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Feminist Oral Histories Against U.S. Empire: Examining Violence,
Resistance and Love Across Three Generations of Vietnamese
American Women

A thesis submitted for satisfaction of the requirements for the
degree Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

by

Trinity Gabato

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Feminist Oral Histories Against U.S. Empire: Examining Violence,
Resistance and Love Across Three Generations of Vietnamese
American Women

by

Trinity Gabato

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Eryn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, Chair

Thesis Abstract: Using an extended case study of the three generations of Vietnamese American women, this thesis explores how imperialism and U.S. empire affected the women and mixed-race children produced from bar hostess kinships and marriages in the aftermath of war. The analysis is anchored in recent scholarship on the Cold War, Critical Refugee Studies, memory, sentimentality, womxn of color feminisms as well as critical mixed-race studies. I argue that intergenerational conversations are an act of resistance and survival that could lead to possible futures of healing by knowing, understanding and labeling the power structures that do

not currently allow the women in my family to exist without having to experience racialized gendered violence, cope with mental illness and live a life that goes beyond surviving. The thesis also highlights the ways in which the multiple generations of women care for each other, find feminist forms of healing, and also create a network of care that goes against the idealized neoliberal capitalist cis-heteropatriarchal nuclear family unit. Overall, by engaging in oral history interviews and employing critical autoethnography, the paper challenges what is constituted as evidence in the academy, displaying the ways in which our lives are shaped by structures of violence that continue to uphold the logics of U.S. Empire, in hopes to shift the current refugee savior narrative that has been echoing in the American consciousness

The thesis of Trinity Gabato is approved.

Kyungwon Hong

Jolie Chea

Eryn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

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Introduction

In this house I listen to stories and scavenge for what is useful. I take the fragments with me for when I leave and come back, for when I leave and come back.

From Lan P. Duong's *Nothing Follows*

My mom sits at the edge of the bed with my grandma's vanity to the left of her. As my grandmother puts on her daily makeup, my ten-year-old mother stares at her, appreciating my grandmother's beauty. My grandpa is in the living room with my aunts teaching them how to punch correctly so they don't break their thumb. He practices high kicks with them, slowly guiding their legs to go up, out, kick. My mom starts playing with her mom's keys as she watches her mom surround her brown eyes with black eyeliner. As my mom fidgets with the keys, she accidentally triggers the pepper spray causing everyone to drop what they're doing to evacuate, running out of the house one by one. My grandma finishes her makeup, slowly putting on her lipstick in the midst of the room filling with pepper spray. She slowly walks out of the house with her makeup intact.

I start with his vignette that my mom continually told me growing up, to create a vision of my family dynamics and to also display the many themes in this chapter such as motherhood, memory, fighting, femininity, and resistance. My grandmother started working as a bar hostess in the midst of the Vietnam War—also known as the American War in Vietnam—at the age of 17 in order to support her family who faced economic turmoil once fleeing to South Vietnam. She continued to work as a bar hostess for about ten years, until she migrated to Virginia in 1971 with spousal sponsorship from an American GI, five years before the end of the war. My grandmother's story is one of the many stories that have been erased from the American master narrative within the larger flow of more than 8,040 Vietnamese women who came to the United

States through marriage (Goedde, Cho). This history of “military romance” (Goedde, Cho) is part of a larger story of how U.S. empire, militarism and imperialism defined women’s lives during the Cold War. Notably, the pattern of “Asian war brides” has been normalized in American society due to the great number of American servicemen who married Asian women overseas, especially during the latter half of the 20th century with U.S. military presence in South Korea and Vietnam (Zeiger, Thai).

During the Cold War and thereafter, the U.S. curated a narrative through photographs, archives, and cultural productions in order to display the U.S. 's intervention in Vietnam as both benevolent and humanitarian (Phu, Cho). Although there has been careful orchestration to make these narratives the mainstream memory of the Vietnam War, many authors have challenged U.S. intervention in general during the Cold War. Scholars have critically examined the role of the United States both in Korea and Vietnam, arguing that the Cold War was not in fact cold but instead a hot war, in which there were multitudes of horrific and treacherous impacts (Kwon). The language used to shift the name from Cold War to “Hot War” is important in actualizing and revealing the violence caused by U.S. imperialism. The U.S. imperialist fabricated myth as the liberator of thousands of refugees not only creates feelings of indebtedness but also allows for the perpetuation of further violence in the name of progress (Kim 109). Situating my grandmother’s story within a larger Cold War framework is necessary in displaying the ways in which these romantic intimacies caused by U.S. militarism have been shaped by the U.S. working within a broader geopolitical project that was trying to position the United States as a humanitarian savior fighting against the enemy of communism. This narrative also allows the shifting away from a story of military defeat while in conjunction erasing the violence perpetuated.

During the Vietnam War, my grandmother turned to intimate work on military camps in order to economically survive. When the first U.S. troops arrived in Vietnam, a black market was created to fuel the needs of the American war machine. A part of this market was the Saigon bar scene where many young Vietnamese women took part as sex workers, dancers, strippers, and waitresses (Gustafsson). Although there have been studies researching women who engaged in intimate labor during the Vietnam War, we lack substantial documentation, especially regarding the subjectivities of such women during the period (Henriot). Therefore, stories of these women are then silenced by age and time (Cho). "Freedom. Money. Fun. Love: The Warlore of Vietnamese Bargirls" by Mai Lan Gustafsson, one of the sole oral history projects on bargirls' work during the Vietnam War, focuses mainly on Vietnamese women who came from rural village backgrounds and moved to Saigon in order to break away from their arranged marriages during a time when most of the men were at war (Gustafsson). Although this study closely aligns with my own research, it still does not fully capture my grandmother's story, nor does it cover the complexities of the intergenerational impacts of these marriages. Gustafsson's work contends with kinship and community that the women created once in the United States, but it does not inspect how their romantic relationships transform in the United States after Vietnamese women migrate to join their husbands. Authors, musicians, poets, and many other 1.5 and second-generation children have been and are currently contending with their parent's lives that were defined, shaped and haunted by war. Like many other Vietnamese scholars in the diaspora, I hope to continue to challenge narratives of U.S. saviorism and humanitarianism by centering Vietnamese American stories and critically engaging with how the U.S. empire continues to affect lives even after the "official" end of war (Espiritu). In order to continue with this trajectory, my research centers the importance of memory, resistance and resentment in the

aftermath of U.S. militarism and gendered violence through the complexities of my family's life histories.

My family's complex life trajectories challenge the notion of linear migration and theories around Vietnamese wave migration, allowing for my family's histories to provide a counter-narrative that further expands the cartography of U.S. empire (Zhou and Gatewood). The French colonial period in Vietnam (1858-1945) and the American War in Vietnam (1945-1975) created more than a century-long duration of colonial and imperial violence and oppression in Vietnam (C. Nguyen). Following the Vietnam War, sociologists like Min Zhou have theorized the different waves of Vietnamese refugee migration. The first wave of 130,000 Vietnamese refugees who came right after 1975 had special provisions to come to the United States (Zhou and Gatewood 118). The second wave of Vietnamese refugees happened at the end of the 1970s where many of them fled by boat, giving them the label "boat people" and the third wave of Vietnamese refugees migrated in the 1980s (Zhou and Gatewood). After the end of the Vietnam War (1975), twenty years of postwar U.S. trade embargo took place, devastating Vietnam's economy and society (Espiritu). Once in the United States, there was mass resistance to Southeast Asian refugees and in 1975 a Harris poll found that 50 percent of Americans wanted Southeast Asians to be excluded (Espiritu).

During the French colonial period and the Vietnam War, my great-grandfather was a general for the French-Vietnamese military. Colonial and imperial forces frequently used Vietnamese intermediaries to build trust with community members and to expand colonial powers (Man). Since my great grandfather had high military ranking during the French colonial period, he had multiple wives and domestic care workers who worked for his families. My grandmother was born in 1945 and is one of the middle sisters of her four sisters. My

grandmother grew up in Hanoi until she was ten years old, when she and her family moved to South Vietnam after French troops were defeated by Viet Minh forces in 1954 (Bankston III and Zhou 4798). Following their flight to South Vietnam, my great-grandfather no longer worked due to the fall of the French troops and his age. In 1965, President Johnson sent the first U.S. troops to Vietnam which then created a black market to fuel the needs of imperialist forces (Bankston III and Zhou, Gustafsson). In order to economically survive during the war, my great-grandmother sold opium on the black market, while my eldest great aunts and my grandmother worked as Vietnamese bar hostesses. Due to her work as a Vietnamese bar hostess, my grandmother shared how she was no longer considered to be desirable by Vietnamese men, so my eldest aunts and my grandmother eventually dated and married American GIs.

My eldest great aunt was the first one to immigrate to the United States in 1967 when she married a U.S. Navy Sailor. The same year, my grandmother had her first child with an American GI at the age of twenty, a decision she made despite objections from her parents and the fact that she was no longer involved with the child's father. This child, my eldest aunt, was born in 1967 in Vietnam and faced harassment and violence for being Amerasian. My grandma's older sister was unable to have children at the time, so she adopted my eldest aunt, who moved to the United States when she was four years old in 1971. Later in the year of 1971, my grandmother then married a different U.S. Navy Sailor, which enabled her to immigrate to the United States. Although she immigrated to the United States the same year as my eldest aunt, my grandmother's husband moved her to Nebraska which was still far away from her first child, who was in Virginia. She lived with her first husband for a few months, but they got a divorce in Nevada shortly after she immigrated.

My grandfather was born in 1935 in Inglewood, California and grew up predominantly in Monterey Park. He eventually graduated from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo in 1959, where he studied mechanical engineering. In 1968, he moved to Vietnam, where he worked as an engineer. Following the birth of her first child, my grandma met my grandfather in Vietnam at the bar the same year he moved. They lived together in Vietnam for about a year until he had to leave since his engineering contract was over. My grandfather said he would come back for her but did not get another contract in Vietnam. After my grandma's divorce she tried to find my grandfather. After searching the yellow pages, she found his home number, allowing her to call his childhood home. My grandfather's sister answered and told her that he was in Nassau, Bahamas but he would be home soon. Once my grandfather returned to the United States, he and my grandma got married and had three children together. My aunt was born in 1973 in Canada and later settled in the Bay Area where she got married and raised my three cousins. My other aunt was born shortly after in 1975 in Virginia Beach. After having my cousin, she joined the Army, leading her to spend most of her adult life in Texas and Alabama. My mother was born in 1982, the youngest of all her sisters, and grew up predominantly in Virginia. She moved to multiple states in her teens but finally when one of my aunts moved to the Bay Area for the Coast Guard, she brought my mom with her. My mom was fifteen when she moved to San Francisco, where she met my dad in high school and had me at seventeen.

Between 1973 and 1983, my grandmother, grandfather and my aunts moved to multiple countries where my grandfather worked as an engineer for many U.S. corporations. They lived predominantly in Saudi Arabia and Indonesia but for a short time also resided in Canada and Singapore. My grandparents eventually moved back to Virginia since my grandmother's sisters were there. While in Virginia, my grandfather worked for the Naval Shipyard and my

grandmother owned bars close to the Naval base. My grandparents were married for about eleven years until they got divorced; eventually both of my grandparents remarried. My grandmother's current husband is also a U.S. Navy soldier whom she met in her bar around 1990. They eventually got married in 1997 and still reside in Virginia. After the divorce, my grandfather moved to Benton, California where his uncle built a house and worked as an HVAC engineer. My grandfather moved to Alabama in 2013 to be closer to one of his daughters, my aunt, and eventually remarried in 2015.

Through the interweaving of oral history interviews and critical autoethnography, this thesis positions the narrative of my grandmother, who worked as a Vietnamese bar hostess and eventually married an American GI, alongside the stories of my mom, her three sisters and my cousin to examine how communication, resistance and love are handled intergenerationally across three generations of Vietnamese American women. In order to uncover the multiple historical, political and personal complexities that shaped my family's lives, this thesis engages with scholarship, cultural productions and frameworks that accrue from literature on memory of the Cold War, intergenerational communication, Critical Refugee Studies and Womxn of Color feminism to politicize the narratives of Vietnamese American women. I argue that intergenerational conversations are an act of resistance, survival and resilience that could lead to possible futures of healing by knowing, understanding and labeling the power structures that do not currently allow the women in my family to exist without having to experience violence, cope with mental illness and live a life that does not go beyond surviving. By examining intergenerational stories and histories, the thesis reveals the ways in which our lives are continually shaped by ongoing structural and systemic violence that work to uphold logics of U.S. Empire. In handling my own family's history and stories with care, the thesis works to

break away from dichotomous binaries of perpetrator/victim and good/bad refugee, in order to display the complexities of feminist rage, resentment and anger (Espiritu, V. Nguyen, hooks, Lorde). The thesis also highlights the ways in which the multiple generations of women resist, care for each other and also create a network of care that goes against the Western neoliberal capitalist nuclear family unit to center intergenerational love rather than trauma. Lastly, by engaging in oral history interviews and employing critical autoethnography, the thesis also challenges what is constituted as real evidence in the academy in order to argue for the necessity of affect in research (Tuck and Yang).

Literature Review

Currently, there are many works from oral history websites to monographs that engage in preserving memory within the Vietnamese diaspora (Peché et al, Vo). Many of these works are incredibly influential in understanding how memory of the Vietnam War has been constructed and influenced by individuals, the state and many other actors. Of particular significance to me is Quan Tue Tran's term, *memoryscapes*, which explains how Vietnamese memory is complex, heterogenous and shaped by "overlapping networks of information" (Tran 243). Using this framework on memory, this thesis considers the ways in which my family's memories have been determined not solely by the experiences they are recalling but instead how their remembrance has been sculpted by a multitude of factors such as state narratives, cultural productions, time and age. Therefore, the recounting of memories in my research will not display an absolute truth or factual history but rather display the ways in which memory is constructed, changing and non-unilateral (Hunt and McHale). Not only is memory itself shaped by social factors, but the way that memories are shared is also subjective and constructed by the way the person emphasizes certain events versus what they leave out or under-emphasize (Hunt and McHale). Engaging with

Yến Lê Espiritu's *Body Counts*, this work also reveals how "post-memories" of the Vietnam War are not only constructed by the second-generation but also by the third generation, displaying how the Vietnam War continues to linger decades after (Espiritu 201).

This thesis also grapples with how intergenerational communication is carried out and handled between family members, to understand the goals of the memories that are told while also inspecting the silences in between (Dalgaard et al., Cai and Lee). In past literature, a main point of contention are the grave pains that silence, organized forgetting and forced amnesia has caused for many Vietnamese refugees and their children (Espiritu, Gandhi, Cai and Lee). Silence and forgetting are tools used by the state and Vietnamese refugees for a variety of reasons. In order to produce a benevolent savior narrative, the U.S. empire has used tactics of forced silence and forgetting. Humanitarian master narratives are then reinforced by cultural productions, memorials and many other sites of remembrance (Yoon). These dominant narratives have served as a way to silence many Vietnamese refugees and cause the second generation to remember the Vietnam War through the lens of the United States being a humanitarian savior in order to maintain current structures of marginalization and oppression. While silence can be used as a tool of violence, some Vietnamese Americans may use it as a way to show love and protect their children from the painful traumatic experiences of war from their pasts (Nguyen, Espiritu). Not only can silence be an act of care, silence can also be used as a tool of resistance (Kim). While this work also contends with silence, my family's intergenerational communication is more aligned with what psychologists have labeled as unfiltered speech, where parents tell stories unexpectedly or a child overhears, making the child then fill in the gaps with their imagination (Dalgaard et al.). To analyze unfiltered speech and the absence of silence, this work centers sentimentality, drawing from Yao's *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in*

Nineteenth-Century America to reveal how unfeeling and affect are shaped by historical processes that shape my own family's histories.

Throughout the thesis, the chapters contend with mainstream narratives about Asian American refugee and immigrant resilience and resistance that usually further perpetuates the capitalist framework of hard work and adaptability (V. Nguyen). Critical Refugee Studies's founding scholar, Y en L  Espiritu, questions "Good Refugee" narratives, revealing how Vietnamese refugees have been portrayed as passive victims who can only be successful if they assimilate to American capitalist ideals (Espiritu). The chapters take up the ways in which neoliberal capitalist imaginaries can cause interpersonal, structural and systemic violence that keep life only survivable. Asian American women's narratives are also many times aligned with neoliberal white feminist frameworks that can be focused on gaining access to capitalist systems rather than focused on the destruction of oppressive capitalist structures. Two centuries ago, the myth of hypersexualized disease ridden Asian American women was solidified through the banning of Chinese American women with legislation, the 1875 Page Act (Choy). Following World War II, stereotypes of Asian American women portrayed them as domestic and submissive, possibly with the influx of Asian war brides following the war (Ninh). These stereotypes in many forms harm Asian American women from creating expectations which justify racial gendered violence. By examining the racial, gendered and socio-economic violence experienced by the women in my family, this thesis grapples with acts of resentment and resistance as outcomes of these experiences (V. Nguyen).

Foundational studies on motherhood and motherwok, such as *The Second Shift* by Arlie Russell Hochschild, have been influential in feminist scholarship and have allowed for the furthering of feminist movements. While scholarship on white motherhood has been contended

with, there is still a gap in literature uncovering womxn of color feminist visions and critiques on motherhood (Collins). In Vietnamese American studies, motherhood has been explored by second-generation writers like Ocean Vuong, Grace Cho, and Susan Lieu, who speculate and contend with their mother's actions after the Hot War. While there are many cultural productions that contend with these relationships, there are not many qualitative research works that focus on how these Vietnamese women eventually become mothers, how they navigate motherhood, and how these types of marriages affected their children, especially in the lives of adult children after some decades of migration. This work reveals the many complexities of having to engage in romantic relations for survival and how this affects women's and their children's sense of identity, ideas of independence and mental health (Zeiger). Despite the fact that Grace M. Cho's academic monograph, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora : Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* and memoir, *Tastes Like War* both uncover the figure of the yanggongjus (Korean word for yankee whore/western princess) while also capturing the intergenerational impact of these marriages, it solely focuses on situating the experience within the Korean War context and does not have direct quotes from her mother (Cho).

Another central focus among scholars working on war marriages has been on the complexities of mixed-race identity and how mixed-race identity is shaped in the aftermath of war (Murphy-Shigematsu). The stigmatization of having mixed-race children in Vietnam did not originate from U.S. military intervention but instead was already being perpetuated by French colonialism. During the French colonial period in Vietnam, mixed-race children were seen as a threat to French imperial rule which justified the removal of mixed-race children. The French cultivated a gendered idea that mixed-race daughters would become promiscuous later and ruin their mother's lives, thus forcing women to abandon their mixed-race daughters (Lessard).

During the Vietnam War, it was extremely stigmatized to have mixed race children with GI soldiers in Vietnam and due to extreme difficulties being a mother during war, many mothers were forced and coerced to give up their children (Sachs, Woo).

The United States was also able to create a savior narrative from the violence that they caused by constructing the mission of Operation Baby Airlift where around 3,000 children were “saved” and taken to the United States, never seeing their mothers again (Sachs, Woo). While there has also been scholarship on the Amerasian Vietnamese adoptees, there has not been many studies on the relationships between children and mothers who stayed together (Yarborough). In order to expand on the current scholarship, this thesis engages the memories of my grandmother to understand her experiences as a mother of mixed-race children and explores how that shaped her daughters’ ideas of motherhood. The examination of motherhood in my family ultimately reveals how a century of colonization and imperialism has affected mixed-race children and their mothers' relationships resulting in further familial tensions, alienation and further trauma (Root, Kim-Prieto et al.).

