes to which they correspond, is to, in a way, assume a Vietnamese cultural identity. Phan promises the reader that to eat "like a Vietnamese person," such as "slurping" (3), is to "start thinking" like one (xxvii). By offering the reader-eater such shortcuts to "authentic" Vietnamese experiences in cooking, eating, and thinking, Phan treats "Vietnameseness" as an umbrella term. In other words, operating under notions of authenticity to appease the reader's tourist gaze artificially homogenizes Vietnamese identity. It is clear that this is done in the interests of the reader because Phan bends the parameters of the "authentic" for the audience's pleasure. He concedes that a certain ingredient is "not traditional, but it tastes good" (104), and, addressing the audience directly, "If you are lazy and you want to use jarred tomato sauce, I don't have a problem with that" (156). These recipe adaptations articulate authenticity (Long 43) in that Phan not only defines the parameters of "authentic Vietnameseness" but also grants permission when and why to stray from it, thereby enhancing the pleasure of experiencing Vietnamese culinary tourism.

The pleasure of the reader is further foregrounded in the authors' address of how "[e]xotic food is understood as authentic precisely *because* of its strangeness" (Heldke 331). Food, Mannur asserts, is one of the ways that minorities are racialized on a day-to-day basis (156), and Ho further specifies that Asian Americans, in their portrayal through foodways in popular media (11), are restricted to stereotypes that associate them with "food, its preparation, consumption, and service" (Ho 3). In *Eating Asian America*, food scholars Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan, and Anita Mannur add that the association of Asian American bodies with foodways has often been expressed in "the trope of the smelly and unwashed immigrant [...] It is telling that when Southeast Asian refugees were relocated to the United States during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the primers given to them to help them adjust to American life included tips on hygiene" (3). It is evident that the cookbook authors whose works I have chosen to analyze feel obligated to address, and attempt to overcome, these long-standing stereotypes. In the preface to one of his recipes, Phan writes, "I know, I know: pig's knuckle soup. For some that doesn't sound good, but don't let it scare you. Trust me" (18). He further promises the reader safety from the manifestations of their worst assumptions about Vietnamese (food) when he assures that the process of frying is "no more messy or smelly or dangerous than any method of cooking" (176). Le addresses how she is sure that "the mere mention of Vietnamese food conjures up images of kitchen disaster" because it is a "mysterious cuisine" (3). In response to those aversions, her opening chapter is titled "demystifying Vietnamese food" (a section on ingredients, techniques, and equipment), as well as repeated disclaimers about matters such as cleanliness: "Vietnamese cooks are obsessed with cleaning food and rinsing it again and again" (9). These concessions are at

once about Vietnamese food and Vietnamese people. These cookbooks emerge as a genre for drawing attention to the racialization of the Vietnamese. The political underpinnings of this racialized discourse of which cookbooks are part include the following:

“Continued stereotypes of Asian Americans and foodways confine Asian American subjects to a discourse that marks them as foreign others whose consumptive habits preclude their full U.S. acceptance” (Ho 18-9).

Part of not being accepted is the implicit threat embedded in how Asians are associated with certain foods that are deemed threatening or immoral by the Western world. For instance, Chris Fischer, a shark conservationist, recently made appearances on various major news shows, such as *The Daily Show*, to circulate his message that Asians are to blame for the exploitation and depletion of the shark population, preying upon the fish for what he deemed to be excessively expensive soups and delicacies for wedding ceremonies. Such mass media representations of Asian foodways as going against nature in the name of arbitrary excess not only perpetuates stereotypes of Asians as indulging in repulsive foods, but also generalizes who consumes such products and for which purposes. In covering the consumption of rhino horn in Viet Nam, journalist Schalk Mouton points out that demand for such resources protected by wildlife protection agencies and activists like Fischer stems from social significance and ritual, but also comes from consumers of a certain class. Mouton’s point diversifies Asians and the purpose and meaning of foodways, resisting overarching generalizations. Expounding upon this, Vietnamese American writer Sonny Le shares his personal experiences with using rhino horns and tiger teeth for medicinal purposes in his family, expressing the

need for conservation education in Viet Nam. He explains this is difficult because, as he broached the need to protect endangered species with his father, Le reflects,

The notion that wildlife is worth more in the wild than on the plate was not easily understood because many did not see themselves directly, or even indirectly, responsible for the catching or killing of such wildlife. They simply saw themselves as consumers, rationalizing that if they hadn't purchased snakes, birds or turtles, others would.

Though such practices are typically associated with Vietnamese culture, Le's reflection places it in a consumer context, which moves the issue away from cultural essentialism into matters of economies of food. Similar distancing from food-based assumptions that essentialize Vietnamese culture as feeding off the endangered, the strange, and the grotesque can also be seen in the cookbooks' explanations, sometimes rather defensive or apologetic, of food and cooking practices.

To assert belonging to the U.S., or Australia, the chefs seem to distance themselves from what would not be considered palatable to U.S. or Australian audiences. Phillips points out that, in the Mai Pham cookbook she studies, the emphasis on cleanliness in cookbooks is to obfuscates connections to ingredients associated with Vietnamese foodways (60), such as blood, which is an ingredient is omitted from the recipes, distancing the author from what would be considered only appetizing to the "Third World" and unsavory in the Western world (58). The same is evident in the four cookbooks analyzed in this chapter. The omission of certain Vietnamese ingredients intends to appeal to the audience and the underlying attempt to belong to the Western nations to which the audience belongs. Stressing cleanliness, through packaging and practice, to occlude the visceral aspects of cooking and eating is to abstract the body of both author and reader, presenting these foodways practices as purely aesthetic, touristic

(Phillips 60). The authors also make more explicit concessions to contexts in which the readers can depart from the recipe to substitute more familiar, appetizing ingredients.

Such departures from what is perceived and presented as “authentic” reveals that the very notion of authenticity is a fabrication. Obviously, on the surface, authenticity is fabricated because the conditions in which the recipes are made change—the kitchens, the ingredients, etc. (Mannur 32).<sup>25</sup> At a deeper level, “the *question* of authenticity is essential to culinary tourism, for this question organizes conversation, reflection, and comparison and arises as much from doubt as from confidence” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett xii). For these four cookbooks, I interpret this “question of authenticity” to revolve around how these diasporic Vietnamese chef-authors must oscillate between assertions of being authentic Vietnamese to be appealing to the culinary tourist’s eye and of being authentic Americans in order to be accessible enough for a wide audience to accept. In other words, the authors must strike a balance between foreign and assimilated in order to be marketable.

However, authenticity is complicated by the fact that Viet Nam’s history and its food are inherently transnational. Mannur has addressed the way fusion cuisine has been viewed as a way to make the Asian cook more palatable and marketable to Western audiences, but it can also be viewed as a way of addressing the transnationalism of all

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<sup>25</sup> In “Community Dynamics and Functional Stability: A Recipe for Cultural Adaptation and Continuity,” My Lien T. Nguyen discusses how the cultural experience Vietnamese cookbooks offer “transcend time and location” in that the food is a practice and affirmation of cultural identity in diasporic immigrant communities (338). Nguyen conducts an ecological community analysis of the recipe for canh chua ca loc, or sweet and sour snake-head soup, which recurs across many Vietnamese and Vietnamese American cookbooks. In brief, Nguyen argues that, even though preparing the dish in the U.S. requires a substitution of traditional ingredients, the overall structure and cultural meaning remains the same. The differences in preparation, according to the Nguyen’s methodology, namely point to ecological differences in the areas where diasporic Vietnamese communities have settled and engage in a dynamic interaction with “non-traditional locations” for their cultural foodways (344). Her “Culinary History” article elaborates on farming of the main ingredient in Vietnamese American farming communities in Hawaii.

cuisine—the cross-pollination of culinary histories through colonialism, globalization, diaspora, and immigration. Each of the authors points to the transnational quality of Vietnamese cuisine; doing so undermines the idea of “authentic” or “pure” origin by showing the ethnic and regional diversity within Viet Nam, as well as Vietnamese American and Vietnamese Australian communities. The authors’ different attitudes toward other cultures’ influence on Vietnamese cuisine themselves testify to the diversity of people of the Vietnamese diaspora. In addition to Huynh’s mention of Khmer culture’s influence on the Mekong region’s culinary history (69), Phan mentions Japan briefly (120) and credits France for the introduction of *bánh mì* (51) and corn (26), but most prominently discusses Chinese influence. These references to countries that had at one time exerted imperial force upon Viet Nam not only attest to its colonial history, but Phan in particular seems to use them as evidence of his legitimacy as a culinary guide. He repeatedly mentions that he and his relatives who imparted to him many of the recipes in the book are ethnically Chinese. He credits his Chinese heritage for specific recipes, such as wonton soup (14) and steamed buns (78), and cooking techniques (which are how the chapters are organized) such as stir frying (124); similarly, Huynh attributes the foundations of Vietnamese food traditions, such as irrigation, to the Chinese (57). Phan also makes larger claims like “Vietnamese food is now full of Chinese ingredients, techniques, and dishes” (Phan 70). Phillips hypothesizes that mentions of Chinese influence on Vietnamese cuisine is a mapping of cultural knowledge (54), but it is not as simple as merely stating fact. There is a purpose, and a history, underlying these repeated mentions. Through these repeated mentions, Phan is also asserting his authority and authenticity, representing himself and his family’s culinary tradition as the assumed

origin. Phan also sets himself apart from the other diasporic Vietnamese chefs when he reflects “When I was growing up, our family had a cook who prepared all of our meals over an open fire” (152). The Phan family’s employment of a servant cook indicates their distinction as upper class. Thus his indications of his ethnic and class differences show that the homeland is not a pure, homogenous place that might be imagined through a lens colored with nostalgia. In fact, his testament to his ethnic and class differences draws attention to inter-Asian imperialism. Nhi T. Lieu explains that China’s period of colonial control in Viet Nam was marked by Chinese domination of foodways industries, such as fishing and rice production (39). The Chinese made themselves citizens of Viet Nam, created insular communities, and later utilized their economic foothold in the country to exploit the Vietnamese, especially as the U.S. came into Viet Nam (39).

Not only does this speak to underlying tensions in inter-Asian history, which reorient the typical East-West dyad of historical narratives, but it also questions the very notion of origin, and thus authenticity, as a pure, fixed state. Tellingly, though each of Huynh’s recipes lists an “origin” for the dish, most of the listed sources are “Throughout Vietnam,” displaying the impossibility of pinpointing a singular origin for the transnational amalgam that is this foodway. Second-generation Vietnamese American Le does not treat China as an origin, what I read as an attempt to rethink colonial history’s influence on Vietnamese foodways:

Many people think of Vietnamese food as French-influenced. Or Cambodian- or Chinese-influenced. It’s true that other countries occupied Vietnam for centuries, and the results of these foreign influences are evident in Vietnamese food. However, the cuisine is not so much a conglomeration of the different influences as it is a showcase of the best of these other cuisines. (xix)

Inquiries into and curiosities about origin are pronounced in Le's book even though she does not travel to Viet Nam as the other authors do. At a distance, Le does not seem to see the diversity of Viet Nam's culinary influences as a testament to historical socio-political divisions, but rather in a celebratory light, almost as a reinforcement of the multiculturalism "that naively celebrates difference and reconciliation simply or primarily through the pleasures of food and eating" (Ku 3), which is common to U.S.-propagated narratives of racial relations. However, in her musings on the unplaceable origins of phở, she does include an aside to say that South Viet Nam's phở is sweetest (69). This is important because her use of alimentary superlatives is charged with the prizing of South Viet Nam's culture and, of course, the politics implicit in its designation as South Viet Nam. Nguyen makes a more concerted effort to distinguish between Viet Nam's regional culinary histories. He organizes the recipes according to the region in which he experienced the dish, each chapter prefaced with a personal narrative about his travels in the respective region. In moving from North to South, Nguyen begins in Sapa, with the tribal groups populating Northern Viet Nam. By choosing to do so, Nguyen spotlights the ethnic minorities in the country, what many readers might not expect from Viet Nam. Nguyen's attentiveness to the different regions of Viet Nam—distinct in their diverse, palimpsestic, and transnational cultural and culinary histories—emphasizes his "outsider" status. Indicative of this feeling, Nguyen writes, "Arriving in Hue feels as if I'm arriving in a different Asian country altogether" (77). Even within the city of Sai Gon, the area called Cho Lon (Chinatown) is a space in which, according to Nguyen, "no one speaks Vietnamese" (252). Contrary to Le, Nguyen shows how the diversity within Viet Nam can lead to separation and distinct cultural borders and divides. Nevertheless,

he occasionally makes similar efforts to Le in attempting to unify the different people of Viet Nam through food. Shuttling between distinct cultural spaces, Nguyen's position is often complicated by competing affiliations between regions and the historical, political implications they bear. For instance, Nguyen explains,

My family in Saigon tell me that food in Hanoi is bland, tasteless, and boring, whereas food in Saigon is much more exciting, creative and flavorsome. Locals in Hanoi tend to differ, saying that food in Saigon is way too complex and uses far too much sugar, the flavors being too sweet, too spicy and too bold for their palates. I have learned to appreciate the subtlety of Hanoi food. [...] But I am yet to convince my family in Saigon on this theory. (40)

Nguyen tries to create some understanding and unity through food, without acknowledging the social, cultural, and political tensions informing each region's distaste for the other's cuisine. Given that the cooks' pursuit of a fixed origin leads them to spaces of diversity and sometimes dissonance evincing histories of discord, their shared inability to pinpoint that idea of a "pure," unified homeland emphasizes what Xu identifies as the crux of diasporic narratives and the identities they articulate: "Having been transported to unknown places, the seed knows no destination but only the journey itself" (Xu 99).

This complicated effort at forging unity bears significant geopolitical implications for second-generation Vietnamese Americans in particular. Whereas Nguyen focuses on spaces within Viet Nam, Le focuses on Little Saigon in Southern California to argue that her understanding of space opens the possibility for unification, what Phillips calls an envisioning of a "utopian" space (50), especially for second-generation cooks who have oscillated between insider and outsider positions to the culture. Le's book opens with her acknowledgements page that includes a photograph of her family, which had been split

into different boats upon fleeing from Viet Nam, reunited in Minneapolis, Minnesota (viii)—the city where the author was born. It seems that this point in time and space functions for Le as a trope of unification, as throughout the book, her prefatory anecdotes and explanations to each chapter mention food as a force of unifying, of bringing families together, as a means of overcoming histories of division and forced dispersion.

She extends this importance of unity to include those who are not “local” to the Little Saigon area: “What you’ll *rarely* see on the streets of Little Saigon are Vietnamese people on their own, without a friend or even a stranger to talk to. The Vietnamese move in packs; it is part of our culture to take pictures together, eat together, do everything together. If someone is ever alone, she is deep in contemplation, or reading a book or the newspaper. And she isn’t alone for long” (xvii). What is compelling about this passage is that it implicitly invites the reader into the social space of Little Saigon, all through tacitly diffusing war-based stereotypes of Vietnamese as combatants and long-standing images of them as savage. Le recasts the Vietnamese as friendly and contemplative as a way to tell the audience that, even though Little Saigon is an ethnic enclave with distinct borders, those demarcations are not barriers that are aggressively exclusive, but rather, when presented as porous through the friendly reach of Vietnamese people within them, can be an invitation into an “authentic” space where culture and history can be toured, tasted. This is particularly interesting when discussed in conjunction with the maps at the beginning of the book. The map of Viet Nam highlights the capital cities of each of the three regions of the country, and the map of Little Saigon, CA, shows the enclave’s boundaries at the street level, as well as within the broader area of Orange and Los Angeles counties. I mention this because it seems as though Le suggests that

unification—with Vietnamese from all different regions of Viet Nam and “tourists” to the area, Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese alike—is possible in Little Saigon. The trope of food as unification, when contextualized with the two maps that open the book, imply that Little Saigon is a space in which histories of division, dispersion, and diaspora are reconciled.

In sum, the second-generation diasporic Vietnamese cookbooks in particular illustrate the tensions between a unifying notion of the “authentic” and the diversity and division—cultural and geopolitical—that belie such a notion. The ambivalence demonstrated by these authors in negotiating those tensions evokes the complexities involved in the perpetual formation of racial, cultural, and national identity, all of which are informed by context. In the next section, I will discuss how the context in these cookbooks that influences identity hinges upon the audience and their expectations of what a Vietnamese cook/author should deliver.

### Part Three: Your Friendly Neighborhood Vietnamese Cook

The four diasporic Vietnamese cookbook authors discussed in this chapter present themselves as accessible to a Western audience by using the model minority framework to prove they are palatable enough to not risk pulling the reader into any culinary practices that are *too* strange. Nguyen and Huynh repeatedly mention their lives in Australia, especially their families’ rise from impoverished immigrant status to successful and assimilated, while Phan states, “Although I was born in Vietnam, I grew up in Northern California” (140), and, more acutely, Le, in her focus on Little Saigon in Southern California, echo their sense of belonging in America, that being American is an

inextricable part of their cultural identities. Such efforts are most pronounced in instances in which the authors express gratitude for Mimi Nguyen's aforementioned perpetual indebtedness of Vietnamese refugees to the countries that took them in. Huynh uses a particularly staggering number of exclamation points when he narrates his experiences in the refugee camps after fleeing Viet Nam, as if in a grammar to make the tragic stories easier to digest. Notably, in one of these reflections on his time in a refugee camp, Huynh writes, "I used to sit watching cars cross a bridge when I was in a refugee camp in Malaysia and dream of one day simply riding in a car. [...] I feel truly blessed to have the opportunity to share my stories and recipes with you" (7). Tracing his disadvantaged past as a recent refugee to his current success and luxury in the very act of sharing the recipes, the present moment of author-reader exchange, Huynh attempts to pay his debt through sharing his stories and his food, all in a gesture of immeasurable gratitude. He credits his ability to write such a book to the freedom that Australia has granted him, as he refers to it as a "heaven" (17), replete with the material resources to live out his dreams as a chef, but also more abstract social freedoms. He often brings up being homosexual, even sometimes as a tangent to the narrative at hand (14), and repeatedly names his partner as a sounding board and source of support for his culinary projects. Part of being a model minority is the assimilation to, and exercise of, professed Western tenets of diversity, equality, and tolerance, even if Western countries like the U.S. do not necessarily practice what they preach, as evinced by ongoing debates about, and gradual legislation regarding, same-sex marriage. Phan speaks to the multicultural aspect of that so-called tolerance when he mentions that in his San Francisco restaurant, "we have broken down the barriers for diners unfamiliar with the food of Vietnam"

(xxix). He argues that, through foodways, Vietnamese can forge their belonging with Americans and vice versa.

The authors use alimentary metaphors to solidify, at the level of foodways discourse, their belonging to Western culture. Phan opens the introduction to his book with an anecdote about cooking his first Thanksgiving dinner in the U.S. (xxviii). This narrative makes him accessible and relatable to an American readership, while also emphasizing his model minority status as willing, if not eager, to assimilate to American culture through its Rockwellian foodways. Similarly, Huynh enunciates his love for Western culture through apples, hamburgers, Elvis—all of which serve as links that led him to fall in love with his partner (14). He also compares fish sauce to the U.S.’s ketchup (29), while Phan calls Hue rice dumplings “Vietnamese Gummi bears” (86), bowls of pho are “the hamburgers of Vietnam” (8), also making comparisons between Vietnamese dishes and chicken noodle soup (100), sloppy joes, and “surf and turf” (158), and Le drawing numerous parallels between Vietnamese dishes and American comfort foods.<sup>26</sup> These comparative reference points serve to make Vietnamese food more accessible to Western audiences but also to assert that America is home, that the flavors of American cuisine are home, and, from that position, cooking Vietnamese is not a compromise of American national or culinary character. This affiliation with Americanness, the pledge of “culinary allegiance,” renders “diasporic identity manageable and less dangerous” (Mannur 170). Part of this repeated pronouncement of

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<sup>26</sup> Of course, such sweeping comparisons, such as street food being “Vietnam’s answer to fast food” (Phan 30), gloss over the effects of poverty in tension with globalization—the Western fast food chains like Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonald’s displacing Vietnamese-owned restaurants in Viet Nam. The traces of such globalization in surface in little details, such as the mention of Huynh’s mother keeping her homemade fish sauce in a Coca Cola bottle (29).

belonging through culinary analogies acknowledges that food is one of the every-day bases that “marks the racialized body in traumatizing ways,” in the sense that “opting to eat certain foods that carry the stigma and smell of otherness viscerally marks the body in disastrous ways” (Mannur 150). These authors’ explicit references to food “coded as American” (Mannur 152) can imply the ongoing traumas of being marked as other, in something as daily as food. Of course, trauma is not always as simple as treating these culinary cultural analogies as the authors’ attempts at rewriting their racial othering. This bi-cultural language of food can be seen as an expression of how trauma bends time and space in shapes outside of a linear, legible orientation. As Ashley Carruthers points out, the trauma of displacement through diaspora spurs a transnational identity that experiences both host and homeland as “simultaneous realities” (78). These numerous comparative statements, then, show how food functions as a means of expressing the liminality of the traumas of diaspora—of being simultaneously, and perpetually, home and away, self and other.

#### Part Four: Tasting Traumas of War, Displacement, and Diaspora

Underlying these model minority representations are ongoing histories of trauma. Foodways can reflect the trauma of war and displacement undergirding diasporic communities. The articulation of trauma through the foodway of cookbooks is evident in diasporic Vietnamese authors’ framing of their recipes within autobiographical narratives and alimentary metaphors that negotiate their cultural identity conflicts. The food expresses “the trauma of displacement” (Ho 80) by the sheer fact that Vietnamese cuisine is present in America, and other countries such as France and Australia, because of

colonialism and war; displacement is always already part of the conversation.<sup>27</sup> The 1.5-generation cookbook authors, Phan and Huynh, also explicitly address the specific traumas they experienced in Viet Nam. Phan writes about the danger of living in Viet Nam: “my siblings and I weren’t allowed to go out in the streets alone because kids were being kidnapped and forced into the North Vietnamese army” (2). The traumas reach back even further in history. In his preface to the recipe for a soup, Bun Bo Hue, Phan informs the audience, “The mention of Hue, a city in central Vietnam, brings up many conflicted memories for me. It was the site of the Battle of Hue, one of the longest and deadliest battles of the Têt Offensive, which began in January 1968, and of the Vietnam War” (16). This recipe comes out of that region—the nostalgia for what once was, before war, before death, before destruction. The food is one of the things that can be carried with people as they are displaced.

These traumas are also experienced by the second-generation cookbook authors, illustrating how “re-experiencing of emotional pasts may also be seen as a longing for times and places that one has never experienced” (Holtzman 367). Though the second-generation feels tied to their parents’ trauma, they are also removed from it. This removal creates a sort of trauma in and of itself, of constantly being marked an outsider to the culture, judged as having a Westernized identity. Because he was born and raised in Australia, Nguyen is marked as different, as an outsider, when he visits Viet Nam, primarily because of his second-generation status. Because of his position, he focalizes the narrative of his cookbook through a perspective conducive to guiding those

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<sup>27</sup> Certain cuisines are in the U.S. and accessibly by Americans because of war: “The reasons there were so many Vietnamese restaurants in Minneapolis/St. Paul, reasons directly connected to the U.S. war in Vietnam and the resultant dislocation of Vietnamese” (Heldke 328).

unfamiliar, hesitant, and/or averse to Vietnamese culture and cuisine. That is to say that he often frames the prefatory narratives in the chapters, as well as the short anecdotes at the top of each recipe, in terms of a first-time discovery. In this way, he is an outsider looking in, just like the audience of the cookbook. It is from this vantage point that Nguyen admits the cultural shock of interacting with Vietnamese in Viet Nam, whom he marks as different. Nguyen repeatedly describes the Vietnamese as “rude,” as assessed by Western cultural conventions: “I wait in line [for pho]; I’m pushed and shoved. [...] There is no please or thank you, and definitely no smile” (40). A disagreement with a taxi driver results in, according to Nguyen, the driver “get[ting] aggressive, shouting, screaming, causing a scene and repeatedly pushing [Nguyen] hard in the chest” (197). Salient about Nguyen’s renderings of the Vietnamese who prepare and serve the food upon which his book is based is the underlying racial objectification. He describes elderly women at the market as “tough and extremely aggressive, their dark skins wrinkled like leather, their rotting teeth ruby red from chewing beetle nut. A lady shouts at me, a burning cigarette hanging from her mouth, ‘Don’t just bloody look at the seafood, buy something!’” (105). Earlier in the book, Nguyen associated blackness with evil through the black chickens (14). Yet these women have the power to send Nguyen “walking away in embarrassment” (105). In this moment, Nguyen shifts from being in a position of power to that of being judged.

Nguyen’s perspective as an outsider tourist and his judgments according to Western social conventions become most complicated when he narrates his family’s traumas of war, part of which is recognizing his lack of knowledge: “I stop and soak in the history and realize how much I don’t know about Vietnam’s past. My parents had

little free time to educate me about my country of origin and now I can discover my roots” (78). Progressively realizing how little he knows about his parents along his journey, Nguyen finds himself in the rice paddies of the Mekong Delta hearing his father speak for the first time “about his time during the war” (270). In Phan Thiet, Nguyen meets his half-siblings from his father’s other wife for the first time:

When I first learned that my father had another family, I was angry and upset and I didn’t speak to him for nearly half a year. I couldn’t understand how he could have two wives, and how he could have kept his other wife and their three children a secret for so long. But the more time I spend in Vietnam, discovering more about my culture and family, the more I have come to understand how things operate here. I was raised in Australia and I have a different set of values, but in Vietnam I have found it is common for men to have two or three wives. (293)

Indeed, it is through the cultural conventions of marriage that many Vietnamese judge Nguyen as an outsider to the culture and hold him socially and financially responsible. People he encounters in Viet Nam consistently criticize him for not being married in a traditional sense, and he repeatedly creates cultural misunderstanding when he tries to explain that he has a lifelong partner in aforementioned Suzanna Boyd, but they are not interested in marrying. Not understanding or agreeing with Nguyen’s cultural purview, Vietnamese families want to marry their daughters off to Nguyen because he, as a foreigner, represents economic opportunity for their family (203).<sup>28</sup> In this instance and in others, Nguyen expresses guilt over his economic stability and his sense of obligation to financially assist those he meets in Viet Nam. He is made aware, though, of the tension arising from being Viet Kieu (the term for “overseas Vietnamese,” often used in a

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<sup>28</sup> Multiple reports in the past few years trace the increasing numbers of Vietnamese girls and young women sold into marriage who are either murdered by their husbands or commit suicide: <http://talk.onevietnam.org/til-death-do-us-part-foreign-vietnamese-bride-killed-in-south-korea/> and <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/society/57587/another-vietnamese-bride-commits-suicide-in-korea.html> offer just a pair of instances of this tragic trend.

derogatory manner), when a Vietnamese woman refuses his attempt to give her money, saying that she does not want his “charity” (236).

Nevertheless, food offers an avenue through which Nguyen is able to connect with Vietnamese families, as it is the medium through which he bonds with his father’s “other” family: “We get to know each other through the one thing we all have in common—our passion and love for food” (297). At the same time, his eating practices also mark him as “foreign” to the Vietnamese. He is marked as an outsider by his lack of experience with eating dog (15, 43). He attempts to overcome what he casts as these deficits in his Vietnamese culinary palette by transforming what is considered repulsive into something appealing (64).

At the same time, Nguyen positions himself as an insider by comparing and contrasting himself to some of the individuals he meets, whose stories he weaves into his own narrative. These comparative, and implicitly competitive, narratives surface as Nguyen’s attempt to legitimize himself as the culinary tour guide; they are his measures of authenticity. For example, he tells the story of Mai, a second-generation French Vietnamese woman, who struggles in her travels to Viet Nam because she does not speak the language or identify with the culture. Relieved, Nguyen writes in response to Mai’s story:

I speak fluent Vietnamese and have such a strong attachment to Vietnam, its people, its cuisine and culture. I can really see how growing up in Cabramatta and living amongst the largest Vietnamese community in Australia was quite a unique experience. [...] I can communicate with the locals when I travel in Vietnam, and it is such a unique experience to be able to talk freely with them and hear their stories. (43)

Throughout the book, he asserts his language proficiency by instructing the reader on which words to use to order Vietnamese foods. These assertions appear to be part of Nguyen's efforts to craft himself as an insider to the culture, to prove his belonging to the culture. He concludes, "On my next trip to Vietnam, I won't feel like I'm visiting—I'll be coming home" (300). Nguyen's declaration of his Vietnamese-ness shows how "Food is used to transform an outsider into an insider" (Brownell 253). In sum, food resurrects the trauma, but also is used to treat it.

One of the ways in which the chef-authors reckon with ongoing traumas often involves "us[ing] words evincing novelty and exoticism to describe their own cuisines" (Heldke 333). The national cuisine becomes a construction focalized through the optics of nostalgia and distance, spatially, temporally, culturally. Barthes discussed how food often advertises, or is marketed as, a commemorative view of a mythologized national past, "representing the flavorful survival of an old, rural society that is itself highly idealized" (Barthes 32). The most apparent instance of this nostalgia is in Nguyen and Phan's stylized photographs of Viet Nam showcased in their respective books. Nguyen's photos are often cinematic in scope as they depict Vietnamese landscapes, while others focus in on cooks' hands and orchestrated close-up shots of the food. Carruthers posits that diasporic representations of Viet Nam represent fragmented memories that manifest in "images frozen in time" (76) that are highly nostalgic so as to alleviate rather than reopen the wounds of trauma (74). This seems to pertain to Nguyen's photographs of boats sailing across a placid Ha Long Bay and bicycles milling through the streets of Viet Nam, as though second-generation Nguyen wants to document and represent the nostalgic side of Viet Nam that his parents told him about and that he is experiencing the

first time for himself. However, when I showed Nguyen's book to my mother, assuring her that the heavy volume was mostly photographs of Viet Nam, she pushed it away immediately, directly stating that she did not want to look at images of her lost childhood homeland. In this way, Nguyen's nostalgic photography does not assuage trauma, but resurrects it—for my mother, reducing a complicated history to a postcard-perfect image, one that does not exist for her in reality outside of that image. The function and effect of nostalgic gestures have multiple interpretations, speaking to the diversity and ambivalence within the diaspora. These oscillating viewpoints are interestingly acknowledged in Phan's photos that shift between participant (looking down at the grill, hands in the ingredients) and observer at street-level (looking at Vietnamese person doing the grilling, handling, people hanging out in the streets). These shifting points of view allow the reader to be involved, but from multiple vantage points that speak to the multiplicity of positions of diasporic Vietnamese individuals. In one photo Phan appears as an eater in Viet Nam and in another he is represented as a cook in San Francisco. Shuttling through space, time, and positions, Phan's photographs subtly attest to the multiplicitous inhabitations of subject/observer, customer/chef, insider/outsider, Vietnamese/American, all movements that blur the distinction between those positions upon which the cookbook genre is founded.

Because of the cookbook genre, the experience of this nostalgic past is not limited to the physical journey, but can be recreated through the recipes, in the comfort of the reader's home. The cookbook authors experience and express this through highly exoticized sensory descriptions, primarily olfactory. Huynh in particular bombards the reader with scents of Vietnamese cuisine, which he repeatedly describes as "aromatic."

He first warns the reader about potentially “offensive” odors, cautioning that the audience should “not be alarmed” by the strong scent of a pickled radish (27), and claims that “you’ll thank me, I promise!” when he substitutes smelly pungent fermented fish with shrimp (108). He becomes a little melodramatic when he reflects that his “non-Vietnamese friends often get squeamish” (102) and that his partner accused him of poisoning him (114) with Vietnamese food, but he attempts to counterbalance this concession to the audience’s potential distaste, if not disgust, for Vietnamese cuisine when he promises them the “amazingly intense fragrance” (32) and the “most memorable and comforting aromas” (33). These “aromatic” descriptions not only serve to ease the reader into Vietnamese cuisine, but the smells, as with tastes, also link the chef’s body to Viet Nam (Phillips 53) and to “render the partition between past and present porous” (Xu 136). For Huynh, steamed fish “smells just like being back in Vietnam” (105), and, in general, “often when I cook now, a combination of smells will transport me back to those wonderful days, filled with food and laughter” (10). Le, an American-born Vietnamese, suggests her desire to experience the same olfactory transportation to Viet Nam of the past: “It may not be proper based on Western etiquette, but people eating loudly with their mouths slightly open, allowing aromas to circulate and enrich each bite, has never bothered me” (Le 5). Building upon psychoanalytic theories posited by Zizek and Kristeva, Xu notes that food, a sensual pleasure of childhood, inhabits the semiotic space where enjoyment has not yet been codified by language (19). The cookbook authors’ emphasis on sensory, particularly olfactory, power of food to invoke memories—a resurrected sense of idealized space and time—speaks to the pre-lingual quality of trauma. As much as these authors try to translate the traumas into language, it is the

multisensory acts of cooking and eating food that encapsulate the perpetual experiences of trauma.

In the case of 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Vietnamese, this nostalgia for an idealized past takes the form of Viet Nam before the war, or at least a limited scope of the war. Huynh's introduction to his book, titled "My Personal Story," is focalized through his perspective as a child at the end of the U.S.-Viet Nam War, expressing confusion and uncertainty as to what the outcomes of the war would be. His childhood version of the war does not include violence or any reference to the military, Vietnamese or American. Nguyen reaches back even further to recreate his ideal of a "pre-war" Viet Nam, describing pockets of the country that he visits as "untouched" (133) where people use "centuries-old techniques" (265) for farming, cooking, and eating. Nguyen even describes his visit to Ha Long Bay as a manifestation of Vietnamese folktales—"powerful dragons fly past, [...] firing jewels of jade from their mouths, protecting this beautiful bay from evil" (46). What is interesting about these exoticized, nostalgic descriptions of Viet Nam in Nguyen's book is that they are most pronounced after his partner, a Caucasian Australian woman named Suzanna (also one of the primary photographers for the book's extensive images), parts ways with him on the trip. It seems that it isn't until Suzanna returns to Australia that he is able to access what he feels is a materialization of his idealized purview of his family's homeland. Her role in the narrative illustrates how the female gender is the key to accessing what Nguyen deems the authentic homeland he was searching for, but only a femininity that is not white—Suzanna's whiteness thwarts Nguyen's discovery of the country, history, and identity. In light of this gendered dynamic to the journey, it is important to examine the ways in

which gender informs the representations and material realities of Vietnamese foodways in these cookbooks.

#### Part Five: Feminizing the Motherland and the Market

Nguyen's ability to access an idealized, nostalgic, pre-war Viet Nam only after parting from his female partner is interesting in that the land stands in as a substitute for her feminine presence. Viet Nam as an origin for the recipes is consistently gendered as feminine in all of the books. This gendering of the foodway—the transmission of recipes—is multivalent. Broadly speaking, tracing the familial lineage of recipes can be seen as an attempt to humanize and hearten Vietnamese who have historically been portrayed as violent or cold (Cruz 367); the use of family, especially the mother-child connection, could, then, be interpreted as a way that diasporic Vietnamese repay the debt that Mimi Nguyen discusses—a display of immigrant gratitude to the country of settlement. On another level, the feminizing of the origins of recipes and food-based traditions in all four of the cookbooks speaks to the history of foodways perceived as women's arena (Heldke 329), associated with women's social work and collectives (337). As such, foodways-based knowledge has largely been transmitted orally (337). Tracing the matrilineal histories of these recipes is the authors' collective gesture to maintain ties to homeland and construct a sense of continuity between then and now (Phillips 52), or what Dorais calls a transnational network based in kinship, even if those females are represented only as memories (108). Indeed, the authors refer to the women who provided the recipes as such a transnational network. Huynh, for instance, indicates that he collected recipes from "family members across the globe" (6). Indeed, the four

diasporic Vietnamese authors credit women, mostly female relatives, for the recipes they include in their respective cookbooks. Huynh attributes many recipes to his Auntie, as well as his mother, the “wedding cook” (75) for their village. Nguyen credits Auntie Five for his rice noodle recipe, as it “belong[s] to her” (67), and often mentions how his mother’s shopping and cooking practices (13), as well as the flavors of her dishes (18), serves as a guide for how he navigates the culinary terrain while travelling in Viet Nam and establishes the criteria by which he evaluates what he tastes in the country. Similarly, Phan credits female street vendors for some of his earliest food-based memories of Viet Nam (2), a former employee at his restaurant whose five-spice chicken recipe he claims didn’t originate in Viet Nam (164), and his female family members—Aunt Ah Nueng, “the best cook in the family” (106), Aunt Phai Pham, “who has an encyclopedic knowledge of classic Vietnamese recipes” (216), and his mother.

Phan’s characterization of his mother, though, is distinct in that he speaks to the social conditions in which recipes were transmitted to complicate the idea of women’s oral histories as part of the nostalgic view of homeland. For example, in the preface to his recipe for peanut sauce, Phan writes, “In the late 1970s shortly after my family moved to San Francisco from a refugee camp in Guam, my mother took a job in a sewing shop. She rode the bus back and forth to work, from our house in Chinatown to the Mission District. While she and the other women waited for the bus, they swapped recipes” (47). Here, Phan attests to the gendered labor conditions in which foodways served as a cultural connective thread or what women of color critique might call a “coalition through

difference.”<sup>29</sup> Although Phan is not participating in the female workers’ recipe exchange firsthand, he does inherit its results and thereby uses that knowledge to connect himself to, yet also distance himself from, that coalition of female cooks. He attributes the recipe to this group of female immigrant workers, yet also asserts himself as apart from that group by using the recipe to legitimize himself as an individual, rather than coalitional, cook who has a restaurant, a cookbook, and all of the acclaim that goes along with it. Thus, as Grace Hong points out, racialized gender formations are produced relationally (ix), so, taking into account that Asian American men have historically been feminized, often by representing them as connected to typically female foodways,<sup>30</sup> the male cookbook authors’ representations of women inform their implicit masculinization of themselves. Within this larger historical context of gendered foodways, the male cookbook authors’ appropriation, transcription, and, in turn, marketing and sale of their female family members’ orally transmitted recipes could be seen as an “exercise [of] the male privilege of objectifying and consuming [women],” just as the food is consumed (Xu 84).<sup>31</sup>

Because the women transmit the recipes to the authors orally, the mode of transmission, and by extension the genre of the cookbook itself, raises questions of epistemology and consumption. Phan notes that when he shared his mother’s spring roll recipe with *The New York Times*, “my mother was sure the restaurant was going to go

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<sup>29</sup> Grace Hong, in *Ruptures of American Capital*, traces the lineage of women of color practice by attributing coalitional politics to feminist scholars such as Cherrie Moraga and Angela Davis.

<sup>30</sup> Wenying Xu points out that Asian American men have been emasculated through the racial and economic exploitation of their labor in food and laundry services that are more often than not gendered as feminine.

<sup>31</sup> Hong elaborates that “men of color are ‘queered’ or estranged from normative masculinity by virtue of the fact that the public sphere is a space of violence and abjection, not self-possession” (viii).

out of business, because I'd given away the family jewel" (44). Huynh admits similar difficulties in accessing food-centered knowledge: "The version [of Bun Bo Hue] I've given here comes from my uncle's wife—she took some convincing to share it with me" (58). There is evidently a distrust of translating the recipes from oral to written forms, as well as from women to men. Le, in her brief history of the Little Saigon area, uses a highlighted text box to point the tourist-reader in the direction of the Southeast Asian Archive at the University of California, Irvine, library. The mention of this resource acquires more meaning in the author's biography at the end of the book, wherein she mentions her "fear of losing recipes passed only through oral history" (204). The movement from distrust to determination of transcribing foodways knowledge not only points to generational changes and the increasing need to achieve recognition and acceptance by sharing/selling Vietnamese culture, but also speaks to the gendered power dynamics involved in formations and representations of diasporic Vietnamese identities. This distrust also vocalizes deeper concerns of epistemology in terms of how knowledge is transmitted and by whom.

When diasporic Vietnamese women have represented their own knowledge and gender identities, they have appeared circumscribed through a patriarchal lens. For instance, Le writes, "The quality of a woman's cooking is a reflection of her character and whether she was raised properly" (3). Le's statement treats foodways as a means of moralistically determining a woman's identity, as if through a patriarchal discourse. Perhaps this statement is not simply reinforcing the general stereotypes about gender roles in Vietnamese culture, but Le's attempt to prove her own worth as a self-identified Vietnamese woman. As a second-generation diasporic Vietnamese, Le could be

dismissed as Westernized (as Nguyen was in the passages I discussed earlier), so her statement about food reflecting character could be an elliptical manner of claiming her own worthiness as a Vietnamese woman because she can cook and well enough to create a cookbook. Another prominent diasporic Vietnamese female chef is Jacqueline Pham. In her cookbook, *Banh Mi*, containing recipes for the titular sandwiches, Pham does not frame the recipes with autobiographical narrative, but in her prefatory acknowledgements page, she credits her PhamFatale website as the source of her success. The site's name of course, sexualizes her, and the short biographical blurb with her photo identifies her as a mixed-race French Vietnamese, adding to the exoticism of her identity as a woman. Le and Pham both struggle with the idea that women are defined by their involvement and knowledge of foodways, which is a gendered association reinforced by the male authors' portrayal of women in their cookbooks.

Showcasing women as representatives of foodways also reveals shifting social terrains in *Viet Nam*. The fall 2013 issue of the U.S.-published culinary magazine *Lucky Peach*, titled "Gender," features a photojournalistic piece called "Meat Maids" about female butchers and the matrilineal heritage of the meat market in Cho Lon, Sai Gon's Chinatown. The women interviewed emphasize that their social skills make them better suited to the meat marketplace: "Men and women are both equally good at doing this job, but women are better at making conversation, bargaining, and creating long-term customers" (67). Yet others admit that the job offers them an escape from abusive marriages and other oppressive socioeconomic issues. Regardless of the multitude of reasons that bring the women to the profession, the consensus is that the matrilineal tradition is changing as a result of economic changes, due largely to globalization in Viet

Nam. The women talk about how their daughters have better lives, one by attending college in Switzerland “work at an office” (63). One woman states, “young women don’t want to sell at the market anymore; they prefer to work in offices so they have the weekends to go out” (65). The customer base is changing, too, since not as many people come to the meat market anymore (62) because they go to supermarkets (66). As per these women’s testimonies, globalization shapes their gender roles in relation to foodways and their positions within the economic market. Briggs et al. refers to how the economies of neoliberalism, specifically the attempts to overcome “backwardness” so as to participate in the global “free” market, influence private matters of identity in that women are increasingly engaging in new, more corporate careers (639), as are the daughters of the Vietnamese meat maids. All in all, these varied gendered representations of foodways all share their attachment of the life-giving properties of food to the female gender. This prompts discussion of how these cookbooks address concrete issues involved in sustaining life—conceptions of healthy bodies, struggles with hunger and the contemporary political economies of food, as well as possibilities for transnational activism.

#### Part Six: Health, Hunger, and Transnational Activism

The representation of Vietnamese foodways in these cookbooks promises health benefits but also links them to non-corporeal, spiritual methods of survival. In terms of health, the majority of the authors emphasize the nutritional merits of Vietnamese cuisine, often framing it in Western dietary logic. Huynh, for instance, points out that the sweets recipes in his book should be reserved for special occasions, as Vietnamese

usually eat fruit for dessert (122) and, as a result, “the Vietnamese diet is generally well balanced” (114). This emphasis on fruits and vegetables—the dearth of which is so often criticized and regulated in Western diets—invites the reader into Vietnamese culinary culture by presenting it as more health-conscious and profiting from the common purview of the Asian body as lean and slender—an appealing model for Western culinary tourists (Wilson 258). This portrayal of the Vietnamese body as healthy also revises the common war-time portrayals of it as victimized, injured, emaciated (Lieu xi).

Vietnamese American journalist Andrew Lam recently published an article in *The Huffington Post* that contextualized the merits of Vietnamese cuisine in the U.S. recession. Lam explains, and essentially recommends, that Americans who are financially struggling to the point of resorting to fast food restaurants like McDonald’s and Burger King to save money can consider Vietnamese food as an equally cost-efficient option, but one that is significantly more nutritious. Lam cites cookbook author Andrea Nguyen, who states, “Being poor doesn't translate to eating badly.” The slant of Nguyen’s statement and Lam’s article locates Vietnamese culinary culture within model minority rhetoric in that Vietnamese cooks and consumers are depicted as innovative, as making the most of what little they have.

Le takes a more nuanced approach by stating that Vietnamese “do not count carbs, or calories for that matter. If we did, 70 percent of our diet would be eliminated” (4). What is interesting here is that Le grants her audience permission to step out of the Western culinary space that incessantly measures and charts calories and carbs—the thousands upon thousands of caloric quantities squeezed in small fonts on fast food nutritional menus—by emphasizing carbs, and their calories, as a necessity to survival.

By way of guilt for eliminating that which enables a population to survive, Le subtly reduces anxieties readers may harbor about foodways, promising a culinary space where Vietnamese food can nourish what the body needs without the American social stigma surrounding demonized carbs and calories. Whereas Vietnamese food has been perceived as non-nutritious (dogs, bugs, etc.), these cookbooks argue that it is the healthy, nourishing antithesis of those perceptions.

The health benefits extend to how Vietnamese cooking practices operate according to a markedly different, “slower” time frame. The repeated mentions of how time-consuming Vietnamese cooking practices are, followed by the authors’ assertions that these investments of time are always “worth it.” This recurring trope, I argue, has a two-fold effect. On one hand, the descriptions of the dishes as slow—the phrases “takes time to prepare” and “plan accordingly” are like a chorus in Phan’s book—reinforce the perception of Viet Nam as backward, as operating according to an alternate temporal pace. On the other, authors Phan and Le in particular stress that these culturally different uses of time are “worth the effort” (Phan) and “worth it” (Le), stressing that readers should “take the time” (Phan). Whereas cookbooks are typically part of the tourism industry by adapting to the “constraints of the tourist’s time, space, and means” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett xi), these diasporic Vietnamese cookbooks attempt to convince the reader to adapt to their suggested time frames and the authors want to persuade readers that doing so is a worthy effort.

The temporal cycles by which Vietnamese foodways operate corresponds with what is presented as healthier foods. Whereas the U.S. is associated with greasy, fried fast foods because of hectic day-to-day schedules, Vietnamese are depicted within the realm

of taking time with food and therefore avoiding flash-frying everything, opting instead to utilize a variety of cooking methods suited to the respective ingredients. However, a closer look at how the authors use American fast food as a point of comparison reveals shifting relationships to American culinary culture. Though Phan states, “Rarely do the Vietnamese sit down and eat a huge portion of fried food—everything in moderation” (177), Le confesses that “the American in me can’t say no to the tastiness of fried foods” (120). Both authors here polarize Vietnamese food as healthy compared to deep-fried American food, but these quotes exemplify that there emerges a pronoun game. The authors, in this instance and others, vacillate between us and them, Vietnamese and American. So, although the authors use the health-conscious associations with Vietnamese food to their advantage, they also speak of it with a tongue accustomed to the tastes of American fast foods. Interestingly, Le jumps into the first person plural point-of-view to include herself as part of the Vietnamese culinary community to say that “We’re still waiting for a Vietnamese version of potato salad and collard greens” (130). In this instance, Le’s shift of pronouns shows a desire for Vietnamese food to take the shape of American culinary culture, a desire that may be informed by her second-generation status and/or that she is writing about Vietnamese food specific to the U.S. I raise this issue of a Vietnamese food wanting to be like American food (whereas the majority of the books focus on the reverse desire) because American culinary culture also impacts Vietnamese body image, despite it being presented largely in these books as healthy, both physically and spiritually. To reflect these cultural influences, a blog site called *Thick Dumping Skin* recently launched to provide a forum in which Asian Americans, most of whom seem to be second-generation, share their conflicted senses of

body image and their cultural identifications through food. One of these conflicts, for instance, is the substitution of brown rice for white rice in the name of health benefits, and the ensuing dissension that causes for their parents. Social media outlets such as *Thick Dumpling Skin*, which are inherently transnational as a technological medium, testify to the growing evidence that Vietnamese and Western culinary traditions cannot be polarized as healthy/unhealthy, but rather that foodways are a terrain on which diasporic Vietnamese constantly mediate between both culinary cultures, their healthy, body image, and how they view and represent their bodies inhabiting time and space.

Ho establishes that Vietnamese culinary culture connects the living and the dead (79) through cooking food as a means of commemorating the dead as well as celebrating life (87). Food can also be an act of forgetting, as in offering food to someone who has recently passed (Holtzman 372). Food, then, emerges as a metaphysical, spiritual means to “survive those losses” (Ho 83). Huynh’s book in particular identifies the medicinal capacities of common Vietnamese ingredients, some of the effects of which are “cooling the blood” (50) and to “purge the sickness” (63). By extension of these healing properties of the food, Nguyen suggests that Vietnamese food is the recipe to longevity, as he periodically notes details such as the “soft and youthful” (20) hands of the old man he meets who makes tofu from scratch. In a mention charged with virility, Nguyen points out that asparagus is a growing trend in cuisine in Viet Nam because of its aphrodisiac qualities (219). Phan directly instructs the reader, “Don’t underestimate the power of chicken stock. Each time my wife was in labor with one of our children, I brought pints of frozen stock to the hospital. [...] Nutritious and easy to digest, it’s a perfect restorative, whether you’re giving birth or just under the weather” (6). Lacing in such comments

about Vietnamese food's life-fortifying and life-giving qualities, especially in a cultural background typically colored with death, evokes spiritual discourses through which these cookbook authors attend to foodways as a means of articulating trauma and surviving it.

Moreover, the cookbooks attach these spiritual practices to cultural holidays, primarily the Lunar New Year, or Têt: Phan's indication of the pomelo as a symbol of prosperity (165), Huynh's framing of his Têt recipe for braised pork with star anise as a promise of "positivity during the difficult years" (83). After all, many of the recipes are associated with special occasions and rituals. What Ho glosses over in this point about spiritual culinary practices, however, is that this custom that draws life and death into conversation through food is often attributed to Buddhist traditions. Le makes the most explicit claim that "Buddhists can be seen as the world's first nutritionists" (87), though both Phan and Huynh offer anecdotes that function as recommendations for Buddhist-inspired vegetarian versions of dishes. Phan revels in what he found to be the surprising deliciousness of vegetarian dumplings on a Buddhist holiday (86), and Huynh explains that his family's tradition of "going vegetarian" for visits to the temple is all part of the spiritual mix of Confucianism, Buddhism and observance of the hearth Gods and associated rituals which has developed over the centuries," which is rewarded with health and good fortune (30). On the one hand, the health-enhancing properties, whether physical or spiritual, of Vietnamese foodways may reinforce stereotypes of Asians as mystical exotics, yet the examples noted in the authors' narratives also serve to diversify Vietnamese by showing the various religions and of deepening audience's understanding of Vietnamese spiritual practices.

Though oftentimes simultaneously reinforcing and resisting identity stereotypes, these cookbook authors all spotlight cooking and eating as a generative force, a promise of life and longevity that calls for a future. The authors do not simply promise a future for Vietnamese culinary culture by having the audience cook their recipes. Rather, they question how the audience will understand the future in a transnational world, one in which globalization complicates who has access to food and what the quality of the food is, especially within the relationship between Viet Nam and overseas Vietnamese. These cookbooks' attention to transnational activism foregrounds the question of how the audience will proceed with what they glean from these texts, ultimately prompting the cultivation of deeper awareness of the foodways that they invest in and their complicity in food-based injustices made possible by increasingly globalized markets and weighted political economies of food.

To address the paths for future study and action, it is necessary to first look at the circulation of material resources involved in the political economies of food. While Le makes statements such as Vietnamese “pride themselves in cuisine that uses only the freshest ingredients” (4), the quality of ingredients in and/or from Viet Nam is an issue of the political economies of food. In August 2013, the California Department of Health issued warnings about ginger candies imported from Viet Nam containing dangerous levels of lead, which speaks to the lack of regulations and quality assurance evaluations conducted in Vietnamese foodways. Corruption also impacts the quality of food. Recent news reported that twenty tons of illegal meat was seized being imported from China to Viet Nam. The meat was primarily decayed chicken feet, “some dating back to 1967,”

that had been chemically plumped to appear fresh, in addition to other treated animal products, such as tripe and cartilage, that were far too old to be consumed safely.

The matter of which food resources are available is important for diasporic Vietnamese in determining where their efforts in contribution to, and activism in, Viet Nam are dedicated. Huynh divides his book into chapters based on ingredients—beef, poultry, seafood—that allows him to comment on the accessibility of these material resources, raw ingredients. (Beef was not used in Vietnamese cuisine until the French colonized the country, speaking to the transnational quality of foodways.) Despite the aforementioned news report about contaminated meat, Huynh claims that poultry has become more common an ingredient since “economic conditions have improved” (67). At the same time, he mentions a beef shortage and expresses the need and desire to bring more beef products to Viet Nam, to take back the food resources he has had the luxury of using in his cooking in Australia (92). His attention to the lack of resources and his desire to fulfill food deficits speaks to how “transnational migration is now at least partially motivated by what the emigrant can *bring* and *send home*” (Wilk 324). These cookbook authors represent the generation of overseas Vietnamese that has the political and economic ability to return to Viet Nam and begin to build this transnational connection and their identities within it.

The transnational web of overseas Vietnamese allows for personally informed views of the issues in Viet Nam, and a connectedness to the country that enables potential humanitarian activism in the country. Scholars like Mannur have theorized about hunger as an absence (17), but it is more important to address the matter in concrete terms, as “[a]ccess to food is the most basic human need and its denial is a terrible measure of

human powerlessness” (Counihan and Van Esterik 9). The proposed efforts to alleviate specific shortages of food in Viet Nam are drawn from the authors’ personal experiences. The cookbook authors speak to how the hunger they experienced in Viet Nam correlates with their feelings of powerlessness in the larger sociopolitical landscape. Huynh recalls the hunger he and his family suffered while under the Communist regime that displaced them *within* Viet Nam’s borders (11). The Communist government, Huynh explains, induced hunger through its construction of tide barriers that changed the fishing industry and the environment as a whole by altering salt levels in soil (12). These environmental changes continue to impact the food production and consumption in Viet Nam today. Nguyen mentions that recently Vietnamese farmers have had to switch their main product to salt because the price of it has exponentially increased in the past few years (170). Because of drought, people who own now-failing rice paddies have resorted to other means of labor to feed themselves. A recent report followed female rice farmer Nguyen Thi Tam as she ventured into the former DMZ to excavate bombs dropped by U.S. military planes during the war in Viet Nam in order to earn enough to feed herself. When asked about the danger of her new occupation in lieu of her dried up rice paddy, Nguyen responded, “A bowl of blood for a bowl of rice... to die or survive doing this, it is all fate” (euronews). Nguyen adds to the discussion of how food is a central, though limited, commodity in the Vietnamese economic market. He narrates his experience of a woman offering food in exchange for an English lesson from him (15). The woman’s use of food as a commodity in exchange for English points to the impacts of globalization. He also mentions the widespread hunger he witnesses, as the book opens with children resisting his initial offers to buy them food because, they told him, they usually only eat once a

day, if that, anyway. The Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition reported that hunger statistics decreased from the 1980s to 2000 (Hop 331), but reports from the Australian National University in the past year indicate that recent economic and environmental developments, such as the construction of dams in the Mekong Delta, threaten to increase existing hunger in Viet Nam (“Hunger” 1). On the other hand, hunger strikes have been a form of activism in Viet Nam.<sup>32</sup>

The shifting tides of the hunger problem in Viet Nam and methods for combatting it raise the issue of what diasporic Vietnamese activism could and should look like in Viet Nam, as addressed by the cookbooks. Most of the cookbook authors describe a form of return-trauma, that being their sense of shock or disorientation upon their first visits to Viet Nam or a return trip after a substantial hiatus. Phan marks these returns by specifying the years he spent away (seventeen years until he at clay pot pork again) or the years he returned to find, as he did in 2011, the landscape and structures remarkably changed (185). Similarly, Nguyen addresses how the changing economy and population transformed Sai Gon since his last visit: “I need to grow accustomed to this chaotic, electric, magnetic and frustrating city. I remember Saigon ten years ago, when the streets moved gracefully with thousands of bicycles, there were curbside cafes on every corner, and endless streetfood stalls lined the walls” (229). These descriptions of being overwhelmed in Viet Nam not only indicate “culture shock,” but show how pervasively overpopulation discourses, which are inherently related to hunger issues, function as “ideologically key to erasing the history of Western colonialism during the cold war, and

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<sup>32</sup> During the U.S.-Viet Nam War, Vietnamese monks held hunger strikes to protest the war. More recently, pro-democracy political dissident Nguyen Van Hai (a.k.a. Dieu Cay) and human rights lawyer Le Quoc Quan used hunger strikes to call attention to abuses they suffered in prison where they were incarcerated for blogging critiques of the communist government.

the production of a ‘new’ policy of help for the ‘Third World’ called development (a combination of industrialization and reforming reproduction through birth control)—as if it were not a continuation of older, colonial policies” (Briggs et al 641). Diasporic Vietnamese need to be careful of perpetuating such Western ideologies in their activism in Viet Nam, of assuming the role of Western savior “in order to transform Vietnam into a ‘free and democratic’ land, perhaps in the image of America” (Dorais 105). Adding to this culturally and politically colored perspectives that diasporic Vietnamese may have going into or returning to Viet Nam with activism in mind, according to Thuy Vo Dang, anticommunist-fueled rhetoric and actions can be seen as a way of reckoning with, and rectifying, war-time traumas associated with the communist regime, as well as the ensuing hardships of adjusting to life in America (68). However, anticommunist diasporic Vietnamese activism and connections to Viet Nam are often practiced in private for fear of communist backlash (Valverde 13). These ongoing political tensions complicate the methods of activism that diasporic Vietnamese pursue, and the authors’ avenues of action in their cookbooks as a form of engagement with systemic political problems in Viet Nam.

For example, Nguyen narrates how police harass and displace street vendors in Viet Nam, citing contradictory permit regulations (42). In response to these punitive systems, activists have worked to implement their own institutions to serve, rather than sustain the oppression of, the people. Nguyen’s Little Lantern Foundation funds education of impoverished children in Viet Nam by training them in the hospitality field. Nguyen also dedicates part of his book to the story of Miss Nga, who founded the Nguyen Nga Center schools for disabled children, many of whom have impaired hearing

or sight. Nguyen narrates his experience of preparing and sharing a meal with these children who have been taught to cook, among other skills in art and music, concluding with the following: “We ate with people who could not hear, could not see, could not walk, could not speak English, and could not speak Vietnamese. But somehow we could all understand each other well [...]—a stroke to the side of the right cheek (the food is beautiful); a rub of the belly in a circular motion (we are full); a roll of the fist under the chin, then opening the palm (thank you) (140). Huynh promotes Vietnamese Australian Jimmy Pham’s Know One, Teach One (KOTO) foundation (36) that, like Nguyen’s organization, trains disadvantaged youth in the culinary arts and hospitality services, offering positions in two restaurants, an online bakery, a cooking class and catering service ([koto.com.au](http://koto.com.au)). The Pacific Links Foundation targets female youth who have been forced into prostitution or sexual slavery. The foundation teaches these young women to cook for restaurants and catering services as a way to provide them a skill that can get them out of the sex trade, as well as the drugs involved in that lifestyle.

These organizations show how foodways offer an opportunity for transnational activism, though the concentration of food and hospitality services also indicates the limitations for education of Vietnamese youth. Because of the increase in foreign hotels and restaurants in Viet Nam, the educational and work opportunities for the youth are largely limited to food service industries. Within globalized economic systems, work still needs to be done to broaden the horizons for Vietnamese. Doing so entails that the relationship between overseas Vietnamese and Viet Nam will continue to be negotiated. This process will not be easy, as transnational connections are often kept private, no matter how public they may be in humanitarian efforts, for fear of anticommunist

backlash (Valverde 14). Though politics complicates transnational activism, along with the identities of the diasporic Vietnamese involved in such efforts, further studying transnational currents of knowledge and information, from foodways to technology, can open up more possibilities for trauma to birth new and different means of survival.