Lastly, this thesis works to unravel the complexities of intergenerational trauma to not only understand the interpersonal causes but also to expose the structural and systemic violence that shape one’s mental health (Rubio, Hartmann et al., Cai and Lee). It is important to not only place blame and responsibility on the individual in hopes of a western cure but instead to try to understand trauma from an anticolonial framework that holds liable structural violence that upholds U.S. imperialism and empire (Rubio, Cai and Lee). My grandmother, my mom, all of her sisters and my cousins have all been diagnosed with mental health illnesses such as depression or mood disorders. Major depressive disorder was reported to affect 30.2% of Vietnamese Americans and it is 1.5 times more likely to affect women (Leung et al., Kim-

Prieto). This work uncovers how these mental health diagnoses and community struggles are a product of imperial and gendered violence, displaying how war and violence does not only affect one individual's mental health but has rippling effects across multiple generations even decades after war.

While there has been predominant scholarly research on intergenerational trauma especially in Holocaust studies and in the field of psychology (L. Nguyen, Harkins, Sangalang), there has been less research on intergenerational healing and love. Recent works such as Linh Thuy Nguyen's *Displacing Kinship: The Intimacies of Intergenerational Trauma in Vietnamese American Cultural Production* contends with the complexities of trauma and possibilities of healing for Vietnamese refugees and the Vietnamese diaspora. Cultural productions like Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and Grace Cho's *Tastes Like War* also explore their own intergenerational familial traumas and forms of healing, but both works unfortunately do not have their own mother's direct perspective or reflections. Elizabeth Rubio's essay "Of Monsters and Mothers" also exposes the complexities of intergenerational healing and the ways in which transformative justice can create space for possibilities of healing (131). Her essay also emphasizes the need for not only structural change but also personal accountability in order to facilitate healing processes. Rubio's powerful essay is predominately autoethnographic, thus we do not get to engage in her mother's perspective or voice around her actions. To expand the work on intergenerational healing and conceive other forms of feminist radical healing, this thesis centers the analytic of love (Cai and Lee). In engagement with Black feminist theories and womxn of color feminisms around love such as works like bell hook's *All About Love* and Joy James's *In Pursuit Of Revolutionary Love*, this thesis works to center not only trauma and

healing but also the ways in which cultivating intergenerational love can be a form of political resistance.

Methods

As mentioned above, this thesis interweaves both oral history interviews and engages in critical autoethnography. Oral history interviews have been widely celebrated as a form of bottom-up history that can create community archives as seen in multiple works such as the creation of *Viet Stories* (Tran, Vo Dang). Oral history methods have also been a technique in providing counter narratives to collective memory and a form of meaning making that may go against mainstream narratives (Crane, Cole). The practice is also rooted in a long tradition of feminist queer BIPOC storytelling and activism that has been used to transform place, time and community (Abrams, Cole). While there is power in conducting oral history interviews, the method has been critiqued for being framed as an egalitarian process that allows for “shared authorship” that gives “voice” to the oppressed subject or community, which occludes the unequal power dynamics and can lead to further exploitation (Kim 1351). While being a family member allows me access to my interviewees, it can also limit the stories and memories that are shared with me since they’ve seen me grow up, thus they may feel the need to shield me from traumatic memories out of care (Smith 11). By engaging with autoethnography, the thesis further challenges western colonial structures that relegate what constitutes as epistemology (Cho). By using my own family history as a case study to understand the intergenerational impacts of war, it reveals how master narratives around the Vietnam War try to simplify, reduce and leave out certain histories in order to promote the war as a liberal project of freedom (V. Nguyen, L. Nguyen). While my family’s history may relate to other people’s experiences, it is necessary to recognize the copious complexities within our own histories. Therefore, this thesis does not

promote the notion that my family's history can be projected nor applied to every single Vietnamese war bride narrative.

My methodology also includes in-depth Seidman's semi-structured interviews where I interviewed my maternal family members two times, in 2020 and 2023, for 30 to 40 minutes each time in order to collect different perspectives and stories. Telling these stories can be extremely retraumatizing, thus by spacing out the interviews and making them shorter, this work hopes to not cause further harm to my family. In the Fall of 2020, I started my research in a qualitative methods course led by Professor Hung Cam Thai where I was inspired to center my own family history, realizing that the personal is political. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown regulations, I conducted all of my interviews either on zoom or on the phone. During that time, I conducted interviews with my grandma, grandpa, my mom and all three of my aunts. In order to broker the conversations during the challenging times of the pandemic, my mom was on the call for the interview with my grandma, grandpa and one of my aunts to help me excavate stories and to be a part of a multi-generational conversation. My grandpa and grandma are both in their late 70s and 80s, which made it even more difficult to interview them over the phone. Thus, it was extremely helpful to have my mom with them in-person while I was interviewing them virtually. After the phone calls, my mom explained to me how she heard stories from her parents that she never heard before and it allowed her to gain a deeper understanding of her family. After I finished the short qualitative paper in 2020, my mom called me in tears explaining how she never learned the histories of her mother and how it provided her a new perspective on their relationship. My mom's reaction to the paper has motivated me to continue to continue to do this work and to write, making our histories legible for my family, myself and for future generations.

Due to the initial round of interviews being on zoom in the midst of the pandemic, I decided to complete the research for this thesis in-person. During the summer of 2023, I conducted interviews in-person with the same family members, in addition to my cousin and my great aunt. In order to interview them in-person, I first traveled to Alabama where my grandfather currently lives and then traveled to Virginia where my grandmother, my great aunt and my aunt live. Finally, I traveled to the Bay Area to interview my cousin and my aunt. These different formats—virtual versus in-person—produced different results. During the first round of interviews in 2020, I had my mom on the line to help me conduct interviews with my grandmother and my grandfather. During the pandemic, my mother traveled and stayed with both of my grandparents for some time during my project. Since my grandparents are older, my mom had to work the technology for them to do the interviews virtually. Having my mom on the line to use her stories and memories to help prompt stories from my grandparents produced more expansive and humorous stories. Since my grandparents could not see the recording device and it felt like a phone call to them, the conversation felt more natural and casual. In-person interviews felt more formal, since my grandparents could see the recording device and there was more build up to finding a quiet physical space. My aunt's 2023 interviews and stories were pretty similar to the stories they told in 2020; many times they emphasized the same memories and reiterated the same sentiments. Although the interviews seemed similar, my conversations with my aunts felt more trusting. It seemed like my aunts trusted me more when I interviewed them in 2023 in the way they spoke to me and did not censor their affective responses.

Overall, this project analyzes and examines the transcriptions of fourteen interviews conducted either in 2020 or 2023. While many qualitative works use block transcribed quotes from the respondent without the interviewer's responses and questions, the thesis presents the

interviews in a way that not only allows for the reader to see what has been said but also what has been asked. Therefore, the questions I asked, any comments I made, and any stories I shared in reply are included to not only put the interviewees' words on display but also my own (Kim). The oral history interviews are also not just one-on-one conversations but there are also multi-generational conversations presented that allow for the reader to also see interpersonal intergenerational conversations rather than just a single quote taken from the interview. Therefore, this method will allow the reader to see an intergenerational capturing of memory and communication rather than it being individually isolated. During the oral history process, I also engaged with material culture, using my family's photos as an entry point to create interview questions and utilizing them to broker conversation during the oral history interviews. Family photographs also allow for one to "shift discussions of war and its aftermath, nudging us even further away from familiar spectacles of violence to consider instead daily struggles to survive" (Phu 149). The family photos used throughout the process not only display what has been lost but also the joy, laughter and resilience that present themselves in my family photos. At the end of each chapter, I created a collage of family photos to pay tribute to my grandmother's handmade photo collages that line her home and to further display how our lives are interconnected and collaged together.

By conducting oral history interviews and engaging with critical autoethnography, I hope to challenge what is constituted as evidence or data in the academy, displaying the ways in which our lives are shaped by structures of violence that uphold the U.S. empire in hopes to shift the current savior narrative that has been echoing in the American consciousness. Through this thesis, I work through the multiple instances of racialized gendered violence my maternal family members have faced to reveal how imperialism continues to affect our lives for generations even

after the end of war (Espiritu, V. Nguyen). While I do not wish to cause retraumatization for my family, I hope that having our own family archive of interviews, photos and written memories will allow for the reinstatement of memories that have been stripped from many Vietnamese American families. This thesis emphasizes the importance of our own personal histories and knowledge in hopes to find alternative forms of intergenerational healing that are not offered within the current violent systems that currently shape our lives.

Chapter Outline

The first chapter of the thesis titled “My Grandma’s Story: Girlhood, Womanhood, Wifehood, Motherhood” explores the complexities of my grandmother’s life, starting from her life as a child in her “girlhood” in Vietnam and having to face the complexities of interpersonal familial abuse, love and navigating war as a child. The narrative then examines my grandmother’s experiences as a bar hostess in Vietnam and how she navigated romantic relationships in her “womanhood.” Lastly, the chapter ends by revealing how my grandmother’s choices in wifehood and motherhood were also shaped by war, trauma and feminist resistance. My grandmother’s life history also provides a counternarrative to stories that have been told about Vietnamese bar hostess work and intimate labor on military camps, revealing how women resisted through their labor. The first chapter also complicates the many existing binaries such as victim/perpetrator or good/bad refugee, trying to contend with the multiple complexities of personhood. By examining my family’s histories, it reveals the entangled layers of interpersonal and structural violence that shape daily lives and life histories. This thesis is also rooted in other ongoing feminist struggles and consciousness, by providing alternative understandings to motherhood, wifehood, grandmotherhood, sisterhood and daughterhood rooted in the Vietnamese war bride experience. Accordingly, this thesis complicates motherhood and

wifehood by comparing the transnational contexts where my grandmother assumed these roles in Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia and the United States. By comparing my grandmother's transnational experiences, the chapter further exposes how motherhood and wifehood in the United States are constructed by cis-heteropatriarchal Anglo-Saxon ideals, ultimately causing intergenerational tensions. This chapter is the first in order to orient the reader to the historical and political context that shapes my maternal family's lives, before moving on to the ways that their memories are constructed and communicated. This chapter offers the reader a base understanding of my grandmother's life, which then allows the reader to better follow the intergenerational narratives of three generations of memory in the second chapter.

The second chapter, "Intergenerational Communication: Fragmented Memory, Absent Silence and Humorous Unfeeling," continues with my grandmother's narrative and works to understand how my aunts and my mom piece together my grandmother's histories. This chapter delves into the ways my family members have navigated and shared memories of love, care and violence. The stories and excerpts in this chapter explore how the absence of silence, or what psychologists have labeled as "unfiltered speech," shapes intergenerational communication and memory between three generations of Vietnamese American women (Dalgaard et al.). While silence has been a clear theme in Asian American studies, my family's stories reveal that while the lack of silence can be a powerful tool for of resistance, it can also cause the normalization of trauma. The normalization and comparing of trauma intergenerationally has led the future generations to understand their own experiences with racialized gendered violence as acceptable. In conversation with Hirsch and Espiritu's concept of second-generation postmemories, the chapter also unveils how the memory of the Vietnam War is not only shaped by my grandmother but also through cultural productions, interpersonal connections to the war and the master

narratives taught in the U.S. South, leading to second-generation and third-generation confusions, misunderstandings and tensions about the historical context that shapes the militarized afterlives that we lead in the United States. This chapter is placed second for the reader to gain an understanding of how the three generations handle, shape and interact with familial memories, allowing the reader to get to know my maternal family members even more before moving on to more vulnerable stories of violence, resentment, and love in the space of so-called “refuge.”

The final chapter, “Bad(ass) Mothers and Re(sisters): Feminist Rage, Resistance and Intergenerational Love,” uncovers how the women in my family have resisted systems and structures of violence which have led them to face carceral consequences and deviant labeling, furthering the perpetuation of state violence even after the “end” of war (V. Nguyen). This chapter also confronts the intergenerational tensions, understandings and entanglements that are shaped by the shared continued experience of resisting against racialized gendered violence. The promise of supposed refuge and safety in the United States are disillusioned when violence continues despite citizenship, assimilation and neoliberal cis-heteropatriarchal capitalist achievements, causing my family to experience feelings of resentment, anger and rage (V. Nguyen, L. Nguyen). Grounded in Black feminist theory and Womxn of color feminisms, this chapter grapples with my family’s stories of resistance, care and love (hooks, Lorde, James). The chapter highlights the alternative forms of care that took place between three generations in the midst of ongoing structures of oppression and violence. Overall, the third chapter argues that the while current systems and structures do not always allow for resistance and healing, my family members have found alternative forms of care and healing that do not always allow one to be fully “healed.” While fully healing in a current world that continues to deny our humanity seems

improbable, my family has continued to resist by cultivating their feminist familial forms of healing, care and love (L. Nguyen). While still acknowledging and critiquing broader structures, the chapter decenters intergenerational trauma but instead focuses on intergenerational love as a possible praxis of knowledge and future making. This chapter is placed last to end the thesis on a more positive and hopeful note, in hopes to not cause the reader further harm but instead for them to imagine possible anticolonial futures that are centered on love rather than violence.

While the stories within this thesis are acts of resistance in themselves, the act of re-telling these stories further perpetuates my family's resistance, survival and resilience. The continued restating and reuttering of these stories lead to possible futures of radical healing for my family by knowing, understanding and labeling the power structures that do not currently allow us to exist without having to experience gendered violence, cope with mental illness and live a life that goes beyond surviving (Cai and Lee, L. Nguyen). This research is also extremely urgent given the fact that the eldest cohort of women who were Cold War brides are now nearing their eighties (Cho). It is important to continue this research to reveal how U.S. military intervention has shaped lives and the generations that followed. Lastly, this project will be extremely healing for myself and for my family members. Many times, Asian American women's stories are dismissed and pushed aside, but collecting and sharing these stories is immensely important in order to expand the knowledge around the complexities of our lives and our memories, in hopes of anticolonial futures.

Chapter 1: My Grandma's Story: Girlhood, Womanhood, Wifehood, Motherhood

I visited my grandmother this past summer in 2023 for the first time since 2018. Although the five years from 2018 to 2023 may seem like a short period of time, it felt like eternity, filled with so much uncertainty in between due to the Covid-19 pandemic. I missed hearing my grandmother's stern voice as she talked about her life and hearing her laugh voraciously as she made "inappropriate" jokes. The first day I saw my grandmother again, I placed my head on her lap and she petted my hair as she told me about her childhood, marriage and motherhood. As I sat with my head in her lap, she whispered many stories to me in a calm tone about how she didn't like being bossed around. In this short moment of care and comfort, I learned more about how my grandmother thought of herself as a young girl, a teenager, a woman, a wife, and a mother.

This chapter carefully examines the many stages of my grandmother's life in order to reveal how my grandmother's choices were shaped by war, trauma and feminist resistance. The first part of the chapter contends with the complexities of my grandmother's "girlhood" as a young girl in Vietnam in order to reveal how her own familial dynamics have shaped her life choices and understandings. My grandmother's experiences of girlhood also reveal how war shapes gender roles and the family, much like Mai Lan Gustafsson's "Freedom. Money. Fun. Love: The Warlore of Vietnamese Bargirls." The second section of the chapter moves into my grandmother's "womanhood" as a Vietnamese bar hostess navigating intimacies, labor and familial duties. In order to contend with the complexities of my grandmother's work as a bar hostess, this chapter engages with Long T. Bui's *Model Machines: A History of the Asian as Automaton* to consider how my grandmother's narrative disrupts the figure of the Asian woman "sex machine" imagined in Western cultural productions and cold war economies. Throughout

the chapter, the phrase “intimate labor” is used rather than “sex work” because my grandmother explicitly shared how she did not engage in physical cis-heterosexual sexual relations with customers unless she was romantically interested and instead performed various forms of intimate emotional titillations to the customers (Parreñas, Brents and Jackson). The final sections of this chapter engages feminist maternal theory and current cultural productions on Vietnamese refugee motherhood to grapple with my grandmother’s feminist resistance in regards to wifhood and motherhood in order to further emphasize how both roles are constructed by cis-heteropatriarchal Anglo-Saxon ideals (O’Reilly, Hallstein, hooks, Collins, Rubio). Overall, this chapter argues for a necessary complication around the concepts of “good” vs “bad” mother, wife and refugee, by engaging with Yén Lê Espiritu scholarship and Vinh Nguyen’s *Lived Refuge* to further problematize the figure of the “good refugee” and the affect of gratitude. By examining my grandmother’s form of story-telling, the chapter also reveals her own feminist critiques and analysis of ongoing colonial imperial violence, allowing her to challenge and subvert structures that have shaped her own life history.

“Girlhood”: Familial and Gender Role Resistance

French colonialism in Vietnam violently took shape starting in 1857 to 1954. The process of colonization included expanding colonial powers by using local Vietnamese intermediaries in the military to further extend control (Man). My great grandpa was a general for the French Vietnamese military during French colonialism in Vietnam, allowing my grandma to grow up wealthy in North Vietnam until the American War in Vietnam started. Before the war started, my great grandfather’s high military position and his wealth allowed him to have multiple wives and girlfriends, one being my great-grandma. My grandmother clearly shares how her father had a high-ranking military and class position allowing him to possess power:

Myself: What was it like being with your parents?

My Grandma: Oh, my parents very hard, do what they say, that's the way it is, my father same thing, my mother we live in Hanoi and my father he is Army there, so he know all the big man. We go to house for the Hanoi. I remember 10-year-old, I live there, the police across the street come to our house to protect ... My father, people afraid of him when he go, people say, "Oh that him so don't bother, don't talk about him."

My grandmother's quote displays her first understanding of the world and her acceptance of familial structures. She shares how her parents were hard on her and how she had to do what they said growing up, which is just "the way it is." Throughout the interview, my grandmother uses the phrase "that it" or "that is the way it is," to display that while life may seem unfair or traumatic within the traditional Western cis-heteropatriarchal familial narrative, she acknowledges her own familial power structures as a simple truth of life.

My grandmother also shares how her parents did not have the time to listen to her or directly parent due to age, war and familial constructions. When her father got too old to work and her mother was away selling opium on the black-market during the war, her sisters had to take care of each other. During the American War in Vietnam, gender and familial roles shifted as men were away at war and many mothers could not provide for their entire family themselves (Gustafsson). My grandma shared how her sisters were in charge of each other and the eldest sister was the one who made the rules of the household. My grandma's family fled South at the start of the Vietnam War leading them to no longer have the wealth or the same political standing. Therefore, in my grandmother's family there was a matriarchal hierarchy due to her father's age and her brothers being soldiers in the war. Her sisters then had to be responsible for parenting while their mother was away and had to find other ways of making money to financially survive. My grandmother shared how her sisters maintained parental power through violent strategies:

My Grandma: My sister, you have to do what the elders tell you what to do, you don't do what your sister says, they beat you up. She put the hot water and burn me. You have to do what your sister say. Same my father hit me, my mother cannot say anything. He the boss, my mother second, he's the boss okay. He not home, my mother boss. She not home, my sister boss. You understand that? You do what your sister say or [she] beat the shit out of you, that the way we grow up. That's it.

My grandma shared how her sister burned her with water as a disciplinary measure if her parents were not home. She then talked about the sequence of hierarchy in the household, explaining "that's just how it is." While my grandmother talks about the trauma and violence that shaped her childhood, she shares her acceptance of their acts as just a part of her life. Through this short phrase my grandmother, rather than villainizing her family, shares how that is just the way that they grew up in a way that positions these violent interpersonal acts as necessary normal actions of survival. My grandmother's family dynamic goes against Western nuclear heteropatriarchal notions of family configurations with my great-grandfather having multiple wives, her mother not being the main caretaker and her sisters being in charge. Although one may see this family dynamic as patriarchal and violent, my grandmother shared this story in a way that embraced her upbringing, an upbringing she was proud to call her own. In my grandma's home she has a huge picture on the wall of my great grandfather and great grandmother. She shared with me, pointing at the photos, the great amount of love and care she had for her parents and sisters.

While not condoning violent acts, my grandmother saw these acts as a part of her childhood, as a part of her family. She shares how her sisters took turns caring for their family and how she had to turn to working at the club to support her family:

My Grandma: Yes, because my sister put me to working, she work in the club so when she marry to her husband, she need me to work in the club to take care of the family.

Myself: And whatever your sisters say you have to do to take care of your family?

My Grandma: You have to, you don't want to, you have to do it. Who takes care of the family? My sister do that for many year, so when she go home [to the United States], who take care of the family? So, I have to lie to them and take people money. So that's it, people, the Navy there, American, them think so they go to club they going to find a woman, not like American here. That the way Navy, Army, them go to club over there, they get drunk and them look for women, that's it.

My grandma shared how her sisters worked to take care of her family and the need to listen to her sisters even if you didn't want to, it was just a part of life. Therefore, in order to take care of her family while also resisting economic oppressive power structures during the war, my grandmother chose to find work in the clubs. Once her eldest sister who worked at the clubs married an American man and immigrated to the United States, the responsibility then fell on my grandmother to continue the labor for the family. The necessity of stepping into the role of primary financial caretaker for her family, a responsibility traditionally designated for males within a cis-heteropatriarchal family construction, illustrates the shifting dynamics of gender roles within Vietnamese families during war. Furthermore, my grandmother's layered quote exposes how American soldiers distanced themselves from the American ideas of protecting white womanhood and went to the clubs to get drunk and engage in intimacies that denied the same respect for personhood. The power imbalances rooted in imperial economic violence permeated not only familial responsibilities but also interpersonal relationships, influencing the dynamics within my grandmother's intimate connections.

“Womanhood”: Resisting the Asian Sex Robot Myth and Gendered Violence

My grandmother was one of 8,040 women who married American soldiers to flee the circumstances of war violently escalated by U.S. Empire (Barth). My grandmother's eldest sister

was the first to marry an American Navy Sailor and she moved to the United States in 1967. This was the same year that my grandmother gave birth to my eldest aunt. My grandmother did not stay with my aunt's father for reasons that still remain silenced by my grandmother. In the meantime, my grandmother had a very hard time keeping my eldest aunt safe in Vietnam, since it was incredibly stigmatized to have Amerasian children. My grandmother's sister in the United States adopted my eldest aunt since she and her husband weren't initially able to have children. Eventually, they had their own children, and my grandmother married an American Navy Sailor in 1971, allowing her to take her daughter back and move to Omaha, Nebraska. My grandmother's marriage to the Navy Sailor was not one of imagined Western fairytale romance and intimacy. Instead, her choice of marriage was shaped by complex political, financial and familial expectations due to being in the midst of the Vietnam War. When the first U.S. troops arrived in Vietnam in 1965, a black market was created to fuel the needs of the American war machine. A part of this market was the Saigon bar scene where many young Vietnamese women took part as sex workers, dancers, strippers, and waitresses (Gustafsson). My great grandfather was too old to work during the American War in Vietnam, which led my great grandma to sell opium on the black market and the need for my grandma and her sisters to work at the military bars to support the family. My grandmother shared stories about how her parent's marriage and the need to follow her sister's rules shaped whom she got to love and marry:

Myself: You tried to marry Vietnamese people?

My Grandma: But them not rich so my sister say no that way.

Myself: Did your husband have a lot of money?

My Grandma: Yes crazy, we don't want to talk about it, sister the boss first, you know, tell father mother and they don't listen to me, they don't have time. When the French left he [her dad] worked for the government, but he too old. My father had wife and

girlfriend, we don't talk about it, rich people them have a lot of girlfriends, that's it. Man, the boss that it, you want to be good, you have to let them do what they want. Talk nice but they want to have a girlfriend, you let them.

My grandmother clearly emphasizes the power hierarchy to let men do whatever they please, even if that means having other girlfriends which may not seem morally acceptable in cis-heteropatriarchal Anglo-Saxon marriages. She also shares the need to “be good” and to “talk nice” to men, displaying the ways in which notions of filial piety shaped her ideas of love, marriage and intimacies.

My grandmother's description of just being “good” and “letting them do what they want” evokes the mainstream stereotype of Asian women as passive robotic objects. By examining historical moments and cultural productions, we can trace the epistemology of the myth that Asian women are “sex machines” (Bui). While many cultural productions like *Full Metal Jacket* display Vietnamese women as automatons and sexual robots, my grandmother's stories of labor were more complex than what has been displayed in white male imagined films and cultural productions. The sexist imagination of the Asian hostesses abroad as sole objects of pleasure allowed the men to justify their intimacies by treating them as economic transactions rather than emotional intimate interactions (Bui 103). My grandma started working as a bar hostess when she was seventeen in order to help financially support her family. Given my grandmother's limited opportunities in Vietnam due to the U.S. empire shattering Vietnam's economy, her sisters advised my grandmother to resist through the engagement of intimate labor by “taking advantage” of American men's position and financial resources (Espiritu).

Although my grandmother found ways to resist when engaging in intimate labor, she also continued to face perpetual gendered violence. When my grandmother did not adhere to the

Western male imagination of Asian women being subservient sexual objects and displayed her own autonomy, she was met with further violence:

My Grandma: So, the guy one time, he fall in love with me, he buy me flowers all the time, one day he come find me and he think because I work in club, I'm a bad girl. So, I go home, and I have people drive me car me home. He stops the car; he scares me, and he take me to go to hotel.

My Mom: And were you fighting him?

My Grandma: Yes crazy.

My Mom: He thought you owed him something then?

My Grandma: Yes, I still take his money but lie to him, but he get mad you know, that what he do, same them you take people money, and you lie to them, say you go back with them some bullshit and you don't do that, they mad, them follow you, them try to hurt you, that's it.

This short story displays the gendered violence my grandma faced while working at the bar and the ways in which the economic trade of emotional intimacies inside the bar could lead to further violence. My grandmother ending her phrase with "that's it" displays the ways in which these actions of violence became regular and well known. The phrase displays the acceptance of the patriarchal violence that women like my grandma had to face while working in the bar and the tensions she had to handle in order to ensure her own safety. My grandma shared that many of the women working at the bar resisted the power structures by lying to the men in order to get their money and go home.

They also engaged in emotional titillations, allowing the male soldiers to build a fantasy of actual intimacies:

My Grandma: Saigon tea. Them say you have to drink but no we just drink a couple drinks and we just drink tea. You tell them Buy Buy Buy you know? So, you say okay, you buy me drink tonight, I go home with you, you know. So, this means money. You know?

My Mom: How many people did you have to talk to? Do you talk that you have to go home with them?

My Grandma: We do many people, no I never go home with them. I just talk like that, TALK like “Oh yea, we go out with you tonight, okay baby” I say, “Okay when I have a time,” but I tell them when I don’t have a time and I have to go home. You know, you know, I live with my mother and father that time I still live with mommy and daddy. Okay, now you get it? Same your daddy, I like him he buy me couple drink. I go with him because I like him.

Many of the women in the bars, including my grandma, found ways in which to resist the patriarchal gendered violence justified through the Asian sex robot myth. The women found ways to do their work and to complete their goal of gaining financial survival during war while also maintaining their own agency. Bui’s chapter, “Sex Machines: Exploiting the Bionic Woman of Color for the Cold War Economy,” shares how the film *Full Metal Jacket* depicts Vietnamese women as machines due to their reduced repetitive dialogue and limited story. Although the reduced repetitive dialogue is a characteristic of Asian sex robots limiting their personhood, this reduced repetitive dialogue allowed them to reduce their own energy and time while achieving their goals during the job. My grandmother shared with me that she would tell the men the same things, the things they wanted to hear, and she would get their money. Although my grandmother’s choice of repeated dialogue would make her seem like an automaton, she was able to strategically figure out what phrases worked for her and what actions would allow her to achieve her economic goals. My grandmother shared how many of the military men would buy her “Saigon Tea” to share, the tea would sometimes be mixed with whiskey making it alcoholic or would just be actual non-alcoholic tea. My grandmother shared how when she was given the alcoholic version, she would throw it behind her to pretend to drink. My grandmother’s repeated actions can be seen as a performance of the “robot self,” in order to appeal and fulfill Western imaginations, but many cultural productions simplify Vietnamese women’s stories to portray the

robot-like performance as if it was their whole self in order to continue the justification of the sexualization and violence that have been inflicted on Asian women's bodies during the Cold War and ongoing imperialism in Asia.

When speaking with my grandma, instead of seeing herself as robotic, she in a way saw the American military men as clones. She told me how the American GIs would frequently say the same things to her, and they all looked the same. While the racialized womxn performing intimate labor on military camps are seen in Western media as the fungible figure of the Asian sex robot, American GIs are not only fungible to the state but also to the womxn working in the bars. In relation to the Asian women sex machine myth is the invincible military man, the "myth of invincible American manhood, where an ordinary man recruited into the world's mightiest army could aspire to be a globe-trotting stud with 'an inexhaustible penis,' roaming around the world" (Bui 108).

My grandfather, a cis white man, often boasted about traveling to over one hundred different countries and engaging in sexual encounters in each one. Despite not serving in the military, as an engineer, he wielded similar economic, racial and patriarchal power to American soldiers. This privilege of working as an engineer building infrastructure shielded him from the looming threat of expendability that U.S. military soldiers faced (Lee). While my grandfather's work took place in the midst of war, he was not on the frontlines fighting the war and thus his life was more protected than the many U.S. soldiers. When recounting his relationship with my grandmother, he frames the narrative around his pursuit of a female companion:

My Grandpa: Well, of course, I was a young guy on the prowl, and I was looking for female companionship. I didn't want to go to a brothel or a whorehouse. So, I went to a few clubs, and I met your mom. She was working in one of them. And I went back, and we started dating, and then we got an apartment together and we got along great. She gave me about 11 great years.

While the stories of military men and the intimacies of Vietnamese women is the predominant narrative, my grandfather's experience as an engineer displays the ways in which the corporate industrial complex played a role in the intimate affairs during war. The building of military infrastructure in Vietnam was one of the United States' largest military construction projects that created not only military industrial money but also money for construction consortiums like RMK-BRJ (Schenck). The war in Vietnam was not only an anticommunist military project but also a project of corporate construction, building of American infrastructure and a way to expand imperial capitalist power. The military bars not only served American soldiers but also men who were a part of the corporations involved in the military industrial complex. In 1968, my grandfather started working as a contractor in Vietnam building air conditioners which were some of the most valuable equipment and were set in place to improve military imperial performance (Traas 385). My grandpa's description of meeting my grandma and their time together displays the ways in which power dynamics play a role in the created narrative. My grandmother was working in the club to provide for her family, while my grandfather didn't feel like attending other venues of intimacy, leading him to go to the bar. While my grandfather starts the narrative as if he is a hunter on the lookout for sexual animal prey, he then transitions to emphasizing their good times and love together. He shares how they ended up sharing a space together and eventually had eleven years of marriage together.

My grandparents' marriage at many points was filled with memories of mutual love and care. In 2013, when I was at a family party for my grandmother's birthday, she jumped in the pool to show off to my grandpa that she remembered how to swim since he taught her. She pulled up her bathing suit, slapped her butt and jumped off the diving board. After she jumped in, she started drowning and my uncle saved her. After my grandmother's swimming stunt, my

grandfather followed her around with his guitar singing her love songs. My grandmother and grandfather's relationship cannot be reduced to their power dynamics caused by the American imperial war machine but instead their relationship lays out the complexities of war, marriage and gendered expectations that made their relationship one that had continuous tensions.

“Wifehood”: Good Refugee, Good Wife

Narratives in the media have created the intertwined dichotomy between the rescued, Vietnamese refugees, and rescuers, Vietnam veterans. In conjunction with these narratives, many postwar news sources displayed veterans as friends of Vietnamese refugees and emphasized the theme of gratitude (*Espiritu*). In order to be labeled as a “good refugee” deserving of the resources and the opportunity to immigrate to the United States, Vietnamese refugees are expected to show gratitude to the state (V. Nguyen). Through the rendering of the figure of the “good refugee” who is successful and anticommunist, the United States is able to justify the Vietnam War as a “good war” that was necessary and moral (*Espiritu*). The construction of the grateful refugee also allows for the justification of current neo-imperial violence (V. Nguyen). Rather than having to gain refuge from the state, many Vietnamese American women, like my grandma, tried to gain refuge through intimacies. Therefore, they do not necessarily owe the state their gratitude but instead their American husband, making the Vietnamese women who participated in war marriages not necessarily a “good refugee” that serves the neoliberal state by assimilating and participating in neoliberal ideas of success, but instead a “good wife” that serves the patriarchal agreement of marriage. Instead of the obligation of proving oneself to the state, my grandmother had the obligation to have children, provide intimacy and be a “good wife.”

Being a Vietnamese war bride created a precarious legal and economic position for many women, making it extremely difficult to leave abusive partners. While my grandmother felt

many obligations of being a wife to my grandpa and a mother to her daughters, she shared how she divorced her first husband, the U.S. Navy Sailor, a few months after she arrived in the United States. While my grandmother dated my grandfather in Vietnam, he eventually had to leave due to his contract ending. My grandfather said he would come back to Vietnam but he never did, so my grandmother had to marry an American GI in order to immigrate to the United States to be with her eldest daughter and her sister. Once she and her first husband immigrated to the United States, he quickly became violent and abusive, causing her to soon divorce him after arriving in Omaha, Nebraska. Since my grandmother already had her sister in the United States and her sister's husband was an American military veteran, this may have made her situation less precarious than Vietnamese women who may have no family or relatives in the United States.

My grandmother continually resisted the imperial patriarchal violence she faced while being a bar hostess and continued to do so even when she married a U.S. soldier, allowing her to migrate to the United States to be with her daughter. She shared with me that even when she married and moved to the United States with an American soldier, she continued to resist against the gendered violence she faced:

My Grandma: Yes, I divorce him in Nevada.

Myself: And then you went to go find grandpa?

My Grandma: Yeah, yeah. I divorced him after only two months. You have to stay there for two months because he was mean, so that reason why I don't want, he go crazy, he worked to kill people. You never know, he can kill you.

Vietnamese refugees and Vietnam veterans have been intertwined in creating a dichotomy between rescued and rescuer. In the media, narratives have been focused on the private home lives of “innocent” Vietnam veterans allowing for a cultural transformation that

turns the loss of the Vietnam War into a “good war.” While cultivated narratives have displayed Asian war bride indebtedness or gratitude towards American soldiers, my grandmother resisted these notions and found a way to yet again escape from further imperial violence. She positions her ex-husband as a killer, who goes crazy and works to kill people. Many times, military Vietnam veterans are positioned as saviors and rescuers, but my grandma posits that his job was not one of rescuing but instead a job of killing (Espiritu). She ends by stating “You never know, he can kill you,” emphasizing the violence follows even after immigrating to the United States, further perpetuating one to be in a continuous state of refugeetude (V. Nguyen 118). An intimate violence could lead to her death even after “escaping” war. My grandmother was able to divorce her husband with details that she does not really explain further. She shared how she ended up in Vegas, allowing her to gamble and party after their divorce. She shared with me how she met famous celebrities and was even asked to be a part of the show business. While many may see this situation as scary and traumatic, my grandma shared the joy and freedom she felt after her divorce, after yet again having to escape the circumstances of structural and interpersonal imperial violence.

Soon after my grandmother’s divorce, she found my grandpa’s home number in the yellow pages. She called the number and my grandpa’s sister answered the phone, letting my grandma know that he was in Nassau, Bahamas. A few months later, my grandpa returned to the United States and reconnected with my grandmother. They got back together and eventually got married, allowing them to start traveling together for my grandpa’s work as an engineer. They ended up getting married in 1974 in Kingston, Ontario, where one of my aunts was born.

When I saw my grandmother this past summer, I sat on the floor looking up at her while she told me stories about the duties of being a wife to my grandfather and a mother to my mother

and aunts. She shared how she felt that as a wife she had to continually provide sexual intimacies with my grandfather and how she did not want to travel but had to for my grandfather's job:

Myself: And then did you like living in U.S.? Or did you miss home?

My Grandma: Miss home but honey I have a kid, two three kids. So, what the hell? I need to go love my kids, so I don't want to, but we go and travel everywhere, your grandpa travel everywhere. We go to Nicaragua, we go to Saudia, we go to...your grandpa he knows.

While my grandmother's life may have seemed glamorous, being married to a wealthy white man that allowed her to travel the world, my grandmother shared a longing for Vietnam. Even in the retelling, she cannot recount every place she went to and tells me to instead ask my grandpa.

For my grandmother and many women, wifeness and motherhood were inherently entangled (Hallstein). Motherwork and wifework have been theorized within well-known feminist works such as Hochschild's *Second Shift*, while scholarship examining and contextualizing the continuous labor of womxn of color mothering and grand-mothering has recently grown to consider intersectional motherhood (Collins). When my grandma immigrated to the United States, she came with her own understanding of family structures and mothering that was shaped by circumstances of war, Vietnamese tradition and socio-economic class, which differed from the Anglo-Saxon ideal notion of motherhood. For example, since my great grandfather in Vietnam was wealthy, they also grew up with maids, nannies and other care workers that allowed her mother to have a network of caretakers in addition to herself. When the war started and they immigrated South, my grandmother's mother was away from home since she was suddenly financially responsible for her family during the Vietnam war. Therefore, my grandmother was left with her sisters to take care of her, shaping her own context and

understanding of motherhood. My great grandfather also had multiple wives and girlfriends, playing a role in the ways in which my grandmother understood family dynamics. My grandmother also shared with me how she preferred being in other countries, where their buying power was greater, allowing her to access the lifestyle she grew up with.

The socio-economic buying power that my grandma and grandpa had in other countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia allowed her to have support and help while fulfilling the motherwork duties. In the beginning of the interview, my grandmother shared how she preferred not traveling and wanted to stay in one place, possibly due to having to move her children from place to place making them find a new school and friends. While she did not enjoy traveling, she shared how she wished they just stayed in Saudi Arabia. My grandmother explained how she preferred living in places other than the United States, disrupting the dominant narrative that Vietnamese refugees can only access the “good life” once they immigrate to the U.S.:

My Grandma: My sister say I love overseas more than I love America. That is true because I go with your grandpa because you can have everything over there, you have servants just like Vietnam. So why you come to America for? You go to Saudi Arabia, Indonesia you have servant people work and you have villa [fancy home].

Myself: But in Saudi Arabia you were just by yourself right?

My Grandma: I live every country, in Indonesia I know how to speak with them too. Even in Nicaragua, just learn through the servant, them teach you. Them loved you, you're good, to them just like family, not like American over here, them you treat them good, them do anything for you, show you how to go buy fish for not too much money. I love in Saudi Arabia people kill the American because he talk bad, you don't put your hand in people face over Saudi Arabia.

My grandmother asks, “So why you come to America for?”, trivializing the American dream and sharing how other countries allowed her to live an even more luxurious lifestyle.

Since my grandmother got to live an upper middle-class lifestyle in Vietnam and abroad she then resents her life in America as a place that does not allow her to have the same resources and access to labor that could help support herself and her family. Many narratives use the Would-Be-Been trope that makes the reader not mourn the war but instead the people who were left behind. They are powerful because they make the case that this life—of education, opportunities, and social mobility—would be unimaginable in Vietnam, and thus could only be had here in the United States. Most often, these “would-have-beens” are mere speculation (Espiritu 98). Many refugee stories are about if they stayed they would have had a less successful life, but in my grandmother’s story she felt as if they were able to stay in Vietnam or abroad they would have been able to survive and sustain a community that has not been possible in the neoliberal United States. My grandmother also explained how she perceived her relationship with the domestic care workers of being one built on trust, care and love. She shared a romanticized vision of how these relationships were not like ones in the United States where people may dehumanize care workers, but instead how living abroad allowed her to have a friend that would teach her language to communicate and how to navigate spaces in the country. While my grandmother may have created trusting kinships with the care workers, her idealization of these relationships signifies my grandmother’s longing for higher social status which was achievable due to my grandfather’s economic power in the countries abroad. In this instance, rather than my grandmother always providing care and service labor, she had someone else to take care of her and be able to provide service labor to her. My grandmother frequently shared how her economic status in the United States did not allow her to have the same communities and people around her.

Due to the nuclear neoliberal family structure in the United States, her economic status abroad and the anti-Asian racism following the Vietnam war, my grandmother explained how life abroad was better for her and allowed her to not only be a mother but also have a job she enjoyed:

Myself: And what was it like living in Saudi Arabia?