This chapter has discussed the ways in which foodways are transnational cultural currents. The following chapter will extend the conversation about blurring national boundaries, but through racial mixing, as I examine multiracial Vietnamese American narratives. As Jinthana Haritaworn points out in her interviews with multiracial Thai individuals, food and sex are symbolically linked as their representations are largely feminized for consumption (139). Following this thematic link, I move from recipes Vietnamese mothers served at the table to the trope of Vietnamese women as prostitutes—the narrative spun through the works of multiracial Vietnamese American children.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### Miscegenation Nation: Prostitution and Passing in Kien Nguyen's *The Unwanted*, My Life Narratives, and Aimee Phan's "We Should Never Meet"

In her December 2011 appearance on the *Jimmy Kimmel Live* late-night talk show, mixed-race Vietnamese actress Maggie Q encountered interview questions written by Kimmel and his staff bearing the weighty subtext that while her "exotic" looks render her admirable in the public eye, she continues to stir anxiety and curiosity about Americans' memories of the U.S.-Viet Nam War. In particular, mixed-race Vietnamese bodies, like Maggie Q's, become legible through narratives rendering Vietnamese women as prostitutes. As soon as she sits down on the interview couch, Maggie Q's ethnic origin is called into question before any discussion of her work as an actress. When she shares that she was born and raised in Hawaii, Kimmel follows with the question "How Hawaiian are you? Were your parents born in Hawaii?" as if to measure Maggie Q's level of "Americanness." Of course, being born in Hawaii—a complex palimpsest of colonialism and miscegenation—is no simple yardstick for identity, far from being definable in the first ten seconds of an interview. In response to the opening question that is essentially "What are you and where did you come from?" Maggie Q seems taken aback as she stumbles over her answer: "I'm just, I'm not, I was born and raised. But I'm Vietnamese-Irish-Polish." Once Kimmel finds out that she is Vietnamese, he elliptically probes her for some kind of confession that her mother was a prostitute:

Jimmy Kimmel: And how did your parents wind up in Hawaii?

Maggie Q: Um, well, my, my fa—[Sighs] they met in Vietnam.

JK: Oh, wow.

MQ: And then they moved back to the states. I guess he retired from the military in Hawaii.

JK: Oh, okay. So your dad was in the military. And did, did your mom work too?

MQ: Did my mom work? [Raises eyebrows]

JK: Did she have a job?

MQ: Yes, my mom, she was a bartender for many years. [Laughs]

Maggie Q's telling sigh evinces her awareness that revealing her parents' introduction in Viet Nam inevitably conjures popular American memory of the war as some sort of *Full Metal Jacket*-style rendezvous between U.S. soldiers and Vietnamese prostitutes. Maggie Q is clearly taken aback by the implication of the question of whether or not her mother "worked"; she repeats it with eyebrows raised, elongating the inquiry as if to prompt Kimmel to say what he really means, "Was your mother a prostitute? Did she meet your father while she was 'working' the corners?" The prostitute figure is a haunting presence in interviews (Haritaworn 138), often the tacit assumption of mixed-race Vietnamese children's origins. Maggie Q is expected to put her family's history on display to provide strangers with an artificial sense of "knowledge" about Viet Nam and the U.S.-Viet Nam War, to confirm the presumed prostitution narrative.

As if to turn the conversation and her family's history into something positive rather than the "dark spot" in U.S. history that the war and prostitution would invoke, Maggie Q quickly follows up with glowing compliments of her mother, and adds that she recently bought her mother a Rolex watch. This addendum seems an implicit reinforcement of the model minority narrative in that Maggie Q is successful enough to bestow such lavish gifts on her mother, thereby assimilating to U.S. American consumer culture and elevating her mother from her former bartender/"prostitute" position.

This recent public interrogation of a mixed-race Vietnamese woman reveals that such questions, and their answers, carry a political imperative. A mixed-race Vietnamese

herself, scholar Kieu Linh Caroline Valverde refers to these loaded questions, and equally loaded responses to them, as a dance, a dynamic process in which mixed-race Vietnamese children both comply to and resist identity classifications imposed by the interlocutor (133). In enumerating the ten most common questions posed to multiracial Vietnamese, Valverde points out how inquiries, such as the ones posed to Maggie Q, attempt to locate mixed-race individuals in social hierarchies, as well as within linear periods of history, based on class, race, nationality, age, and gender. Because certain answers can locate the interviewee in a place and time that elicits discrimination, responses require a quick determination of how much to divulge and what to withhold—in Valverde’s terms, this is a dance of “spins, dips, turns, and even sidesteps” (133). Cynthia Nakashima points out that “the discourse on multiraciality is highly symbolic, with the mixed-race person being much less the subject of honest inquiry than a functional representative of a social issue” (36). That is to say that the questions to and answers by mixed-race Vietnamese are implicitly a self-reflexive matter of representation, rooted in deeper histories and methods of telling and receiving life stories, of “knowing” the self and others, that are social battlegrounds.

Such questions circulate because multiracial children in the context of the U.S.-Viet Nam War presented socio-political dilemmas that extended long after the war, legacies that endure in the lives of many. These dilemmas include the numerous U.S. military operations that aimed to reckon with the offspring of U.S. soldiers in Viet Nam, all of which testify to the U.S.’s attempts to transform its defeat into a victory, a “saving”

mission.<sup>33</sup> During the Fall of Sai Gon on April 30, 1975, Operation Frequent Wind evacuated over 2,500 orphans, many of whom were Amerasian. Operation Babylift was the most public evacuation of Amerasian orphans, numbering about 3,300, due in part to the media coverage of the first plane that crashed killing 144 people, as well as the PBS documentary *Daughter from Danang*.<sup>34</sup> Extending beyond the years that typically demarcate U.S. military occupation of Viet Nam (1965-75), the Amerasian Homecoming Act was implemented in 1989 to bring offspring of U.S. American servicemen to the U.S., as many of the children had been abandoned at orphanages by not only their U.S. American fathers, but also their mothers who feared discrimination by the communist government or simply could not afford to raise the children. The dilemmas of what to do with multiracial Vietnamese children continued after they arrived in the U.S. In Tammy Lee Nguyen's 2009 documentary *Operation Babylift: The Lost Children of Vietnam*, the now adult "babyliftees," the majority of whom are mixed race, share their experiences since being adopted in the U.S. One of the adoptees named Bert expresses his frustration with the U.S. American public being oblivious to mixed Vietnamese children's struggles in the U.S. as a result of the media portraying them as a humanitarian effort orchestrated to "make President Ford look good." Though they concede the educational and work opportunities afforded to them by life in the U.S., the adoptees go on to elaborate on their respective struggles, including racism, violence, isolation, uncertainty, untraceable hereditary health problems, survivor's guilt and the confrontation with the repeated questions of "what are you?" and "where are you from?" in the predominantly white

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<sup>33</sup> See introduction's discussion of Yen Le Espiritu's "We-When-Even-When-We-Lose Syndrome."

<sup>34</sup> Many scholars have analyzed *Daughter from Danang*, including Jodi Kim who delivers a compelling reading of the documentary in the framework of a Cold War narrative.

communities in which they were raised. Amerasian children transported to the U.S. later on and not always adopted by U.S. American parents were often placed in resettlement cluster sites, one being in the South Bronx, and faced poverty and violence (McKelvey 5). As recently as 2007, the U.S. government passed the Amerasian Paternity Recognition Act.<sup>35</sup> Most recently, according to the 2010 U.S. Census, more than 9 million U.S. Americans identify as more than one race, and, as Asians are the fastest growing group in the U.S., multiracial Asian Americans constitute an increasingly large segment of the country (Kina and Dariotis 4). Thus, reckoning with the ongoing histories of multiracial Vietnamese Americans is to engage in discussion pertinent to the larger shifting terrain of racial identity, politics, and representation in the U.S. today: “The unresolved question of Vietnamese Amerasian citizenship thirty-five years after the Vietnam War highlights a particular failure in U.S. politics. Situated within contested contours of race, nation, foreign policy, and immigration law, Vietnamese Amerasians have been cast as human war remnants and Cold War casualties” (Schlund-Vials 100). Jodi Kim adds that U.S. representations of Vietnamese Americans typically serve to reinforce the “masculinist hypervisibility” of U.S. imperialism and the genocidal war in Viet Nam, and cultural texts produced by Vietnamese Americans are inherently politicized because they can dismantle the U.S. imperial myopia that sustains Cold War ideology (195).<sup>36</sup>

Despite the figures of the specific U.S. initiatives noted above, there are no exact statistics of how many multiracial children were born, abandoned, and or killed in Viet

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<sup>35</sup> Scholars have critiqued the delay in the U.S.’s legislation to grant Amerasian children citizenship in comparison to France’s quick evacuation of approximately 25,000 Vietnamese children of French descent after France’s defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 (Lamb 2).

<sup>36</sup> Kim’s chapter on the Vietnamese’s place within the U.S.’s Cold War rhetoric analyzes the documentary *Daughter from Danang* and Aimee Phan’s short story collection *We Should Never Meet* in relation to Operation Babylift, as well as Trinh T. Minh Ha’s film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*.

Nam during the U.S. war there (Lamb 2009) or how many live in the U.S. today. Oftentimes the documentation attesting to children's U.S. American paternity was destroyed as a matter of survival. William Tran shared with *Smithsonian* magazine: "My mother burned everything. She said, I can't have a son named William with the Viet Cong around" (Lamb 1). The books that do recount the experiences and/or collect testimonies of mixed-race Vietnamese children are limited because they are written primarily by journalists and U.S. Americans who served in the military or provided healthcare during the U.S.-Viet Nam War; these texts include *Children of the Enemy: Oral Histories of Vietnamese Amerasians and their Mothers*, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and The Children of War in Vietnam*, *Surviving Twice: Amerasian Children in the Vietnam War*. Because multiracial Vietnamese children have had limited opportunities to represent themselves, additional questions about and for multiracial Vietnamese Americans surface. What does it mean to be mixed-race Vietnamese? What does one say to such questions? How to answer? In light of this lack of materials for multiracial Vietnamese children, this chapter is significant to continuing and expanding the discussion of this history and the ongoing issues multiracial Vietnamese Americans face, particularly in addressing the weight of the aforementioned questions and *how* mixed Vietnamese Americans go about responding to those inquiries.

The options for *how* to respond to questions of identity are complex because of the socio-political weight of the existing terminology. Daughter of writer Alice Walker and author of the memoir *Black, White, and Jewish*, Rebecca Walker explains that being asked "What are you?" or "Where are you from?" constructs a false dilemma of either

exposing racial makeup as an offering or subscribing to a “don’t ask, don’t tell” position (15). Opting for silence is understandable, given that answering can be difficult because of the politicized language involved in identifying oneself. In the scholarship focusing on mixed race identities for Asian Americans, the term “race” itself has been problematic (Kina and Dariotis 17), as it can perpetuate notions of race as a fixed, biological category, rather than a social construct, or in the terms of Michael Omi and Howard Winant, a process formation.<sup>37</sup> In her preface to the mixed race studies reader, Jayne Ifekwunigwe points out that many terms, once seen as “scientific,” such as “half-caste,” “hybrid,” “mulatto,” among others, are pathologized and derogatory, so those of mixed parentage seek other, more empowering terms of identification (xiv). In lieu of “race,” many Asian Americans have used the term “mixed roots”<sup>38</sup> or “hapa.” But, in regard to the latter term, “hapa” appropriates the Hawaiian term for mixed, which can be identifying as Hawaiian rather than representing one’s own ethnic identity (Kina and Dariotis 14). The essentializing implicit in the use of such pan-Asian terms, for some, corresponds with the derogatory terminology employed to discriminate against multiracial Vietnamese, including “con lai” or “my lai” (“half-breed”) and “bui doi” (“dust of life”) (Schlund-Vials 99). In his extensive interviews with Amerasian children from Viet Nam, Robert S. McKelvey points out that “bui doi” is not specific to mixed-race individuals, as it means “poorest of the poor,” but the fact that it has been commonly applied to multiracial

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<sup>37</sup> *Racial Formations in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s.*

<sup>38</sup> The annual mixed-race event (including traditional conference, art performances, and film screenings) that takes place in the Japantown area of Los Angeles, CA, is called the “Mixed Roots Festival.”

Vietnamese attests to their lack of education and opportunities in Viet Nam.<sup>39</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I will be using the terms “mixed-race” and “multiracial,” not only because they are part of conventional nomenclature in the research I have conducted, but also because they draw attention to the concept of race as a category of analysis and a construction that informs the conflicts that mixed Vietnamese face.

The terminology for responding to such questions is complicated because the questions themselves are loaded. These inquiries have historically implied two responses bifurcated by racial stereotypes of Asians, the “happy hapa” or the tragic Amerasian (Kina and Dariotis 14), which essentially seek to categorize the mixed individual into a “good” or “bad” mix (Nakashima 4).<sup>40</sup> The “good” kind of mix is defined by a discourse celebrating multiracialism, either through a “love knows no color” analytic that casts a positive light on the interracial relations in the past of empire, or through the representation of the mixed child as a future citizen who transcends race and borders (Haritaworn 2). However, the expectation of multiracial individuals to serve as a “bridge between worlds” or a promise of a multicultural, peaceful future “carries the essentialized assumption that racialized groups are so deeply divided that interracial unions offer a solution to racial conflict” (Kina and Dariotis 5). That assumption serves to reinforce the

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<sup>39</sup> Though McKelvey’s book collects a large number of mixed-race Vietnamese testimonies, the book is framed in a way that emphasizes the success of those Amerasians living in the U.S., while those still in Viet Nam suffer a degraded existence. McKelvey’s background as a U.S. military officer may influence his privileging of the U.S. in his study, which was conducted in the ‘90s, at a time when the U.S. may have pushed for works like his to promote their Amerasian “integration” initiatives.

<sup>40</sup> Haritaworn elaborates, “On the one hand, there’s the good mixes that tend to be figured as white or whitening: from the ‘good social mix’ attested to the successfully gentrified area to the ‘good mix’ of the cosmopolitan citizen of the world, and the beautiful ‘mixed race’ face of the multicultural nation (Lees 2008, Ahmed 2004). On the other hand, the ‘bad mixes’ of the mixed-up in between: the confused multiracialities that cannot escape marginality, the second generationality that fail to integrate and are sentenced to a life of criminality, disloyalty and terrorism, who hail from the segregated areas and communities that never mix enough (Fortier 2008)” (11).

narrative that mixed-race children are born from relations rife with tension and imbalances of power—in this case, the commodified sexual exchange between an American GI and a Vietnamese prostitute. Furthermore, “putting the multiracialized subject in charge of abolishing the entire ‘race’ project is not only, potentially, essentialist, but also overestimates multiracialized people’s agency and sets them up for failure” (Haritaworn 35). Certainly, I do not aim to “solve” any problems of race in this chapter. Rather, I contribute to the existing discussion by opening up other possible questions and responses, many of which are ambivalent and cannot be reduced to “good”/“bad” or “success”/“failure.” To perpetuate those reductive binaries is dangerous, especially as the failure to “solve” the problem of racism ultimately adds to the negative associations with multiracial people as a social problem themselves.

The negative associations with multiracial identity include rape, broken or socially aberrant families, guilt, and isolation (Walker 15). The pathologization of mixed-race children is embedded in the political discourse that physically brought them to the U.S. The very impetus for the Amerasian Homecoming Act was a photo taken by a U.S. American journalist and published in the October 1985 issue of *Newsday*. The photo depicts Minh, a young Vietnamese boy with phenotypical Caucasian facial traits and a severely disabled body as a result of polio. As this photograph was circulated worldwide, Minh became a sort of poster boy for the tragic Amerasian—a figure who elicited the sympathy, if not the pity, to propel the petitioning and eventual passage of the Amerasian Homecoming Act, led by congressman Robert Mrazek. The representation of multiracial Vietnamese children as irreparably traumatized persisted in the years immediately following the passage of the Amerasian Homecoming Act, as reports on the status of

Amerasian children in the U.S. often highlighted poverty, illiteracy, behavioral problems including violence and substance abuse, as well as medical issues revolving around mental health concerns such as depression and suicidal tendencies.<sup>41</sup> Such pathologizing risks marking multiracial Vietnamese children as embodiments of the lingering guilt about the U.S. war in Viet Nam and the shame of illegitimate, unknown, or even defective paternity in miscegenation. The residual ambivalence regarding racial mixing during the war is evident in U.S. pop cultural representations of Viet Nam. In the 1985 film *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, the title character, made famous by Sylvester Stallone's hypermasculine performance, seeks vengeance against the Vietnamese, but along the way his rampage grows amorous toward a young Vietnamese girl named Co (which actually only means "young lady" in Vietnamese) who has phenotypically Anglicized features and speaks the Queen's English to Rambo as she acts as his translator. Played by Chinese-English Singaporean actress Julia Nickson, Co's character shows how "whitened" mixed-race characters are distinguished from other Vietnamese as exoticized figures "worth saving" or, in other words, a "happy hapa." Yet, at the same time she is also a "tragic Eurasian" because Co dies just before Rambo "saves" her from Viet Nam. She is left behind, forgotten. Rather than adhere to the black and white optics U.S. American cinema has established for viewing this history, the discussion should be reoriented to frame these issues confronting multiracial Vietnamese within the context of social conditions in which they live so as not to efface those issues as being non-existent

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<sup>41</sup> See "Vietnamese Find No Home Here in their Fathers' Land" by Seth Mydans in 1991 and David Lamb's 2009 "Children of the Vietnam War."

or a thing of the past and not to reduce them to irreparable problems inherent to the character of mixed Vietnamese.

To resist the forgetting and the one-dimensional representations of mixed-race Vietnamese, this chapter will draw into conversation several of the limited number of narratives centered on multiracial Vietnamese individuals. There are several firsthand testimonials from Amerasian children of the U.S.-Viet Nam War,<sup>42</sup> which will be peripherally mentioned in this chapter to provide context, but the primary works to be discussed in relation to exploring the capacities of the genre are the 2002 *The Unwanted: A Memoir of Childhood* written by Kien Nguyen, a 1.5-generation mixed Vietnamese fathered by a white U.S. soldier and a Vietnamese mother, and my own life narratives about experiences as a second-generation mixed Vietnamese woman so as to show diversity of multiracial experiences in terms of gender and generation. Before going further, it is important to note the distinction between Nguyen's text, subtitled as a *memoir*, and the description of my work as *life narratives*, rather than another memoir or a general autobiography. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point out that the term "autobiography" refers to the Western tradition that "privileges the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story" and marginalizes minority narratives (3). While "memoirs" have been written by "the socially marginal," the term "memoir" has been used to market narratives as more "titillating" (4). In other words, because the "memoir" genre tends to focus on a slice of the subject's life, rather than the entire life as

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<sup>42</sup> These works include *Children of the Enemy: Oral Histories of Vietnamese Amerasians and their Mothers*, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and The Children of War in Vietnam*, *Surviving Twice: Amerasian Children in the Vietnam War*, and a children's book entitled *Escape from Saigon: How a Vietnam War Orphan Became an American Boy*, a life narrative told by an American woman who adopted a daughter from Viet Nam.

in autobiography, that slice of life initially appears specific or unique but can often become universalized and essentialized, seen as representing the whole experience of a larger group that is exotic or compelling to the reader. Indeed, part of putting Nguyen's and my own work in conversation with each other is to show that neither is representative of "THE" universal, monolithic mixed-race Vietnamese American experience. So, in lieu of the loaded terms "autobiography" and "memoir," Smith and Watson employ the terms "life writing" and "life narrative" to encompass not only autobiography and memoir but also the "heterogeneity of self-referential practices" (4). To allow for such heterogeneity at a genre level also permits exploration of the fluidity of identities that are, in Joan Scott's words, constructed through language and the articulation of "lived experience," a process in flux especially pertinent to multiracial identities.

While I have purposefully chosen to call my own work "life narratives," it is important to look at how the marketing of Nguyen's text as a "memoir" informs how the narrative is structured and delivered to readers. Nguyen's memoir narrates his life from 1972-1985 in Viet Nam. Nguyen remembers his life with his mother, Khuon, and his other mixed-race brother, Jimmy, in their upper-class, prosperous life in Nha Trang in the years immediately preceding the Fall of Sai Gon, after which they are displaced from their home. As the Communist party institutes its regime in South Viet Nam, Nguyen is subject to violent anti-miscegenation discrimination and is at one point imprisoned in one of the many re-education camps operated by the communist government to "re-educate" (read torture and indoctrinate) those deemed antagonistic to the nation-state, including Nguyen who, in being mixed, was seen as affiliated with the former enemy. Describing years of classed and racial struggle, the narrative comes to a close at the moment that

U.S. planes, under the Orderly Departure Program (ODP), begin to take flight, transporting Nguyen and hundreds of other Amerasian children, along with their families, to the United States.

In addition to the linear narrative structure that parallels immigration and coming of age and depicts the U.S. as a happy ending, the publisher's marketing of the memoir reinforces the model minority myth that further spotlights the U.S. as a benevolent savior. In the author interview, which is part of the reading group guide at the back of the book, the anonymous interviewer asks U.S.-centric questions such as, "Can you tell us a little about your life now in America?" and "How does life in America differ from the life you knew in Vietnam?" despite the fact that the memoir ends immediately before Nguyen's journey to America. Nguyen replies, "I am living the American Dream," where "people are innately good," and he emphasizes freedom, opportunity, and pride in being a "member of the melting pot." The framing of the interview casts Nguyen in the mold of the reformed, grateful refugee and model minority figures. What is "titillating," to borrow Smith and Watson's term, about the publisher's marketing of Nguyen's memoir is that his answer (the text itself, along with the interview responses) to the publisher's leading questions fortify the model minority narrative and attest to how the autobiographical genre can be used as a guise for incorporating marginalized individuals.

Whereas Nguyen's memoir moves from Viet Nam to the U.S., my narrative moves in reverse formation tracing my first trip from the U.S. to Viet Nam, peppered with memories of correlating experiences in the U.S., so as to show the transnational flows of multiracial discourses. The decision to show the transnational flows of multiracial narratives is inspired by some of the most powerful life writing penned by

scholars in the academic arena. In Saidiya Hartman's critically reflexive life narrative *Lose Your Mother*, she travels to Ghana "in search of strangers" (6) and to "engage the past," of which she felt she is the "afterlife" (6). Hartman admits to feeling like a "proverbial outsider" in the U.S. (3), plagued by a phantom connection to a place and people she did not know (17), and wanted to find a sense of belonging, waywardly seeking that sense of kinship in "the past [that she thought] was a country to which [she] could return" (15). Though in a completely different historical context, I felt similarly to Hartman in pursuing a sense of belonging by what I sensed was *returning* to Viet Nam, though I had never physically been there before. I "knew" Viet Nam through idealized visions of it, imparted to me through my mother's kaleidoscope of childhood memories of her homeland. In my experiences of discrimination based on racial and cultural difference from others in the predominantly Hispanic and Black community in which I was raised, I nostalgically viewed Viet Nam as a home where I would belong. I felt, as Hartman states, "It is only when you are stranded in a hostile country that you need a romance of origins; it is only when you *lose your mother* that she becomes a myth" (98). The seduction of the idea of return being "what you hold on to after you have been taken from your country" (99) propelled me to visit Viet Nam. Like Hartman, my experience of "return" was tinged with disillusionment upon the realization that "[t]he country in which you disembark is never the country of which you have dreamed" (33). Yet, in these encounters with disappointment and unremitting traumas, possibilities surface: "Loss remakes you" (100). The paramount "remaking" for me was coming to the understanding that there would be no fixed destination or resolute sense of belonging. Instead, my home was a space of shuttling between Viet Nam and the U.S., and, as in life narratives such as

Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera* and Ruben Martinez's *The Other Side*, my interspersing of experiences growing up mixed in the U.S. within my life narrative of travelling to Viet Nam illustrates this liminal existence that blurs space and time. Writing in such a manner was my effort to create a space that I never felt I'd had.

Engaging these two perspectives in dialogue is important to the articulation of trauma because, as Caruth states, "The traumatic histories of two [people] can emerge only in their relation to each other" (42). Highlighting the relations between my experiences and Nguyen's, as well as our significant differences, helps to facilitate a conversation that addresses the ongoing trauma of being isolated from one another and, oftentimes, the Vietnamese American community at large. Carving out this discursive space is especially important because "mixed race people are not a physical community" (Lee qtd. in Kina and Dariotis 11). To generate such a conversation is to develop new languages for *how* multiracial Vietnamese American identities can be formed and articulated. Treating language, discourse, and genre as critically reflexive aligns with the overall goals of this dissertation to spotlight how modes of representation impact racialized and politicized histories.

Keeping in mind the project to create a communal space that does not exist for mixed individuals,<sup>43</sup> the intertextual dialogue of this chapter will highlight three major thematic parallels to create that space, not necessarily of similarity but through conversation with pre-conceived narratives about these themes and, of course, dialogue between Nguyen's work and my own. To compare and contrast Nguyen's text and my

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<sup>43</sup> As stated by filmmaker Kristen D. Lee, "mixed race people are not a physical community. We don't have a "Little Hapaland" downtown" (qtd. in Kina and Dariotis 11).

own work, the two themes selected for the purposes of this chapter are based on common questions posed to multiracial Vietnamese. In regard to the question asked of Maggie Q, “How did your parents meet?” the first section of this chapter will examine metaphors of prostitution, ambivalent in their oscillation between victimized fallen woman and oversexualized threat to the stability of nationhood. In Nguyen’s memoir, the depiction of his mother reifies the tragic figure of Kieu in Viet Nam’s national allegory, *The Tale of Kieu*, as he idealizes his unknown U.S. American father. Though Nguyen reinforces the national allegory of Kieu, he also points to how being mixed, as a trait punishable by death because of its threats to the nation, becoming a biopolitical form of bare life, Giorgio Agamben’s term for those deemed expendable by the nation-state. As these questions associate the multiracial child’s life with death, namely from the war, my life narratives in regard to this theme revolve around Vietnamese people’s repeated questions about whether my father was a soldier, but also how the imposition of this prostitution narrative upon my identity was complicated by an instance in which a Vietnamese man defended me in the face of questions about my origins. Because biopolitics foregrounds the struggle of survival, the second theme focuses on the question “What are you?” and how racial passing and identity formation are central to surviving discrimination in Nguyen’s narrative and my own successes and failures as “passing” for either white or Vietnamese, often resulting in a default assumption that I am Hispanic. Those identifications, however, opened up possibilities for alternative kinships. Accordingly, the last section of this chapter is devoted to how passing continues in the U.S.; this aspect of passing not addressed by Nguyen’s text will be discussed not only through my own life narratives, but through an Aimee Phan short story, “We Should Never Meet,” about

multiracial Vietnamese finding a sense of belonging with gangs that affiliate with Mexican Americans as well.

Ultimately, this critically reflexive approach to multiracial Vietnamese life narratives aspires to edify one of the major purposes of this dissertation at large—to explore the boundaries and elasticize the capacities of the genre itself, to participate in the processes of narrating ongoing histories. Doing so in the genre of autobiography or memoir is particularly weighted. Though the methodology of incorporating personal narratives has been perceived to risk the “hypervisibility” of its subjects (Kina and Dariotis 8-9), what Joan Scott calls “lived experience” can both reinforce and resist dominant expectations, and its capacity to resist is in the showcasing of what “has hitherto been hidden from history” (365). In their collection of mixed race Asian American Art, *War Baby/Love Child*, Kina and Dariotis argue that valuing the positionality of authors and artists does not insist mixed individuals further fracture themselves between their personal stories and an academic discourse or a particular fixed “Asian American aesthetic” (9). Though the autobiographical genre’s perpetuation of Vietnamese exploitation certainly has fueled this dissertation’s exploration and value of other genres, I include my own personal narratives here in the spirit of Kina and Dariotis’s claims about genre and identity. It is through my positionality as a second-generation female Vietnamese American expressed in my narratives that I feel I can bridge my personal voice and academic discourse to reach a larger audience. Nancy Miller, in *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*, states that the use of the personal in the academic is a form of “personal criticism” that “work[s] more like a relay between positions to create critical fluency. [...] These autobiographical

acts may produce a new repertory for an enlivening cultural criticism” (25). Ultimately, this “enlivening” is what I hope to contribute through this sharing of stories. Indeed, at academic conferences, creative writing readings, and *Moth*-style oral storytelling events in which I have participated in the last few years, it is my personal narratives, some of which have been included in this chapter, that have been most generative in facilitating engagement from, and conversation with, the audience. These discussions have been productive, transcending the anthropological, assimilationist inquiries Pelaud and Hong critique.<sup>44</sup> I put these mingled discourses into writing here to aspire to produce scholarship such as that of Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu whose *When Half is Whole: Multiethnic Asian American Identities* artfully weaves personal narrative, testimonies of others, and formal academic research for a compelling exploration of multiraciality in Asian America. The methodology of researching one’s own life, which is a non-linear cycle of living and reliving, has produced a deeper understanding of the complex negotiation through which mixed-race Vietnamese children attempt to represent ongoing trauma and loss. If writing is remembering, then literary form can be as fragmented and non-linear as the memories themselves. These shifting terrains speak to a “state of liminality” for mixed race writers, who complicate reductive expectations and limitations upon their work by creating “newly formed syncretic narratives, perhaps even new languages” (Brennan 49). This chapter is, indeed, my attempt at a new language. In so doing, this chapter works toward broadening the possibilities of how mixed Vietnamese see themselves and how to articulate their identities in response to the inevitable

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<sup>44</sup> Isabelle Thuy Pelaud has cautioned against the trend of treating Vietnamese American authors as “anthropological informants.” Grace Hong has also discussed how the genre of autobiography posits a subjectification of “possessive individualism” that offers the “promise of universal incorporation,” under the umbrella of neoliberal discourse (xiii).

questions, perhaps by even reframing the questions and changing the conversation altogether. In sum, this chapter is an exercise in transcending the paradigm in which mixed Vietnamese are the objects of inquiry by allowing the mixed Vietnamese to be the ones posing new and different questions.