My Grandma: I like it. I have a job. * Excitement *

Myself: What was your job?

My Grandma: I am a supervisor for food. Oh, my God. I'm a boss, see nobody got a job to work in Saudi Arabia, but I have it. A lot of women only marry, but then not be there long, they go in two months or something.

My grandmother spoke excitedly about the opportunity to work in Saudi Arabia and to be in charge. She also proudly claimed that she was one of the only married women in Saudi Arabia with a job. This role not only allowed her to be a mother at home but also be a worker where she felt needed and in power. In contrast, my grandmother's other work as a mother, a bar hostess and later a bar owner was predicated on the continuous servicing of men. My grandmother may have spoken so highly of this job because it was one of the only jobs where she was not having to serve men and lie to men, but instead she got to be a leader, doing something she was proud to claim as her own. While my grandmother spoke highly about living abroad and the ways in which having care workers around her helped her live as a mother and worker, once she moved to the United States, those systems and networks of care were no longer available, making her the sole caretaker and leading her to be emotionally and physically absent.

“Motherhood”: The Monstrous Vietnamese Mother

Motherhood has been shaped by racialization and systemic barriers. The very "creation" of the United States was predicated on the forced motherhood and gendered violence faced by

Native and Black women. This historical context underscores the deep-rooted connection between motherhood and the mechanisms of racial capitalism. Additionally, instances such as the coerced sterilization of women of color further exemplify how motherhood has been entangled with systemic gendered violence (Collins). Conceptions of “good” motherhood are predominantly predicated on white heteropatriarchal middle-class Anglo-Saxon ideals, leading other mothers who do not follow these practices to be labeled as deficient mothers (Palko, Ladd-Taylor and Umansky). “Good” motherhood is dependent on racist, capitalist, neoliberal and patriarchal principles, putting even more pressure and subjecting further judgment on Womxn of Color and Queer mothers (Palko). Ocean Vuong's essay, “A Letter to My Mother That She Will Never Read,” works through the complexities of having a Vietnamese refugee mother and the ways in which violence and care can both exist at the same time. Vuong displays deep understanding and compassion for his mother while also acknowledging the violent acts she did to him. He beautifully writes, “I read that parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children. Perhaps there is a monstrous origin to it, after all. Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war... You're a mother, Ma. You're also a monster” (Vuong 22). Vuong contextualizes his mother's violent acts as not only interpersonal, but acts stemming from the PTSD from systemic and structural violence she endured during the Vietnam War, as well as the challenges being a Vietnamese refugee in America. Elizabeth Hanna Rubio's “Of Mothers and Monsters” also contends with her relationship to her mother who was a refugee from the Korean War, further pointing to the necessity to not only acknowledge the structures and systems that shape motherhood but also the need to hold people accountable for their actions. Rubio emphasizes how her mother can hold multiple truths, how her mother can both be someone affected by the systems and structures of violence while also perpetuating further interpersonal

violence. Vuong's narrative and Rubio's essay contemplates the notion of who qualifies as a "good mother" and who possesses the emotional capacity to nurture their children, all within the context of colonial and imperial violence.

Since it was extremely stigmatized to have mixed race children with GI soldiers in Vietnam and due to extreme difficulties being a mother during war, many mothers were forced and coerced to give up their children (Sachs, Woo). War, violence and systemic oppression not only split families physically, but also shape one's ability to be an emotionally loving mother even if given the opportunity to stay together. Since my grandmother was forced to work as a bar hostess to provide for her family and marry an American soldier to come to the United States, it may have led to not only a resentment towards her husband but also a resentment towards her children. Since it was extremely stigmatized to have mixed-race children, my grandmother was not only looked down upon due to her work as a bar hostess in Vietnam but was also shamed for being a mother to mixed-race children. Therefore, these circumstances of survival shaped the way my grandmother understood her position as a mother and the internalized shame shaped how she could show love for her children.

My grandmother shared with me her own personal family histories and how they informed her way of parenting. She shared with me that kids and grandkids in her family in Vietnam usually don't talk to their elders personally or intimately, but instead they have a more hierarchical relationship where the elder tells the child something and they have to do it. My grandmother shared with me the violent consequences she faced if she broke the rules in her own home:

My Grandma: I kick my daughter in Indonesia but here you don't. In America you not allowed to do that.

Myself: In Vietnam that's okay?

My Grandma: Yeah, beat the shit out of you, lock you up. Nine o'clock, you come 9:05 your father lock you up, beat you up, five minute, that way my father. In America you do what you want.

My grandmother explained how her father would beat and lock her up if she came home late or broke the rules. Although child abuse and violence should not be justified, it could have also been shaped by the decades of war and violence around them, from French colonialism to American imperialism. The circumstances of colonialism, imperialism and systemic violence could have shaped a constant fear and need to be harsh as a parent since the world around them could be even harsher. If my grandmother came home late as a child, it could mean that the outside violence of war could happen or could have happened to her. My great grandfather was also a general in the French Vietnamese military, displaying how violent military practices could be brought into the home. The violence then is not only done through combat but can also be transferred to interpersonal familial relationships, thereby normalizing violent disciplinary practices due to the historical context. While historical context may provide insight into these actions, it does not justify the further violence inflicted and contemporary research has displayed how violent practices can have extremely negative impacts on childhood physical and mental well-being. Childhood abuse can cause PTSD, which is then exacerbated by the context of war (Powers et al.).

My grandmother's story of parental violence reveals how violence was normalized in her household and this normalized as a parental practice. She shared with me how she used physical abuse with her children:

My Grandma: American you love your kid, you don't hit them, but my kids do good to me. I don't hit them, I don't know if I hit them or not, I don't remember.

My Mom: You never hit me in America, but you hit us overseas when you lived in Indonesia.

My Grandma: Oh yes, mmmm, I hit your sister, I beat the hell out of her.

My Mom: You throw glass bottles?

My Grandma: Yes, yes.

My Mom: And then when you came to America was that weird that you couldn't hit your kids?

My Grandma: Yeah, that's crazy. You can go to jail. That's crazy. What the hell?

My grandma shares how she doesn't remember if she physically hit her kids and once reminded she bluntly shares that it was crazy that in America you could not do this any longer. My grandmother without little remorse states, "Oh yes, mmmm, I hit your sister, I beat the hell out of her." My grandmother saw the abuse of her daughters as a normalized and justified part of life. Throughout the interviews, my grandmother also uses swearing to emphasize her continuous resistance by pushing back against idealization of respectability politics grounded in whiteness and conservative Anglo-Saxon motherhood (Lane).

In her analysis, my grandmother highlights the differing perspectives around respect between the United States and Vietnam:

My Grandma: That's the way we do. That's it. You talk about American, your mother talk to you, you talk back, you're not allowed to. Your mother say yes means yea, no means no, you don't have to say anything to her. That's it. You just listen to her. Mom say, "Okay you go market," "Yes ma'am." You know? Let's go. If she say something not right, you still do it. Don't say, "No mom," don't do it, you know? Yeah, we don't allowed to, she beat the shit out of you.

In a way my grandmother's explanation of respecting her mother can be seen as an ultimate feminist expression. Many times, mothers are not seen as authority figures within the nuclear family, but my grandmother explains how her mother's knowledge and orders are ones that you

can trust without question. Meanwhile in the United States, notions around American feminist empowerment emphasize the importance of individualism, asserting oneself and resisting parental control. These differing cultural and feminist ideologies created tensions between my grandma and her daughters. Moreover, my grandmother's upbringing in Vietnam further exacerbated these tensions, as it diverged from the American Anglo-Saxon ideals of motherhood.

Consequently, these disparities not only strained intergenerational relationships but also contributed to a sense of emotional distance that impacted the depth of their love for each other.

My aunt shares how the love with her mother felt absent:

My Aunt: My mom was hardly there. She never hugged us. She was really mean. I mean, she used to cook and stuff. But emotionally, she was emotionally absent. I don't think she really cared what we did or my dad, for that matter. Because we would leave the house and not come back and didn't really do anything. Yeah. They would try. My dad would try to discipline us, but it never worked out for him. Because we were bad kids.

laughter

Although my grandmother fulfilled motherwork and wifework duties such as cooking, my aunt explains how my grandma was mean and emotionally unavailable to them. My aunt continued and explained how she felt that her mom just gave birth to them but that was the extent to which she was a mother to them:

Myself: I guess now being a mom yourself. Did that kind of change the way that you saw grandma like the way?

My Aunt: Yes, it made me realize that my mom she pretty much just had us she gave us birth and she never hugged us. Like I said, she would cook, she would cook that you know, cook us dinner and drop us off at school and stuff, but it was very... I don't remember being feeling loved or like "Oh, my mom's a great person." She was kind of just there...

My grandmother explained to me that she felt the need to have more children in order to please my grandfather. Feelings of indebtedness and gratitude as a wife may have caused my grandmother to have children that she may have not wanted. My aunt shared how my

grandmother was present doing “wifework” such as cooking and dropping her children off at school, but she did not really engage in the expected emotional nurturing of motherhood. Since my grandmother may have had feelings of indebtedness to my grandpa, she had her children to please his requests and once she fulfilled the duty, my grandmother decided to resist by not engaging in the emotional labor of childcare.

My aunt also shares how she felt as if her mom hated her and blamed her for being an obstacle in being with her family:

My Aunt: Well, I didn't like grandma until a couple years ago, on my 40th birthday, she called me, and she said, “Hey, do you know what today is?” and I was like, “I don't know.” She's like, “Today's the day I forgive you for being born.” I was like, “Well, thanks. I don't really care.” You know what I mean? And it was a whole discussion. Just, you know, just being grandma. And I think she finally forgave me because she was pregnant with me when her brother died, and Grandpa died. And she thinks for some reason, if she wasn't pregnant, she could have gone back to Vietnam and saved her family or something.

This quote highlights the conflicting feelings that my grandma had around motherhood. She frequently resented the need to marry an American man, immigrate to a new place and leave her family. Vinh Nguyen's *Lived Refuge* explains how resentment unveils the “...precarious refuge marked by continuous unsettlement. In this way, resentment clarifies the actions and reactions of those who must continue to hold on to the past, who presently live the effects of a past that is not yet past and who attempt to reach the refuge held out to, and also withheld from them” (V. Nguyen 9). My grandmother's children were then further products of the multitude of forced past choices that were shaped by imperial violence, war and economic fragility. My grandmother's hateful acts towards her daughters displays the ways in which refugee resentment manifests itself in a holding on to the past. My grandmother's resentment bubbles as the promises of refuge, of marrying a rich white man, having American children and living out the so-called “good

refugee” life does not allow her to save her family and does not provide the protections promised (V. Nguyen).

“Grandmotherhood”: Grandma’s Bar, a Site for Patriarchy and Motherhood

My grandmother frequently told me to just please your husband, to say yes and to be nice, displaying my grandmother’s need to display her sense of gratitude through niceties. “You just have to marry a rich white man and you’ll be okay,” my grandma said sternly every time I would visit her. She looked at me and continued, “All men are the same, at least marry a rich one.” My grandmother would repeatedly tell me to “always just say yes and be nice to men but you don’t really have to do it, but you just say it to make them happy.” These unforgettable lines have lived in my head since I could comprehend my grandma’s words. As I grew older, I began to think about how these words of advice from my grandmother reveal her own critique of white heteropatriarchal love, intimacies and dreams. Through her advice, my grandmother revealed her acts of resistance and hoped that the generation of women who followed her would possibly hack the systems of racial cis-heteropatriarchal oppression. While my grandmother may seem to be reproducing systems of racial heteropatriarchal oppression, her constant reiteration of this phrase displays her awareness of the structures and systems that shape power dynamics, allowing her to subvert them and have the upper hand by knowing the rules of the game of refuge in the United States. Since my grandma is not able to provide safety and refuge for her daughters through her own economic or social power, she tells them the ways she knows how to achieve these things, through their looks and marriage (V. Nguyen).

My grandmother owned and helped operate multiple bars in Virginia once she and my grandpa finally settled in the United States in 1983. Since my grandfather traveled frequently for his job, he bought my grandmother a bar that would allow her to work while he was away. My

grandmother was a business owner, an entrepreneur and seemed to live the American Dream. While growing up, the bar my grandma owned felt like a safe place and a place of community. My cousins and I would frequently go to the bar to visit my grandma where she served us fried bar food and allowed us to play games on the computer monitors meant for gambling. The air was filled with smoke and all I remember is the walls being pitch black. One night when I was five years old my mom went out with her friends and allowed me to stay with my grandma. My grandma took me to her bar while she worked, and I fell asleep playing a video game that simulated a restaurant. I woke up to my grandma yelling at a man to stick me in the car. These memories prompted me to want to know and understand the particular experiences of what it was like to grow up in a bar. I've heard stories about my grandma's bar and I also have my own experiences being there, but I never heard the stories that my mom shared with me during this interview:

Myself : What was it like going to the bar growing up?

My Mom: Oh yeah, I would go to the bar from when I was little and then have animal cookies. I would play with the animal cookies and take naps on the pool table. One time, I made a lot of money by stripping with my clothes on when I was little. I danced on the table and everyone threw money at me. That was fun.

Myself: How old were you?

My Mom: Oh, seven or eight. And I would play that horse race game and then my mom would be like, you had to be super pretty, or like, be perfect. So, like, she would like if you didn't look a certain way, she wouldn't bring you out.

My mom shares how her childhood innocence was shaped by the bar scene. Although this testament may suggest my grandmother's lack of care for my mother, my grandmother ran her own bar, leaving her with little options of childcare if her other daughters were not there to watch her youngest daughter. My mom shared how she thought it was fun getting to dance and she

didn't share that she felt objectified as a child, but instead always felt the need to be perfect to win her mom's love. After my mom shared this quote, my mom shared how her mother's love was predicated on the constant need to look perfect. My mom explained to me if her hair wasn't perfectly put together or if she wore the wrong outfit that day, her mom would just leave her at home. She also shared how my grandma would even allow men to put money down on her in the bar so that they could possibly date or marry her when she grew up:

My Mom: She would bring us to the bar or wherever where she could sell us to the people that were bidding on us, literally she would bring us and then she had people giving her money for when I turn old enough to like marry me or date me. So, we were like a product.

My grandmother's push for perfection and using her daughters as products both perpetuated and resisted ideas of femininity to further profit from the patriarchal structures that defined their lives. My grandmother has continually found ways to economically profit and use the preconceived notions of the over-sexualized Asian robot sex myth to her advantage. My mom and my aunt shared how they felt objectified through this process, even though my grandmother financially awarded them. My grandmother would try to take money from men by stating how they could date my mom later in life, using their sexism in a way that favors her.

My aunt shared another tactic my grandmother would use in the bar:

My Aunt: Every summer, I would come home from college, I would go to the bar. And my mom, you know, I would get in the bar. And she'd be like, go, my makeup is in the back room. And I'd be like, I don't want to, and I would fight her, and I wouldn't do it. But that was the first thing she would do. And then she'd get a beer, I'd end up leaving that bar after two hours with like \$200 to \$300 because she would be asking every guy in there to buy me a beer and she would be using the same beer, she would just pull it down and act like she was getting a new one.

My grandma would tell men to buy my aunt a beer and would use the same beer over and over again, tricking them into giving her more money. Although my grandmother was resisting

patriarchal notions by taking financial advantage, it also led her to cause further distance from her daughters. Anglo-Saxon cis-heteropatriarchal visions of " good motherhood " are usually tied to traits such as nurturing, care and unconditional love (Collins). While many children crave these traits from their mothers, my grandmother provided the advice, guidance and nurturing that she could best provide. In a way, my grandmother showing them how to financially take care of themselves by using their looks was her way of nurturing in a world that does not provide unconditional love.

My aunt shared how my grandmother's tactics frequently made her uncomfortable and how she would resist my grandmother's wishes:

My Aunt: She always wanted me to wear sexy clothes. I don't have any cleavage, because she would tell me to wear a crop top and I never listened to her. I told her no. I didn't want to do that. In order to make money, like she really believed that I should get married to a rich guy.

While my grandma's push for femininity and perfection may have been due to the pressures she faced and having to be beautiful to survive war, it put pressure on my mom and aunts so much that it made them resentful of their mother:

My Aunt: I feel like my mom, growing up with my mom, she's very vain. I really think that all of us are vain in some way because we grew up having a mom, you know, who always wanted us to be perfect. Or sometimes she would tell us we looked ugly. God, my mom sucked.

My grandmother's harsh words and constant need for them to be perfect may be seen as a product of violent patriarchal systems, causing strife and pain between my grandma and her daughters. These ideas of femininity, worth and perfection when not coming from only the media and society but also your own mother can cause extreme emotional pain. While my grandmother may have been demystifying the ways in which sexist gendered systems work through her words and actions, interpersonally this need for perfection felt like a loveless act—or rather, a love that

was solely predicated on looks and feminine abilities. Within feminist discourse, domination theory argues that women's sexuality is often constructed based on male desire. Many scholars and community activists are continually debating whether gender equality can be achieved with sex work existing (Sloan and Wahab). Consequently, leveraging one's femininity to exploit patriarchal systems has been viewed by some as inherently anti-feminist, as it can be perceived as perpetuating male desires and reinforcing traditional gender roles. This dichotomy between the empowerment gained through financial independence and the objectification experienced through the commodification of femininity underscores the complex intersections of feminism, labor and sexuality within contemporary society.

These various complexities played a role in the ways in which self-worth was constructed intergenerationally:

My Cousin: But I also think it is a little bit like, people like, we're at a slightly, I don't know if it's sexist, but they're not afraid to like use their femininity to get what they want. But I think I'm also kind of affected me when I was little, because I was like, is that all we're like, valued? Because all we have to offer?

The ideals of motherhood frequently center the concept of unconditional love. Traditional narratives around motherhood posit that one is supposed to love their child unconditionally. However, my grandmother's love for her daughters was many times predicated on feminine expectations and certain conditions. These expectations from my grandmother not only shaped the second generation, but also the third generation's perception of themselves. My cousin explained how my grandmother and aunt's use of femininity, shaped her own ideas of her own self-worth, feeling as if her only value was tied to looks based on expressions of femininity. While using femininity as a tool in a patriarchal society can be empowering, it can also feel limiting when the value of one's personhood is estimated on displays of cis-heterosexual expressions of femininity, appearance, and sexual offerings.

Although the space of the bar was a site for pressured perfectionism and performance, the bar was also a site of joy and bonding for the next generation. My grandmother brought my mom to a place where she could watch over her, a place she knew she would be safe and a place where she also grew up. My cousin and I talked about the normalization of bar culture and the bar as a place of youth:

Myself : How do you feel like growing up and seeing grandma own a bar?

My Cousin: I feel like it was really, like, normal for us. We were a little, it was like, considered fun and normal. And then growing up, it's really strange to be like, Oh as little kids we were at like a bar with that, you know, had like a strip club and naked people that was like okay. And I think that's normal for her because it was normal for grandma to do that and bring them around. So, like for her, it wasn't weird at all. But then as you get older, you know, if we saw like a kid behind in a strip club or behind a bar or in a club, we'd be like, what is going on? Oh, it's just their daughter would be like, yeah, why are they here?

Although to many a bar does not seem like a place for children, this was a place where we got to bond with our grandma and got to see her life. When I visited her during the summers, I sat at the bar playing computer bar games until I fell asleep and a bar patron would carry me out to my grandma's car. She would then wake me up in the car and tell me that we were going to K-Mart or Walmart to get snacks. While this may seem strange to many, the space and being a part of it as a child was exciting and normalized.

My aunt also shared how she found out my grandma brought her son to the bar as a young child:

My Aunt: I introduced her to her grandson when he was two. I went to the strip club and he was 2 years old sitting on a stack of yellow pages with a stack of \$1 bills playing poker machine with a cheeseburger next to him. Every time one of the strippers got off the stage, they would have to give Chandler \$5 in ones. So, she didn't get to see him for the next couple of years * laughter *

As my aunt told this story we started sharing laughter, and while this may seem to some like child neglect, to us it was what made her mom and my grandma unforgivingly herself. While my grandmother does not fit Anglo-Saxon ideals of motherhood or grand-motherhood, her unconventional methods, while being a product of war and violence, brought joy and laughter to multiple generations, with memories that will always remind us of our grandmother's sustained love, joy and fun.

My grandmother, in all of her complexities, holds multiple truths of being many different things to many different people. She is all at once a 'bad mother,' 'fun grandma' and 'loving wife' (Rubio). When my mom explained the ways in which my grandma pressured perfection and the need to marry for financial mobility, she shared how she felt, "But then I like realize I don't like hate it or feel any certain way because I know what she had to do to live. She just wants the best [for us] but it's just hard taking her advice." My mom's quote displays her understanding for her mom and the historical context that has shaped her life, while also not excusing her actions (Rubio). My mom's ability to hold multiple truths of her mother displays the intergenerational love and care that continue to persist even though their relationship has been shaped by multiple forms of interpersonal, systemic and structural violence (Rubio).

My grandmother accomplished the heteropatriarchal American Dream that lives in the white imagination by marrying a white rich American man, yet my grandmother, while advising her daughters and granddaughters in turn to marry a rich white man, continually critiques the power dynamics that underlie this advice. Although my grandmother has been able to achieve a mass amount of capitalist consumption and accumulation which is seen all throughout her house, the mass amount of clothes, jewelry and things display the ways in which neoliberal ideals of mass consumption does not put to rest the resentment and anger my grandmother feels from

facing the violence of imperialist war and inequalities in the United States. To many she has achieved the neoliberal heteropatriarchal American Dream with a house in the American South, a white husband, four daughters and piles of consumption that lay across her many bedrooms. One bedroom is completely filled with clothing, jewelry and makeup products. Yet they just sit there while my grandmother sits in front of her computer watching YouTube videos that are taking place in Vietnam. She watches Vietnamese gardening YouTube videos, longing for her home, her family and a place where the tensions causing resentment do not have to live. All of my maternal family long for a place that goes beyond surviving and live within the many memories of home, family and joy. The good, the bad and the in-between memories shape my family, allowing us to make sense of our lives in the so-called place of refuge. In order to understand the familial histories, the next chapter focuses on intergenerational communication to inspect the absence of silence in my family and to understand the complexities of how memory is passed down.



Fig. 1. *Girlhood, Wifehood, Motherhood, Grandmotherhood, 2024*

Chapter 2: Intergenerational Communication: Fragmented Memory, Absent Silence and Humorous Unfeeling

My grandmother's house sits on the corner of a wide street in southern Virginia with a sprawling front yard and plants she cultivated herself covering every inch. In between the plants are various sizes of Buddhas that lay on the ground for stomach scratches. I remember doing cartwheels in the front yard and catching fireflies with my cousins on humid summer nights. July brought the whole family together to celebrate my grandmother's birthday, spanning multiple generations. These recollections, though filled with joy, are intertwined with a quest to comprehend my family's Vietnamese heritage and its significance. My grandmother told me memories of joy, horror and love; many times, as nonchalant as saying the time of day. I also recall memories of us all standing around in the backyard and watching my aunts tell stories with frantic laughter in between each silence.

Through this project, I hope to understand and reveal how intergenerational communication is carried out and unpack the goals of the memories that are told, while also inspecting when silence is deployed and when it is absent (Cai and Lee 2022). In past literature, a main point of contention is the grave pains that silence, organized forgetting and historical confusion has caused for many Vietnamese and Southeast Asian refugees and their children (Troeng, Cai and Lee). Y-Dang Troeng's *Refugee Lifeworlds: The Afterlife of the Cold War in Cambodia* argues for the necessity of moving towards the silences even in fear and terms the concept "aphasia" to contend with the debilitating silence that has permeated the afterlives of refugees. Silence and forgetting are tools used by the state and refugees for a variety of reasons. The U.S. empire has used silence and forgetting to continue the benevolent savior narrative which is displayed through dominant narratives in cultural production, memorials and many other sites of remembrance (Espiritu). These dominant narratives have served as a way to silence

many Vietnamese refugees and cause the second generation to remember the Vietnamese War through the lens of the United States being a humanitarian savior in order to maintain current structures of marginalization and oppression. While silence can be used as a tool of violence, some Vietnamese Americans may use it as a way to show love and protect their children from the painful traumatic experiences of war from their pasts (N. Nguyen, Espiritu). Not only can silence be an act of care, silence can also be used as a tool of resistance to “remake new worlds” (Troeng 4, Kim).

This chapter expands on these works to explore instead how the absence of silence shapes intergenerational communication and memory between three generations of Vietnamese American women. In order to reveal how memory is complicated by master narratives and intergenerational misunderstandings, this chapter contends with the psychological term of “unfiltered speech” to display how a lack of silence can also cause detrimental consequences (Dalgaard and Montgomery). The chapter not only analyzes the memories of the first generation and how they are told, but also explores the term “postmemories” utilized by Marianne Hirsch and Y n L  Espiritu, to understand how war and memory is pieced together by the second generation (Espiritu, Hirsch). Thus, the chapter inspects how the second generation has come to understand the Vietnam War, being Vietnamese and working through the traumas of war that their mother faced before them by piecing together what has been coined by psychologists as unfiltered speech (Dalgaard and Montgomery). The chapter also highlights how the use of humor and jokes have also been a key strategy to pass down memory and story intergenerationally within my family. While oral history studies have looked at humor as a “tool of alternative truth telling” and psychologists have theorized humor as a possible protective factor against posttraumatic stress, the theories about humor are still not agreed upon (Panichelli-Batalla,

Boerner et al.). In this chapter, consider how humor has been a powerful tool of communicating memory, trauma and shared understanding in my family. This chapter also engages with works on sentimentality, drawing mainly from Xine Yao's *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* to understand the ways in which unfeeling and affect play a role in how memory and trauma are passed down intergenerationally. Finally, the chapter explores postulations and reflections on futures for Vietnamese American memory caretaking and how to handle intergenerational communication in hopes of achieving futures of radical healing (Cai and Lee). This chapter ultimately argues for the necessity to not only reflect on the silences, speech and intergenerational trauma, but also the larger structures that make us have to contend with these things in the first place. Thus, this chapter argues how it should not be a parent's job to figure out the "right" way to intergenerationally communicate stories of horrific trauma, but instead it is important to point to the larger structures of violence that lead multiple generations to have to grapple and cope with the lasting impacts of war every day, even generations after.

Unfiltered Lived Memories: First-Generation Storytelling

One story that has always stuck with me is one where my grandmother shared her memory about her first love. Sitting at her dining room table, amidst the aroma of her crafted pho simmering for 48 hours, she recounted this memory during an oral history interview in 2020, with my mother and me:

My Mom: Did you ever date Vietnamese people?

My Grandma: Oh yes, I had a boyfriend who was Vietnamese. He want to marry with me but because he poor my sister say no. You have to be rich.

My Mother: So, what happened?

My Grandma: Oh yes he kill himself, he love me and we only sixteen- or seventeen-year-old you know, he say if your family don't let me marry with you then I kill myself, he do it. He stupid, that is the way people, people crazy. Especially, Filipino they do same shit like that, men. You know? That's it...I talk in Vietnamese?

Myself: No, you are speaking English grandma.

My Grandma: *laughter* I don't know what I say.

My grandmother's telling of this story has many layers and allows us to gain insights into the many ways in which trauma is communicated across three generations. My grandmother frequently tells this story, thus there are not many silences but instead changing of subjects. My grandmother first talks about how her sister told her not to marry her first love, displaying how she felt like she had no control over whom to love and how she had to choose a partner in order to financially support her family during war. My grandmother stating "He stupid" after revealing something traumatic in a way takes away from the violence caused by war and puts the responsibility on the lover as an individual. While on the phone with my mom and me, my grandmother also interestingly relates her story to my own Filipino father. In telling this traumatic story, she not only refers to her Vietnamese boyfriend as stupid but also makes the statement that all Filipino men are stupid. Throughout my life, my grandmother has repeatedly told me how Filipino men are not suitable partners and how Vietnamese people do not like Filipinos because they are darker. Thus, she uses her story of trauma to communicate her advice to my mother and me. While colorism and white supremacy clearly play a role in my grandmother's statement, it may also reveal her reinforcing her sister's orders to not be with an Asian man, out of concern for long-term financial well-being. While interviewing my aunt, she also stated how she was sorry for how my grandmother talked about Filipino people. I told her how I was surprised to find out in college that not all Vietnamese people dislike Filipinos and

she was like, “Really? I thought it was like an all Vietnamese people thing.” Therefore, this displays how my grandmother’s own conceptions created the intergenerational narrative that all Vietnamese people do not like Filipinos. Due to war and financial constraints, my grandmother was unfortunately forced to see love not as an affect in itself but as a method and tactic for survival. My grandmother’s story displays the ways that conforming to the imperialist white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal formations of love was necessary for her to survive the war and continue to survive in the United States.

While it is not recorded here, my grandmother has nonchalantly told me in her small kitchen by the window that “he set himself on fire.” While my grandmother is not silent about the many traumatic events that have taken place in her life, through the telling of this story and the way she quickly changes subjects displays to me that this story is one that brings up a lot of pain and sorrow. Throughout the interview, my grandmother also asks if she is speaking Vietnamese, possibly displaying how telling these traumatic stories transport her back to Vietnam or that these stories are so intimate she can only think of herself telling them in Vietnamese. While my grandmother has not remained silent about the many traumatic events in her life, many times she tells them with either laughter following or sometimes unfeeling. These are the tactics she uses for survival and to cope with the realities of love during war, a way to communicate her own experiences and memories in a way that allows for her listeners to be relieved by her laughter that follows (Cole, Yao 6).

After the tragic end to her relationship of love, my grandmother started working as a bar hostess at seventeen and started dating white American GIs. When my grandmother was twenty-years old she had her first child with a white U.S. Navy Sailor. Amerasian children have become a physical reminder of war and American intimacies in Vietnam. These intimacies were then

framed as a savior project where Vietnamese mothers were no longer capable of taking care of their children, making it necessary to save them by bringing them to the United States. One famous project in the American media was called Operation Babylift (Phan, Espiritu). In a 2015 NPR interview, the benevolent humanitarian narrative is continued by focusing on the white male pilot and the chief medical officer who were on the C5 plane that crashed killing 138 children and people (Martin and Staff). They then talk about how one of the children was able to reunite with the medical officer and she shares how she held all the babies in her arms. Thus, all the Vietnamese children of the C5 crash who survived are due to the service and bravery of the Air Force officers.

Although there is a continued narrative and focus on the Amerasian children who were saved by brave military officers, many times there is not a focus on how Vietnamese mothers had to navigate saving their children during the war. Since it was extremely stigmatized to have mixed race children with GI soldiers in Vietnam and due to extreme difficulties being a mother during war, many mothers were forced and coerced to give up their children (Sachs, Woo). While there has been scholarship on the Amerasian Vietnamese adoptees, there has not been many studies on the relationships between children and mothers who stayed together. While many of these stories are traumatic, my grandmother explains it frankly, as a part of life:

Myself: And did you have your first child when you were in Vietnam?

My Grandma: Yes in Vietnam.

Myself: Was it hard?

My Grandma: Yes, they don't like American, they beat the shit out of her, so that is reason why I have to marry with American, so that's it.

Myself: You couldn't marry Vietnamese because you already had auntie?

My Grandma: No, already Vietnamese don't want to marry with me already when I start working in the bar so that it, no more. They call you bad name, that crazy, that way life.

In this segment of the interview my grandma ends her statements with “that’s it” and “that way life.” She acknowledges that such discrimination is crazy and yet that is just a part of life. The denial of mixed-race children in Vietnam was imposed and deeply imbedded by French colonialism before the American War in Vietnam which possibly reveals the reason my grandmother just accepts it as a part of life. During the French colonial period, mixed-race boys, the French believed, could be saved through the education system, but mixed-race girls had no chance and were going to ruin morality in society (Lessard). Mixed-race children were seen as a threat to French imperial rule in Vietnam. Therefore, in order to justify the removal of mixed-race children, the French cultivated a gendered idea that mixed-race daughters would ruin their mothers and would become promiscuous later in life. Not only did French colonialism have an effect on the ways in which mixed-race women have been treated, but they also shaped Vietnamese motherhood, such as how some women were forced to abandon their mixed-race daughters during that time to save themselves from stigma. Thus, French colonialism left a gendered legacy of Western idealization and rejection of inter-racial mixing within Vietnam (Lessard). My grandmother makes sense of the war and unequal racial gendered dynamics as “that way life.”

In 2023, my grandmother elaborated on her memories having a mixed-race child in Vietnam during the war:

Myself: What was it like having half white kids in Vietnam?

My Grandma: My daughter, when she was six years old, she go to school and people try to beat her up.

My Mom: Did you have to make her darker? I thought you said you had to put dirt on her or something?

My Grandma: In 68' people from North come to South and kill American so you have to put chocolate on her face or they'll kill her. I don't take her go nowhere.

My Mom: What happened to the maid holding the baby?

My Mom: Yeah she die in the house, the bomb coming she die and my baby still living, she lucky.

My grandma shared that when she tried to bring my eldest aunt to school, people tried to beat her up causing her to have to put chocolate on her face to protect her. Through this intergenerational conversation, my mom is also aware of certain memories and stories allowing her to prompt more stories from my grandmother. My grandmother calmly shares how a maid died while holding her child in the house and candidly calls my eldest Aunt "lucky." In *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America*, Xine Yao explains how unfeeling can be a tactic of survival: "There is a necessary calculus of refusals: the apparent lack or dulling of affect can be a defensive tactic of everyday psychic survival in a world predicated upon racial and sexual violences" (Yao 15). My grandmother's bluntness and unfeeling display how she copes with the violence of war (Yao 198). Unfortunately, with neoliberal capitalist lifestyles where one is made to constantly be working in a survival state, there is not much space for feeling, processing and allowing oneself to understand the ways in which war has impacted one's life. My grandmother living in Virginia Beach has also kept her isolated from community and other Vietnamese refugees aside from her sisters, who also married American military men. Thus, my grandmother has had to find ways to make sense of her world, the war and the violence in a way that may have led to unfeeling for survival, allowing war and violence to feel mundane and part of life (Yao). While her storytelling may seem and sound unfeeling to me as her granddaughter, this experience may seem unspectacular to her since many

people during the Vietnam War faced similar tragedies. Being third-generation and not living through war, I frame my grandmother's stories within my own life experiences and context, possibly projecting a need for affect on my grandmother.

When I interviewed my great aunt, my grandma's sister, she also shared about the war and trauma just being a part of life:

Myself: What was it like growing up in Vietnam?

My Great Aunt: Well back then it was a little bit, for the last 5 or 10 years the war was always there, they coming in. It's a little bit scary because I go to school. I can remember, you know, the North Vietnam bomb the South so they can see some times on the way to school, you can see the bodies on the streets, stuff like that, and at night when you sleep you heard the bomb thing all the time. A little bit scary because a lot of people even surround with the whole sand bags so they can go in. My family they don't do that but it is scary but we live through it. Because it was going for a long time long time as long as I can remember when I grew up, you can hear bomb almost even back in 1963 to 1969, you can hear the bombs all the time. It just is sad.

While this seems incredibly traumatic to me as a person who has not lived through war, my grandmother and my great aunt grew up in the midst of war. War became a part of life, a part of walking to school, a part of intimacies and a part of being for them. My great aunt states how it was "a little bit scary" and in a way diminishes the horror of having to live in war every day as a little girl in Vietnam. My great aunt's narrative of growing up in war displays how violence became a part of daily life, and while it sounds extremely scary to me as a listener, maybe it was actually only a little bit scary to her or maybe that is how she's framed it to survive through the daily reckonings of war.

While my great aunt spoke about the impacts of war on her life, she also spoke about the memories of happiness, joy and friendship while in Vietnam:

My Great Aunt: I was learning English in Vietnam, English is my second language, but I never paid that much attention to it. But it good because I did learn in school in Vietnam,

that's why when I come in United States only three months, I picked up normal. I did really good, I went out to work, I did everything. I think I can speak English better than my two sisters who have been there forever. I pick it up quick like in three months. I got the job by myself. I find a job by myself at work. I do everything so it worked good, but I got homesick a lot.

Myself: What did you miss?

My Great Aunt: You know childhood friend, you know you'll go out, and you go out with your friend's birthday party. Back then when I was young ,I love to go to party for dancing. You know how they have birthday party to go there and dance, and we just didn't drink. I don't smoke, but we love to dance. I do that, that when I was thirteen years old. I missed that a lot. I missed with all the friends so I go back. But 1974 I went back [to Vietnam]; I come here [United States] 71' and 74' I go because I really homesick, I buy one way ticket I never think I'll come back to the United States, never. So when I go back things change, it not like what I think before, so I work there for two months and I already come back. Yeah, I wanted to come back, but because of my family, so I end up I stayed there for six months then I come back but then it just like changed. I come back Vietnam, I'm not even 21 yet I'm only 20, and I never forget that but I cannot wait to get out. I miss my family I stay with and then I went back. I come back to Vietnam in the first part of February and then I think I came back to the United States in July [1974]. Yeah. I can hardly wait to get out there. It just changed.

In order to immigrate to the United States, her sister and U.S. Navy husband sponsored her to come. My great aunt explains how she felt homesick and that she went back even while the war was happening. Unfortunately, my great aunt did not really go into detail in how she was able to financially afford or figure out a way to go back to Vietnam. While interviewing my great aunt, this was the first time I ever heard of anyone going back to Vietnam during the war. Hence, my great aunt's journey of going back and forth to Vietnam confuses theories of linear migration (Zhou and Gatewood). While her journey is somewhat of a mystery, it displays the longing and love she has for Vietnam, not only as a place of war but also a place of joy.

My great aunt's quote displays that she not only has memories of Vietnam as a place of war and trauma but also a place of joy, friendship and care. Although war and trauma from U.S. imperialism were a prominent factor in shaping my family's lives, it did not stop them from finding spaces and places where they could continue engaging in practices of care and love. A

place can hold multiple truths and be a space of multiple memories (Rubio, Vo Dang). Thus, these stories of joy complicate the perceived landscape of war, making it also a place to dance, a place of friendship and a place of love. While many get to live out their youth and their 20s filled with a whole decade of friendship, love and dancing, my aunt's youth was cut short due to war. Thus, it is necessary to not only acknowledge how war takes lives, but also takes away parts of people's lives. Although my aunt booked a one-way ticket and thought she would never return to the United States when she did go back to Vietnam, she soon realized that it was not the same home that she left. Even if Vietnamese Americans were to return to their homes, due to the destruction of war and violence in Vietnam, she would never be able to return to the imagined home that she longed for and the specific time of prewar Vietnam. She was not able to practice the same acts of joy that seem so ordinary in life such as dancing at a friend's birthday party.

Not only does my aunt have longings and memories of joy from Vietnam, but my grandmother also shared with me her desire to go back to Vietnam. I asked her, "Did you like growing up in Vietnam?" and she replied quickly with "I love to go back; I want to go back." My grandmother doesn't answer the question if she liked growing up there but instead states that she wants to go back to Vietnam, as a future aspiration. While my grandmother does not directly answer the question, she frequently talks about her little sister's trips to Vietnam inspiring her to want to return. Rather than focusing on her experiences growing up in Vietnam, she may think about the possibilities of returning to what it was like prewar in Vietnam or the new possibilities of Vietnam now. When I visit my grandma, she frequently sits at her desk by her front door watching YouTube videos. Many of these YouTube videos are of women gardening in Vietnam or doing other mundane tasks. While my grandmother may not speak at length about her longing for Vietnam, YouTube allows her to transport herself there and engage in possibly creating new

types of memory surrounding Vietnam (Lam, Jack). My grandmother has not been back to Vietnam since she immigrated to the United States due to finances, ongoing health issues and her fear of planes but her younger sister goes more frequently, possibly due to her husband's wealth.