### Part One: Homeland as Mother, Mother as Prostitute

In order to discuss the role of prostitution in narratives, it is important to establish the intertextual, transhistorical connection between the way prostitution is represented in Nguyen's memoir and what is widely regarded as Viet Nam's national allegory, *The Tale of Kieu*. A nineteenth-century epic poem that narrates a young Vietnamese girl's descent into prostitution, *The Tale of Kieu* is Viet Nam's national allegory for centuries of invasion and victimization by imperialist powers. Traced as an adaptation from a Chinese novel, the poem was written in Vietnamese vernacular by Nguyen Du<sup>45</sup> and elegizes Kieu, one of two beautiful sisters heralded for their beauty, primarily articulated through nature metaphors. Kieu is introduced with "Her eyes were autumn streams, her brows spring hills./Flowers grudged her glamour, willows her fresh hue" (3). Evident in these natural metaphors here and throughout the text is the connection between Kieu's body and the land of Viet Nam. This connection elicits the reader's sympathy for the

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<sup>45</sup> Huynh Anh Thong provides a concise and compelling introduction to the bilingual edition of *The Tale of Kieu* in which he explains that Nguyen Du's use and celebration of Vietnamese vernacular in the nineteenth century was a political act in that doing so set Vietnamese language and literature apart from the Chinese traditions that had dominated Viet Nam for nearly a thousand years, and instituted this Vietnamese linguistic and literary culture as distinct prior to French colonization. The linguistic and political historical context of the poem, then, emphasizes the importance of its themes of resisting foreign forces that repeatedly victimize Kieu, a stand-in for Viet Nam.

unfortunate events that befall Kieu by allegorically critiquing the imperialist injustices committed against the country of Viet Nam.

In a series of melodramatic turns over the course of fifteen years, Kieu is torn from her betrothal to an upstanding young student named Kim by being brokered into prostitution in an act of Confucian filial piety, then engaged to a married brothel patron (71), then kidnapped and sold into servitude to the wife of her fiancé (95), only to be married off to another man who sells her back into prostitution (109-11). Throughout, as in a soap opera, she is assumed to be dead more than once, only to reappear to the shock (either in relief or dismay) of others. Clearly fated to be a “fallen woman” at every turn, Kieu is relieved to finally marry Tu, a war hero who avenges her by rounding up all those who wronged her so that she may dole out punishments as she sees fit. For the first time, she feels liberated from her past (125) because she “had a voice” (127). However, in the mercy Kieu shows, Tu is defeated (131), and alas she returns to her position as the one who ruins everything. Though Kieu is ultimately reunited with her original love, Kim, her “fallen woman” status prevents her from being a wife; and so she remains to him merely a friend while he reproduces with her sister. One of the echoing thematic refrains through the poem is Kieu’s bemoaning of the plight of women in general, but also her individual twisted fate of being doomed to victimhood. It is inescapable. For instance, even when she is trying to be good and repent through prayer for the external circumstances that she internalizes as her own sins, she is kidnapped and sold into servitude (85). Her attempts to liberate herself from the cycle of victimization through suicide by blade and by water (43, 137) are likewise unsuccessful and she thus must resign herself to the will of others who orchestrate her fate.

The characters who victimize Kieu are typically foreigners and she herself must travel “far, far away” (49), as she is “doomed to live/on foreign land and sleep in alien soil” (47). Consequently, “Kieu knew not where to find a home” (105). In his introduction to the bilingual edition of the poem, Huynh Sanh Thông points out the political implications of Kieu’s rootlessness. While Kieu’s sexual victimization once served as a nationalist allegory, her relations with foreigners and associations with lands outside of Viet Nam came to signify the infidelity of traitors (xxxix). For the purposes of this chapter, I would add to the point about Kieu’s sexual treachery that her liaisons do not lead to offspring; her sexual encounters are impotent, as are the foreign marriages between people she meets along her travels. Indeed, the only childbirth alluded to in the poem is between her true love Kim and her sister Van—the traditional, filial, and inter-Vietnamese pairing. Unspoken, yet evident, in this impotence is that the mixed children of interracial unions are bastardized aberrations, cleaved from the nation by their parents’ indiscretions.

What I would like to highlight as a trope in *The Tale of Kieu* is the repeated question with which the eponymous protagonist is perpetually confronted, “What happened in your past?” Without fail, Kieu always divulges the tale of her origin and circumstance “from top to bottom” (107). And, without fail, her interlocutors, including a nun who refuses her refuge, respond to her tale with muddled pity and disdain. Save for her compromise to be platonic friends with Kim at the end of the poem, the question of what to do with her, or what she is capable of, is always met with a pre-determined answer: rejection. The resounding echo of fate is heard in one of the closing lines “Heaven appoints each human to a place./If doomed to roll in dust, we’ll roll in dust”

(167). Ending on this note, the poem moralizes that fallen women are condemned to the position of the prostitute, literal and/or symbolic, who stands “as ghost, as ancestor, as subaltern subject” (Haritaworn 25). As it has been deployed in narratives, the prostitute figure embodies the ghostly remnants of the past, in terms of histories of colonization, political divisions, and racial tension. Lan P. Duong points out that these divisive histories, and the ensuing ambivalence in negotiating identity, are compounded for diasporic Vietnamese whose writings treat Kieu as symbolic of their own feeling of being victims of fate and that they are aptly named Viet Kieu (6).

Nguyen’s memoir does indeed utilize the figure of the prostitute to articulate his childhood memories of growing up multiracial in Viet Nam. Although Nguyen does not explicitly position his mother, Khuon, as a prostitute (the nature of her relationship with the two U.S. soldiers who fathered Nguyen and his brother Jimmy remains ambiguous in the book), he does pathologize her as a Kieu-like fallen woman in his descriptions of her and in his tracing of her series of reversals in fortune. Nguyen’s initial descriptions of his mother are aestheticized, idealized renderings of her as a “mermaid.” In one of the first passages of the text, Nguyen describes his mother through a gaze and in a tone and language suggestive of his struggles to reconcile not necessarily what was lost, but how to represent those losses (Eng and Kazanjian 6):

Upstairs, I decided to take a peek inside my mother’s bedroom. She sat regally at her makeup desk, fully dressed in a pale evening gown that glistened under the orange light like a mermaid’s scales. Her attention was focused on brushing her long hair, which rippled down her arching back, jet-black and wavy. My mother was not a typically thin Asian woman. She had heavy breasts and round hips, joined by a thin waist. Her eyes, big and rimmed with dark mascara, concentrated on the image before her. Years spent watching my mother’s gaze at herself in the mirror had convinced

me that she was the rarest, most beautiful creature that ever walked the face of this Earth. (7)

Popular reviews of the memoir interpreted such descriptions as implying that Nguyen's mother was "virulent" (*Publisher's Weekly*) and "vain" (*Biography*). However, simply because the text is autobiographical does not justify critiquing the personalities of the individuals involved. Rather, to treat the memoir as a literary text warrants examination of how Nguyen's representations of his mother (attempt to) represent loss and how he engages with Vietnamese literary history's deployment of the female body as allegory for homeland in a manner that is more ambivalent because of his tenuous position as a multiracial child of the U.S. war in Viet Nam. It initially seems as though his mother's body, in its regal and exceptional beauty, presents a nostalgic feminization of his earliest memories in Viet Nam, one that reduces his mother to mere object—as "mermaid," as "creature"—that operates as some national allegory by "perpetuat[ing] the analogy between Vietnamese women and the country Viet Nam as passive victims" (Pelaud 128), particularly South Viet Nam because Ho Chi Minh's government depict the south as "feminized, decadent, and cowardly" in order to empower the north's political imperatives and prowess (Duong 6). And, while the abundance of her body, her long hair and large breasts and eyes in particular, could be read as a reductive romanticizing of the Vietnamese landscape, these aestheticizations speak to how he renders his mother as an embodiment of fertility, of life and protection.

The protection that Khuon is able to afford her sons is granted by her affiliation with foreigners. Both of her sons' U.S. American fathers gave her the money that she used to build the gated mansion in which they live (22), and she frequently throws parties

with “foreign guests with sandy hair and blue eyes” in attendance (10). Nguyen describes his mother as foreign herself: “formidable, elegant as an Egyptian queen” (10). Nguyen’s correlation of Khuon’s beauty and her affiliation with the foreign initially bears the effect of valorizing and idealizing her—she and Viet Nam are the object of desire, at least in Nguyen’s nostalgic representation of his earliest childhood memories.

This ideal rendering of his mother soon deteriorates, as Nguyen becomes considered traitorous for his affiliation with foreigners. Against the urgings of children in his neighborhood, Nguyen talks to a U.S. American soldier who says he reminds him of his brother at home in the U.S. Nguyen juxtaposes this flashback with a scene in which a Northern Vietnamese soldier “play[s] with [his] curly hair” while educating him about the rhetoric of Uncle Ho (66). Just as many of Nguyen’s narrative choices hinge on reversals, foils, and binaries, this juxtaposition emphasizes that he, phenotypically and ideologically, falls outside of what is considered acceptable “Vietnamese” and, more than that, his marked difference is a source of danger for him and his family.

As time goes on and Nguyen grows more attuned to his difference as a bastardized mixed-race child, his descriptions of his mother come to speak to what Duong refers to as the “trauma of betrayal” (2). Duong explains that the family unit is imagined as the nation and vice versa (4), and, within that symbolic, interpellative structure, the mother figure is most often pitted as the “treacherous subject” (3). The female, in other words, is the screen onto which national and global configurations of loyalty and betrayal are projected (Duong 2), just as Nguyen does to his own mother. His use of figurative language in representations of her as the memoir progresses blame Khuon for betraying the national family by sleeping with the white U.S. Americans who

fathered him and his brother, but also his by breaking up his existing family unit. For instance, when Nguyen's mother disobeys her parents by rejecting their insistence on taking Loan, the servant girl who is the caretaker for Nguyen and his brother, with her to escape invading North Vietnamese forces, Nguyen describes his mother's face as "frozen in an icy mask" (24). No longer is Nguyen representing his mother as the fertile, feminine ideal as he did in the opening of the memoir, but now she is cold and inhuman in her anaesthetized countenance.

Nguyen represents his mother as culpable for the discrimination he suffers. Nguyen's family members call him a half-breed, telling him that the term designates him as a "bastard" (97), despite the fact that his mother was at one time married to their fathers. Nguyen's changing descriptions of his mother trace his absorption of external discrimination against multiracial children and their mothers. The discrimination includes traitorous hypersexualization, as seen when Khuon eventually submits to the pressure of the imposed prostitution narrative. Charged with the task of documenting inhabitants who qualify as citizens under the new communist regime, community leaders interrogate the paternity of her children by subjecting her to a false dilemma: the butcher's wife demands, "there are two possible ways for a person to have had mixed-blood children: through prostitution or through adoption. You have admitted earlier that fucking was how you got them, so you must be a hooker" (111). Khuon responds, "Yes, I was" (111). It is because of her mixed children who "remind everyone of the past" (124) that Khuon must assume the identity of a prostitute in order to conform to the national narrative represented by Kieu, which is inculcated by anti-American rhetoric of the new communist leadership. Khuon is repeatedly referred to as a "lowly prostitute" and a

“whore” by other characters throughout Nguyen’s memoir and, although Nguyen never refers to her in those terms himself, his figurative descriptions of her render her along similar lines. The indexing of mixed-race children and their mothers as participants in, and products of, immoral, treasonous behavior marks them as outside the norm of the new nation, undeserving of protection and a future. Assumed promiscuity is also transferred to Nguyen himself. When he narrates the experience of being molested by his mother’s boyfriend Lam, he explains that Lam calls him a ““little tramp”” (132). By utilizing that language, Nguyen seems to connect the discrimination against his mother for her sexual history with his own sexual abuse. This association between multiraciality and sexual perversion or stagnancy continues when his teenage girlfriend Kim refuses his sexual advances because she is concerned about their own potential children being discriminated against: ““What will happen to the baby, unwanted before it’s even born because its father is a half-breed?”” (315). These instances implicitly reinforce his existence as a mixed-race Vietnamese as a life of transgression, perversion, and pain, all historically associated with multiracial offspring (Ifekwunigwe 8).

As the memoir continues, Nguyen’s descriptions of his mother illustrate the power of the family-as-nation narrative that blames and punishes the mother. When Nguyen and his brother Jimmy’s mixed features draw attention and incite gossip, their mother devolves to a “caged animal” (44). After the fall of Sai Gon Nguyen writes that his mother “looked like a monster” (45). It is no coincidence that these descriptions appear at points when Nguyen is made hyper aware of the shifting family and national structures around him. His language, consciously or not, renders his mother as the reason for his increasingly tenuous position as a multiracial child in recently conquered South

Viet Nam. Rather than reinforce the reviews that judge his mother's character and thereby are complicit in Nguyen's figuring of her as the brunt of his own uncertainty and fear, I aim to carry out Duong's project of trans-Vietnamese feminism that aspires to "decenter nationalist notions of the family and familial notions of the nation, both dependent on each other and other circumscribed roles for men and women" (3). Showing the continuities between Nguyen's figurative language and long-standing tropes of the female Vietnamese mother as traitorous prostitute allows for the cultivation of a deeper awareness of representations of Vietnamese mothers and their mixed-race children as shifting terrains for negotiating identity. Internalizing those metaphors can create division and self-hatred, but recognizing those narratives as the metaphors that they are, rather than giving into judging Khuon's character for instance, enables us to deepen our understanding of how mixed individuals negotiate their identities in relation to a sense of family, to define family itself.

In contradistinction to his haunting descriptions of his mother, Nguyen glorifies his absent father as a U.S. American promise of protection. Even though all Khuon tells her son is that she worked as an interpreter for his father, whom she calls Mr. Russo, and that he is, in vaguely clichéd terms, "talk, dark, and handsome" and "a good father" (271). Despite the fact that Khuon says Russo referred to her only as "Nancy Kwan," Nguyen insists that the man would remember them (271). Nguyen's idealization of his father embodies his boyhood fantasies of the U.S., as is evinced by the letter Nguyen recreates in the memoir in which he writes to his father with "euphoria and hope," pleading to be taken to America to alleviate his hunger and unhappiness (272). It is clear here that Nguyen's anonymous father stands in for the U.S.—a place that Nguyen

idealizes as a multicultural wonderland that would grant him safety from the discrimination he suffered in Viet Nam.<sup>46</sup> When he receives his letter confirming that he is granted immigration to the U.S. under the Orderly Departure Program, Nguyen writes, “There had not been a moment of happiness since the day I was taught the word *half-breed*” (281). He treats Viet Nam as the source of his pain as a multiracial child and the U.S. as a cure to that pain. What’s more, that at the end of the memoir when Nguyen describes his imminent departure, he pivots to identify as U.S. American rather than Vietnamese. Describing his approach to the office that arranged for Amerasian departures, Nguyen writes, “for the first time in many years, I was not ashamed of my American features. Watching them [the other Amerasian children of the ODP] made me realize where I came from, and where I should belong” (303). Here, Nguyen translates his phenotypical likeness to some of the other Amerasian children into a sense of origin and belonging to the U.S. where, in his representation, multiraciality is celebrated rather than condemned. Doing so seems to commit the problematic discursive act of rejecting racism only to actually emphasize race and racism (Gordon and Newfield 3). The way in which Nguyen represents his journey as a multiracial Vietnamese aligns with narratives that cast the U.S. in the role of benevolent savior that liberates those entrenched in the

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<sup>46</sup> Nguyen’s glorification of white American paternity is repeated in the author’s postscript at the foot of his story “The Lost Sparrow.” Nguyen ends with “I married the daughter of the man who wrote *Chim Hot Trong Long*. On my wedding day, he whispered to me, ‘From now on, you can rest assured you have a father.’ And I have called him Dad, ever since” (308). This autobiographical addendum to the story (which doesn’t seem to be a requirement of the mixed race literature anthology in which it appears because the other authors don’t include one) sheds light onto how and why he tells the story of “The Lost Sparrow.” In it, even though the narrator is not a product of prostitution, she projects her self-hatred and others’ association of her with prostitution onto the women sex workers at whom she gazes from afar: “She saw herself among the bare-breasted women. The sores would sparkle on her skin like jewelry. *Damnably whore*” (306). Here, as in *The Unwanted*, Nguyen glorifies the father figure at the expense of villainizing the mother as a culpable, marginalized figure.

chaos and violence of presumably backwards Viet Nam, ultimately reinforcing racialized polarities of white U.S. Americans and Vietnamese.

In this final scene, Nguyen begins to ventriloquize the pro-U.S. celebratory rhetoric of multiracialism, as if to demonstrate his Americanness. Nguyen glorifies the African American woman conducting his pre-departure interview: “She was a black woman [...] as beautiful and alien as a colored porcelain doll” (304). Aestheticizing her in this way contrasts the racist and anti-black rhetoric (to be discussed in further depth in the next section) that Nguyen encounters in Viet Nam. Nguyen’s language in this scene seems an effort to prove he transcended the racism with which his childhood in Viet Nam was fraught by “becoming” American, especially as he describes the other Amerasians as grasping at him as he walks toward the plane that would take him to the U.S., clinging to “the dream they aspired to live someday themselves” (306). He glorifies himself. This elevation of self not only to the status of model minority but to happy hapa is underscored in the supplementary material the publisher includes at the end of the memoir. As mentioned briefly at the beginning of this chapter, in the conversation with the author, when asked to describe his life in the U.S., Nguyen responds, “I am living the American dream. [...] I am a proud member of the melting pot. American has given me so much opportunity that it makes up for all the suffering I went through as a child. Life in America has proved to me that people are innately good.” Of concern in this statement, along with his epilogue that claims the nightmares stemming from his childhood traumas ended with the publication of *The Unwanted*, is the message that the U.S. is a solution to problems of racism sanctioned and enforced by the nation-state.

## Part Two: Multiracial Vietnamese Children as Born from Death

Despite the fact that Nguyen's subscription to the Vietnamese mother-as-traitor and U.S. American father-as-savior narrative eclipses discrimination against multiracial Vietnamese in the U.S., his text, upon close reading, does offer insight into how and why discrimination would follow multiracial Vietnamese across borders. This lies in the biopolitical context that associates the lives of multiracial Vietnamese children with the mass death of both Vietnamese civilians and U.S. soldiers in representations of the highly protested war worldwide. The political stakes of investigating Nguyen's representation of his mixed-race identity lie within his eventual transformation of his mother from a life-giving force to the embodiment of death. These literary moves entangle the lives of Nguyen and his siblings with death. When his mother uses herbal methods in attempt to abort her third child (her only child conceived with a Vietnamese man) so that she can take care of what she calls her "snot-nosed parasites" of mixed-race sons (50), her efforts fail, resulting only in a macabre gush of blood and screaming. Whether intentional or not, the scene tacitly mirrors a previous description of a pregnant woman whose "stomach had been ripped open by many hasty footsteps, and next to her lay her dying fetus, moving weakly under a mob of curious flies" (25). Drawing this parallel illustrates how Nguyen comes to understand his mother, and his own birth, as a marker of death. Nguyen refers to his own birth, and his likeness to his father, as a confrontation with death when he states, "my appearance made [my father] recognize his own mortality" and made him decide to leave Viet Nam (22).

Nguyen's juxtapositions of life and death are not simply a matter of blaming himself or his mother for his father's departure and the potential life in the U.S. Nguyen

could have had, but is rather a testament to deeper biopolitical forces undergirding being a multiracial Vietnamese. Foucault's concept of biopower and biopolitics refers to sovereign governmental structures and practices bearing the intent to survey, extract, and maximize, but also punish, life forces (242). Under biopolitics, bodies are treated as a mass population (245) and, when deemed in need of punitive measures, the sovereign can discipline that population, since "the balance is always tipped in favor of death" (240). As Haritaworn clarifies, even though biopower "identifies its goal as fostering life, it nevertheless coincides with massive death" (12). Achille Mbembe extends this idea in his study of necropolitics, which posits that massive death is systemic to liberal society (Haritaworn 13). Those who are marked for death fall into the state of exception. Defined by Giorgio Agamben, the state of exception includes those who are distinguished from citizens by being stripped of their protection by the state. Essentially, those in the state of exception are considered bare life, otherwise known as "life that does not deserve to live" (137) or "life devoid of value" (138). Agamben describes these lives as those considered lost as a result of illness or accident, but in the case of multiracial Vietnamese, the loss manifests in the racialized political "losses" of mixing with invading U.S. forces, similar to how Carl Schmitt adds that those qualified as the exception were used to distinguish between alliances and traitors during wartime (Ong 5). In this sense, multiracial Vietnamese are considered traitors and thus lives undeserving of life.

This biopolitical process can clearly be seen when Nguyen describes the ransacking of his neighborhood as newly appointed leaders mine their community members' homes for evidence of "sinful" capitalist pasts (127) and, if found guilty, were sent to "death camps." Nguyen and his family are under constant threat of being sent to

these camps, or states of exception, because his mother, in her relationships with white American men, is considered a capitalist traitor. Sex and politics are dangerously intertwined. When Nguyen himself is incarcerated in a reeducation camp for attempting to escape Viet Nam by boat, he is questioned for cavorting with ““prostitutes and hustlers”” (239) and the warden repeatedly refers to him as ““half-breed”” (246), showing the national rhetorical of conflating treason of escape with prostitution, thereby positioning the female as traitor. Within the camp itself, time and space is suspended as “darkness ruled, [and] day and night were obsolete” (248), and the line between alive and dead becomes blurred as prisoners trudge in “zombielike lethargy” (246) and he begins to feel that they are all “refugees from the grave” within own country (249). The living dead state to which he is confined is attributed to his treasonous multiraciality and shows how being cordoned off as bare life in these states of exception is racially charged.

As numerous scholars have pointed out, Foucault omits discussion of racialized biopower.<sup>47</sup> Ann Laura Stoler’s *Race and the Education of Desire* situates Foucault’s theories in the context of colonialism and the racialization of nationhood, citizenship, and selfhood (3-12); she points out that biopower was used to define the home through “a racialized notion of civility” (97), which would pertain to Nguyen who is repeatedly displaced from homes and marked as uncivilized because he is racially mixed. Focusing more specifically on racial mixing, Haritaworn treats multiracial discourse as an arm of Foucault’s notion of the biopolitical state, both in terms of practices of formally examining, measuring and classifying individuals with the census, for instance, but also

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<sup>47</sup> Foucault’s address of racism in his lectures is limited to very general descriptions of how racism “subdivides the species” (255) and is a result of colonization (257). More often than not, Foucault deploys “racism” in the context of the human race and distinguishing between life and death. This generality is what numerous scholars have critiqued.

in terms of the dispersal of biopolitical practices in informal, everyday life, namely the identification as, and demand to be recognized as, mixed (12). Haritaworn argues that such identification is “not particular to the ‘mixed’ subject but rather symptomatic of the broader workings of biopower” (12). Aihwa Ong critiqued Agamben for relying upon the binary of citizen/exception, arguing that with refugees and migrants, there are “multiple kinds and qualities of dispossession” (Briggs 634), including, in this case, multiracialism. The identification of being mixed in daily life as a categorization of bare life, of being worthy of death or already dead, is evident in a short scene in Nguyen’s memoir.

As Khuon orders bowls of noodles for her starved, exhausted children after their trek, Nguyen points out that “At the next table, the prostitute suddenly sat up, screaming into the dark yard with a harsh voice. ‘Get out of here, you whores.’ On her naked shoulders and arms, tiny sores bloomed like red carnations in spring. ‘Stop following me everywhere’” (178). Here, the prostitute wields against her children the same language used to marginalize her, further displaying the layers of internalized and perpetuated patriarchal, colonialist discourse. As the Nguyens do not see who the prostitute is screaming at, the restaurant proprietress explains that her children are mixed American, “‘the burnt-rice kind’” who are “‘too black to be seen’” in the dark night beyond the boundaries of the restaurant (178). The consensus in accounts of multiracial Vietnamese children is that those who had black fathers were subjected to the worst discrimination, the primary reason being that light skin is considered more attractive in Viet Nam, as it is “valued as a sign of social privilege, connoting not having to work outside” (McKelvey 64). It is only when informed of their presence that Nguyen recalled that he “could see two pairs of eyes burning at us like hungry wolves” (178), using the very animalized

language that has been used against him throughout his childhood. The ambivalence embedded in his language, his seeing of these other mixed children, points to his own difficulties in remembering and articulating his position as a mixed-race individual, showing that the process is one of constant renegotiation, which remembering and writing requires.

The implicit equation of white with life and dark skin with death displays how, as Foucault asserts, racism functions within biopower to fragment and hierarchicalize races, to “create caesuras within the biological continuum” (255). In doing so, racist biopower “regulate[s] the distribution of death” (Mbembe 17) to the end that “the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer” (Foucault 255). Because mixed-race children are seen as the “abnormal” and “inferior” race—more so a reminder of the U.S. invasion of Viet Nam—the biopolitical regime of the new Vietnamese sovereign state as depicted in Nguyen’s memoir “consists of the capacity to kill in order to live” (Mbembe 18) in that it attempts to erase mixed-race children—a sort of living dead—in order to live as a more racially pure nation-state.

The danger of being eradicated as bare life without being “classified neither as sacrifice or homicide” (Agamben 82) is doubly pronounced for mixed-race girls. This is particularly apparent when the soup lady recounts the cause of death of one of the prostitute’s other offspring:

The girl used to come around here begging for food. They grabbed her one day. It happened right here down this street. Three men. They had some sort of agreement with the mother, buying the kid’s virginity. Well, they took her to that deserted farm next door. One of them put his you-know-what in her mouth while the other two pinned her down. The poor child

didn't know, so instead of pleasing him, she bit down on it. [...] They killed her with a rock. [...] Then they paid the mother to keep her mouth shut. The police couldn't find the killers, and the girl died in vain. No one cared. (179)

Though the soup vendor recounts the Black-Vietnamese girl's violent death in a detached, rather sanitized tone (e.g.: his "you-know-what"), her story underscores that, in the wake of U.S. retreat from Viet Nam, mixed-race children were treated as disposable bodies, as bare life, in that they were subjected to violence perpetrated by citizens, demonstrating Foucault's point that the sovereign's biopower manifests and is exercised in multiple loci, all granted impunity. The disposability of these lives was determined by race, and in Viet Nam there were clear hierarchies based on gradations of skin color. Valverde explains that discrimination against dark-skinned mixed Vietnamese, like the case of the girl Nguyen describes above, occurs because "Vietnamese racism against Blacks stems from the French colonial period, when North African members of the French army were stationed in Viet Nam" (140). With this added historical context, it is apparent that biopolitics functions within a palimpsest of colonialism and racism. So, in this brief scene wherein Nguyen and his two siblings are nourished by their mother and the "soup lady," their life-sustaining experience of eating heartily is compromised with this multilayered story of violent discrimination and death, keeping them suspended between life and death. They are, in essence, always already dead.

Although Nguyen is mixed white, Nguyen is subject to biopolitical forces within his own family as well. Nguyen's cousins kick his dog Lulu to death and, in a parallel act of violence, beat Nguyen to the point that he and his brother Jimmy flee the family home. As Nguyen "crawl[s] on all fours" (101), his animalization can be read through what

Mbembe argues is part of colonialism being a state of exception in that “[i]n the eyes of the conqueror, *savage life* is just another form of *animal life*” (24, original emphasis). Mbembe explains that the colonized is associated with the animal in its connection to nature, which is obvious in the symbolic figure of Lulu, but also more implicitly in the fact that Nguyen’s animalness is attributed to his mixed-race, which is viewed as a result of his mother’s unrestrained sexuality—a body in savage excess. Thuy-Anh Vo, currently advocating to reintroduce to U.S. Congress the Amerasian Homecoming Act that would grant mixed children automatic citizenship, recently described the hypersexualized epithets used against her father, who is the son of a Vietnamese woman and a white American soldier. They called him “my lai mười hai lỗ đít” (“mixed child have twelve assholes”),<sup>48</sup> as well as subjected him to bullying and beating him to near deafness. Similar to Nguyen, Vo’s father says that others who were mixed like him were “abandoned or thrown into ditches” because they “represented colonialism, the enemy and infiltration of ‘the white man’” (Vo 71).

As Pelaud stresses, the stigma of mixed race children is not solely a matter of racism, but an articulation of anti-colonial movements (126) in that it discourages racial mixing with foreign forces, which would include histories of imperial invasion and more contemporary processes of neo-colonial globalization, as in the influx of Western corporations mushrooming across Viet Nam’s landscape, including hotels, fast food, garment industries, and technology firms. Nguyen invokes these histories of invasion as he recounts his mother’s fear that her two mixed-race sons would be hurt or killed if they

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<sup>48</sup> Many of the Amerasian children McKelvey interviewed also testified that their peers antagonized them, coming up with a rhyming taunt that roughly translates to “Amerasians have twelve assholes” (27).

stayed in Viet Nam after the U.S.'s retreat. Nguyen explains that his mother "knew that Vietnam was beset with racism. Through generations of defiance, as they struggled against Chinese, Japanese, and French oppression, this bias had been ingrained in every Vietnamese person. My mother feared what it would do to my brother and me in the future" (22). Here, Nguyen, in paraphrasing his mother, indicates that mixed children embody a presumed weakness, a breach in the fortitude of centuries of Vietnamese resistance, as in Kieu's allegorical fall from grace. As physical reminders of those traumas, mixed children would be, and were, subject to discrimination as an extension of edifying the strength of the nation-state and its foundation upon a notion of racial purity, which will be discussed further in the following section. Because his mother, in the footsteps of Kieu, is charged with shouldering the responsibility of bearing this "shame," she expresses and imparts the fear of retaliation against racial mixing to her children. The future, as taught by his mother, is a dangerous path for a multiracial Vietnamese child. Mixed-race children are categorized as part of the state of exception, within the physical and political space of the reeducation camps, because their lives are deemed residue of the mass death inflicted by the war in which their white American fathers served and represented threat to Viet Nam.

This racialized liminality between life and death is interestingly portrayed on the cover of the book, what looks like a studio or school portrait of the author as a child. In it, the young Nguyen crosses his arms as he stares straight ahead at the camera, with what registers for me as sadness, worry, or discomfort in his eyes. On the one hand, the cover photo could be read as an empowering effort to make visible Asian Americans, let alone multiracial Vietnamese Americans, who have endured a centuries-long history of

invisibility and its implications of exclusion, disenfranchisement, and discrimination.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, the headshot photo, captioned with the book's title *The Unwanted*, sentimentalizes Nguyen as a mixed race child of Viet Nam. In seeming to solicit sympathy, or even pity, from the audience upon their first visual encounter with the text, the cover presents what Judith Butler refers to as the "struggle at the heart of ethics" (135). In *Precarious Life*, Butler explains how the exhibition of the Other's face presents the audience with the struggle to determine if the image humanizes or dehumanizes the Other (141). The risk of dehumanizing is backed by the nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific techniques of "reading," and thus pathologizing and marginalizing, non-white bodies body (Somerville 265). The cover photo is ambivalent in that the audience can, or should, see Nguyen as both humanized and dehumanized, as seeking heightened sympathy or unworthy of life. That is to say that, if read as Vietnamese, Nguyen is a dehumanized Other in that he is a product and reminder of war that the U.S. would like to forget. However, if read as White, he is sympathetic and worthy of "saving" to assuage U.S. guilt about its war in Viet Nam.