While my grandmother did not open up about many stories of growing up in Vietnam, she shared more about her youth when she referred to my grandfather. My grandfather arrived in Vietnam in 1968 as an air-conditioning mechanic. While in Vietnam, he frequented the bar where my grandmother was a bar hostess. After they met, they spent about a year living together in Vietnam, but before coming to Vietnam my grandfather traveled to many countries doing different contract jobs. Although my grandmother doesn't really share with me stories of when she was little in Vietnam, she shared how she had a crush on Elvis during her youth while in Vietnam, which drew her to my grandfather:

My Grandma: Yeah, but I go to marry with your grandpa. I go to Canada with him because he my husband because his job so I have to go with him but I have marriage paper but I know he's a playboy but you know he likes a lot of women but he loves me. He would wear clothes just like Elvis.

Myself: He looked like Elvis?

My Grandma: I love Elvis. Yeah, I do. I love Elvis. When I was in Vietnam. I love the picture. That's my dream I have picture of him, you don't know about Elvis.

Myself: I know, he's handsome.

My Grandma: He's handsome and his hair look like Grandpa. He wear clothes like him.

Myself: And he dances like him?

My Grandma: Yeah he dancing very good, he a good dance. Your grandpa that's it. So what you wanna know?

Although my great aunt and my grandmother's memories of joy are quite different, both of them speak to their love and memories of dancing. My grandmother's voice lights up thinking about

the memory of her Elvis poster in Vietnam and the memories she had together with my grandpa. When the first U.S. troops arrived in Vietnam, they also brought with them American food, culture and media. In 1965, when the first three hundred and fifty American soldiers arrived, Elvis's "Heartbreak Hotel" was the number one record (Chapple and Garofalo, James). The recent revamp of Elvis films in 2022 and 2023 shifts the focus away from the U.S. violence perpetrated during that year, the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movements, instead emphasizing a shared love of American rock and roll. This recent revamp is especially notable during the current revamp of civil unrest, demonstrated by movements like Black Lives Matters. My grandmother's obsession with Elvis displays the United States's soft power but also allowed her and me to create an intergenerational connection over a shared American icon.

PostMemories: Second-Generation Fragments

While my grandmother and my great aunt spoke about how war played a role in their daily lives in Vietnam, their daughters, my aunts, tried to piece together the stories that were told to them about the Vietnam War and our family histories. Espiritu's use of "postmemories" highlights the experiences of how second-generation Vietnamese Americans, children who were born in the United States and their parents born in Vietnam, have tried to piece together memories and the events of the Vietnam War (Espiritu 150). Using my grandmother's unfiltered speech and fragmented story-telling, my aunts and my mom have all tried to piece together my grandmother's life history. My aunt shared how she has a fragmented understanding of my grandmother framed by how she grew up in Vietnam:

Myself: When growing up, did grandma tell you a lot of stories about growing up about Vietnam at all?

My Aunt: My mom for whatever reason told me this story. They were very rich. And then when the war started, they had to go underground. She was told to go underground. And then her and her sisters, especially her, had to start working at strip clubs. And I don't want to say that some of them were hookers but from what I gathered from my mom, she may have been, just so that they could bring money back into the house. So that aspect when I first started, your grandma owns strip clubs.

This story is commonly told about my grandma intergenerationally. My grandmother's story of growing up rich is commonly emphasized to possibly emphasize how she faced great loss from the Vietnam War. My grandmother's emphasis on utilizing intimate labor to keep her family afloat may also emphasize to her daughters the neoliberal capitalist ideals of hard work and sacrifice. While my grandmother may have said she worked at a bar while in Vietnam, she may have not gone into detail with her daughters growing up, or they may have not felt that it was appropriate to ask about her role in the bars. Therefore, in order to fill in the gaps, my aunts may have made assumptions based upon narratives in cultural productions, historical context or other personal memories my grandmother has told them (Espiritu 142). Growing up my aunts would jokingly say goodbye with the phrase, "Me love you long time," unknowingly perpetuating the western orientalist visions of Vietnamese women. Thankfully, I didn't watch Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* while growing up, thus preventing what is now labeled the "hooker scene" on the internet to play a role in my memory or understanding of my grandmother. Although I didn't see it, the film came out in 1987 when my mom was five years old and her sisters were in middle school and high school. Therefore, it possibly played a role in their memory and consciousness, filling the gap in piecing together postmemories (Espiritu).

While one of my aunts had limited postmemories of my grandmother, my other aunt had a more detailed telling of my grandmother's background:

Myself: And what was it kind of like? Did grandma growing up share any stories about Vietnam with you?

My Aunt: Yeah, she would. So she would be very, grandma grew up very spoiled. Her dad was a general. And she had bodyguards everywhere where she went. And great grandpa was allowed to have as many wives as he could because he was a general in the Chinese French army in Vietnam. He was actually Chinese. Grandma's Vietnamese, so he had four wives. And great grandma was the youngest. So grandma had twenty-one brothers and sisters from four different wives. But only five of them are from grandma. From your great grandma.

Myself: I know someone told me that great grandma sold opium?

My Aunt: So she sold opium and did other things that she had to do.

While this story is less focused on the war as a whole, it encapsulates my aunt's own understanding of my family's history during the war. My aunt is able to detail my family's socioeconomic status in Vietnam, my great-grandfather's position in the army and the familial dynamics of my grandmother's family.

In order to understand how my aunt found out this family history, I asked:

Myself: And when grandma would tell you these stories would you sit you down? Or like how did she kind of communicate the stories to you?

My Aunt: Uhm would she communicate? Well, she went from being rich to like working in a bar. Like your grandma, my mom, went from being rich, did other nefarious things, and you have to remember, grandma owned a strip club, and she doesn't really sit down, and she's not a sit down and talk to you kind of person. It comes out when it comes out. It's when she's talking, stuff it just comes out.

My aunt who has a greater recollection of family histories is eight years older than my mother. Therefore, she predominantly grew up abroad, in Saudi Arabia and Jakarta, Indonesia, which may contribute to my grandmother's emotional availability to tell stories. In these spaces, my grandmother had domestic care workers and other people to free up her time from a multitude of emotional and labor responsibilities. Passing down memories and intergenerationally communicating can be extremely emotionally laborious. Therefore, it is necessary to ask, who is given the space, time and emotional availability to pass down memories to their children and

grandchildren? This further displays how the violence of war and imperialism not only cause silence but also impede on the possibilities of passing on familial life histories (Troeng).

My mother shared with me her little understanding of our family histories:

Myself: Did grandma share stories with you about Vietnam growing up?

My Mom: Not really. She just said like, you're lucky that I talked to you because Vietnamese parents aren't supposed to talk to their kids. Stories about Vietnam, no, because she was never home. Yeah, like I would only see her when I was little, my memories of her was like watching Asian movies with her. I didn't know what the heck was going on. I just like to pretend I knew what the monkeys were doing. She didn't really spend time with me. No Vietnam stories.

According to psychological studies, traumatized parents may have a decreased emotional availability (Buckley). The psychological study then goes into how this shapes the next generation's attachment styles. While understanding the shaping of one's attachment style is important, I would like to use this finding to think more about the violence of the U.S. empire and imperialism. Not only does war and the violence of imperialism cause traumatization to one generation, but it can also lead to the neglect of the next generation, furthering trauma for the next generations. The war lives on through these relationships and how mother-daughter bonding is taken away from both of them. Due to the current violent structures in the United States as well, my grandmother was unavailable to emotionally care for my mother, pass down family histories and allow her to gain an understanding of what it means to be Vietnamese. This lack of intergenerational communication not only leads to possible insecure attachment styles but also leads to my mom distancing herself from being Vietnamese and feeling Vietnamese. Thus, my mom did not seek out other Vietnamese community members, and since Vietnamese American history was not taught in schools, my mom's only understanding of being Vietnamese came from her mother, a person who did not have the emotional availability to provide a historical context

to her actions. This disconnect between generations then limits historical understandings that can propel change by being able to identify trends of structural violence caused by U.S. empire. Instead, the trauma and neglect become isolating and personal since there are little tools for critical understanding.

Second-generation Vietnamese Americans come to understand the Vietnam War not only through their family members but also through interactions with others impacted by the narratives and memories of the war (Espiritu). All of my aunts shared with me the ways that their consciousness of the Vietnam War impacted their lives while growing up in the American South. They also shared how the emotional violence and racism for being Vietnamese American was solely experienced in the space of the United States:

Myself: What was it like growing up in Virginia?

My Eldest Aunt: Virginia, I guess it was alright. See, as a child I lived in different places, Nicaragua and stuff like that. There were still racial issues in Virginia I guess because the Vietnam War...so they were racist against Vietnamese. So I was kind of more of a loner until I moved overseas, and basically, kinda kept to myself kind of.

Myself: And when you're overseas, did you find it easier to make friends and stuff?

My Eldest Aunt: Oh, yeah. Because we had every race there at the overseas Oil Company.

My eldest aunt's account highlights how being Vietnamese American was particularly difficult in the United States, while she was able to make friends in the other countries she grew up in. In Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, my aunt lived and went to school in U.S. corporation "camp towns." The camp towns not only had Americans but also families from the country itself and people from all over the world. My aunt shared with me how some of her closest friends were from countries like Nigeria and Saudi Arabia. Since there are families from multiple racial contexts and all of the families have the same social class, there may have been less racial

othering, since the people who lived outside the camps were predominantly othered. For example, my aunt also shared with me how she wasn't allowed to play with kids outside of the camp, and how they predominantly stayed inside the American camp. My aunt described how she would sneak past the camp wall and hangout with "village kids," for whom she brought gum every week. She eventually got caught and was unable to hang out with them any longer. The differing racial dynamics and the lack of the emphasis on the Vietnam War within the context of the other countries may have allowed for my aunt to make more friends. Therefore, my aunt's experiences with more racial equality in other countries may be due to her class position in the American camp.

My other aunt also shared how she experienced similar racialization when she arrived in the United States:

Myself: Did you experience a lot of racism in Virginia, or did you feel like it didn't really affect you?

My Aunt : No, I did. I never really noticed any racism, actually, until I was older and came back to the United States. Yeah, I didn't, I didn't recognize that there wasn't anything. And of course, it's not that I didn't see color, because everybody sees color. It was that I didn't see people make fun of me or say things to me ever until I came back to the United States. When I was older, if they did when I was younger, I didn't catch it. You know? I don't feel like there was, there really was no, I don't think that people were outwardly racist towards us overseas. But yes, in America, when I came back, of course, the kids at school would judge me for being Asian and pretend that they had an accent, even though I had no accent whatsoever.

When they finally returned to the United States, the racial lumping my aunts experienced then made them sole products of the Vietnam War to their peers and a narrative so entrenched in social interactions that it affected the way that they were able to find community and networks of care (Espiritu 145, Joshi and Desai). My other aunt also shared how the racialized position played a role in her making friends once in the United States:

Myself: What was it like, like attending school?

My Aunt: You know, just being half Vietnamese after the Vietnam War. It's pretty hard anyways, does that make sense? Like the white people didn't want to hang out with Charlie [racial slur for Viet Cong]. And then the Vietnamese people didn't want to hang out with the half white people. That was a little rough.

My aunt expands on how being mixed-race during this time of memory and reckoning with the Vietnam War in the U.S. South led to her not being able to find community. Due to their position as mixed-race children, my aunts were ostracized from both white and Vietnamese communities, making it even harder for them to find a sense of belonging, care and alternate community (Bettez, Leonard, Tamai). It also makes it even harder for them to gain an understanding of what it means to be Vietnamese and the historical shaping of the Vietnam War outside of the context of their own family.

While there has been an absence of silence in my family and an openness when talking about trauma they have faced during war, rather than staying silent my grandmother has “lied” or created alternative stories when sharing about her experiences. My eldest aunt has a different father than my other three aunts. She was the only daughter born in Vietnam and throughout her childhood my grandmother, rather than being silent about her thoughts of her father, she instead created different stories every time my eldest aunt asked about him. In an interview in 2023, my eldest aunt shares about the multitude of stories she heard from my grandmother and tries to piece together my grandmother’s past:

Myself: Grandma was looking for your dad?

My Eldest Aunt: So like I said, I had, you know, after a while, I'd never even bothered to listen to my mother. Because she always told me my father was dead. And she told me he didn't want me and then to find out he wasn't dead, she didn't know who my father was. So I stopped listening to her, if you know what I'm saying? You're telling me all these lies. So I just kind of stopped listening to her.

Myself: I guess, why do you think she would tell those lies?

My Eldest Aunt: Because her parents were very mad at her for being pregnant. And then she tried to have an abortion. She was 20, and plus when I came out I was light-skinned. So they already knew that it wasn't a Vietnamese guy, and she was dating some guy, and then she had a fling with my father. So her parents were really mad at her. At the time [1967] they had gone wild because it was after the communists had taken over. And I guess things were different.

My family's intergenerational communication, while not faced with many silences, still had many holes and gaps. While many second-generation Vietnamese Americans had to deal with holes in memories and piece together stories due to silences or forgetting, my grandmother, rather than not telling anything, chose to tell different things (Espiritu 147). Therefore, my grandmother's tactic of multiple narratives then can cause confusion, tensions and even further forgetting since there are too many narratives (Troeng). My eldest aunt was unsure of the exact history, timeline and "personal transgressions" that shaped my grandmother's life due to her saying many different things at different times (Espiritu 156). Throughout my oral history process with my aunts, when I asked them about what my grandmother told them, they also told me similar things in which my grandma would sometimes change the story each time or would tell alternative stories that are different from each other. My eldest aunt also highlights how my grandmother lied to her multiple times, causing her to no longer listen to her mother's stories or ask about them. My grandmother's lies of telling her that her father was dead or didn't want her, in a way, is an act of emotional violence. In order to protect herself from this emotional trauma, my aunt chose to stop listening to her, possibly missing out on other memories that were told to her. Although my eldest aunt states that she stopped listening to her mother, she shares an empathetic understanding of why my grandmother would lie to her about her father. My aunt saw my grandmother as a whole person who was facing parental pressures, war and other

obligations rather than just labeling her as a “liar.” While lying may be seen as a violation of care, my eldest aunt in a way had an understanding of the reasons her mother may want to forget her father.

Forgetting is also a tactic used by one of my aunts to deal with the traumatic memories and experiences she faced while growing up. My aunt shared with me that she and her sisters try to forget, which has brought her sisters closer, has helped patch their relationships with their mother and has allowed them to create a positive narrative of their grandmother for the third-generation. She empathetically stated, “You know, we don't think of the bad times and think of the good times and that makes us closer. You know, sometimes I just blacked out the bad times.” Focusing on positive memories and the “good times,” has allowed them to come together and care for each other. In a way, my aunt also points out her empathy and tries to remember the good times they had together rather than allowing someone’s bad moments define her relationships. While it may seem as if forgetting causes one to ignore the violence caused by U.S. empire and current structures, it can also lead to possibilities of healing, care and understanding (Cai and Lee). One way my aunt uses forgetting to create relationships of care is by shaping positive narratives of her mother for her son: “Well I tell him the good memories of grandma because I didn't want him to hate grandma from the beginning. So I always tell him the good memories of grandma.” In order to facilitate intergenerational communication and care between my grandma and her son, she has shaped a positive narrative that highlights the good memories of her mother. She hopes that by telling positive stories, her son will not have a sense of hate towards his grandmother, which could allow for a loving relationship. Although my aunt had a tumultuous relationship with her mother, she tries to provide futures for her son in which he can possibly have a loving relationship with his grandmother.

While my aunt created positive narratives to cultivate intergenerational relationships, my mother tried to seek out positive stories from her mother:

My Mom: My mom would just talk, I don't know what she would talk about, what would I talk about with her? Oh, she just said the same thing how guys, literally I've had the same conversation since I was little, she would be like, get guys for money, that's all she would talk about. Money is the only thing that matters, like love isn't love, guys are horrible, and she would say really horrible stories about my dad, literally would be the same conversation every time, still now. She just talks bad about people. She is just very negative, so I have to ask her, can you tell me something good, I'd have to coax it out of her, same thing with my dad.

Although my grandmother expressed negative stories and memories to my mother, my mom tried to prompt my grandmother to tell positive stories from her past. While my mom and my aunt have found ways to cope with stories of trauma and tried to find alternative stories of joy, in many ways the stories, while not silent or hidden, can still cause detrimental effects to the future generations.

Subsequent Memories: Third-Generation Understandings

While my mom and my aunts, the second-generation, have pieced together parts of my grandmother's life history, my cousin and I, the third-generation, have been trying to make further sense of the fragments. Since we are one generation removed from our grandmother, we are then able to see her in a wider and different lens than our parents. My cousin and I only saw our grandmother once or twice a year, thus many things we knew about her came from our moms or aunts. Therefore, we had more time and distance to process the stories of trauma we were told. While we had more time to process and mothers who guided us through the processing, it still played a role in our own mental health, understanding of the world and the way we come to understand our own lived traumas. My cousin and I discussed how the stories of trauma passed down affect our own lives:

Myself: I know we talked a little bit about mental health. But I guess our family is very open, right? I think of a big thing about Asian American studies like, oh, like there's silence, right, silence about stories and silence about emotions. Did you feel like that growing up about silence around mental health or like silence in general?

My Cousin: I feel like in a way, because like you said, we're very open. But it's almost like we would see, like grandma would say these traumatic things in a way that was like, ha ha, hee hee, it happened. Yeah. Like, it was not a serious conversation, like this is what happened to me and how it affected me. It was almost like she said, it like it is what it is, who cares? And same thing with like, our moms would tell stories. And they're like, Yeah, ha, ha, that's just the way it is.

In this exchange, I explicitly ask my cousin about the trends I've seen in Asian American Studies about silence and feeling. My cousin also acknowledges the absence of silence in our family and my grandmother's rejection of sentimentality when telling stories of trauma. She also emphasizes how our mothers engage in the same practice of diminishing and normalizing their own traumatic experiences, similarly to our grandmother. My cousin continues to share how this practice of minimizing trauma has impacted the future generations:

My Cousin: When you're like, "You should probably talk through that." They're like, "What do you mean? Like, that's just how it just happens? Live on and go about your day." So it did feel weird to be like, those stories were awful. And of course, we had things that happened to us that in retrospect that was bad for us. But if they are having all of these even more, in our minds, terrible events, and they're just like living it out, why would I need to go get help or talk to somebody about this? So it was not like I was told that it was a bad thing to talk about it. It's just, you don't think you should because that becomes normalized. So I think it was helpful growing up in our generation that was really big on mental health. So that we're able to be like, okay, these are things that aren't normal and are okay to talk about. And you don't need to normalize things that aren't normal.

My cousin points out how trauma and violence have become so normalized in our family to cope with the consistency and frequency of experiences that they no longer hold importance. These horrific experiences then become mundane through repetition, leading one to question the necessity of problematizing them, further disguising the larger structural ongoing violence.

My cousin also acknowledges how our generation has had more understandings of mental health and she speaks more to the tools that our generation has today:

Myself: I think something that scares me is just kind of watching our moms and going through hard stuff later in life and seeing their minds get worse and worse.

My Cousin: I think it is letting things build up, and not realizing it. Because then you tell yourself like, "Oh, it's fine." And things aren't, things could be a lot worse. And they're a lot worse for other people. And I don't deserve to feel like, you know, these things are bad. And they like, let it build up and let it build up to the point where, like, they don't know how they just don't have the tools to handle it. So when it gets out of hand, they're like juggling it. So, and it is scary, like see it because, you know, you think like okay, I feel like that's not going to be me. But then of course, we've always had discussions where like, it is scary to be like, did we give ourselves the proper tools like break out of the mold of like, that way of thinking to where like things happen in the future, we can handle them, which I think I don't mean to like pat ourselves on the back, but I feel like we've done a good job. Yeah, hopefully. Hopefully, fingers crossed.

In her dialogue, my cousin shares the ways in which a sense of deserving plays a role in the ways in which one chooses to minimize their trauma and violent experiences. So frequently, Vietnamese Americans are told that they should be grateful to be in the United States and to have been saved, and when they are not "saved" in the promised place of refuge, they then have to come to terms with the fact that the United States perpetuates further trauma and violence to maintain U.S. empire (V. Nguyen, Espiritu, L. Nguyen). Therefore, it can be easy to feel undeserving of the space for grief, sadness and processing since we may feel like our problems are smaller in comparison to the generations before us. While speaking with my cousin, I realized the validity of our feelings and the necessity to make space to process them. My cousin then contemplates possible futures and hopes. She shares how there is a possibility of breaking free from the cycles of trauma and violence with the current tools and support systems we have now created. Having the emotional space and safety to label and acknowledge these cycles has

allowed my cousin and I to create presents and futures where we are able to change not only for ourselves, but also for the first, second and hopefully for the generations in the future.

In order to have these futures of possible radical healing and breaking of historical trauma, it takes resources and community (Rubio, Cai and Lee). In the United States, neoliberal capitalist structures do not always allow for time, space and community creation, thus leading to continued cycles of trauma for future generations. In the next chapter, the thesis focuses on the possibilities of resistance and healing in a society that is predicated on the dehumanization of marginalized peoples (L. Nguyen). How are we supposed to worry about our mental health when we can barely figure out how to pay rent? How are we supposed to create collective action and revolutionize systems when we have to be the sole caretaker for family members? Although imperial violence has been a life-long factor in our lives, all of us have found ways to resist, create our own healing systems and alternative economies outside of the framework of the colonial forms of healing. I hope to look towards potential futures of not having to be unfeeling to survive the current world; instead, I envision a world that does not systemically take away our feelings, hopes, and dreams.



Fig. 2. My Grandmother's Collages and Constructions of Memory, 2023

Chapter 3: Bad(ass) Mothers and Re(sisters): Feminist Rage, Resistance and Intergenerational Love

“You should be lucky to be from here, don’t you feel proud?”, my grandmother proclaimed as she pointed at a pair of jean shorts that were covered in American flags. “You want to buy this? Show where you come from?” My twelve-year-old self shook my head no and I whispered, “No thank you, grandma,” in reply. As we walked through Walmart, I thought about my grandmother’s connection to the United States and the pride she wanted me to share. Even at twelve years old, being from the United States and seeing the American flag represented injustice, inequality and racism. In grade school, teachers always advocated for the power of nonviolence when discussing justice and resistance. Throughout my education, Martin Luther King Jr. was heroized for his nonviolent actions, while figures like Malcolm X and the Black Panthers were villainized for their tactics of resistance. Hence, I believed that nonviolence and fighting with kindness were the only “good ways” to fight injustice. However, sitting around the dinner table with my grandma, my great-aunts, my mom, my aunts, and my cousin, we all laughed in amusement as they told stories about fighting, violence and resistance, ending each one with an emphatic refrain: “We were *bad*.” Growing up, the women in my family always proudly shared stories fueled by rage and anger, resisting the neoliberal “good refugee” narrative. I was often puzzled by their actions and questions whirled in my head. Why would they put their lives in danger? Why would they risk going to jail? Why were they so angry?

Resentment, rage and retaliation shape the stories and lives of my grandmother, mother, aunts and cousin. The storytelling around these seemingly negative affects display how experiences of violence and discrimination continue even when one is supposedly granted refuge in the United States (V. Nguyen). Vinh Nguyen’s *Lived Refuge* describes the ways in which resentment manifests as outbursts of anger and sometimes violence, causing the criminalization

of refugees which then produces the label of “bad refugees” (V. Nguyen 53). As Nguyen explains, resentment is produced by the disillusionment of the neoliberal American dream, of continued violence even after promised refuge, and how the emotion can disrupt narratives of the Vietnam War being a project of liberation (V. Nguyen 60). Nguyen argues, “the wounds of war are not always healed through refuge. Moreover, in refuge, these wounds might be further aggravated, picked over and over again...(V. Nguyen 55),” thus displaying how the refuge that is promised after receiving citizenship and legal resettlement in the U.S. is not always sufficient in creating a livable life that goes beyond surviving. This chapter explores my grandmother’s, my aunts’ and my mom’s stories of resentment, anger and retaliation in order to expose the racialized and gendered violence reproduced by U.S. empire even after receiving “refuge” in the United States. Thus, displaying how refugee afterlives and the subsequent generations are continually facing multiple reiterations and transformations of war that takes place not only in the imagined “war-torn” Vietnam but also in the supposed place of refuge, the United States.

Vinh Nguyen’s chapter predominantly focuses on masculinized expressions of resentment and anger by exploring the narrative of a male gangster in Aimee Phan’s *We Should Never Meet* and the story of four Vietnamese brothers who instigated the 1991 Sacramento Hostage Crisis. By exploring the stories of my female relatives, this chapter expands Nguyen's discussion on resentment by taking an intersectional approach, revealing and examining not only masculine expressions of resentment and violence, but also feminist outbursts of rage, violence and resentment. Anger in itself is a gendered affect that many times is available for men to express; meanwhile, when women express anger, they are demeaned, silenced or labeled as being too emotional (Wallaert). Although there is unequal access to anger, feminist anger has been a “powerful source of energy serving progress and change” (Lorde, Kay and Banet-Weiser

605). Black feminism has conceptualized the expression of anger as a necessary tool for survival that exposes the acts and systems of gendered racialized violence (Lorde, hooks, Kay and Banet-Weiser). The oral histories in this chapter deal with multiple stories of violence and anger, but when recounted, they are done so with humor, as a tool to deal with trauma (Panichelli-Batalla). The oral histories in this chapter use humor and tragic-comedy to deal with and expose the continued experiences of gendered and racialized violence (Cole).

When speaking with my mom and my aunts, many times we end a story about my grandmother stating humorously, “Grandma is small, but she is crazy,” or “Grandma isn’t afraid to do crazy things.” The Combahee River Collective Statement articulates, “Black feminists often talk about their feelings of craziness before becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule, and most importantly, feminism, the political analysis and practice that we women use to struggle against our oppression” (CRC). Womxn of color are repeatedly labeled as crazy and my maternal family members have always expressed to me their feelings of craziness. These feelings of craziness and acts of craziness are materializations of the overlapping systems and politics of oppression. Unfortunately, due to a lack of access to Ethnic Studies and to critical consciousness, many womxn of color are then made to feel alone and isolated in their feelings of craziness, putting the blame on themselves. When womxn of color then act on those feelings, turning them into emotive actions in response to the violence they are facing, they are then also labeled as “crazy” and labeled as deviant. By exploring stories of when the women in my family resisted violence with feminist rage, this chapter reveals how they were met with carceral consequences and punishment, which has led to intergenerational tensions.

Vietnamese American authors continue to grapple with the impacts of war, violence and trauma on the nuclear family. Through cultural production and scholarship, second-generation

authors like Grace Cho, Ocean Vuong and Lan Duong have been grappling with their maternal and familial relationships exploring their intergenerational memories, trauma and ongoing violence caused by the Cold War, structures of whiteness and U.S. empire that continue after immigrating (L. Nguyen 10). All of the authors point to the many complexities of familial relationships and highlight the structural systemic violence that leads to dealing, coping and healing within their own families. Through this chapter, I plan to understand how my own family has been trying to find ways to heal and cope with not only the trauma caused by imperial violence but also the ongoing violence that continues once they are in the place of seeming “refuge,” the United States (V. Nguyen).

In Vietnamese refugee studies, a main focus has been on intergenerational trauma and the harmful impact of silences. While these issues are important to acknowledge the lasting impacts of U.S. empire and have also shaped my family’s lives, this chapter hopes to also center stories of joy, care and finding alternative types of healing to display the many ways that people continue to resist, even while living in systems that choose not to see them as fully human. Centering stories of resistance and care is also important in challenging the idea that Vietnamese refugees are solely passive victims needing and obtaining help from the United States (Espiritu). Drawing on bell hook’s *All About Love*, this chapter ultimately argues for the shifting from an emphasis on intergenerational trauma to an emphasis on intergenerational love as an analytical tool, asserting that love is not only an interpersonal form of healing but also a political act of resistance.

“Bad”(ass) Grand/Mothers: Daily Resistance and Carceral Consequences

My grandmother, my mother and my aunts all have stories that display their own chosen form of resistance and resentment towards imperial racialized gendered violence. While these

stories elicit comedic affect, they also display the intersecting forms of violence that shape their everyday lives leading to each of them having to live in a continuous fight. All of my maternal family members shared stories about having to continuously fight for themselves and with themselves to maintain their sense of identity and being in a society that has rendered them inhuman. In this chapter, I explore how the seemingly mundane activities in the lives of three generations of Vietnamese American women have been shaped by structures of oppression and violence, making everyday a fight for survival. Linh Thuy Nguyen explains, “The ruptures between the United States and Vietnam are not only manifest in losses of context but also mundane moments that reveal the daily struggles of immigrants and refugees of color to exist as full people in a system predicated on denying their humanity” (L. Nguyen 96). Examining the violence they faced during mundane moments and activities reveals my family’s justified resentment that many times led to retaliative violence. In consequence, my maternal family faced further violence in forms of incarceration and deviant labeling. Their stories then make known the continued racialized gendered violence that continues even after war and promised refuge in the United States, making their lives solely survivable rather than livable (V. Nguyen).

Being in a constant state of survival for multiple generations due to colonial and imperial violence has caused familial ruptures, mental health crises and carceral consequences. My aunt shared a story of the racialized aggression my grandmother faced while doing a mundane task such as grocery shopping:

My Aunt: Another time, we went into a store and this lady bumped into her with a grocery cart. My mom said, “You need to say sorry, lady.” She said, “I’m not saying anything to you Charlie bitch” or something. And Grandma walked away, and I was like, Wow, that’s pretty cool. She walked away and next thing you know she went to the end of the aisle. And you see this little 4’11 lady with the buggy just hauling ass down the aisle and bumped into that lady and knocked her down. She said, “I don’t have to say sorry white b*tch.” Grandma did not put up with much.

This story elicited laughter between my aunt and me, bonding us around a story of my grandmother's resistance. Although this story may seem just comedic, it also displays ways in which racialized violence pervaded their everyday lives. This story itself and how the story is told highlights the use of humor to cope, understand and reshape memories. Therefore, humor can be used as a tool to deal with trauma, allowing one to uncover systemic and structural violence that shape one's life through humorous storytelling (Panichelli-Batalla).

While my aunt's relationship with my grandmother is complicated by memories of abuse and trauma, humorous stories of my grandmother display a type of love my aunts have for my grandmother and my grandmother's love for them. One of my aunt's stories emphasizes the ways in which my grandmother showed her love through fighting for them. In a way, my aunts telling those stories is also an act of love for my grandmother. My aunt shared how she tried to tell good memories of her mother so that her son wouldn't hate his grandmother. She explained how she told a story of my grandmother standing up for her:

My Aunt: Well, I tell him like the good memories of grandma because I didn't want him to hate grandma from the beginning... One time she went to school and my teacher like left crescents in my wrist. I still have scars from them, she drew blood. And my mom went up to that school and proceeded to beat her a** in front of all the students for touching her daughter.

My aunt shared how my grandmother stood up for and beat her teacher up for putting hands on her, further sharing how my grandmother did not care about the possibilities of carceral consequences. My aunt further explained how her teacher held a grudge against her because her father was in the Vietnam War. This interaction of "racial lumping shape[s] young Vietnamese Americans' postmemory of the Vietnam War, instructing them that their place in the United States is intimately, and at times violently, related to Americans' racialized understanding of "Vietnam" and its people" (Espiritu 145). Therefore, this instance of racialized violence between

my aunt and her teacher displays the profound impact of the societal contention around the Vietnam War, not only inciting violence during war and trauma from war but also producing further violence in the United States for multiple generations.

Rather than fighting racialized violence by assimilating, my maternal family chose to physically fight back, leading to deviant labeling and criminalization (L. Nguyen 20). My aunt continued her story ending with the statement “...And she didn't care if she was getting arrested.” My aunt explained that my grandmother faced consequences for sticking up for her:

Myself: And did grandma get in trouble or anything?

My Aunt: She got arrested in front of everybody in school.

Myself: Did she have to go to jail?

My Aunt: Yeah, grandma had to go to jail a couple times. Grandma got into lots of fights. Grandma went to jail. A couple of times.

One of the times my grandmother went to jail, my grandmother called the house phone and my mom who was eight years old picked up the phone. My grandmother told her to pick her up from jail. Since my mom was so little, she only had a bike and rode it many miles to pick up her mom. While trying to interpersonally resist and fight back, resistance has been met with carceral consequences.

Over the course of history, movements of resistance against racialized and gendered violence have been met with continued police violence, incarceration and deviant labeling. Vinh Nguyen explains, “refugee resentment is outlawed—criminalized and socially prohibited”(V. Nguyen 53). Immigrants of color are incarcerated for pushing back against the violence they experience that maintains systems of white heteropatriarchal supremacy. Through the criminalization of the racialized gendered subject, they then become the perpetrator of violence while white heteropatriarchal neoliberal capitalist systems of violence are then maintained. My

grandmother, my mother and I laughed together as she told another comedic story that revealed the racialized violence and carceral consequences she faced:

My Mom: How was it coming to America, were people mean to you?

My Grandma: The guy because I hit him, you remember when you were a kid? Because I drive and he try to hit me with a car, and I tell him stop and he don't stop, and he put the finger in me.

My Mom: Are you saying that you flipped him off?

My Grandma: Yeah, yeah he piss me off.

My Mom: And then we went to court and what did you do?

My Grandma: So, I told them what happened, and they said you not allowed to talk like that (in the court). I say because he call me a Chinese or a Vietnamese hooker so I say your mother hooker too, I yell at him. I talk to your grandmother and she hooker too. I say your family, all your family, your cousins. That funny you know what I mean? That's so funny. He says you're a bitch, I say your mother a bitch too. HAHA, so them say nothing so what he say? Don't call one-person honey, call all of them. Me, I know how to swear really good.

My grandmother highlights how the man called her a “Chinese or Vietnamese hooker” displaying that racialized gendered stereotypes that cause not only political and institutional violence but also interpersonal violence. These stereotypes of the Orientalized sex worker come from long histories of violent racialized political exclusion, portrayals of cultural productions and imperial violence in Southeast Asia. The recent Atlanta Spa Shooting, where a white male perpetrator killed six Asian American women spa workers because of reasons like not controlling his sexual impulses displays the ways in which these stereotypes not only stem from histories of violence but perpetuate even further violence. These violent occurrences do not happen in a vacuum but instead are an accumulation of orientalist misogynistic visions of Asian American women that are rooted in histories of colonialism, exploitation and imperialism (Choy 156). While my grandmother's interaction may not be as shockingly violent, it illustrates the

ongoing violence Asian American women face forcing them to normalize the situations. When Asian American women try to defend themselves against violence, they face even further interpersonal, familial and carceral consequences. Although my grandmother's response displays that she feels unapologetic about her actions, her justified rage was met with incarceration. My grandmother continued, telling us how the judge asked my grandmother to explain what happened in which she responded by displaying what happened. She started hitting and cursing at the attorney to answer the judge's vague question. My mother explained how she remembered vividly sitting in the courtroom as the judge called for order in the court as my grandmother explained her narrative. The disciplining of my grandmother's speech and actions in the court highlights the further state violence and trauma faced after enduring interpersonal racialized violence.

My grandma also shared a story where she responded violently to my grandpa's gendered violence and highlighted how she feels proud of her actions. In the U.S. narrative, Asian war brides are seen as the model mother and traditional wife (Saenz, Sean-Shong and Benigno). This narrative popularized in the United States also romanticized the Asian war bride as being subservient and in debt to their GI husbands for saving them from a war-torn country. Although this is the master narrative, my grandmother explained her response to my grandfather's gendered violence:

My Mom: If dad would say something mean what would you do?

My Grandma: I watch TV and he tell me to go up there and he drunk already, and he call me a whore or something. I tell him your mother fucking whore and I hit him in the head with a glass ashtray, so he had to get seven stitches. So, he scared of me, don't bother me no more.... See how mean I am. Crazy but he scared of me.

My grandmother's actions while extremely violent seem justified to her since it made my grandfather never verbally assault her again. Although violence does not justify violence, my

grandmother's actions highlight the approach she felt was necessary to ensure that she would not have to face further violence from my grandfather. My grandmother's story also complicates the master narrative of subservient images of Vietnamese refugee wifehood. My grandmother ends her story stating, "Crazy but he scared of me," displaying how extreme acts of "craziness" can be necessary to ensure a defense against escalating political and personal violence rooted in historical violent systems and structures, in hopes that these acts will allow for a future where the violence "don't bother me no more."

Re(Sisters): Generational Resistance

Discourse, discrimination and racialization did not end with my grandmother. Facing racialized gendered violence continued for my aunts and my mother in the United States. My aunts and my mom also told stories about their continuous struggle in daily life trying to deal with the systems, structures and individuals who perpetrated violence in their lives. Therefore, displaying the ways in which possibilities of a "better life" in the United States may not be possible for Vietnamese American women in the current landscape that has been built on racialized heteropatriarchal neoliberal values. My grandfather explained the racialized gendered violence that impacted his daughter's lives:

My Mom: How many times did you see us get into a fight because we were a mixed race and people were picking on us?

My Grandpa: Well, I think that happened often, but we always had a heavy bag at home, and I taught all the girls how to punch. I was proud of my daughter in the seventh grade in junior high. After class, they stood up and a boy behind her reached around and grabbed her tits from behind. And she turned around and she grilled him with a right cross. Knocked one of those teeth out and then they had to take the other one out, so he lost two teeth. His dad called me up and said, "What are you going to do about it?" And I said, "Well, I don't know. Maybe I should bring charges against his son for putting his hands on my daughter's tits." I said, "It's your fault. You should have taught him better." I said, "If I had done something like that my dad would have kicked my ass up between my shoulders and I would have been grounded till I was 18."

My grandfather's story highlights the gendered violence and assault that happens on a day-to-day violence that is usually justified by the phrase "boys will be boys." erin Khuê Ninh's chapter, "Without Enhancements" points out how her own lived experiences were informed by a continuous experience of sexual violence and coercion. Ninh, my aunts and many other women's life experiences are shaped by constant and compounding experiences of sexual violence that permeate their daily lives. Even in an activity like going to school, my aunt is continually met with gendered violence. My aunt explained how these instances of gendered assault continued in the seventh grade:

My Aunt: I think it was that was seventh grade. I would be sitting in class and the guy behind me always kept on, pinching my butt. You know, he'd mess up my chair. And he touched my butt. And so, I took my pencil and I turned around and I stabbed him in his leg. That's about it. But he did, like, you know, he bothered me a lot before that happened, so I just did that.

My maternal family's stories display the ways in which they are fighting against a society that continually denies their humanity (L. Nguyen). How are womxn of color supposed to move through the world in a way that centers joy, community, and love when one can barely survive the day? When womxn of color defend themselves and express rage, they are labeled as deviant and inhuman. My aunt emphasizes the continuous assault that led her to do the violent action. In a patriarchal violent world that continually violates you and denies your personhood starting from childhood, it is surprising that we continue to survive every day. While these situations are sexually violent, my aunts and my mom have all told me stories about the egregious sexual violence that defined their childhood and early adulthood in the United States and many of the other countries they lived in. While some feminist and oral history works incorporate the details of traumatic stories surrounding violence and sexual violence as necessary to seek justice and

acknowledge the traumatic violence, in this work, including the multiple accounts of sexual violence is not necessary to recognize the ways in which sexual violence has shaped our lives (Abrams 177). The re-telling and refiguring of these stories of trauma may possibly further traumatize my family and the reader. Although these stories are not written in detail, it is important to recognize the ways in which sexual violence has compounded in our lives, creating a constant fear of having to face sexual violence and the need to live in an everlasting fight or flight.