Notably, the cover photo shows the worn edges of the original photograph and mirrors the effect of crinkled paper below the photo and on the spine of the book. The publisher's choice to emphasize the wear of the image creates the effect of the reader salvaging the photo and, by extension, Nguyen. Granting the reader a sense of saving this

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<sup>49</sup> Eleanor Ty has pointed out, throughout history Asian American visibility has depended on the body (4), and, in response, Asian American authors and artists are "reinscribing marks etched on their corporeal selves" to "destabilize the set of meanings commonly associated with their Asian bodily features" (11). Ty asserts that "the politics of the visible is also about our invisibility" (4). This is to say that "'the politics of the visible' deals with the effects of being legally, socially, and culturally marked as 'visible' and, paradoxically, with the experience of being invisible in dominant culture and history" (12). The risk of making the invisible visible, though, is that the dominant American culture's scopophilic gaze that reads the Asian body as legible "places the spectator in a position of knowledge, mastery, power" (11).

mixed-race child from all of the hardships he experiences in the state of exception in Viet Nam, the publisher casts itself and the readership as the antithesis, the remedy, to the biopolitical regime. It is not the passport photograph of fifteen-year-old Nguyen that is described in the memoir (293), but a childhood photo from the time that he was first confronting racial discrimination in Viet Nam. The U.S., then, is figured as savior, as life. Built within this construct, the text does not acknowledge the ways in which states of exception manifest within the U.S. after its war in Viet Nam was “over” and the multiracial children and many of their mothers immigrated to the U.S.

Even in the U.S., ghostly residuals of the life-from-death follow me. In school, I confronted the “What are you?” question innumerable times. Once, in third grade, I remember attending a cultural food fair and the only other Asian girl in the school, which was predominantly Mexican American and African American students, asked me what “nationality” I was. As early as eight, I was put in a position of having to distinguish and explain between nationality and race, as well as when, how, and why these two concepts were conflated when people saw my face. When I did give in to explaining that I am Vietnamese, Irish, and Norwegian, people were most commonly taken aback, confused as to how what they saw as three disparate ethnicities could possibly come together outside of the presumed G.I.-prostitute narrative, despite the fact that the U.S. is celebrated as a multicultural “melting pot” where diverse individuals could meet, as my parents did—at a post office in Huntington Beach, California, to be exact. Oftentimes when people have asked me the follow-up question of which branch of the military my father served in (he didn’t because his matriculation in university allowed for a deferment of his draft number), I witness their facial expression and the tenor of their voice change. Invariably,

I see and hear the bated breath of expectation, the anticipation that the story of how I came to be involves horrific violence and death. On the other side of that haunted Pacific, the sideways gazes of the Vietnamese show curiosity and/or condemnation, aware of the presumed history they believe that I make visible. This echoes in the inquiry that is the refrain of my existence: *Bố em là người lính, ha?/So your father was a soldier?* In other words, was my mother a whore? Every time someone asks me this question upon introduction, I watch their faces scan my own, calculating age and timelines in their heads. A few gray hairs. Fall of Sai Gon. But no wrinkles yet. Orderly Departure Program. Too young. Maybe the Amerasian Homecoming Act. Their faces and voices tacitly say to me, how could you exist without mass death? You cannot, they communicated to me. With these assumptions, I became wracked with guilt to be multiracial Vietnamese because my life was so inextricably intertwined with the death of both Vietnamese and U.S. Americans during the war. To identify myself was to internally grapple with the resounding question, “Who must die so that we can live?” (Haritaworn 14). In this way, my understanding of being bare life in the biopolitical sense did not manifest in the horrific external circumstances that Nguyen endured, but rather in the internal struggle to reckon with being a life enshrouded in death, of being walking, talking evidence of a condemned war that rendered millions of Vietnamese and thousands of U.S. soldiers a state of exception.

While my responses to such questions and assumptions varies from divulgence to silence to diversion to boldfaced lies, my mother has devised and rehearsed a response that she has used over the years and that she instructed me to use during my visit to Viet Nam. This response was to tell the interlocutor that, yes, I am mixed, but not American. I

am half-French. Invoking the previous colonial power is supposedly a wound less raw and, for my mother, deflected the implication that she was a prostitute. During one of my childhood visits to the doctor when I was being diagnosed with Hepatitis B, which many Vietnamese carry, the doctor elliptically inquired about my sexual history (non-existent at that point in my life) and quickly pivoted her gaze to my mother as if to inquire about hers in order to determine the origin of the disease, which in the U.S. is assumed to be the result of sexual promiscuity. My mother, understanding the implication, was quick to respond with the lie that I was half-French. Though seemingly unnecessary, if not a non-sequitur, I understood my mother's reflex protest as a method of contesting the assumption that I was the product of prostitution and any of the diseases that might be associated with that practice. Worried that I would encounter similar assumptions that I was the product and practitioner of such diseased sexual acts simply because I was mixed, my mother forced me to promise her that I would not tell any one in Viet Nam that I was mixed American. I could only introduce myself as half-French because Vietnamese people would "like that more," she told me, and if anyone questioned why I spoke Vietnamese so well, I should credit the French school system.

However, one of the most substantial interactions I had while visiting Viet Nam branched out beyond these reductive questions and assumed answers informed by the skeletal prostitution-G.I. narrative. Rushing to eat my ice cream before it melted in the heat and humidity of the Vietnamese summer, I locked eyes with a motor scooter rider who began to approach me where I sat on the curb outside of the national "reunification" palace in Sai Gon. Because of the tractor beam-like sense of purpose in his eyes, when this man first approached I thought he wanted money, which would be expected whether

he perceived me to be American or “Viet Kieu.” In broken English, the man introduced himself as Vinh, coincidentally my biological brother’s name, and asked us if my travelling partner and I would like a ride anywhere, pointing to an older man he called his uncle who was standing next to another moped. I met Vinh early in the trip while I was still enthusiastic to disobey my mother’s wishes by speaking Vietnamese with as many people as I could. So, I responded to Vinh’s introductory proposal by telling him in Vietnamese that we did not need a ride because we were waiting to tour the palace grounds that housed war-era artifacts, including captured tanks from the South Vietnamese and U.S. militaries.

Though there were a few instances in which people on the street solicited me for sex or drugs and I chose not to understand the Vietnamese language, I usually chose to practice my Vietnamese language skills as often as possible. As it often happened during my trip to Viet Nam, the rhythm and flow of Vietnamese coming out of my mouth unlocked the hearts of many of the people I met. When they knew that I was Vietnamese and that I could understand them in their native language, they shared stories personal, painful, funny, and, always, torrential. Vinh was a flood. Since my travelling partner spoke only English, Vinh spoke directly to me for the good part of an hour in the heat, all in Vietnamese, save for a few sentences with which he attempted to impress me with the French he had learned and was very proud of.

Of the many stories Vinh told me in our time at the gates of the palace, the longest one stands out in my memory as distinct through the hazy heat waves of that day. When I told him I was from California, he mentioned that his father lived in the U.S. Suddenly crestfallen, Vinh proceeded to tell me that his father had abandoned him for an American

woman he met while travelling. He did not say what this woman's racial makeup was, if she was Vietnamese or white, but it didn't seem to matter, as her being American and taking away her father echoed the sentiments of the Kieu narrative, but of a different contact and crossing—it was his father, not a mother, who was “tainted” by sexual/romantic relations with a foreigner, and his father had gone to America rather than stay behind in Viet Nam. I don't think it was coincidental that Vinh was the only person I met in Viet Nam who did not question who my mother or father was. It was as if he knew, based on his own personal loss of his father, that those questions were painful and the answers exceeded the reductive molds that the American G.I.-Vietnamese prostitute narrative imposed.

Later in the trip, Vinh and his uncle met up with my travelling partner and I for lunch. Afterward, they took us to Chợ Lớn, Sai Gon's Chinatown, for my companion to have a tailored suit made. Upon introduction, one of the female tailors remarked how my large size was beautiful and then asked if my father was a soldier. In the split second that I was negotiating a diplomatic response so that she would still agree to sew a suit for my friend, Vinh jumped in and clicked his tongue at her, simultaneously flicking ashes from his cigarette on the floor of her shop. He mumbled something about showing no tact, and he flashed me a quick look of understanding and protection. The woman apologized by offering me food and a discount on a tailor-made áo dài, the traditional Vietnamese dress. She did not ask me anything else about my racial makeup.

In that moment, I realized that, despite his aversions to Americans and what they had taken away from him personally, Vinh understood that the relationships between Vietnamese and Americans were more complex than that of the G.I. and the prostitute.

His father had taught him that through his absence, through the parallel life Vinh had imagined his father living with his new stateside family, just as I had imagined finding a sense of familial belonging by travelling to Viet Nam. Vinh and I met each other somewhere in the middle of that imagined space, and in that moment that he protected me from that echoing, injurious question, I felt for the first and only time a sense of family in Viet Nam. Vinh granted me the sense that being me was to be alive and part of a family, rather than by default being born of division and death.

### Part Three: Passing as Vietnamese/American

To survive in a biopolitical context that deems one “disposable” often entails changing the self. Those practices of passing involve changing physical appearance or cultural displays (Williams 167). Though U.S. American literature bears a history of passing narratives far too long to encapsulate within the confines of this chapter, it is important to synopsise some of the key thematic threads in order to better understand Nguyen’s position within the discourse. Predominantly African American works, such as Nella Larsen’s seminal *Passing* and Pauline Hopkins’ *One Blood*, passing narratives often involve notions of authenticity rooted in the one-drop rule of hypodescent.<sup>50</sup> Such notions operate under the assumption that race is biologically determined. According to that “logic,” passing has been perceived as an aspiration toward whiteness. Passing as a member of a socially defined and acceptable group has historically been treated as an improvement or a form of resistance by subverting racial divides, but such subversions

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<sup>50</sup> Kevin D. Brown provides a concise yet thorough history of hypodescent in American racial politics in “The Rise and Fall of the One-Drop Rule: How the Importance of Color Came to Eclipse Race.” *Color Matters: Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of Post-Racial America*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

often end up reifying binary conceptions and “oppositionalized, unequal structures of race” (Williams 167). The historical focus on multiracial people desiring and attempting to pass as white led to pathologization of mixed individuals, treating them as inherently and irreparably fragmented and marginal, as in the figure of the tragic mulatto.

In *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing the Color of Cultural Identity*, Dawkins explains that pathologizing centers on the representation of the multiracial person as being fixated on achieving monoracial identity to overcome being seen as tragic and/or racially treasonous (26). To break out of those hierarchicalized binaries of viewing race that would further reinforce the perception of Nguyen and his mother as racially treasonous, it is imperative for the purposes of this chapter to treat race as a social construct, and racial identities as shifting within that complex terrain. Given this dissertation’s emphasis on the question-and-answer dynamic of Vietnamese American narratives, it is relevant to discuss passing as a matter of rhetoric, as it is rhetoric that informs how the questions are posed, the answers formulated, and the dialogue danced.

As part of the growing number of scholars and thinkers who critiqued that biologically based view of race by pointing out that race is a social construction, Dawkins treats passing as rhetoric. Her rhetorical approach is relevant to framing this chapter because of its emphasis on the posing of questions and various methods of responding. Drawing upon rhetorical tradition, Dawkins debunks Platonic rhetoric’s binaries of truth/deception that risks further marginalizing and pathologizing multiracial people through continued historical amnesia. Instead, Dawkins employs a more Sophistic analytic that frames passing in terms of its variable conditions and the relationship between passer and audience, which ultimately opens up more possibilities for

identification rather than merely black or white (10).<sup>51</sup> Passing can be positive, rather than tragic, and indeed powerful.

For the most part, Nguyen deals with the pressure to pass as Vietnamese as a means of survival. Nguyen remembers how his mother “poured the dark liquid over us and marinated our blond heads for what seemed a long time. [...] Her roughness as she tugged at our hair and her silence burned a panic in us. Both of us were crying from the sting of the dye” (45). His mother Khuon inflicts the pain of passing onto her mixed-race sons in an attempt to be recognized as part of the community, the developing Communist Vietnamese nation, and to thus be granted protection by that state. What constitutes the nation is negotiated through Nguyen’s mixed-race body through enforced practices of passing as Vietnamese. In the public sphere, Nguyen’s body, in testifying to miscegenation resulting from U.S. occupation, is treated almost as a liability, a potential compromise of others’ loyalty to the nation-state. Mixed Vietnamese children were discriminated against because they were reminders of the American presence in Viet Nam that caused so many Vietnamese to lose family members and friends, so Amerasian children were considered to be “children of the enemy” (McKelvey 23). For example, one of Nguyen’s schoolteachers tells him,

The school is planning to celebrate the unification of Vietnam. [...] You are my best student, and I have decided that you will be the front-runner of the march, holding the national flag in your arms.’ She paused. ‘There is one small problem, though. I fear that your appearance may cause some

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<sup>51</sup> Dawkins looks at historical and literary instances of passing that complicate the black/white binary to which many passing narratives have been limited by looking at combinations of passing that add multiple angles to identity. One of her most compelling examples is of Ellen Craft, a mixed black and white woman who passed as a white, disabled man to escape to freedom during slavery. Passing as white granted her mobility and access, whereas passing as disabled allowed her to cloak her illiteracy. While my chapter focuses primarily on racial passing, it is important to consider other forms of passing within the Vietnamese American community, in terms of gender, sexuality, disability, as well as regional and cultural identity.

distraction among the spectators. [...] Do you think these curls would be gone completely if you, let's say, cut your hair really short? [...] I want you to get a haircut, so that no other teacher in this school can criticize my brand-new parade marshal. I want them to be just as full of pride as I am when they watch you lead the march. (141)

Here, the teacher bases her appointment of Nguyen as procession leader on merit, but only under the condition that he cuts off the curls that allude to his multiraciality, an instruction that serves to protect her, not him.

Her individual pride dovetails with the pride in the newly unified nation—a dual pride that is contingent upon Nguyen performing a racialized embodiment of nationhood. This passage is weighted by histories of monoracial conceptions of nationhood that have disenfranchised and discriminated against mixed-race individuals. In her study of the denial of citizenship to mixed-race peoples in Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, Ann Laura Stoler points out the irony that mixed-race individuals were perceived as a threat because of their supposed rootlessness from communities and families, but that the majority of Vietnamese were subject to displacement and abandonment during colonization and war (224). According to Stoler, mixed-race Southeast Asians reflect the instability of the nation as a whole, not just those born of miscegenation, and, in doing so, they destabilize by fostering a “discomforting awareness that these racial categories are porous and protean” (215). Along these lines, mixed-race people can be seen as spotlighting what Ernst Renan, in “What is a Nation?” stated to be the arbitrariness of nationhood, as those borders have been shifting throughout history and that these “nations” are undermined by the multilingual, multiethnic realities of their inhabitants. Because of this, multiracial Vietnamese children were seen as threatening, if not treasonous, to the Communist nation-state and forced into the government’s re-

education camps, as discussed earlier. When the U.S. intervened to airlift Amerasian children who were not in the re-education camps, those who were, including South Vietnamese military officers, expressed resentment toward the perceived favoritism Amerasian children received on account of their paternity rather than the merits of those who fought and struggled for safety and were now suffering in the re-education camps (McKelvey 10). Nguyen illustrates this when an officer snidely remarks that the Orderly Departure Program is ““meant for half-breeds” (308). Thus, Nguyen’s depiction of the ambivalence toward the racialized conception of the nation underscores that nationhood is, as Homi Bhabha states, a matter of performativity and the notions of self/other mere significations within the performance (299). An explicit performance, the parade in which Nguyen is recruited by his teacher to march in illustrates that a performance of nationhood is a “space that is internally marked by cultural difference and the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities, and tense cultural locations” (Bhabha 299).

Though the parade passage above treats passing as performance, Nguyen’s representation of passing practices comes to take on a less-performative language as the memoir progresses. Upon the implementation of legislation to bring them to the U.S., Amerasian children were considered “golden passports” out of Viet Nam, but since they did not have documentation to prove their American paternity, they had to rely on their “mixed racial features” to prove their eligibility (McKelvey 7). In this way, Nguyen’s phenotypically Caucasian features are seen as advantageous. This is evident when, not long before his departure to the U.S. Nguyen presents his practices of passing as linearly leading to an endpoint. He explains how eventually his practices of passing became

unnecessary: “As I grew older, my hair got darker. [...] By the time I was eleven, my blond hair had become a rich brown” (139-40). In this description, Nguyen implies that his changes in physicality are attributed to his and his mother’s supposed willing it into being, and in doing so he seems to internalize an evolutionary, eugenicist type of logic and language that has been used to marginalize him. In pointing out that the practices of passing are no longer necessary, Nguyen suggests that identity is a process, but one whose end goal is to aspire to whiteness, implying that belonging is a status that is achieved, rather than an ongoing negotiation.

I, on the other hand, believe that passing doesn’t culminate in as acceptable an endpoint as Nguyen suggests. Rather, passing is a continual process that changes according to social context, one that I experience in the U.S., always shuttling between Vietnamese and white. When I was a child, my mother tried to pass me as white because, for her, being Vietnamese had proven to be dangerous. She had survived the innumerable dangers of war, and the body counts tallied in her tales of childhood testify to that. Though she had survived the war, her body still encountered struggles with being marked as Vietnamese in the U.S. Shortly after arriving in the U.S. as a teenager, my mother dated an Asian American man who told her that her nose looked like that of an elephant, that her “Asianness” was ugly. Consequently, she invested time and pain into three nose jobs, which in the early ‘80s did not produce the most “natural” results. My uncle, too, went under the knife to slit his eyelids so that his eyes were wider, more Caucasian-looking.

Billboards advertising plastic surgery clinics flank the streets of Little Saigon, California, where I spent most of my childhood—higher nose bridges, wider eyes, and

fuller breasts were all for sale. Andrew Lam, a prolific Vietnamese American journalist who writes for New America Media,<sup>52</sup> recently reported on the increasing rates of Asian American plastic surgery. Lam reports that “According to a survey by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS), in 2005 Asian-Americans had 437,000 cosmetic surgeries. In 2010, the number has risen to 760,691—almost doubled in 5 years.” In the largest population of Vietnamese in the U.S. located in my very own hometown of Little Saigon, CA, “there are more than 50 local listings for cosmetic improvements and surgery” (Lam), and that is a very small geographic area to offer so many plastic surgery services. Lam makes the interesting point that multiracial Vietnamese children were once “derided, chastised and beaten” for being “children of the enemy,” but over time “those mixed children’s features are coveted” by wealthy Vietnamese who “go under the knife to look like them” (Lam). Interestingly, mixed-race children have served as a physical marker of what is desirable to what a Vietnamese should not or should look like.

In my experience, my mixed features did not follow the linear evolution from condemnation to celebration that Lam traces on a historical scale. Rather, the passing practices that my mother enacted upon my body exhibited muddled emotions that sometimes simultaneously pushed me into and pulled me away from my multiracialism. When I was little, my mother, sometimes in the same breath, teased me for looking nothing like her but more like “a Filipino” yet also attempted to shield me from the critiques she suffered for looking “too Asian” by clothespinning my nose to make the bridge higher and the cartilage of the wings less wide. In the summertime, when my skin

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<sup>52</sup> Lam has collected some of his works, journalistic and autobiographical, in two collections: *Perfume Dreams* and *East Eats West*.

yellow-browed and freckled, my mother creamed and powdered my face white. By age nine, I surpassed my mother in height, and she often remarked, “I want to cut off your long legs and attach them to mine. In elementary school, I was the tallest girl. But I stopped growing because I could not drink milk or eat nutritious food like you do.” So, my survivor’s guilt grew with my legs, and I became hyper-conscious of the traits that revealed my Vietnameseness and that marked me as white, as different from my mother.

My passing as a white American was also at times a matter of survival. When I travelled to Viet Nam for the first time in 2010, my mother told me not to speak Vietnamese, just act white because it’s “easier.” “You are more white than Vietnamese anyway,” she says. I remind her, “I’m just as Vietnamese as I am white, Mom. You should know that. I came out of your vagina.” My mother rolls her eyes and replies, “Okay, sure.” My mother’s dismissals of the Vietnamese identity she imparted to me through story, food, language, prayer, and never-ending mourning have always wounded me, yet when I arrived in Viet Nam, I recognized that her insistence that I pass as white had purpose.

At the Sai Gon airport, a mixed girl, who looked much more phenotypically “Vietnamese” than I did and had a Vietnamese last name on her passport, was stopped by customs and was subsequently harassed about her reasons for being there as a “Viet Kieu,” a derogatory term for Vietnamese who left Viet Nam, and was then shaken down for money until she was in tears. Ignorant of how to navigate the situation, I did what my mother told me to do. When it was my turn to speak to the customs official, I spoke in the whitest English I could muster: “Hi!” I exclaimed. “I hear Vietnam is lovely this time of year.” The customs official looked at my Norwegian last name and permitted me to pass

through without a second glance. My surname granted me a sense of power to circumvent the system designed to enact the Vietnamese Communist government's discrimination of "Viet Kieu," especially those whose mixed-race features embody the so-called treason with which Vietnamese Americans have been associated.<sup>53</sup> Dawkins points out that passing can be a form of power in that it facilitates escape from systems of domination and subordination (32). Though doing so may not change the system, tacitly undermining it enables survival. My name, most likely my height, bone structure, and light eye color, as well as my emphasis on my fluency in the English language enabled me to slip through that system of discrimination—to pass—into Viet Nam where, depending on the context and people with whom I was engaging, I did not pass as white, even when I made the conscious decision to try to do so.

On my last night in Sai Gon, my travelling partner dragged me, begrudging, into a massage parlor, insisting "Relax, not everything is the whorehouse you think it is." As we were ushered down the hallway, I peered through the slivers of glass in doorways and caught glimpses of naked men stretched out under the blue light of wall-mounted televisions. One wore a heavy gold pinky ring on a hand that rested on a bulbous belly. In our massage room, an older man rubbed a thick salve on our faces and placed cucumbers on our close eyelids. After he prepped us, I heard the masseuses enter—a young man for me, and a young woman for my male travelling partner. Without saying anything to us beyond "okay?" and telling me in broken English to relax my tense muscles, the two

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<sup>53</sup> In *When Half is Whole: Multiethnic Asian American Identities*, Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu explains that he adopted his mother's maiden name, Shigematsu, to legitimize himself as Asian American and "to be accepted in the patriarchal Asian communities" (36). Though contrary to my particular experience of having my white father's surname be advantageous, Shigematsu reinforces the point that names are an important part of racial passing.

began massaging our legs then placed our feet in buckets of hot water as they moved up to arms and shoulders. For an hour, my eyelids were weighted shut by the cucumber slices and so I only listened to these two young masseuses talk about their lives. Mostly, the girl confessed her frustration with the boss woman who did not intervene when male customers demanded that she go beyond what she is paid to do. The boy, like an elder brother, supported her by agreeing with the injustice of the situation. By that late point in the trip, I had heard so many sad stories, like Vinh's, I did not have the energy to reveal my proficiency in Vietnamese and thereby invite more of such stories.

At the end of the massage and of the girl's stories, the young man peeled the cucumber slices from my face and wiped it clean. Once my face was dry, he hovered over me for a moment and we looked at each other for the first time. He turned to his masseuse partner and said, "This one looks Vietnamese, doesn't she?"

"Mmm," she agreed. "But I like this brother here," she lifted her chin to point at my Caucasian travelling companion. "His nose is straight and high, not like my flat one."

"Yes, he's very handsome," the male masseuse said. Then he turned back to me, and I felt nervous. "Do you think she understands us?" They stared at to me to see if I would react.

I stammered, in Vietnamese, "Yes, I do. I understand everything you said."

Surprised, the girl stumbled backward, and one of her feet got stuck in the bucket of now lukewarm water. Like something out of the opening credits to *Benny Hill*, she fell backward onto a tattered velvet ottoman, and the bucket lifted into the air, spilling foot water everywhere. We all laughed in this moment, but once we helped her to right herself, she stared at me with seriousness in her eyes. "Chi biết nói tiếng Viet, ha?"

“Da,” I assured her that my Vietnamese was not merely some parlor trick. In Vietnamese, I told her, “I am Vietnamese. My mother is from Đà Lạt.”

The girl smiled at me. “You came back,” she said.

My experience at the massage parlor illustrates that the processes of passing are not unidirectional. Even though I attempted to pass as one identity, the interaction I had with others and their readings of phenotypical traits and cultural cues in behavior triggered identification of me as Vietnamese. And, in a massage parlor setting that is almost cliché by this point in its association with prostitution, the prostitution narrative never came up. Once the young masseuses had disassembled my attempts to pass as non-Vietnamese, our bonding as Vietnamese was forged and they treated me no differently because of what many in Viet Nam and in the U.S. had assumed was the violent, immoral sexual impetus of my birth.

That said, my experiences with passing are not limited to the binary of Vietnamese or (white) American. A Southern California native, I am most commonly assumed to be Mexican, which perhaps speaks to the dominance of Mexican immigration narratives in the area. (And indeed the first thing I ate when I returned to the U.S. from Viet Nam was a burrito.) Multiracial Vietnamese photographer has also said in interviews that she is most often mistaken as a Latina. Tellingly, one of Jimmy Kimmel’s responses to Maggie Q’s divulgence of her multiracial identity was “buenas dias.” Hispanic tropes seem to be the default assumption and response to those with “ambiguous” racial identity.

The relationship between Mexican and Vietnamese is interesting in terms of multiracialism cinches together those communities and histories. According to Yen Lê Espiritu, in “Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in U.S.

Scholarship,” the model minority figure that is deployed to describe Vietnamese Americans and to frame multiracial Nguyen’s memoir as a narrative of saving and reformation has been “wield[ed] as an ideological weapon to chastise and discipline poor black and brown communities for perceived persistent problems of poverty, unemployment, and crime” (416). Focusing on narratives that foreground the alternative kinships forged between multiracial Vietnamese Americans and Mexican Americans fosters the understanding of how racial identities are mutually constitutive. Doing so enables a transcendence of model minority rhetoric that has historically pitted Asian Americans against African Americans.<sup>54</sup> Given the history of the model minority narrative being used as a means of essentializing and dividing racial groups, my purpose in including my life narratives of growing up in an area that was predominantly Mexican American shows that those relationships were at times contentious, which speaks to the power of divisive rhetoric based on racial stereotypes that thwarted my ability to pass, but also oftentimes generative in the ways that passing became a process of forging alternative kinships. This is how I came to understand that identity was not limited, as Nguyen’s memoir suggests, to a binary of the white father or Vietnamese mother. Valverde states that “Another alternative to ‘dancing the dance’ is to avoid the Vietnamese American community entirely [...] to look elsewhere for a sense of belonging and acceptance” (142). Espiritu adds that forging such cross-group affiliations is part of “community-building,” which can become part of “our ongoing efforts to destabilize the dominating hierarchies” (33).

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<sup>54</sup> For a thorough history of the Asian American model minority in relation to African Americans, see Ellen Wu’s *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 2014.

The bonds between Chicano@s and Vietnamese Americans, especially mixed-race individuals, are rooted in a deeper history of cross-group affiliations tethered through shared decolonizing spirit. In *Aztlán and Viet Nam*, Jorge Mariscal anthologizes Chicano soldiers' writings from the Viet Nam War in an effort to show the solidarity they sometimes felt with the Vietnamese, stemming not only from shared oppression at the hands of U.S. imperialism, but also a shared agricultural lifestyle. Further paralleling the Mexican and Vietnamese experiences of U.S. imperialism, Shohat and Stam have pointed out that "[t]he very names of some of the military operations in Vietnam—'Rolling Thunder,' 'Sam Houston,' 'Hickory,' and 'Daniel Boone'—resonated with the memory, and the attitudes of the American frontier history relayed in the Western" (121). In this instance, the U.S. government implicitly glorifies the invasion of Viet Nam by invoking the language used to mythologize the conquest of Mexicans and Native Americans in the American West. In recognition of the "political, emotional, and cultural [parallels] between the inhabitants of Aztlán and the inhabitants of Viet Nam" and their shared "suffering from the exploitative nature of U.S. imperialism and capitalism" (Oropeza 95),<sup>55</sup> Chicano@s protestors of the Viet Nam War began to "break apart narrow conceptions of citizenship and national belonging that had privileged whiteness, masculinity, and military service" (82). The challenges to racialized normative conceptions of citizenship were important because both groups, Mexican and Vietnamese, were cast as foreigners invading their own respective countries (Oropeza

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<sup>55</sup> Chicano movement leader Manuel Gomez wrote that Chicanos and the Vietnamese were not foes because to think of them as such would be to reinforce colonialism, but rather they were " 'brothers involved in the same struggle for justice against a common enemy,' namely, the United States" (89).

106).<sup>56</sup> Despite drawing these important parallels between Vietnamese and Mexican American histories, neither Mariscal or Oropeza attend to mixing between the two groups, which would be a significant topic to address in future studies so as to not limit the conversation of multiracial Vietnamese Americans to mixing between Vietnamese women and white U.S. American men as goes the prostitute-G.I. narrative with which this chapter started.

Though these socio-historical parallels between Vietnamese and Mexican Americans seem rather easy to delineate here, the process of achieving cross-group affiliations was not easy, nor linear, task. My experiences in trying to pass as a means of fitting in with Chicanas while I was growing up in San Pedro, California, in a largely Mexican part of the city, were fraught with conflict, testifying to the racial tensions thwarting cross-group affiliations.

In elementary school, Ana had a John Stamos-caliber pompadour circa 1987, a perma-glare, and an effortless oscillation between curses in Spanish and English. Ana was the kind of Chicana I wanted to be. One afternoon, our class was lining up at the end of recess, and Ana was whispering in Spanish to her friend Luz. It very well could be that due to the radiating vibrations of their Spanish conversation I had let my bodily guard down and was leaning into their conversation in an attempt to catch a word I recognized or learn a new sound. Probably too closely because Ana swiveled on the heels of her high-top Reeboks to face me, that glare of hers sharp and hard, and spit Spanish at me. All I caught was “pinche gordita.”

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<sup>56</sup> This is exacerbated now by controversial legislations like SB1070 and the general rhetoric surrounding the increased number of Vietnamese American students in higher education.

My heart beat into the galloping nervousness of preparing to *do* something. “Oh yeah?” I said. “Well,” and here I jutted my chin toward Ana, “*may ãn cuc ði!*” I felt momentarily empowered by the sound of this, of how I made those “c”s cut through the air, hoping that it passed as equivalent to Spanish. But then I remembered that what I said translates to is, “You, go eat poop.”

Ana, though she did not understand the words I had said, only laughed. Behind her, Luz’s body quaked with guffaws and she shook her half-sucked lollipop at me. “That’s a good one, chino,” she said.

There was a push and pull to my efforts to belong to the group of bilingual, bicultural girls I knew growing up because there were no mixed-race Vietnamese kids in my neighborhood, at least at the time. My rejection, based on being a “chino,” was a race-based exclusion—a roadblock to cross-group affiliations intended to transcend the notion of race—that has been echoed in other Vietnamese American literary works, primarily those describing gang culture. In those contexts, passing became a mode of survival that was protected by the gang.

For example, in the title work of Aimee Phan’s short story collection *We Should Never Meet*, a mixed-race Vietnamese girl named Kim, brought to the U.S. by Operation Babylift, establishes kinship outside of bloodlines with a Vietnamese-Mexican gang, though she ultimately decides to leave gang life to find a more complete sense of belonging. Kim demonstrates heightened awareness of her body and her marked phenotypic difference from those who lives in the Little Saigon, California, community where Phan sets the story. Details of physical comportment—from preferring to sleep facing the wall (33) to smelling like French fries (38)—are highlighted throughout the

story. Phan's story shows that the struggle to pass does not disappear upon immigration to the U.S. On the contrary, Phan's protagonist Kim exemplifies the complications of passing as Vietnamese when she bears ties to a gang that does not necessarily define its membership by race. Kim is a foster child who shuttles between "homes" because unlike the other Babylift orphans who had "stayed in the adoptive homes assigned to them," Kim was repeatedly "returned" (45). What Kim doesn't realize is that, as explored in the documentary *Operation Babylift: The Lost Children of Vietnam*, Kim is not the exception to the rule. Her struggles to find a sense of identity are similar to others from Operation Babylift. Jodi Kim's reading of Phan's story points out that "Her situation disrupts the facile assumption made by both the Americans and the Vietnamese at the time of the Babylift that life in the United States would necessarily have been better for such 'orphans'" (220). Like her counterparts, she struggles with identity because of her lack of familial roots: "Kim was classified as an orphan when she arrived in the States as part of Operation Babylift. But that didn't mean her parents were dead, only that they'd given her up. No identification on her but her name. Her real birthday was unknown" (36). Indeed, Kim's existence is paradoxically defined by uncertainty, marked by unanswerable questions of "Don't you want to know about your American father? You look so much like him. Maybe he's looking for you. Maybe he wants you. Maybe he's rich" (52). It is telling that the questions focus on the father, while Kim's concerns in the story revolve around finding a mother figure. These questions' slant on paternity points to the primacy of whiteness and Americanness in narratives of multiracial Vietnamese, particularly Nguyen's, but Kim distinguishes her search for affiliation by pursuing her matrilineal heritage and her attempts to pass as Vietnamese rather than white.

Kim's attempts to pass as Vietnamese, though, are repeatedly rejected. Phan describes Kim as experienced in being discriminated against for her multiracialism: "Kim was used to insults and threats whenever she was caught stealing, especially when they recognized she was *my-lai*" (31). These instances of discrimination reinforce the history of mixed-race individuals being pathologized as criminals, deviants, and generally fragmented and tortured people. Refused the affiliation she seeks with the Vietnamese community, and despite her bonds with one of her foster siblings, Kim discovers a sense of belonging in her relationship with a gangster named Vinh who belongs to the gang Brookhurst 354. The gang affords her affiliation and protection, "beating up assholes that harassed her" (41). The story picks up at the point that Kim is working her way out of the debts, material and emotional, accrued during her dependent romance with Vinh, in which she "let him fuck her out of gratitude" (48). Before deteriorating into a relationship based on sexual obligation, the rapport between Vinh and Kim indicates how multiracialism was a reason for inclusion, rather than exclusion. Kim is recruited and accepted expressly for her racial makeup, as "Her height was an asset; so was the ambiguity of her racial makeup. Lots of people mistook her for Hispanic, sometimes even white" (28). Her inclusion, though, could be interpreted as merely an advantage to crime, as her ambiguous ethnic makeup would be difficult to identify in a line-up.

However, reading Kim's identity through the lens of criminality risks essentializing Vietnamese Americans as perpetrators of violence that are considered extensions of the violence committed during the U.S.-Viet Nam War. Asian American scholar Jodi Kim's analysis of the story borders on this as she argues that his gang activity attest to the "persisting legacies of the Vietnam War," in that he "complicates the

politics of defeat and victory by highlighting how much the ultimately ‘defeated’ Americans destroyed Vietnam” (222). Although attending to the conditions of violence that Vietnamese Americans face is certainly important, especially to overcoming the effacing model minority narrative, suggesting that those exposed to violence will inevitably succumb to violent behavior themselves borders on pathologization of Vietnamese Americans. Such pathologization is evident in T.J. English’s sensationalized study written in the style of a true crime page-turner, *Born to Kill: America’s Most Notorious Vietnamese Gang, and the Changing Face of Organized Crime*, wherein English melodramatically describes the young Vietnamese American men, many of whom are identified as multiracial, as “a brotherhood born of trauma, sealed in bloodshed” (9). Similar effects appear in more formal sociological studies of Vietnamese American gangs, such as Patrick Du Phuoc Long’s *The Dream Shattered*. Drawing upon his interviews with inmates at juvenile correctional and rehabilitation facilities in California, psychological counselor Long treats racial mixing as a major cause for Vietnamese American gang violence. Long describes Amerasians as “most to be pitied” (61), and argues that “many of these ‘children of dust’ will join Vietnamese gangs—in fact, street gang actively recruit them. An astonishing 90 percent of the male Amerasians who ended up in San Francisco are members of gangs” (70).

High statistics present gang violence as a threat for multiracial Vietnamese American males in particular. However, further investigation of how such figures are calculated in the U.S. Department of Justice’s “Fact Sheet” about “Vietnamese Youth Gang Involvement” reveals that the majority of Vietnamese American “gang members,” thirty-six percent according to this study, were identified as such through a theory called

“social centrality,” vaguely described as an individual who “identifies at least one gang member among his peers who provides core social support” (Wyrick 1). By this logic, mere friendship with someone who participates in gang activity could implicate the individual as a gang member his/herself. Vietnamese American slam poet Bao Phi has pointed out that the rhetoric of lumping Southeast Asians into the category of “gang member” justifies police discrimination and even valorization for imprisoning, shooting, and killing Asian American “gang members.”<sup>57</sup> Although it is important to address the Vietnamese American alienation and marginalization that may be alleviated by the surrogate kinships that gangs offer (Vigil et al 210),<sup>58</sup> doing so evidently often risks committing fallacies of faulty cause and effect and presenting sweeping generalizations that homogenize and pathologize multiracial Vietnamese Americans, thereby neglecting to account for the diverse range of experiences that are evinced by this conversation of Nguyen’s memoir, my life narratives, and Phan’s short story.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> In his poem “8(9),” Phi writes nine stanzas in memoriam of Fong Lee, a Hmong-American teenager—not a recognized gang member—who was shot at nine times by a police officer (eight of those bullets puncturing his body, five of which entered when Lee was already on the ground) who received the Medal of Valor. The term “gang member” parenthetically interrupts the lines of the poem to visually represent the intrusion of criminalizing discourse against young Southeast Asian Americans. When I saw Phi perform this poem at University of Southern California, Phi’s fellow slam poet Kelly Tsai read all of the mentions of “member” in the poem, and the contrast of her voice to Phi’s powerfully showed the brainwashing effect of the anti-Asian rhetoric. Despite the evidently anti-Asian rhetoric, Phi explained in his comments prefacing the performance that the Fong Lee shooting and the ensuing injustice of the trial did not receive media attention as the Trayvon Martin shooting did. The sweeping-under-the-rug of the Lee case to spotlight the Martin case seems to be another instance of the racialization of Asian Americans being played off that of African Americans. In other words, the Asian American story was ignored to perpetuate the model minority stereotype while at the same time reinforcing the stereotype of the African American male as aggressive and violent.

<sup>58</sup> Vigil et al point out that the high school dropout rates for Vietnamese Americans in Orange County, California, were double that of their white American counterparts during the 1990s, which belies the model minority mythology that effaces these larger social and political issues.

<sup>59</sup> Though it does not address multiracialism directly, which is the reason I am not discussing it in the body of this chapter, Lac Su’s memoir *I Love You are for White People* also addresses Vietnamese-Mexican relations through gang life. Su recounts how he learned on the playground, and later in gangs, that finding a sense of belonging among another racial group was fraught with tension. At recess, children chant racial

Indeed, as Phan's story progresses, Kim differentiates herself from the gang in and through her feelings toward Vinh. Internally, Kim's mixed features create tension in her relationship with Vinh. As she assesses her lingering attraction to him, the narrator admits, "It was a shame he stood only an inch taller than she. Kim knew he couldn't help it, especially since she was so tall because of her white blood" (34). Attuned to the physical differences between them, Kim begins to use these as reasons for distancing herself sexually and emotionally from Vinh, resolving to resume her pursuit to pass as a Vietnamese woman.

It is when an older Vietnamese woman pays equal attention to Kim's body that she is for once not polarized, by others or herself, as being different on account of her mixed appearance. As Kim peruses jade jewelry, the Vietnamese woman working at the store speaks to her in Vietnamese. Phan writes,

How did you know I was Vietnamese? Kim asked. Hardly anyone could tell unless they were looking for it. But this woman knew right away, spoke to her in the native language the very first time. [...] I can tell, the woman said. The way you walk and carry yourself. It's obvious. But I was raised here, Kim said, and before she could stop herself, I'm an orphan.

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slurs at young Su, "things like, 'Ching chong, ching chong,' or 'Kung fu, Bruce Lee...hiya!'" (52). Without any proficiency in English, Su is not yet able to fully understand, let alone respond to, their taunts that reduce him to a pan-Asian stereotype. However, the first friend he makes, Johnny, also Vietnamese but already acquiring fluency in English and Spanish, translates for Su the white and Mexican children's racial slurs, and teaches Su cuss words in English to verbally fight back—"Fuck!...Fuck yoo!...Mudderfuckah you! Fuck yoo, sista. Fuck yoo, fodder. You shit, poosy. Fuck yoo!" (53). His exclusion is also articulated through racial terminology later in his life. In one of his first confrontations with Chicano gangbangers in Los Angeles, Su describes how they racialized his body: "Frog and his brothers don't call me Lac. They like to call me Little Chino or Chinito. Chino is a member of their gang who is Mexican like them but is really short and has slanted eyes" (85). This marked exclusion is reinforced by the role that the Chicanos have Su play in the gang, namely as a pawn in their plans. Because he is Vietnamese, he is kept at the periphery of the gang's kinship structure, undermining its own beyond-bloodlines structure. But Su eventually finds a sense of belonging with a Chicano family. Beaten for once uttering "I love you" to his father, Su describes his awe as he observes his Chicano friend Art exchange terms of endearment with his own father: "I'm transfixed by the verbal interchange between Art and his father. Phrases like 'thank you' and 'I love you' flow so freely from their lips. I try to grasp how these exchanges of affection work" (147). From Art's family, Su learns ways to express himself and to create alternate ways to raise his own children, whose mother is a Chicana.

The woman shook her head. It doesn't matter. Whoever raised you, wherever, you're Vietnamese. (39)

The nameless woman's affirmation of the Vietnamese identity to which Kim aspires and that informs her efforts to pass sparks a maternal relationship with this woman. They share music and stories, the woman offering her advice about her relationship with Vinh. However, the hope for a maternal bond that Kim thought she had established with this woman, who remains nameless throughout the story, is severed when Kim asks her for money that she needs to get out of debt from Vinh, her relationship with him, and the gang lifestyle, only to have the woman refuse her with "You're practically a stranger" (49). The woman follows with a facial expression "located somewhere between confusion and disgust" (49). The woman admits that the kindness she showed Kim was out of pity, and in this moment Kim experiences the familiar sense of difference as expressed through bodily metaphors that she did earlier in the story, prior to meeting the woman. The narrator explains, "Her [the jewelry store woman's] features were not so similar to Kim's, her face, body language not so loving" (50).

The anger Kim feels toward the woman due to her rejection compels her to run back into the arms of Vinh who avenges her through retaliatory theft of the woman's jewelry shop: "They wanted to give back their pain" (53). It is in this moment that theft crystallizes as a theme: as an orphan, Kim feels as though her sense of family and identity was stolen from her and she was stolen from her cultural and ethnic homeland. Her repeated marginalization on account of being mixed continually reopens the wound of this rejection, this theft of selfhood. At another level, too, the thematic weight of theft foregrounds the commodification of Kim, at least in terms of the financial responsibility

she bears to her foster parents and that she takes upon herself before ultimately allowing Vinh to reap for her through theft. In other words, her worth is often described monetarily, but only to underscore how unquantifiable, illegible, and ineffable her struggles are to those around her.

This commodified language through which Kim's "worth" and "exchange rate," so to speak, are expressed bears additional weight given the fact that "Amerasian children were sold in Vietnam to other families as a form of living passport to the United States" (Mydans 2). The ways in which such commodification influences the treatment and perception of multiracial bodies come into sharp focus in Kien Nguyen's short story "The Lost Sparrow," which fictionalizes the diary of South Vietnamese writer Nhat Tien who was born of a Vietnamese prostitute and a foreigner. His English-language adaptation of the story illustrates how this commodification of multiracial children manifests when the nameless blond-haired protagonist is being sexually abused by her stepfather, and her mother's only interjection is limited to "*Be careful. [...] Don't frighten her! She's the ticket that will take us to America*" (299). This young girl is threatened with sexual violence *because* she is mixed, yet also commodified, and thus "protected" in the interest of profit, *because* she is mixed. There are long-standing stereotypes of mixed-race women being "hyperobjectified" as "oversexed" (Valverde 135). Valverde has pointed out that multiracial males tend to be more accepted because of Vietnamese patriarchal and filial mindsets, so the experiences of mixed Vietnamese females underscore added layers of discrimination and danger on account of gender.<sup>60</sup> The precarious position that

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<sup>60</sup> The ways in which gender compounds racial discrimination through sexual objectification and exoticization are illustrated in Kim Lefèvre's 1989 self-proclaimed "autobiographical novel"—an

mixed female children found themselves in resonates with Kim's situation because of the foster fathers who sexually abuse her and incite her being "returned" and the ensuing sense of homelessness that propels her into the arms of Vinh and the Brookhurst 354 family.

Kim's cycles of rejection from her foster families, Vinh and the gang, and the Vietnamese woman suspend her in a liminal space. Phan's story closes on this sense of the ineffability of Kim's plight as a multiracial Vietnamese woman as she sits and waits, not knowing the outcome of Vinh's raid of the woman's jewelry story. Phan's emphasis on "waiting, waiting" (54) creates a temporal lull that evokes an existence defined by questions, by uncertainty.

To conclude, it is a disservice to Vietnamese to think that we are all model minorities, coasting through engineering degrees, making money, and living the American Dream. There is the vivid, thrumming reminder that the reason Nguyen and I exist in the bodies that we do are because of war, of violence and death. To echo Jodi Kim's critique of U.S. imperialism in Asia, we are here only because they were there. With this in mind, I hope to begin to break what Mimi Nguyen calls the culture of indebtedness that has been constructed for Vietnamese Americans, to show that it is

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important indication of the need for blurring and commenting on genre classifications. A mixed-race female coming of age during French occupation of Viet Nam, Lefèvre testifies to how mixed-race boys are preferred over females, who are always under the threat of becoming a prostitute, to perpetuate the role assumed to be the reason for her birth. For instance, in the earliest stages of her sexual development, she recognizes that "pour des métisses comme moi, 'tellement plus désirables que des Vietnamiennes'. [...] C'était comme une infirmité dont je serais atteinte et qui aurait éveillé en lui quelque penchant pervers" (151). This "pervers" exoticization of the colonial past sexualizes her mixed-race body yet at the same time deems her unworthy of marriage, thereby highlighting how certain characteristics mark underlying moral assumptions and evaluations of worthiness as a self and a subject of the nation. Lefèvre is, throughout her life, subject to exclusion and, because she is female, that exclusion also includes sexual violence. Her attempts to pass throughout her "autobiographical novel" center on the blurring of gender binaries, masculine/feminine.

okay, if not encouraged, for second-generation (and third and fourth, and so on) Vietnamese Americans to question, to be curious, angry, ambivalent. Multiracial identities are not something to be pinpointed or fixed, but to be acknowledged as fluid and dynamic as we navigate the ever-shifting terrains of the questions with which we are confronted and the responses that we decide to formulate. As my points of departure with Nguyen, writing does not offer a resolute reconciliation of traumas, but it is through writing that we can be “freed from the colonizer’s teachings of self-hatred” (Pelaud 134). It is my hope that by engaging in life writing in this chapter I can allow for a departure from what is familiar, to question home and homelands (Lockford 85), thereby creating new senses of home, spaces of identification that are in between Viet Nam and America. Of course, there are an increasing multitude of these spaces. I can only speak to Vietnamese-White American mixings, which in a way reinforces the Viet Nam-U.S. binary of history. There are so many other different mixings of Vietnamese, which show how global the diaspora is. These stories have yet to be told and we are, as Kim was at the end of Phan’s story, waiting.

This chapter has raised questions regarding the racial diversity of Vietnamese Americans and alternative kinships that they form in order to carve a sense of belonging. The following chapter will pick up this conversation by discussing diversity in terms of sexuality. As LGBT representation remains an ongoing struggle in the Vietnamese American community at large, the texts I will examine—Andrew X. Pham’s memoir *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam* and lê thi diem thúy’s novel *The Gangster We are All Looking For*—explore

how queerness presents alternative ways of connecting with one another, both in kinship and genres of writing.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

“For Our Truths Change With Time”<sup>61</sup>: Queerness, Alternative Kinships, and Hauntings  
in Andrew X. Pham’s *Catfish and Mandala* and lê thi diem thúy’s *The Gangster We Are  
All Looking For*

In 2010, I booked a flight for my first trip to Viet Nam, which had, at that point, existed for me in my mother’s stories. With my forehead pressed against the airplane window, the ocean appeared a placid, open space that extended empty for miles and hours. I knew, though, that it was full with history, ghosts.

My uncles who tried to escape by boat were captured, beaten, jailed before they even made it to the water and had to wait until the ‘90s to cross the ocean to the U.S. They never spoke about it, though. When I asked one of my uncles about it, he only laughed and showed me his purpled gums where false teeth had been inserted to replace the ones that had been beaten out of his mouth in attempt to starve him to death for daring to flee. My stepfather, who actually made it to a boat, once told me, in unsettlingly nonchalant fashion, the story of his journey—drinking urine, escaping Thai pirates, sunburned lips, beatings, witnessing rapes and murders, arriving alive on unfamiliar shores. “Florida real nice,” he said to end the story, as if he were recounting a vacation.

These memories, at once my mine and not mine, cycled through my mind as I listened to Vietnamese families on the plane bicker about sharing the armrests, as we all crossed the ocean to a country that, to varying degrees, felt like home. For me, the ocean is always all of these stories—their dissonance and their complement. In lê thi diem

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<sup>61</sup> From Andrew X. Pham’s *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam*.

thúy's 2003 novel *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, water is similarly full of stories: napalmed Vietnamese children's bodies glow eerily in it, "bodies stopped in mid-stride, on their way somewhere" (86); another murdered body in the U.S. is hacked to pieces and dumped in the Pacific (91); a sibling's ghost surfaces from its waves. The epigraph to the novel explains that "In Vietnamese, the word for *water* and the word for a *nation*, a *country*, and a *homeland* are one and the same: *nước*." What is significant about this linguistic fact is that "nước" locates a sense of home and national identity not on land or within borders, but in the in-between space of the ocean and seas. As Susan Najita suggests, focusing on the Pacific is a decolonial gesture of decentering Euro- and U.S.-centric discourses of history and literature (2). In line with such an effort from the epigraph to the end of the book, lê's novel brings submerged histories to the surface. As in my experience of the ocean being full and not empty, the epigraph sets up how oceanic and aquatic tropes and metaphors are lê's stylized effort to articulate traumas—traumas of being displaced from one home in Viet Nam to forge another in unfamiliar San Diego, of shuttling between senses of self, both in terms of national and gendered identity, as her adolescent protagonist comes of age. Despite being a sort of "coming-of-age" tale wherein an adolescent Vietnamese girl immigrates to the U.S., the novel is not linear; rather the structure of the book is, in the author's own words, "tidal" and, in its ebbs and flows, acknowledges the quality of trauma in that "reclamation may only be partial, losses may not always be made good, and wounds may never heal" (Najita 18). At the same time, part of reconceiving history as based on water instead of land is to see the former not as distance, but as connection. In this way, the novel, like water, is generative in its presentation of possibilities for ties and kinships across what are typically seen as

finite divisions between binaries of life/death, masculine/feminine, Vietnamese/American. lê's destabilization of such binary logic primarily hinges upon her portrayal of the deceased brother character who emerges from pronounced absence in the text to meld, at times fleeting yet resonant, with the body of the protagonist, his sister.

Though not necessarily as stylistically rooted in water, Andrew X. Pham's *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam* similarly focuses on liminal spaces as sites of trauma but also of possibility. He does so by likewise constructing a non-linear narrative that weaves through past and present, as well as across borders of the U.S., Viet Nam, even Mexico and Japan. The memoir, also sometimes marketed and discussed as a travelogue, narrates Pham's personal, individual experience of returning to Viet Nam over a decade after his family fled the fall of Sai Gon; Pham decides to quit his corporate job in the U.S. and bicycle through the country of his birth. The primary way in which Pham decolonizes histories of the U.S.-Viet Nam War and expectations of Vietnamese American literature is through his own representation of a sibling relationship. In this case, Pham's transgendered deceased sibling, Chi-Minh, haunts the narrative in his returns and retreats, calling for Pham to recall memories he thought were lost and to redirect the readers' navigation of the narrative. This attention to how readers read is seen in both Pham and lê's purposeful use of space on the page. The authors, I argue, emphasize seemingly "blank" page space to textually reinforce their themes of reconceptualizing dichotomies that undergird U.S.-centric historical narratives of the war in Viet Nam, as well as readers' expectations of Vietnamese American literary narratives.

As both Pham and lê pay textual and thematic attention to the dominantly unseen or material, I find that queer of color critique is conducive for thinking through the authors' implicitly politicized messages about historical and literary narratives, as well as their representations of diasporic families, namely the gender-blurring relationships between the central pairs of siblings in both texts. In my reading of Pham and lê's texts as queer, they emerge as manifestations of what Roderick Ferguson points to as "an intellectual document that critiques sociology and literature as sites of knowledge production" (54). That is to say, both of these texts rework U.S.-centric discourses that cast Vietnamese Americans as reformed, compliant, heteronormative members the U.S. nation-state—a conception that operates according to a land-based epistemologies indicating that once you cross a border you become a certain, fixed subject. Pham and lê's texts—though taking autobiographical and fictional approaches, respectively—share a queerness in the identities and familial structures represented, but also in their styles of storytelling: both of which show a diversity of Vietnamese Americans that helps destabilize colonial-era reductive representations of a supposedly homogenous group.

Thus, in taking a queer of color and queer diasporic critique to these texts, I hope to show that their queerness manifests not only in terms of the "gender and sexual heterogeneity that comprises minority cultures" (Ferguson 24), but also in their conception of diaspora, its traumas, and the representations of queer Vietnamese American identities. This is not to propose a one-to-one equation of what Gayatri Gopinath suggests can be distilled down to "queerness is to heterosexuality as the diaspora is to the nation" (11). Rather, bringing the discourses of queerness and diaspora together can be useful for thinking through the ways in which Pham and lê represent the

ambivalence of diverse, dynamic Vietnamese American identities within their texts, as well as the purposeful uses of structure and space on the page to think about queer ways of reading the text itself. The authors' revisions of temporality—playing with the structure of their texts to fold and cycle past, present, and future into one another—but also their meaningful reworkings of spaces on the page call for new ways of writing and reading, as well as for new conceptions of spaces regarded as “home” and Vietnamese American identities within it. The queerness that surfaces in these texts is important to Vietnamese American literature in that they call for readers to reconceive of their relationships to the authors and their narratives. The alternative kinships within the texts, then, can also extend to the relationships between readers and Vietnamese American writers.

With a queer of color critical approach, this chapter will first discuss how lê and Pham's texts represent space and time in a manner that queers writing and reading practices for Vietnamese American works. Further investigating the spatio-temporal constructions of “home” for diasporic Vietnamese in the U.S., I will then examine how the authors destabilize fixed notions of home and of family structures within it. I argue that both writers, in their representations of family, blur gender lines to question how conceptions of “masculine/feminine” inform Vietnamese American identities. Following that discussion, I will analyze how lê and Pham's depictions of queer sibling figures blur dyadic, heteronormative gender lines and open up possibilities for alternative kinships, which in turn present different ways of conceiving of the time and space of diaspora. The haunting presence of past figures, namely the deceased siblings, reenvisions possibilities for the future, not only for LGBT individuals, but Vietnamese Americans at large.

Much of queer of color critique begins with labor and liberalism. As David L. Eng, in *The Feeling of Kinship*, states, “queer diaspora” allows for the decentering of the U.S. and its homonormative ideologies in order to consider individuals occupying alternate spaces and times (12). I start here because globalization and nationalism, central to the conditions of the diasporic Vietnamese movements to the U.S., have been cast as heteronormative, patriarchal, and masculinized. In terms of nationalism and globalization, it is first necessary to address the U.S. imperialism that fueled the war in Viet Nam and contributes to conceptions of ever-changing definitions of “Vietnamese,” “American,” and “Vietnamese American” identities. In *The Anarchy of Empire*, Amy Kaplan asserts that

imperialism is a network of power relations that changes over space and time and is riddled with instability, ambiguity, and disorder, rather than as a monolithic system of domination that the very word ‘empire’ implies. [...] it also suggests the internal contradictions, ambiguities, and frayed edges that unravel at the imperial borders, where binary divisions collapse and fractured spaces open. (14)

With the collapse between the “empire” and those countries and people it attempts to colonize, identity, both national and individual, comes into question. This is to say that the notion of home central to war, imperialism, and diaspora—along with its inextricably tethered binary divisions constructed between Viet Nam/U.S., victim/veteran, masculine/feminine—emerges as a queer space. At an international level, home as a queer space can be considered a “past time and place riven with contradictions and the violences of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles [...] rather than evoking an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside history” (Gopinath 4). Home is not a fixed site of purity, but in its “various forms of violence and, conversely, possibility

and promise [...] that are permanently and already ruptured, rent by colliding discourses around class, sexuality, and ethnic identity” (Gopinath 15), a manner of reckoning with trauma (165). Trauma is not articulated through nostalgic renderings of the homeland, but through representations that rework notions of home (165). As part of this reworking of home, Pham and lê defy common expectations of the structure of Vietnamese American narratives—those that move from the violent, chaotic homeland of Viet Nam to the idyllic destination of the benevolent U.S., resulting in a pat resolution, almost as if paralleling diaspora with a coming-of-age tale. On the contrary, Pham and lê complicate notions of home and of what it means to be “Vietnamese American,” thereby offering a politicized queering of the very idea of “Vietnamese American” identity.

First, lê does not give in to the expectation of commencing her narrative in Viet Nam. In fact, the first words of the novel locate the reader and characters in Linda Vista, a suburb of sprawling San Diego. Not only does she start in San Diego, but lê, in the span of one paragraph, compresses the novel’s entire spatial journey in reverse chronology—that is to say, she describes her family’s most recent home first, going backwards in time until she ends with her mother in Viet Nam while she and her father arrive in California. This immediate reversal of conventional temporality upends the anticipated narrative trajectory, destabilizing chronological, plot-driven storylines that imply reductive linear coming-to-America identity formations. Indeed, lê’s refashioning of time and space illustrate the shifting terrain of home, of family, of self. In this opening description of the first “homes” she lived in upon arriving to the U.S., lê identifies specific intersections—“Thirtieth and Adams” and “Forty-ninth and Orange” (3)—yet the “homes” at these locations are referred to as merely “Green Apartment” and “Red Apartment” (3).

Through color, the abstract renderings of these supposed homes that promise a new American life speak to the fragmented quality of memory; more so, the shuttling between these locations asks the reader to focus less on the destination and more on the processes of getting there—those in-between spaces—during which her family is separated, which belies assumed heteronormative immigrant family structures. Lê's attention to these liminal zones expands the expectations of Vietnamese American narratives to be structured according to origin and destination; immediately in this novel, readers are dislocated from any fixed sense of home so as to better understand the conditions in which many Vietnamese Americans were subjected upon arrival to the U.S.

Moreover, the ocean is not limited to symbolizing the nameless protagonist's crossing from Viet Nam to the U.S. Its recurrence in the novel links the danger of the U.S. war in Viet Nam to violences committed in the U.S., showing that the latter is not the benevolent savior or site of the American Dream manifested. In Viet Nam, a younger girl is napalmed and found "floating on the sea. The phosphorous from the napalm made her body glow, like a lantern" (86). The U.S. shores of the Pacific are no less haunted, as the protagonist recounts, "we turned on the TV one night and heard that our manager and his brother had hacked a woman to pieces and dumped the parts of her body into the Pacific Ocean in ten-gallon garbage bags that washed up onshore" (91). The continuities of danger between Viet Nam and the U.S. underscore the violence underlying diaspora and living in queer spaces. Also, the protagonist's preoccupation with bodies of water, from the ocean to a pool that is eventually filled with concrete, throughout the novel illustrates the intangible, unspoken connections between characters. Through water, the nameless protagonist fluidly passes between other characters' points of view, their

memories. The tidal process of ebbing and flowing between people, as well as between times and spaces, is queer in and of itself because it presents a manner of writing and reading narratives that does not rigidly subscribe to individualistic, linear immigrant narratives that portray the U.S. as an idealized destination.

Indeed, *lê* depicts the U.S. as a site of danger in terms of displacement and discrimination. The sponsorship program that offers the protagonist and her family a supposed home in the U.S. is marked by uncertainty from the beginning. Their first sponsor, Mr. Russell, who is “a retired Navy man,” conflates Vietnamese people with “his memories of the Okinawans and the Samoans and even the Hawaiians” (4). When he dies, the protagonist and her family, which at this point is comprised of her biological father and four other men who became “uncles” through the diaspora (these kinships will be discussed later), “there was some question as to where we would be sent. Tokyo? Sydney? Minneapolis?” (5). This uncertainty is met with a limited acceptance by Mr. Russell’s son, Mel, who consistently reminds them that they don’t belong, which fosters what Mimi Nguyen calls “the gift of freedom.” Essentially, American “acceptance” of the Vietnamese casts them into the role of “the grateful refugee,” one that is ever genuflecting in debt to the U.S.: “Ba said whatever we might come to think of Mel, we should always remember that he opened a door for us” (8). Such enforced gratitude casts the white American male sponsor as a patriarchal figure to whom the Vietnamese family heads are subordinated. The resulting power imbalances stymie the expected experiences of family and home for the Vietnamese refugees in the novel.

The family also confronts socioeconomic hardships of maintaining a place to live, let alone a sense of home. After an eviction notice comes and the family cannot pay their

financial debts, they are fenced out of the property. In response, “we break into our own house. Quiet, we steal back everything that is ours. [...] Though it’s quiet, we can hear police cars coming to get us” (97). Here, they are criminalized in their own home, and this reawakens traumas of displacement, especially for the mother, who bemoans her loss of her garden, crying, ““Why are we always leaving like this?”” (97). It is in instances like this that the echoes of the atrocities the U.S. committed in Viet Nam can be heard most resonantly. In this way, lê points to deeper socio-political issues that ensued after the war in Viet Nam was supposedly over. As I mentioned through Ferguson’s quote earlier, lê’s novel can be (re)read as an “intellectual document” that raises stifled histories and contemporary realities for many Vietnamese Americans.

In a similar spirit, Pham’s text addresses larger issues of U.S. American violence in his representations of “home” in his narrative. Pham confronts the idea of “home” undergirding U.S. imperialism by reckoning with the trauma of displacement on a global scale, not just for diasporic Vietnamese, but also for U.S. American veterans of the war. Many readers might expect that a memoir by a Vietnamese refugee would begin in Viet Nam and move toward the U.S. or, conversely, begin in the U.S. and return nostalgically to Viet Nam. Contrary to both of these expectations, Pham, like lê, uses the first sentence of the first chapter to pointedly dislocate many readers’ expectations by placing Pham in an unidentified desert in Mexico, mid-way through a cycling journey. As it usually functions as the exposition of a linear narrative, home does not fit into the binary of U.S./Viet Nam; instead, Pham highlights the reach of U.S. imperialism across time and space.

That is not to say that the setting of the Mexican desert is an abstracted landscape floating in the ether for this encounter. In fact, the backdrop of Mexico likewise draws attention to “Asia as a continuation of the American frontier” (Cawley 75). Such an extension of the frontierism that dispossessed and displaced innumerable Mexicans in the formation of the United States draws attention to the similarities between Mexicans and Vietnamese in regard to the continuities of U.S. imperialism enacted against them. Of course, at the level of discourse, “[t]he very names of some of the military operations in Vietnam—‘Rolling Thunder,’ ‘Sam Houston,’ ‘Hickory,’ and ‘Daniel Boone’—resonated with the memory, and the attitudes of the American frontier history relayed in the Western” (Shohat and Stam 121), invoking the language used to mythologize the conquest of Mexicans and Native Americans in the American West.<sup>62</sup> Pham also extends this history of imperialism by looking at the link between the Viet Nam, Japan, and the U.S. He points out the ambivalence his mother has toward Japan—a tangling of admiration for their capitalistic success and resentment toward them for their historical attempts to invade Viet Nam (42); as a result of his own experiences in Japan during a layover to Viet Nam, Pham is similarly ambivalent, as he admires the Japanese for their politeness, the careful sculpting of gardens, including a pet cemetery where he sleeps because he cannot afford a Japanese campsite. In his occupation of unconventional

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<sup>62</sup> Also, Mexican-American soldiers felt solidarity toward the Vietnamese was rooted in a shared agricultural lifestyle; Jorge Mariscal explains that Chicano veteran Freddy Gonzalez “dreaded the thought of killing Vietnamese people because ‘they worked the fields and lived simple lives, like most Hispanics from the [Rio Grande] Valley’” (4). The works of Chicano/a Viet Nam veterans that Mariscal’s *Aztlán and Viet Nam* anthologizes exhibit a sense of shared ambivalence and guilt in being turned against the Vietnamese, with whom they sympathized. Salient here is not only the spatializing of Tyle in Mexico to resurrect such transnational histories, but also to draw attention to the fact that not all U.S. veterans were white men like Tyle. In fact, a large number of soldiers deployed to combat in Viet Nam were high school dropouts, the poor, black, and Hispanic (Cawley 76).

spaces like the pet cemetery over the course of his trip, Pham himself shows that he becomes a queer subject. Further, the costs of being in Japan are connected to its bustling industry stemming from “its fascination with America” (46). Lisa Yoneyama, in *Hiroshima Traces*, has pointed out how Japan’s heavy industrialization is part of its urban renewal to level the history of the atom bomb’s destruction toward WWII and surpass the U.S. in terms of pursuing futurity secured by capitalist development (63-4). As a result of this heavy industry, Pham’s body suffers: “A hacking cough develops in my lungs. When I blow my nose, snot comes out black. My eyes are bloodshot from the air pollution. My throat is scratchy from car fumes. I wash it with can after can of Coca-Cola” (46). The Coke here, an emblem of American globalization and consumerism, crystallizes the point that the notion of “home” is not pure because it is, especially for diasporic individuals, informed by systems of globalization and imperialism. In this way, Pham decenters home, asserting that from a queer diasporic reading, home is not static, but marked by “travel and transitivity” (Gopinath 166), what Pham engages in to show that whatever he thought was a fixed sense of home is actually always changing in response to its connections to other countries and cultures. This motile representation of home is not only important for structuring Pham’s narrative in a non-linear manner, but for reconceiving narrations of history as well.

While Pham’s narrative seems to open up these alternative spaces for literary and historical narratives about Vietnamese American queer diasporic identities, it is important to recognize that, as Meg Wesling points out, analogies that link queerness and diaspora can reductively assume that the pairing is transgressive, which only further reinforces dichotomies of gender and globalization so that global is masculine and the local,

feminine (34). With this caution in mind, I must clarify that, although it may seem Pham exercises the male privilege of transgressing or subverting assumed binaries, he actually critiques the hypervisible masculinity often undergirding narratives about Vietnamese Americans—ones that pit the über-masculine American soldier against the comparably feminized Vietnamese male. With his depiction of Tyle, an American veteran of the U.S. war in Viet Nam, Pham begins to interrogate the gendered assumptions underlying many discourses of the U.S.-Viet Nam War and ensuing diaspora, which I argue allows queer possibilities of narrating those histories and their ongoing traumas to emerge.

Initially, it may seem as though the primacy of Tyle in the text (he appears in the first chapter), with his cliché self-identifying statement of “I was in ‘Nam’” (8) is yet another instance of “the narrative of the Vietnam War as told in the United States foregrounds the painful experience of the American Vietnam veteran in such a way that the Vietnamese people, both civilians and veterans, are forgotten” (Sturken 8). Pham, though, does not perpetuate this dichotomy by placing veterans in contradistinction to the Vietnamese. And, although some might argue that Pham tries to assert his masculinity over Tyle by representing himself as a solitary traveller as in many canonical U.S. American literary works, more often than not his gender identity is questioned by others, forcing him to continually renegotiate his masculinity as a Vietnamese American male.<sup>63</sup> Both Vietnamese and veterans’ identities are in flux and both have been silenced; as such, they are both queer figures in their unexpectedly shared sense of not belonging, of being out of time and place.

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<sup>63</sup> Throughout the book, Pham confesses to the moments in which he has been emasculated—when a white trucker throws trash at him and shouts racial slurs, and when his ex-girlfriend’s father, the aforementioned Colonel, diminishes and strength and virility as a partner for his daughter, whom the Colonel has been molesting.

One of the ways in which Pham draws attention to their queerness from U.S. imperial constructions of time and space is by underscoring their shared displacement. Like Pham and his family in their diasporic flight from Viet Nam, Tyle is also depicted as an exile, “the person separated unwillingly from home and family” (Cawley 73). At one point during his conversation with Tyle, Pham asks himself, “Are you my people?” (8), indicating that the division between U.S. veterans and Vietnamese begins to dissolve, along with the notion of home. Whereas mainstream depictions of veterans focus on his return as coming home and resuming his position of patriarchal protector (Jeffords 214), Tyle cannot even be located in a home and, in his tear-filled pleading with Pham, he is certainly not cast in the light of protector. Indeed, Tyle is depicted as out of space and out of time—a purposeful disorientation of a figure who has typically embodied a linear narrative of war, of leaving and coming home, of struggle and resolution. His body is an anachronistic one: “He is a giant, an anachronistic Thor in rasta drag” (5) who “ghosts into the orange light of campfire” (7). He also undermines expectations of masculinity—“His Viking face mashes up, twisting like a child’s just before a first bawl” (9). These overturned expectations of an American veteran “disrupt master narratives, those of American imperialism, technology, science, and masculinity” (Sturken 16), and allow a different veteran’s voice to emerge.<sup>64</sup> Doing so is a politicized act on Pham’s part, as

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<sup>64</sup> Pham also dedicates part of his narrative to another kind of silenced veteran, a former North Vietnamese officer. Toward the end of the book, Pham introduces the figure of The Colonel, formerly of the Vietnamese Nationalist Army. The Colonel views himself as a hero and “plunge[s] onward with his beloved war stories” (273) to relive past glories, perpetuating the reductive binary of masculine victor and feminized loser in which he perceives himself as the vanquisher of both the Viet Cong and the Americans: “Those pitiful Americans,” he said without remorse [...] “The Viet Cong killed the young ones like flies.” (273) Pham directly criticizes how The Colonel’s stories attempt to reinforce a linear, reductive narrative about the war—“I listened to him with open amazement, wondering if he realized the irony of his current situation or the karmic disaster he was heaping onto his daughter: guilt” (274). In this critique, Pham not only points out the error of glorifying the past and thus ignoring its realities, but also suggests that these

American veterans of the U.S.-Viet Nam War have, after all, often been silenced and misrepresented, reduced to homogenized representations, represented as “ahistorical” (Haines 84). Veterans have been rendered as ahistorical, atemporal, in order to be used as heroic figureheads that can recruit for, and justify, other wars (82), thereby silencing Viet Nam veterans’ historically specific position of knowing “the lie” of the war and effacing their “politically volatile” subject position (84).

While notions of home are significant in the global framework discussed above, it is also important to look at specific domestic home sites, as “the expulsion of queers of color from literal homes and from the privileges bestowed by the nation as ‘home’. [...] These subjects in turn ‘collectively remember home as a site of contradictory demands and conditions’” (Reddy qtd. in Ferguson 2-3). Pham illustrates the complexities of his family’s home in the California primarily through his transgendered sibling’s occupation of, or refusal to occupy, its space. Pham’s characterization of Chi-Minh points to ruptures in heteronormative, patrilineal logic pursued by Vietnamese immigrants’ hopes for progress and success in America—an internalization of what Margot Canaday refers to as the requirement for immigrants to be heteronormative as part of the U.S.’s post-WWII state-building and bureaucratic policing of homosexuality (3). Most explicitly, their father is arrested for beating Chi-Minh (196), a legal intervention that delays, if not shatters, the Pham family’s pursuit of the ideal immigrant experience of success and happiness in America, which hinges upon an adherence to a patriarchal familial structure. The culturally-informed expectation that children who are born male possess more

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realities, however represented, will affect future generations. Doing so implies that history is never complete, but relived, carried over. He also suggests that the Vietnamese are complicit in the same kind of historicizing that the U.S. is, and that it is important to distinguish between Northern and Southern Vietnamese political projects.

potential for securing a future for immigrant families is explored in a flashback scene in which Pham's father asks all of his sons about their grades in school but neglects to inquire about Chi-Minh's academic progress. In fact, Pham points out, "Dad rarely asked Chi anything" (193). Neglecting to ask Chi about her performance in school, the father undermines her potential for future, scholastically and socio-economically.

Throughout his adolescent and adult life, Chi-Minh does not adhere to such capitalist-oriented expectations for education and career. Chi-Minh would be considered, according to Judith Halberstam's terms, a queer subject in that he "live[s] outside the logic of capital accumulation" (10). Halberstam elaborates to explain that "Queer subjects live during the hours when others sleep and in the spaces that other have abandoned and in terms of the ways they might work in the domains that other people assign to privacy and family. [...] For some queer subjects, time and space are limned by risks they are willing to take" (10). Chi-Minh certainly occupies "riskier" times and spaces, as he repeatedly runs away from home. In one flashback, Pham describes how Chi-Minh jumped the fence at the juvenile detention center, hides by the creek for the night, then knocks on his window but does not enter the house, instead eating the food Pham gives him behind the garage (213). In a way, Pham himself is occupying queer spaces by rejecting the temporal and spatial restrictions of his nine-to-five corporate job and deciding to cycle on his own. Interesting, too, is that Lê's protagonist repeatedly runs away from home, once in the "fall of the year [she] turned sixteen" (101). The recurrence of this running seems to invoke the memories of fleeing Viet Nam, and thus running's "queer" occupation of space is linked to diaspora.

Diasporic Vietnamese American writers are often expected to render Viet Nam as home, an implicit relegation of them to a “foreign” country, but Pham also reworks that notion of home to point out that it is clearly not “pure” or fixed in meaning, that he does not completely belong there either. He does so in his representation of the triangulation among capitalism, race, and masculinity. Capitalism’s role in defining the masculinized evolutionary scale of a society’s progress is most evidently, and humorously, illustrated when a Western tourist in Viet Nam asks Pham, ““Don’t take this the wrong way, but why are so many Vietnamese men lounging around all day—don’t they have to go to work or something?”” (262). Though clearly a question naïve to so-called “third-world” poverty, the tourist’s inquiry raises the important association of masculinity with capitalist futurity. This gendered connection bears with it the implication that men not working in a society that does not operate according to a Western capitalist model are inferior, impotent, and ultimately unable to secure a future for their families, for their country. In essence, capitalism and nationalism are aligned with men, but Vietnamese men are emasculated. In this particular context of globalization that allows for Western tourism to Viet Nam, masculine and feminine are blurred. Pham’s attention to the larger spheres of labor foregrounds the ways in which gender and race intersect for the queer space that Pham himself inhabits as a Vietnamese American. This position is most pronounced in his encounter with Tam.

A musician whom Pham meets in Vietnam, Tam exemplifies the internalization of the pressure to advance capitalistically as a means to assert masculine dominance and, implicitly, assure an individual and national future. Significantly, Tam insists on speaking English as he states, ““American people value time. My teacher say time is money for

American people. American people work very, very much. More than Vietnamese. So America is better, stronger than us” (131). Pham responds, ““But Vietnamese work six days every week. Americans only work five days”” (131). In this conversation, Pham must continue to contest the association of the U.S. with capitalist success, masculinity, and, ultimately, the future, which corresponds to Said’s gendering of East and West in Orientalist discourse, but also speaks to broader issues of citizenship and masculinity for Asian American males.

In *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*, David L. Eng points out that historically Asian American males have worked in restaurants and laundries, “low-wage, feminized jobs,” and these “economically driven modes of feminization cling to bodies not only sexually but also racially” (17). According to Sean Metzger and Gina Masequesmay, “Based on myths of founding fathers and self-made men, this dominant fantasy of national construction and belonging has worked to define ‘the American citizen’ to borrow the eloquent phrase of Lisa Lowe, ‘against the Asian immigrant, legally, economically, and culturally’” (10). Having quit his white-collar job at the beginning of the narrative, Pham, too, seems to struggle with such exclusion, as masculinity is defined as work, not only from a Western voice, but from the Vietnamese as well.

As a Vietnamese American, Pham encounters his own struggle with masculinity as determined by the extent of his investment in, and exercise of, capitalism. Throughout his travels in Vietnam, Pham is referred to and treated as “Viet-Kieu”—an implicitly derogatory term to identify Vietnamese who emigrate and live outside of the homeland. With this distance come expectations, primarily financial, as demonstrated by the

numerous scenes in which Pham is gratuitously overcharged by Vietnamese vendors. One of Pham's Vietnamese acquaintances explains that his Viet-Kieu status, and the perceived capitalist success associated with America, are the reasons for these surplus fees: "Foreigners aren't poor. Can't be. Especially not Viet-Kieu" (198). The assumption here perpetuates the view of the U.S. as an emblem of the future by virtue of its capitalist success while also reinforcing Vietnamese people's internalized Western view of Vietnam as "behind" in a linear temporal framework.<sup>65</sup> Essentially, the transferring of poverty onto a linear timeline of progress (rather than as an address of how the globalization and national corruption that perpetuate that poverty), points to the internal conflict of Vietnamese Americans, or Viet-Kieu, who feel financially obligated to "donate," putting them in a hierarchical position over their own people. The ambivalence here belies the linear trajectory of leaving behind Viet Nam for American capitalist success, displacing what Grace Hong calls "a developmental temporality" that undergirds the ideas of masculinity that has historically constituted citizenship to the U.S. nation-state (68). In these instances of being identified as Viet-Kieu, Pham does not fully belong to Viet Nam or the U.S., is emasculated by both national exclusions. Queer of color critique illuminates these spaces created by the intersection of gender and race within labor economies and shows that Pham's memoir is critical of how Vietnamese American

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<sup>65</sup> This temporality articulated through capitalist logic is complicated in its invocation of Cold War histories in which the U.S. attempted to justify its colonial projects in Asia as a containment of communism, rendered as the opposite of capitalism. However, as Jodi Kim suggests in *Ends of Empire*, "this effort actually necessitated a peculiar *containment* of capitalism itself. This is to say that the United States has had and continues to have a vested interest in monitoring, manipulating, and maintaining the flow of capital into particular channels: channels that augment its economic, political, and military strength" (27).

literature has been expected to pinpoint a fixed truth about Viet Nam and/or the U.S., as well as Vietnamese American identities.

While Pham's text addresses how capitalist-oriented futurity is masculinized, lê's text draws attention to how capital structures temporality in the contexts of female immigrant labor. As Gayatri Gopinath asserts, centering the oft-ignored female subjectivity in queer diasporic studies allows for an approach to diaspora that does not submit to the heteronormative and patriarchal conceptions of the individuals and families of diaspora (6). In lê's novel, the narrator's mother is promised the American Dream via laborer productivity. As Yen Lê Espiritu clarifies in her study of Asian American gendered relations, "Asian women ensured the physical survival of Asian America not only because of their reproductive powers but also because of their *productive* powers" (30, my emphasis). Describing her mother as a seamstress, lê's narrator states, "My mother worked very fast, turning things out like a factory. I imagined that the sharp little needle was the loudmouthed man on a factory floor, shouting out orders for her to go faster. Faster than yesterday! Faster toward tomorrow!" (68). On the one hand, this depiction of the mother's body as a mechanized laborer points to the socioeconomic reality undergirding the family's immigration—that is, "As 'shadow workers,' these women toil in the most exploitative sectors of the economy—in the sweatshops, in domestic service, and in food and cleaning services—performing labor-intensive, low-paying, and physically dangerous work" (Espiritu 11). Lisa Lowe, in her seminal *Immigrant Acts*, specifies the exploitative nature of the garment industry in which Ma, and so many other Asian American women throughout the decades, works: "the sewing woman [...] will intensify her productivity even if it results in exhaustion or personal

injury” (155). As a testament to such gendered labor conditions, Ma’s body illustrates immigrant female laborers’ subordination to the patriarchal capitalist state, represented here by her daughter’s imagined “loudmouthed man.”

At the same time, the mother’s work—scored by the chorus of “Faster than yesterday! Faster toward tomorrow!”—represents the pursuit of the lofty ideals of the American Dream and the promise of futurity through the productivity of the immigrant Asian woman’s body. This brief moment in the protagonist’s view of her mother, then, critically draws attention to what Lowe refers to as the U.S.’s exclusion of Asian Americans through exploitative labor and marginalized status, while simultaneously constructing a homogenized nation through their integration into the economy, as well as ideologies such as the American Dream that only efface the trauma of the U.S.-Viet Nam War by imposing an erroneous sense of the refugees’ agency and control in their flight from the homeland (Min 245).

Grace Hong further contends that female immigrant laborers’ differentiated status as noncitizen, female, and temporary underlies the capitalist accumulation and citizenship as possessive individualism, or the ownership of self (3), which has historically been an institution of whiteness and masculinity (5). In lê’s novel, such exclusion from ownership and thus citizenship is evident in their host family’s possessiveness of material objects, particularly the glass animals that the narrator breaks (27). The narrator’s mother, too, is not associated with ownership until she drives the new Cadillac, which she immediately crashes (39). As immigrant laborers, they are consistently dispossessed and even criminalized, as in one scene in which the protagonist and her father are surveilled for “suspicious” behavior at a grocery store, a scene appropriately narrated through the point

of view of a news report (110). Through these modes of capital, lê testifies to how the mother's labor indicates the queer times and spaces to which immigrant laborers are relegated. By essentially highlighting the racialized, patriarchal character of the U.S. capitalist system that subordinates Asian American women, lê's depiction of Ma's body prompts readers to consider the implications of feminizing futurity, of embodying the future through the (re)productive female.

Ma, in *Gangster*, physically blurs masculine/feminine on her own body, namely through transformations of her hair: "When Ma first arrived in America, she had very long hair. [...] After she cut it that summer, she looked more like the women who read the news on TV. 'Modern' was how she described it" (67). Of course, on one level, this transformation attests to the assimilation to U.S. standards of feminine beauty and fashion, as dictated by the media and the association of modernity with the West. Yet, Ma's subsequent changes to her hair, the traditional marker of feminine identity, suggest that her character does not merely bend to gender norms. This gender dualism is particularly loaded for Asian Americans because the long history of gendering Asian ethnicity has rendered "Asian American men and women as simultaneously masculine and feminine but also as neither masculine nor feminine" (Espiritu 88). As a means of retaliating against her husband for drunkenly gambling away her money, Ma later shaves her head. In response, "Ba gave her a blue baseball cap to wear until her hair grew back and she wore it backward, like a real badass" (91). Though it seems that her agreement to cover her shaved head indicates acquiescence to patriarchal enforcement of femininity, Ma's "badass" wearing of her new accessory signifies rebellion traditionally reserved for a masculine agent—dressed, not coincidentally, in blue. Moreover, this dispute also

indicates the complications of changing gender relations between Asian men and women after immigration in that “immigrant men reasserted their lost patriarchal power in racist America by denigrating a weaker group: Asian women” (Espiritu 36). The narrator’s attention to her parents’ changing relationship underscores lê’s effort to re-envision the gendering of Asian American bodies as a heterogeneous and shifting terrain of identity formation. Because the family is never heteronormative because of their racialized status, the relationship among mother, father, and daughter attests to a sort of queering of the Vietnamese American family structure.

Indeed, lê disrupts the alignment of the (re)productive future with the feminine, as the character of Ma is caught in a web of social relations beyond the roles of wife and mother. In fact, in the first chapter of the novel, Ma is dislocated from the family altogether: “Ma was standing on a beach in Vietnam while Ba and I were in California with four men who had escaped with us on the same boat” (3). She does not immigrate at the same time, and when the narrator and her father arrive in San Diego, lê describes the absent mother through the ideal, sexualized image of the American female, which promises a better, if not idyllic, future in the U.S. The narrator looks at a poster welcoming her to sunny San Diego and reflects, “I looked through the triangle formed by the woman’s tanned knee, calf and thigh and saw the calm, sleeping waves of the ocean. My mother was out there somewhere” (6). This image calls to mind Teresia K. Teaiwa’s point that the image of the bikini-clad white woman renders invisible the violence committed in the South Pacific Islands, one of which gives the two-piece swimsuit its name (15). The poster that lê’s narrative sees likewise hypervisibly occupies the foreground, but it is lê who draws attention to the background image that would usually

get eclipsed—the ocean, the space where the mother, along with so many others, were lost, physically, spiritually. The center is the absence. Indeed, when Ma finally does arrive in the U.S., she suddenly pops into the narrative—“Ma and I lay awake” (38)—without explanation of how and when she arrived. Through these literary turns, lê’s attention to presence and absence in this regard testifies to the erasures of racialized immigrant women’s labor that reinforce the notion of American citizenship as white masculine ownership (Hong 3). In critically revising associations with the feminine, lê reveals the queerness aligned with diaspora. With the mother absent and rendered unseen in many ways, their family does not conform to the heteronormative family structure because the conditions of the Vietnamese diaspora have necessitated that they come to the U.S. at different times, as well as perform largely invisible labor.

lê’s representation of her mother’s productivity aligns with Pham’s portrayal of the expectation of his mother and sister to be reproductive, and their living outside of those norms. Both authors present the anticipated maternal characters in their narratives as queer female figures. Gayatri Gopinath points out that diasporic narratives are focalized through heteronormative optics that typically focus on patrilineal, often oedipal, relationships between fathers and sons (5). This becomes more pronounced in narratives revolving around Vietnamese culture, as audiences expect to read (and authors are expected to deliver) families whose relations operate according to Confucian principles, such as patrilineal inheritance and filial piety. Pham’s text in particular addresses this expectation of structuring the family, but both Pham and lê disrupt that patrilineal, heteronormative logic, namely in focusing on queer female figures, as Gopinath urges queer studies to do, and specifically foregrounding fathers’ relationships with their queer

daughters. In doing so, the authors queer the family structure and open up possibilities for generative alternative kinships.

Pham may occasionally seem to reinforce heteronormative, patriarchal views of women in his representations of his mother. However, he only does so to acknowledge his father's traditional expectations of male and female roles in his family. In recounting a memory of the time preceding the family's attempt to flee Viet Nam to the U.S., Pham focalizes the narrative through his father's perspective as he looked upon his wife sentimentally and "felt a squeezing tremble of love in his chest when he saw his wife hunched over great tubs of wash" (32). Here, the mother is domestic and dutiful. Evoking the "tremble of love in his chest," an emotion that does not otherwise get articulated as such in the book, the mother also embodies a promise of a new life, a future, in the United States. Lisa Yoneyama examines how, during periods of war, women and their bodies are often cast in a maternal, nurturing, and domestic lights to implicitly emphasize "motherly love, which is understood as primordial and given, [that] emerges as an antithesis to modernity, science, and technology" (196). As such, women are associated with their reproductivity, their promise of new life—in this case, a future living the American Dream in the U.S. This would correspond with the fact that the only child Pham's mother bears in the U.S., Kay, knows nothing about the war or Viet Nam.

Although Pham addresses the expectation of his mother to fulfill the Confucian-informed, patriarchally determined role of "lifelong housewives who expect to be near their children all their lives" (27), Pham disrupts this expectation when he shows how his mother is very much isolated from her children once they are in America and her attempts to be maternal are subsequently misdirected: "This woman who lets in every

Mormon that comes by the house with pamphlets. This woman who makes egg rolls for cosmetic girls at the department store who give her free makeovers. This woman who eats cold leftovers standing in the kitchen alone because lunch in her American household is too lonely” (27). Dislocated from her children just as Ma is before she appears in lê’s narrative without explanation, Pham’s mother can no longer ensure a future, at least not the American Dream type of future she and her husband envisioned upon immigrating. Both lê and Pham portray their mother characters’ severance from their children to reveal Vietnamese diasporic women’s potential disillusionment with the American Dream and their prescribed function within it. These women complicate traditional maternal roles to destabilize the expectation of patrilineal diasporic family structures, which implicitly inform structures of diasporic narratives. Pham and lê’s acknowledgement of women’s divergences from such formulaic family structures allows not only questioning of gender norms undergirding narrative content and structure, but also assumptions about sexuality.

As I mentioned by invoking Gopinath earlier, diaspora not only assumes patriarchal family structures and gender roles within it, but also assumes diasporic individuals to be heterosexual by default. Pham positions his transgender sister, Chi-Minh, in direct confrontation with this expectation, as enforced by their father, who attempts to maintain a Confucian hold on his children. The first-born child, Chi-Minh is an immediate disappointment to her family because she is born female. Pham makes the important point that while a “Vietnamese first son is worth his weight in gold, all his life,” he does not believe “that’s why Chi wanted to be a boy. She was just never meant to be a girl” (189). Chi-Minh’s transgenderism, then, is not an attempt to adhere to

heteronormative family structures and temporalities, but is rather a departure from and subversion of her parents' heteronormative diasporic view of a reproductive future in the U.S. In other words, her increasingly masculine qualities call into question "maleness" and the cultural importance Vietnamese parents imbue in a first-born *male* child.

Pham critiques this prizing of maleness and masculinity in his descriptions of Chi-Minh's gender-bending bodily traits and assumption of paternal roles. Even in the face of familial violence that is enacted upon Chi-Minh's body,<sup>66</sup> Pham renders his late sister's transgendered body as one of strength, of possibility. Chi-Minh's physical transformation from female to male is marked at a specific point in time: "Chi came home at thirty-one, a post-operative transsexual. She was a man and his name was Minh" (295). However, in the frequent flashbacks to Pham's childhood memories with his sister, Chi-Minh was blurring the boundaries between male and female: "Chi had a new identity. At school, she was a *he*" (194-5). Therefore, even though Chi-Minh's operation is located at a

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<sup>66</sup> I must first address how the fact that Chi-Minh was beaten by her father and eventually committed suicide initially appears to reinforce the image of the Vietnamese body as victim. In her discussion of how images have "made" the history of the U.S.-Viet Nam War, Marita Sturken studies the implications of the (in)famous 1972 photograph of naked Kim Phuc running—mouth agape, arms flailing—from a napalmed village. Sturken writes, "As a young, female, naked figure, Kim Phuc represents the victimized, feminized country of Vietnam" (93). Familiar to so many Americans, this photograph has functioned, then, as part of the U.S.'s attempt to cope with collective guilt about the war, an effort that has filtered out Viet Nam's complex histories through the image of this victimized girl. As such a self-serving projection of American guilt, the photograph perpetuates, in Yoneyama's terms, a "binarism that unidimensionally identifies such nationalized collectivities as either victims or victimizers" (11). The proliferation of images and texts that reinforce such victimologies bear two effects most pertinent to the discussion of Chi-Minh. First, assigning victimhood to an individual or group artificially relegates them to the realm of the past by forever tethering them to the trauma that rendered them victims to begin with. Chi-Minh, represented as a series of vivid, recurring memories in Pham's narrative, resists this relegation to the past, showing that the death of her physical body does not constitute victimhood because she is very much alive in the text. Second, national victimologies that engender a "phantasm of innocence" (Yoneyama 13) ignore the realities of violence between Vietnamese people themselves. Because Chi-Minh's body is a site of inter-Vietnamese violence, it defies the reduction of the Vietnamese body and identity to victim, thereby blurring the distinction between past and present that victimologies propagate. Or, the reduction of Chi-Minh to victim could further commit the erroneous, oversimplified psychoanalytical reading that her homosexuality and eventual transgenderism was a result of the abuse at the hands of her father.

specific (turning) point in time, Pham shows through memories that Chi-Minh's transgendered body does not equate female with the past and male with the present or future, nor is it a disappointment that the first-born child was born biologically female. Rather, transgendered Chi-Minh very much dislocates her father's position as head of the family, in terms of body and mentorship of the younger male children in the family, including Pham himself. For example, Pham remarks that Chi-Minh's bodily strength surpasses that of their father:

At sixteen, she was as tall as Dad and much stronger. The beam of her shoulders matched any boy's her age. Every morning, she hammered through her routine of fifty push-ups, a hundred sit-ups, and twenty pull-ups without breaking a sweat. Trained in martial arts since age eleven, she held the equivalent of a black belt. Her chest was flat but thick and tight. And only I knew why. Chi bandaged her chest, like someone with broken ribs, to hide her breasts. She had been doing it since puberty. (193)

Here, Pham minimizes their father's physical prowess to emphasize Chi-Minh's, which further subverts the victim-victimizer dynamic, but also destabilizes the patriarchal family structure. By performing the latter function, this passage implicitly disrupts what José Estaban Muñoz calls, and rejects as, "reproductive futurity" (92)—a heteronormative temporality in which the future relies upon children. Because Chi-Minh does not fulfill her role as a typical good Vietnamese daughter, she severs the promise of her own reproduction to continue the Pham family line, but also undermines her parents' attempt to secure their future by having children. After all, to reproduce after a genocide is an added cultural obligation. Pham's text directly addresses the familial and cultural conflicts that arise in the effort to acknowledge, let alone, value such alternative kinships. Chi-Minh is confronted with the heteronormative expectation for the future to be constituted by heterosexual reproduction, particular in romantic relationships: "Minh had

told Mom over the phone that he was married and that his wife didn't know about his sex change. Their marriage had been on the rocks since his layoff. It was inevitable: She wanted children. They were getting a divorce" (296). This heteronormative standard for children is heightened by the added immigrant expectation of producing new generations in America, which is voiced by Pham's mother. When Pham tells her that his brother Huy is gay, she responds, "'You shut up! Don't talk ridiculous!'" (315). Chi-Minh, though, enables a new kind of futurity that does not rely on his participation in reproduction.

This non-reproductive futurity is most evident in the relationship he has with his brothers. In a description of one of the happiest moments with his siblings during their childhood in Vietnam, Pham writes that "Chi showed [Pham] that she could pee standing as well. No difference, she said to him" (216). Also, "every morning, Chi took Huy, Tien, and me down to the bay to teach us to swim. [...] In the water, Chi held each of us up by our stomachs and we learned to dog-paddle. [...] Chi built a driftwood fire on the beach and fried the fish" (54-5). In performing and teaching these typically masculine activities, Chi-Minh shows that she is part of a developing future via a queer temporality that is "about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing" (Halberstam 2). Not only does queer temporality open up possibilities for alternative futurities, but, following Eng, queer diasporic theory enables a re-visioning of the past. According to Eng, queer diaspora does not seek homeland as a pure origin, a heterosexual nation-state, but allows for alternative kinships outside of those constructs (13-14), offering a "different story about nation building" (14) and thus the future. The potentiality, the hope and happiness residing in this memory, here lies not in her own children, but in the fact that the brothers who survive her will carry her through the

future—that even through the seemingly most mundane activities of urinating and swimming, Chi-Minh shepherds her brothers into adulthood. In this alternative family structure, Chi-Minh can actively foster the development of her brothers’ identities without preoccupation with, or hindrance because of, her gender.

Chi-Minh’s transgender body shows that queer futurity opens up potentialities for larger communities, especially LGBT individuals among those younger generations of Vietnamese Americans. Concretely speaking, Pham’s younger brother Huy, who has suffered sexual discrimination to the point that he carries a gun (38), decides to come out after Chi-Minh’s suicide. After describing the scene in which Huy comes out to him, Pham points out that “It was brave of him. Minh’s death had given him that” (317).

Further, Pham humorously reconstructs his ensuing conversation with Huy in which his brother

walked [him] through his “gay history.” He lectured me on his community’s terminology. Gay sex. Anal sex. Top Bottom. Rice queens. Potato queens. The joy of oral sex. He even offered to give me the number of a famous gay practitioner of this art—reciprocation no expected. No woman could possibly know more about a penis than a man. Just close your eyes. [...] We laughed. It felt very good talking plainly to each other. (318)

In a reversal of common scenes in which coming out proves to be divisive, this scene shows a bridging of distance between family members, as Pham and Huy speak and joke candidly. Pointedly, the chapter in which Huy’s coming out occurs is titled “Brother-Brother,” representing a union, a sameness, rather than the other chapter titles’ linking of dissonant, binarily opposed terms. Even in death, Chi-Minh opens up for her younger brother new avenues for expressing his sexual identity.

lê's novel, too, stresses on the first page that alternative kinships are central to becoming Vietnamese Americans in that the diaspora separated so many blood-related families, yet forged so many new familial structures. She writes, "Ba and I were connected to the four uncles, not by blood but by water" (3), and she later refers to these men as "their new Vietnamese brothers" (15). These alternative kinships, exceeding the limitations of patrilineal bloodlines, are what Raymond Williams terms the "structures of feeling" that must be seized in a Benjaminian moment of emergency (Eng 15), which in this historical context would be boat people's traumatic flight from Viet Nam. Such alternative kinships extend even further beyond the relationships forged between refugees in transnational connections across space and time: "Years later, even after our family was reunited, my father would remember those voices as a seawall between Vietnam and America or as a kind of floating net, each voice linked to the next by a knot of grief" (lê 105). Articulated through water, the alternative kinships in lê's novel show how queerness can be a process of rethinking relationships between people, perhaps even including the relationship readers and Vietnamese American writers, calling for an understanding of the heterogeneity of Vietnamese Americans.

In relation to representation of the diversity of Vietnamese Americans, lê's book also blurs gender identities to reconceive of familial relationships. Like her mother, lê's nameless narrator resists gender conventions in her pursuit of becoming more like her father, who is the eponymous "gangster we are looking for" (93). The girl's distaste for wearing "'American dresses'" tethers nationality and gender. In other words, assuming the identity of "American" for the narrator means to be forcibly feminized in traditional Western standards. Such a feminization could, historically speaking, be unsettling for the

adolescent narrator as she becomes attuned to how she is and extension of a genealogy of Asian women who have been “cast as the ‘superfemme’” to reinforce the white man’s virility (Espiritu 94). lê writes, “I’d run around the room and let the dress rise up and down around my neck, like rooster feathers ruffling before a cockfight” (16-17). lê’s allusion to a rooster here is no subtle masculinization of the girl’s body, yet the dress, like Ma’s blue cap, is a superficial means of bending gendered bodies. While this could draw attention to a Butlerian performativity of gender, what I find more interesting are the instances in which both lê and Pham locate the masculine and feminine, male and female, within the same body. lê herself pointed out that the notion of “gangster” in her novel is not necessarily the hyper-masculine figure we tend to see in Hollywood films, but is instead outside of gender: “gangster” is a “projection of a bravado, an attitude of rebellion, the notion of a figure who can hold it all together. [...] What will it take for you to be that person?” (Hidle). The call to character transcends typical gender roles’ harnesses.

In one of her first sexual experiences with her female friend who “ran a hand across the two lumps on [her] chest” (69), lê’s protagonist takes off the clothing, which she had previously found to cage her gender identity, as she takes off her shirt and wishes she could “run around with [her] shirt of all the time” (70). While the narrator is shirtless, her anonymous friend reads her body as that of a boy—not just any boy, but her deceased brother:

I felt my friend’s hands in my hair. She lowered her face toward mine.  
 “Hey, boy,” she said. “Upside down, you look like a boy. You look like  
 the brother of...” And she said my name.

I looked at the sky. Looked at the clouds. I wanted to go to sleep. I closed my eyes. I could still feel my friend's fingers in my hair. I heard her ask, "Is it true that you had a—" "No," I said, pushing her hands away and sitting up. She touched my bare back and I pulled away. "Don't," I said, reaching for my shirt. (71)

In this short exchange of dialogue, both the narrator and her brother are absent, as lê purposefully chooses to leave the girl's name unspoken and the narrator interrupts her friend before she can ask about her brother. It is only through the protagonist's exposed body that this gender-bending haunting occurs and becomes legible, however ambiguously and silently lê renders it. The narrator's body is both masculine and feminine, male and female, her dead brother and herself. When she mentions her brother's arrivals in her life, he is all but ephemeral. He is, indeed, quite embodied in her own corporeal experiences of growing up: "When I had a rotten tooth, he had a rotten tooth" (148). Such blurring of the boundaries between genders and life and death likewise surfaces Pham's representation of his deceased female to male transgendered sibling, Chi-Minh.

In the sense that lê and Pham call for readers to reassess and revise their understanding of the binary oppositions—home/foreign, masculine/feminine, life/death—in which dominant epistemologies are often rooted, these authors prompt audiences to practice new ways of reading and writing. First of all, Pham and lê open up spaces for talking about diverse sexualities within Vietnamese American communities and histories at all. Just as Eng notes that alternative kinships demand a new language for articulating familial bonds (16), Pham illustrates how Chi-Minh's relationship with his siblings provides such a new language, not in regard to terminology but in the sense that his homosexual (Huy) and heterosexual (Pham) brothers are able to speak about their

sexualities at all. The importance of enabling LGBTQI Vietnamese-Americans to express their sexual identities is evinced by the communities' continuing debates over homosexuality, some of which have been particularly newsworthy in the past couple of years. Generally speaking, Pauline Park, chair of New York Association for Gender Rights Advocacy (NYAGRA) addresses how transgendered Asians' pursuit of representation to be compounded by several other complex factors: "Transgendered Asians and Pacific Islanders (APIs), like many other transgendered people of color, face multiple oppressions based on race, ethnicity, citizenship status, and language" (Metzger 111), including lack of health care, discrimination from the state and "gaining acceptance from their families of origin" (111). Ideologically speaking, the history of racism against Asian Americans has implicitly homogenized them as heterosexual (Espiritu 2), and thus has stifled representation of LGBT Asian Americans, politically and literarily. In regard to Vietnamese American communities in specific, homosexuality and transgenderism has been an issue of debate.

In February 2011, when several gay Vietnamese groups registered to participate in the annual Têt (or New Year) parade in Little Saigon, California, they were met with fervent protest. Local politicians made their obligatory concessions that they were not against homosexuals, yet that they had no part in public Têt celebrations. After a few years of protest, the non-profit organization Vietnamese Rainbow of Orange County (VROC) was successful in securing a spot for the LGBT float in the 2014 Têt parade. Though the eventual inclusion was a considerable victory for the LGBT Vietnamese American community, the problem surrounding the years-long debate lies in the marginalization of Vietnamese Americans from their largest cultural and spiritual event

of the year on the grounds of sexual orientation. This marginalization and fracturing of identity is nothing new in the U.S., yet some Vietnamese amplify these problems of discrimination and exclusion. For example, Van Tran, president of the Vietnamese Interfaith Council of America, justified his opposition to the group's participation by stating, "Homosexuality is also not accepted in 1,000 years of Vietnamese culture" (Bharath). Likewise, at a San Jose community panel held at the beginning of December, LGBT Vietnamese-Americans agree that "telling family or friends that you're gay can be difficult for anyone, but it can be especially stressful in the Vietnamese community, where parents and elders were raised in a traditional culture for which homosexuality was a secret shame" (Bailey 1).

The consensus that Vietnamese culture compounds the difficulty of coming out points to the pronounced generational and cultural differences within a community whose first waves of diaspora are no more than two to three decades old. One participant confessed that he considered committing suicide after his parents disowned him for coming out homosexual. While this recent forum in San Jose illustrates that efforts are being made to promote tolerance, this is clearly complex cultural, generational, and sexual territory for Vietnamese Americans to navigate. *Catfish and Mandala*, although now written over a decade ago, speaks to continuing struggles with sexual orientation in Vietnamese-American communities and—through its honest and ultimately hopeful rendering of Chi-Minh—can possibly provide the guidance and sense of understanding and healing requisite to addressing such a complex issue.

In addition to such political implications of representing queer figures in Vietnamese American literature, Pham and lê also queer the material ways of

constructing a narrative, primarily their self-conscious uses of silence and spaces on the page, calling for meaningful and, ironically, immaterial ways of reading, what Gopinath calls, “queer diasporic reading practices” (21). Chi-Minh affects the way Pham, her heterosexual brother, expresses his own stories. Chi-Minh, as the crux of Pham’s memories, allows him to think of his authorial, individual past and future differently. As Halberstam notes, queerness “has the potential to open up *new life narratives* and alternative relations to time and space” (2, my emphasis). It is this concept of queerness as a narrative of life that highlights Chi-Minh’s influence upon Pham as a writer addressing issues of Vietnamese American identity. For instance, Pham’s decision to write the memoir seems largely due to his family’s silence about Chi-Minh. He points out that they “talk around her history” (26), as if Chi-Minh is a temporal gap, and they never tell the youngest child—American-born Kay—about Chi-Minh. The elision of Chi’s history is equated with the loss of Vietnamese culture as the family’s assimilates to American culture: “She slipped away from us the way our birth-language slipped from our tongue, in bits, in nuances. The finer subtleties lost like shades of colors washed out under a harsh noon sun. Unused words dried up and faded away. Her name was not spoken” (215).

The loss of Chi-Minh and the loss of Vietnamese language and culture, of course, prompts Pham to return to Vietnam in attempt to recover memories of both. But, more interesting here, is how Pham’s description of the loss of Vietnamese language is illustratively performed by the poetry of the passage, the poetic language that runs throughout the book. For instance, Pham transforms nouns into verbs—“The German *crowbars* himself out” (292), “she *donkeys* into an explosive laugh” (245), “my innards

*faucet into the toilet*” (219). While disorientations through language are by no means new to literature, in light of Pham’s larger project as it is conceived of in my argument, his imparting of agency to ordinary objects can be viewed as a “decolonization of language,” which Lisa Yoneyama asserts is necessary to become aware of oneself as a survivor storyteller (86). I draw attention to these stylistic elements that contest some of his messages because Pham’s narrative is not one of complete reclamation or easy resolution. The ambivalence, from the sentence to structural to thematic levels, shows, namely through Chi-Minh, that the future is not a destination, but a process—perhaps, in Muñoz’s words, a world that is not yet here.

Chi-Minh haunts Pham’s present. And I use the term “haunt” here purposefully. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery F. Gordon critiques empiricism and “technologies of hypervisibility” (16) to draw our attention to the power of a haunting, a present absence, or a ghost who is a “social figure,” drawing us into a “structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition” (8). Gordon acknowledges that this power can be fantastical or mundane (3), and it is in one of these seemingly ordinary moments that Chi-Minh—as a ghost, a social figure—presents a resonant power. In a chapter titled “Chi-Me,” Pham alludes to how Chi-Minh provokes this simultaneous looking backward and forward, a Benjaminian angel of history whose “backward glance enacts a future vision” (Muñoz 4). In the memory of his final conversation with Chi-Minh, Pham asks, “Minh, you remember the star fruits we used to eat on the roof?” (332). Their conversation ends with an anticipation of moving forward in time, as Pham tells Chi-Minh, “We gotta hang out together more. Soon, okay?” (333).

Notably, too, the spacing between the siblings' lines of dialogue in this remembered conversation is tripled, leaving empty spaces that speak. In one capacity, these purposefully exaggerated spaces disembody the dialogue, "evok[ing] an ambiguous sense of longing and loss. The presence of human bodies is absent from the scene, yet their absence is palpable" (Min 236). In other words, both the reader and Pham, in writing this scene so visually, are involved in what Min calls the "desiring fantasy" of spaces that indicate the "absence/presence of bodies" (237). The seemingly "empty" space engenders a desire for a legible text, but because Pham does not offer one, readers are left with longing that mirrors his own. Essentially, the readers can literally "see" Pham's longing for his sister who is about to leave him, to leave life, as well as his mourning for the fact that she did not "finish" the journey of migration, that she undermines the notion of migration as a linear departure-arrival narrative to begin with. She is, after all, an individual whose "ashes were scattered on a sea he never finished crossing" (299). Though this reading of the scene seems melancholic, it is not necessarily defeating, as assuming so would reinforce Chi-Minh as a tragic, victimized figure. These tripled spaces can, perhaps, represent potentiality—what could have been said or what is being said, non-verbally, in returning to the past in order to look toward the future. As Gopinath suggests, "queer diasporic lives and communities often leave traces that resist textualization" (21), so the spaces Pham uses in his remembering of Chi can draw attention to the limits of the material realm—the pages of the text itself—and reorient readers' assumption that blank space is necessarily empty; rather, it can be, as it seems in Pham's use of it, full of possibility. Chi-Minh bends time and questions memory formation, presenting an epistemology irreducible to concretized notions of here and

there, past and present, but suggesting instead one of meaningful absences and silences requisite to the history of cleaving Vietnamese and American.

Pham's location of his brother's final resting place in the sea, a home where he and so many other Vietnamese refugees haunt in body and spirit, underscores the politicized act of respatializing history with the ocean—rather than land masses, namely the U.S.—at the center. From the epigraph of her novel that states how “nước” is the Vietnamese word for homeland and articulating national identity, lê points to the importance of the ocean in respatializing Vietnamese American history as a narrative not bifurcated into origin (Viet Nam) and destination (the U.S.), but as the space in between. When I published an article on the designation of *The Gangster We are All Looking For* as the community-wide read for San Diego's 2011 One Book, One San Diego selection, I cited how lê mentioned at her talk in La Jolla that the structure of her novel is “tidal.” She explained that the last two chapters are mirrors of the first two, the middle chapter function as a sort of tide that cycled the mirroring chapters back into one another. It is no coincidence, then, that highly sensory descriptions of water accompany the arrivals of the ghostly, haunting presence of her own deceased sibling. The brother's death is not explained until the end of the book, after he periodically appears in the narrative as if he is still alive in a very embodied, *felt* way: “I needed only turn around and there would be his face, his hands” (74), “I began to feel that he was right beside me” (148). After meaningfully withholding this knowledge about the origins/cause of the ghost that readers would expect from a linear narrative, lê finally locates the boy's death: “Twenty years ago, my brother's body was pulled from the South China Sea and left lying on the beach to dry. Friends and relatives encircle him. [...] One of the boys scratches the ankle

of his left foot with the toes of his right foot. [...]There is a hum of indecision. No one has yet begun to cry. The moment is warped, sensuous. It hovers like summer heat” (126-7). Provocative here are the shift from past to present tense and lê’s arrest of time as the narration zeroes in on the seemingly insignificant, yet incredibly intimate, detail of the bystander’s foot scratch. This suspension of time in such a pregnant moment, which is crafted for the reader to embody through its humming and heat, allows the haunting to occur, emphasizing that the ocean and the Vietnamese American histories that those waters contain requires suspension of preconceived notions of space and time, of life and death. Indeed, lê’s message that “sometimes you don’t need to see or touch people to know they’re there” (94) applies not only to the novel’s story about these specific siblings, but more widely to all the other Vietnamese who were lost at sea for various reasons. lê dedicates space to these anonymous individuals in her text as well:

She had heard a story about a girl in a neighboring town who was killed during a napalm bombing. The bombing happened on an especially hot night, when this girl had walked to the beach to cool her feet in the water. They found her floating on the sea. The phosphorous from the napalm made her body glow, like a lantern. In her mind, my mother built a canopy for this girl. She started to cry, thinking of the buried giant, the floating girl, these bodies stopped in mid-stride, on their way somewhere. (86)

In this sense, both Pham and lê’s centering of the ocean bears powerful, far-reaching epistemological implications by which broader histories of U.S.-Asia relations can be remembered. These texts’ ability to do so via their attention to embodied waters dovetails with the decolonizing project set forth by Setsu Shigematsu and Keith L. Camacho, who asserts that “centering the Pacific [...] rearticulate[es] how the Pacific has been historically seen by Asian and American studies paradigms as an open frontier to be

crossed, domesticated, occupied, and settled” (xxxii). Reorienting space in history but also in critical academic studies opens up possibilities to examine the ways in which colonization in Asia continues through the arms of militarization, globalization, and tourism (xx). As Julie Thi Underhill has stated, “ghosts often manifest proportionate to guilt” (Metzger 175). In my view, U.S. guilt over its central role in these ongoing projects of colonialism by different names continues to surface.

Because Pham and lê’s texts spotlight such issues, it would be unjust to allow them to remain confined to erroneously imposed autobiographical genres. Rather, I hope that I have shown that they are what Jodi Kim has termed the “unsettling hermeneutic” that is Asian American cultural production, a literary and artistic genealogy that “reads Asian American cultural politics against the grain of American exceptionalism and nationalist ontology” (5). This is not merely to find an alternate or anti-American history, but rather to inform of the “conditions of possibility and impossibility for such a telling, querying, and knowing” (Kim 8). Pham and lê’s attention to such queerings and hauntings insists on the reexamination of U.S.-Asia histories and the importance of reflecting upon the methods with which we choose to narrate our lives, our histories. “Words can only do so much,” lê said back in La Jolla in 2011, “but they’re all I have.”

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## CONCLUSION

Over the winter break during which I am writing this, my cousin came to visit for the holidays. I had not seen my cousin for twenty years, since he first immigrated from Viet Nam and we became hide-and-seek adversaries and tree-climbing partners. We spoke Vietnamese to each other as we played and he, being much more fluent than me, taught me how to joke in our shared mother tongue, and I taught him American English slang. In my reunion with my cousin, I was reminded that my dissertation's attention to the social significance of questions and answers continues to be an ongoing issue, within the Vietnamese American community, even within families.

When I crossed my mother's living room to greet my cousin, I saw confusion cross his face and, as we shook hands, I realized he was perplexed as to who I was. He did not recognize me neither from his memory nor the pictures of me and my siblings that my mother had sent over the course of our years apart. The ensuing conversation did not flow as expected into conventional familial catch-up questions, not even a "How have you been?" Instead, my cousin, upon my mother's re-introduction of me by name, began by asking me if I dyed my hair. "No," I responded, quizzical. He explained, "I remembered you were blonde. I thought you dyed it to look more Asian."

I have never been blonde. I found it interesting, though, that he remembered me as so physically different from him, different from even myself. Likewise, his assumption that I would physically alter myself to acquire a more "authentic" Vietnamese appearance positioned me outside of our family and its culture in which we were both raised, though he was born in Viet Nam and I in the U.S. "No," I repeated and then tried to divert from that

awkward impasse by asking him, in a mixture of Vietnamese and English, about his daughter, his job, among other conversational topics.

At some point, my mother entered the conversation and spoke solely in Vietnamese as she does when she is in her own home. During one of his responses to my mother's questions, he looked at me sideways and asked my mother, in Vietnamese, if I understood the language, as if to see if he should edit what he said. When he arrived in the U.S., we spoke Vietnamese exclusively because he did not know any English, and only a few sentences before he asked my mother this, I had been speaking to him in Vietnamese and clearly following everything that was said to me in Vietnamese. Though initially taken aback by this question from a family member who should know it is unfounded, I was not surprised that it came up. I've been met with this question many times, or, when I do speak Vietnamese, people often laugh because they evidently do not expect that language to come out of my mouth.

Though my cousin, who is a trucker, said he was envious that I am in graduate school, he was unresponsive when I told him that my dissertation is about Vietnamese American literature. Apparently, he, like many other members of my family, distrusts the study of our culture. Contrary to the model minority mythos, my experience of growing up in a Vietnamese refugee family involves distrust of education as a white American institution and the idea that studying Vietnamese literature is a further betrayal of the culture. To do so is to position oneself outside of the culture rather than, as I see it, to dig deeper into it.

This exchange of questions and answers with my cousin crystallized how what is considered inside/outside of "Vietnamese American" identity, culture, and history

expands and contracts constantly. The moment-to-moment ebb and flow—sometimes painful and exclusionary, other times hopeful in presenting vistas of possibility—not only pertains to my experiences, but manifests on various stages of representation, from the local to global.

Locally, the Orange County festival for Têt, the Vietnamese celebration of the lunar new year, was displaced from its annual location in Garden Grove because city officials demanded more money, and has since been relocated to fairgrounds further away from Little Saigon and a full week after the actual new year takes place. Along with the struggle to find space and funding for the cultural event, controversy has surrounded the inclusion of an LGBT float in the accompanying Têt parade for the past few years. However, 2014 marks the first year that the LGBT Vietnamese American community will be permitted to participate in the parade, due in large part to the advocacy of the non-profit organization Viet Rainbow of Orange County (VROC). The community's response to the recent inclusion of the LGBT community will be telling of the continuing struggle to expand what the identification "Vietnamese American" means.

Negotiating and revealing the ever-shifting boundaries of "Vietnamese American" does not only involve those who self-identify as Vietnamese Americans. On a global scale, there are links between the Viet Nam War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The various traumas, physical and emotional, are not only experienced by the displaced refugees, but also by veterans. While this dissertation has focused on the experiences of Vietnamese refugees and the subsequent generations who inherit their traumas, the U.S. veterans are equally important to these histories, as traumas inextricably tether all involved, despite (or perhaps especially because of) their disparate experiences. The link

between veteran survivors from both the Viet Nam War and the wars in the Middle East came into sharp focus in the recent documentary *Gold Star Children*, wherein the daughter of a Viet Nam War vet emphasizes that it's not just the soldier who "pays full measure" with his life, but it's his children who pay. This woman who had lost her father in Viet Nam drew upon her ongoing trauma over that loss to mentor children who have recently lost parents to the wars in the Middle East. Her articulation of trauma as inherited and ongoing, as well as her resolve to give back to those suffering from the U.S.'s military operations, echo the major threads of thought and action in my dissertation, so it is all the more important here to stress that studies of trauma should not, cannot, divide parties involved in war. To do so would be to replicate the political and military systems that inflict the trauma upon both parties. Rather, we should consider the complex yet heartening ties that bind us under the differing surfaces.

Such considerations of blurred lines are especially important given the enlistment of Vietnamese American soldiers in the recent wars in the Middle East. At the community college where I teach, a Vietnamese American veteran recently committed suicide, and he is only one of several Asian American soldiers who have taken their own lives in the past couple of years. These tragic losses beg the question of how they negotiate their families' histories with their military service, or how their military service comes into conversation with their cultural identities. This is not to say that these men are inherently always-already in conflict by being Vietnamese American soldiers, but the recent string of suicides spotlights the opportunity to showcase the stories of those currently serving in the U.S. military, to question the conditions under which so many

men have committed suicide during and immediately after their service. Future studies should consider delving into this topic.

Also pertinent to future studies in Vietnamese American history, culture, and literature is the genre of comedy, one of the most wide-reaching forms of storytelling and one that is particularly interesting when it comes to coping with, and representing, trauma. Interestingly enough, a Vietnamese American veteran, Thom Tran, is a founder and regular performer in the travelling comedy troupe, the GIs of comedy. Discharged as wounded in 2005, Tran uses comedy to address his ongoing struggles with post-combat trauma. His use of comedy illustrates the capacities of the genre to address such trauma-laden histories of war, and would be an interesting way to approach the aforementioned suggestion of future research in Vietnamese American military service.

Relevant here, too, is that Tran and his fellow comedians have utilized online mediums to reach wider audiences. In the past few years, the proliferation of Asian American comedy channels on YouTube, including *Just Kidding Films* and comedian Dat Phan, showcases humor as a genre to be further explored. The use of the YouTube channel, with its high visibility and user comment function, also elicits conversations about representations of Vietnamese Americans in social media and warrants the inquiry of who is laughing at these videos and why.

For second-generation Vietnamese Americans, YouTube has opened wide the foray into publicizing music and dance. While many existing studies examine the transnational flows of Vietnamese variety programs such as *Paris by Night* that are largely music and dance, the YouTube arena presents more diverse styles of songwriting and performance. The range of styles too—from Cathy Nguyen's simple A cappella and

sometimes accompaniment from an acoustic guitar to the dance crew Poreotix's innovative and highly stylized breakdancing—illuminates the diversity of art forms being produced in Vietnamese America. This ever-growing body of work and burgeoning field of study exhibit dynamism and innovation that calls for the discourse—the questions and the answers—to shift along with it.

Therein lies the promise for the rich future of Vietnamese American cultural productions. The questions posed in the Levertov poem with which I started this project relegated Vietnamese people to the realm of the past, but the growing body of Vietnamese American works shows that our histories are ongoing; rather than resign to being fixed in the past, we carry it with us, onward. With this ever-extending horizon ahead, the issue will no longer be what questions are asked of us, but the multitude of questions we can ask in return.