My mother explained how she also felt as if she had to continually fight her whole life due to being a Vietnamese American woman, leading her to be labeled as a “bad” kid, to be continually kicked out of school and being moved from place to place. My mom plainly stated, “I guess being over there (Virginia Beach) and people being racist...anytime when someone looked at me I felt like I had to fight.” My mom grew up in the U.S. South and being mixed-race forced her to feel the need to constantly fight for her life and her existence. She emphasized how her childhood was shaped by the constant need to fight:

My Mom: In eighth grade, I got into a gang so I started fighting and I had a chip on my shoulder because everybody would look at me or I guess because I was Asian or whatever...Anyhow I got into a gang and my dad also left me for a whole summer, left me with \$1,000 and left for like two months. So, your aunt decided to take me to Texas to keep me out of trouble and then I moved to Texas and then I was good for like a year and then ended up being bad or skipping school again. So, then she shipped me to my mom's and then that's when I was in Norfolk and I got into a fight again at school so then from there I went to my dad's in California and then there it was like people were actually racist super racist in California...So I always been in fighting phase or you know sticking up for myself because people looked at me a certain way...

My mom describes the ways in which her racialization and the way that people looked at her made her feel like she always had to fight. Although looks may not seem like a justified reason to violently fight someone, the act of looking has been used as a racialized and gendered tactic of violence, intimidation and power (hooks). The “gaze” has been explored by feminist authors

positing the ways the gaze has been used to maintain power structures. A popular feminist rhetoric and framework is the “male gaze,” where men use their gaze to objectify and sexualize women (Mulvey). The male gaze has been clearly identified in cultural productions where many films about women are constructed through the lens of the male gaze. hooks’s *Black Looks: Race and Representation* reflects on her own experience with being able to gaze and the ways that children of color are ordered to not look or gaze at people. The gaze is not only a form of gendered violence but is also historically rooted in racialized violence. In thinking about who has the right to look, hooks also points out how the gaze was used as a form of power by white male slave owners in stopping black slaves from being able to gaze back. Mirzeoff’s *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* also identifies this racialized dynamic, arguing how constant looking has historically been an act of monitoring by pointing to the example of the white slave owners who always look at and surveil black slaves in a “plantation complex” (Mirzeoff). Mirzeoff describes the ways in which having the right to look expresses autonomy and personhood. Foucault’s ideation of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* also politicizes looking and reveals how the act of looking is used for surveillance, allowing for further power and control. Therefore, interpersonal staring and looking can be used as an act of intimidation, control and a display of power. Staring and looking can also render someone inhuman, as an animal, an object, an alien that doesn’t deserve privacy and autonomy.

My mom described how she no longer felt the need to fight once she was in a place that was more racially diverse, which mitigated the continuous staring:

My Mom: I feel like in the Bay Area, actually it was like going to that school I didn't have I think because it was so mixed-race and there's so many different Asian people that I didn't have to fight people, yeah I didn't really get into fights in the Bay Area.

My mom's feeling of not having to think and fight since there were people who were racially similar displays the ways in which place shapes a constant need to fight for life and livability. This highlights how having community and people from similar backgrounds around you can create space for yourself to feel and be safe. Thus, making it important to think about which spaces are made livable for people of color and how community can powerfully shape one's need to be in a mode of constant survival.

Creating Intergenerational Love and Healing

Experiencing and hearing the stories of resentment, resistance and rage that display the ways in which life is only made survivable for my family has made me question if healing is even possible in a place that continues to deny the humanity of BIPOC peoples. How is healing possible in a social world created by the continuous genocide of Indigenous peoples, the exploitation and incarceration of Black and Brown peoples, the continuation of war to maintain the stealing of capital and the maintenance of white supremacy continually reshaping itself in a post-colonial world? In order to continue living in a "system that is predicated on denying their humanity," my maternal family has learned how to find alternative forms of care and healing (L. Nguyen 96). Linh Thuy Nguyen argues that "reconciliation with family, speaking one's family story, and excavating family history do not result in transcendence or 'healing' (how one might heal from or transcend the conditions of neoliberal capitalism) but may instead point us to new ways to relate to ourselves, our families, and our communities" (L. Nguyen 15). Nguyen posits that there is no way to fully heal in a neoliberal capitalist society, thus displaying the deeply violent systems that lead to little possibilities of futures of healing for BIPOC communities. While Nguyen decenters the logic of healing, the quote ends with hopefulness and the possibilities of family histories to allow one to create new connections and relations.

My grandma and my great aunt described the ways in which neoliberal capitalist systems and individualism in the United States differed in comparison to Vietnam, hindering their ability to fully create community and create familial networks of care. When I was visiting my grandmother this past summer we went to my great grandmother's grave in the Virginia cemetery. My grandma shared with me how she went frequently to talk to her mom and fix her flowers. When we said bye to the grave, my grandma kissed her mom's photo and said, "Bye mommy, miss you." Afterwards, my grandma looked at me and stated, "If she was in Vietnam, the community would have helped, and she wouldn't have died." Tragically, my great grandmother died in a burning trailer in Virginia, a situation where she could have possibly survived if she had help and people she knew around her. My grandma's words highlighted the ways in which individualism and neoliberal values in the United States led to her mother's death, displaying a resentment towards these societal ideologies.

My great aunt also highlighted how she didn't really see her sisters due to the nuclear familial arrangement in the U.S. that differs from her experience of Vietnam:

Myself: What was it like growing up with sisters and siblings?

My Great Aunt: It nice but we not that close like in Vietnam. In Vietnam, I think everybody more closer; we see each other almost all the time. Here, everybody have their own job working and you talk to them but you only see them once in a while. It's not like back home... Everything here is different. You know, they all have their own family and they all work.

Myself: I know now you spend a lot more time with your sisters. But did you continue? Were you guys spending a lot of time together?

My Great Aunt: Actually no, a long time ago now when I was younger, I spend a lot of time with my sister. I do less now because they older. I like to see them, help them out. But it not much like when I was younger. I'd be honest with you...I mean I still see them once a week or some time once a month. That's not a lot but here that's a lot, that's good.

My great aunt explained how she felt like in Vietnam there is more of a collective community and more time that you spend with your family, which is not common in the United States. She points out the ways in which individualism and nuclear familial arrangements in the United States makes it more difficult to create frequent community with each other. She states at the end how seeing her sisters once a week or once a month is not a lot in comparison to how she grew up in Vietnam, but how compared to Western standards of seeing one's family infrequently, it is considered good enough. Although the societal ideologies around community and family differ in the United States compared to Vietnam, my great aunts and my grandma continue to resist the familial dynamic shifts by trying to be intentional about seeing each other and finding time to help each other out. While the current systems make living only survivable for my family, pointing out familial shared experiences through this project has allowed for an understanding of each other that is not usually made possible in the neoliberal capitalist systems.

Although the current violent systems and structures are irreversible, I still try to maintain hope that we can eventually have livable futures that go beyond surviving. I maintain hope that the United States will reckon with its past and ongoing genocide to achieve a world where BIPOC folks are no longer denied humanity and no longer have to fight to survive on a daily basis and can instead be in a place where coalition, solidarity and community continue to thrive. While scholarship predominantly focuses on coping and understanding intergenerational trauma, this chapter hopes to reveal and understand the ways in which intergenerational love is curated and constructed. bell hook's *All About Love* describes the current lovelessness that plagues the current nation and the ways that love has shaped her own lived experiences. By using bell hook's concept of love and lovelessness, this section focuses on how loving in itself is a political act of resistance, in a society that has traumatized women so much that you would think they would

need to be unfeeling and loveless to survive. In alignment with bell hooks, I argue that loving is even braver than to cause violence, because loving takes vulnerability and can be a political tool for survival. Intergenerational love has always been a continuous threat to (settler-) colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberal capitalism. By denying and stopping intergenerational love and solidarity through force, trauma, and policy, systems of oppression are then maintained and justified. In order to understand my family's intergenerational love, this section grapples with stories of care, healing and unconditional feminist love.

While I was visiting my family in Virginia this past summer, I was surprised to find out that my eldest aunt was taking my grandmother and her sisters out to lunch every week. She also explained to me how she went on bike rides with her aunt and their husbands at least once a week. As she told me stories about them laughing, picking fruit and getting drinks after their bike rides, I realized the ways in which they built a familial care network with each other, prompting me to ask my eldest aunt's motivations for this:

Myself: And I know now you've been like, biking more with your Aunt.

My Eldest Aunt: Yes. Now we're building that relationship.

Myself: How did that start?

My Eldest Aunt: Well, I started it actually, I always kept on trying to have a relationship and it became a blowout, actually with my mother. And then she changed her life around because she's had hardship also, from the past, which I guess is hard to let go of. So, we started accepting each other, how's that? I can't say anyone's at fault. I mean, I tried. And then when I started one day a week and I was like, you know, to make myself happy. So, I would get all of my aunts together and my mom. And we do one day a week if not more.

My eldest aunt explained the ways in which creating this network of care was incredibly challenging but ultimately she was able to make herself happy by creating that opportunity to see her family once a week. My eldest aunt clearly and empathetically states, "And then she changed

her life around because she's had hardship also, from the past, which I guess is hard to let go of," displaying the ways in which she is recognizing how violent systems and structures may have shaped her mother's actions thus leading to her acceptance of her mother. My eldest aunt not only brought her mom and aunts to lunch at the "Crazy Buffet" every week and went on bike rides, but they also created systems to bring each other to doctor's appointments and frequently brought homemade food to each other.

Although my eldest aunt explains her understanding of my grandmother, my other aunt explained more about the complexities of forgiveness:

My Aunt: Until now, I don't know just the last year she's, you know, been apologizing for being a bad mom. And I agree with her. Thank you for the apology, but you were a shit mom. So, I know I love her. And I still call her to talk to her...but I don't per se like, miss her around me...and I think the rest of your aunties are more forgiving than I am. For sure. Especially your eldest aunt, because I can't unsee the things that she went through with your grandma and grandpa. I know. In my heart, I would not be talking to them today.

My aunt contends with the ideas of forgiveness and love, thinking through the ways in which one can have love for someone but still not feel compelled to be around them. My aunt also emphasizes her non-forgiveness and the ways in which she cannot unsee what has been done to her and her sisters. Elizabeth Hanna Rubio's essay "Of Monsters and Mothers" grapples with the difficulties of having a mother who has experienced structural violence and war while also perpetuating violence against her growing up. Rubio argues for the necessity and ability to hold multiple truths and the ways in which anger for a person can still be possible even with an understanding of the systems and histories that shape one's life. Rubio explains the multiple complexities of anger and healing: "I can know that this is not just about you and me, I can work to lessen our collective suffering, to struggle against the violence that made us who we are, but I can still be really fucking mad. Understanding and accompaniment and healing do not preclude

rage. It does not bestow a facile forgiveness” (Rubio 130). This quote acknowledges how an understanding of the systems and structures in shaping the violence that one has experienced interpersonally does not always facilitate forgiveness nor does it eliminate anger (Rubio 130). In alignment with Rubio’s essay, my aunt also continues to grapple with the complexities of understanding, compassion, and anger.

My aunt’s statement also displays how caring and loving her sisters has complicated forgiving my grandma even more. My aunt not only recognizes the violence that my grandma did against her but also the violence she caused for her sisters. At the start of the dialogue, my aunt explains how my grandmother recently started apologizing for being a bad mom. For my grandma, the denial of motherly affects towards her daughters was in a way an act of resistance, since she may have felt forced to have children due to pressure of being a Vietnamese refugee war bride.

While my grandmother’s way of resisting was abandoning her mothering duties, my aunts and my mom resisted in turn by being present mothers and using children as a healing source. My aunt shared how she didn’t find healing through creating understanding between her mother and her, but instead in becoming a mother herself:

My Aunt: You know, I think the real healing process for me and your mom is through our children. I mean, taking care of you guys, I think, in some way has helped us. I don’t know why I am sad, but it’s true. For especially your mom and myself, without you guys, without somebody else to have to care for, I don’t think we’d feel like we have a purpose. So, you guys help us heal. And then we try so much to not be like our mother. But I think in a lot of ways we are. And sometimes we have to step back.

Through this heartwarming quote, my aunt posits how having children gave herself and my mom purpose. She identified how having children in a way was a healing process that allowed them both space to care for someone else. While having children was healing, my aunt also postulated how it is a constant challenge and tension to try and not be like her own mother. Rubio’s essay

also contends with anxieties of being a mother and not wanting to reproduce the same violence: “And then there is my child. You have made my efforts to do better for him so damn exhausting. But every time I take a deep breath before reacting, every time I choose compassion for myself so that I can choose compassion for him...I am suturing gaping intergenerational wounds” (Rubio 132). Rubio brilliantly portrays the complexities of healing and grappling with the experience of parental violence while having a child herself. Throughout the essay, Rubio professes the anxieties of raising a child herself in the shadow of having a mother who has also been shaped by war and empire. This quote explains the ways that Rubio continues to heal intergenerational wounds through little acts of care for her child, revealing the healing in having a child but how it is also a constant daily struggle and commitment. My aunt continued to tell me how she and her youngest daughter are committed to improving communication to actively resist the unhealthy patterns inherited from my grandmother.

My mom also explained the ways in which having a child was a healing process:

Myself: Why did you want to have me?

My Mom: I didn't want to have a baby. I got pregnant and had to have you. But you were the best, like you calmed me down a lot, you're the best thing, because I'm telling you I fought like once a week or something and then when I had you I turned into a caring person and I actually had like emotions. I actually was nicer. I didn't fight all the time because I had someone to worry about, like I couldn't get in trouble. I just cared about being a good mom, because I was like, anyone can call me anything, but no one can say I'm a bad mom.

My mom had me when she was seventeen years old and a sophomore in high school. Growing up, my mom always asserted that she thought she would be dead by now if she didn't have me. She declared how life was so unlivable before having someone to care for that she believed she would have gone down a path of fighting that would have led to her death or that she would have eventually ended her own life. This story many times made me feel pressure to live up to

something to live for. How could I save my mom's life and how do I help my mom survive in a world that has continually failed her? Although hearing this story caused many anxieties in myself, hearing it growing up also saddened me and made me think about the ways in which her life was rendered unlivable by the structures, systems and people around her.

This story also made me think about my mom not only as a mother but also as a whole person. A healing process for myself has been trying to not only understand my parents and family members through their familial relation to myself but instead as whole people and picture the child they were before me. In this fragment of the interview, my mom also explained the ways in which having a child calmed her down, allowed her to access emotions and stopped the need to fight because she had someone else to care for. Thus, displaying the power of care and love in creating space to take someone out of a constant need to be in fight or flight, living a life of just surviving, and making life a little more livable. My mom also details how she cared about being a good mom and finding resistance through motherhood. Although my mother was constantly labeled a "bad kid" for having to constantly fight for life, she found resistance in aiming for the good mom label. In contrast with my grandmother's "bad mom" label, both my grandma and my mom found resistance through motherhood. Due to my grandmother's resentment of feeling forced to have to marry to survive war and to have children in order to prove her gratitude and fulfill patriarchal duties, my grandmother then resisted through the denial of motherhood. Being a teenage mother, the majority of people in my mom's life urged her not to have a child and insisted that she couldn't be a "good mom" due to her age. Therefore, although on the surface their paths diverged, my grandmother and my mother both found ways of resistance and power through motherhood in their own ways.

My aunts also described how they created bonds around motherhood:

My Aunt: When we had kids, your aunt, me and your mom got pregnant all at the same time. I got pregnant first, then your mom, and then your aunt. And our thing was that we weren't going to be like our parents. That was our goal. And that's pretty bad when your goal is how are you going to raise your kids and we all said, "Well, we're not going to be like our parents."

My aunt's statement displays the ways in which they resisted by choosing to be mothers and coming together to create a collective decision about parenting. After my aunt shared this, she shared more about how being mothers together made them all closer since they would call each other for advice, support and understanding. She shared how although many of her sisters had arguments and conflicts growing up, being pregnant together drew them together and allowed them to heal their sibling tensions. Many times, healing is thought of through the lens of mental health structures, but through oral history we can recognize other feminist forms of healing, coping and understanding.

Moreover, my aunt explained how she and her sisters created a game to heal through the humor:

My Aunt: Going back to the healing process, your mom, auntie and I, we all decided we were gonna play the game called "Guess What Mom Says," and the person who gets it right would take a shot. We put her on the other side of the table and we're gonna count to three and then you say something, and she would say it, and whoever got it right got to take a shot.

My aunt identified the creation of a drinking game around my grandma as a part of the healing process and the way that they cope with the trauma they faced involving their mom. Something as small as a drinking game may be thought of as silly or lighthearted, but in many ways it is an expression of care, love and solidarity amongst sisters. In a way the game also displays the ways in which they know my grandma deeply and have love for her, since they are able to predict her next phrase, meaning that they are constantly listening to her.

My aunt continued explaining and reassuring me that she loves her grandkids:

My Aunt: You look back, you can't change it, you wish you could do things different. Just so you know, you're very loved by your grandma. She just loves her grandkids. And I think even in the back of her mind, she still has a little bit of prejudice. She knows she's getting old and there's not much longer that she's gonna see you guys. Hopefully she takes advantage of the fact that she has grandkids....I mean, she told me she knows she was a bad mom. And I think that's why I think your mom worked so hard to get you where you are...

While my aunt recognizes the ways that my grandmother wasn't able to be a good mother, she also tries to emphasize how she is trying to be a good *grandmother*. Thus, showing how although motherly love may have not been possible due to my grandmother's historical and political circumstances being shaped by imperial violence, my grandma gets another chance at being loved and loving her grandkids. Ultimately showcasing, how motherly and grandmotherly loving and caring can be a form of feminist healing that can resist the current violent systems and structures. Thankfully, my grandmother, my mother and my aunt's resistance through love has been beneficial in getting the opportunity to experience unconditional intergenerational love and care.

Healing has not only been a process for the second-generation. Ss the third generation, my cousin and I speculated on the future:

Myself: I think something that scares me is just kind of watching our moms and going through hard stuff later in life...

My Cousin: I think it is letting things build up, and not realizing it. Because then you tell yourself like, "Oh, it's fine." And things aren't, things could be a lot worse. And they like, let it build up and let it build up to the point where, like, they don't know how they just don't have the tools to handle it. ...We've always had discussions where like, it is scary to be like, did we give ourselves the proper tools like break out of the mold of that way of thinking to where like things happen in the future, we can handle them, which I think, I don't mean to like pat ourselves on the back, but I feel like we've done a good job. Hopefully, fingers crossed.

My cousin highlights the ways in which we are constantly talking with each other about the future, about the tools to ensure our future, and ends her statement with appreciating ourselves

for the work we've done trying to find forms of healing in our lives. After this statement, we discussed the different tools that each generation had in allowing us to come to a critical understanding and consciousness that was not available to the generations before us. The advancement of technology and furthering of critical consciousness tools like social media, the de-stigmatization of mental health, and the expansion of Ethnic Studies has allowed us to be able to identify harmful narratives and label the structures that shape our lives. The expansion of these tools also allowed the space to talk about and identify shared stigmatized relational experiences that enabled us to realize that we are not alone in our experiences. In the virtual world, community is not limited to physical space and time, allowing one to then find even more alternative forms of healing and community that may not be available due to structural barriers. My cousin and my conversation also highlighted the care and intergenerational love we have for each other, for our mothers and for our grandmother.

Although I remain hopeful that feminist intergenerational love can be a powerful tool of healing, I also continue to grapple with the possibilities of fully healing from the past given ongoing (settler-) colonial, imperial and structural violence that makes living a form of surviving. I write this final chapter in anger of what my family has gone through and how the world around them has continued to fail them. This anger and feminist rage has taught me to be aware of the structures and systems that continue to shape my family's lives, in hopes that by pointing them out and actualizing them as a collective intergenerational experience, we can start to reimagine what a livable life could look like for womxn of color, for refugees of color, and for all marginalized peoples (Lorde).



Fig. 3. *Intergenerational Love, 2024*

Conclusion

This thesis centers my family's histories in order to reveal how war, imperialism and U.S. empire continue to perpetuate violence even after reaching a supposed place of refuge and gaining citizenship to the United States (V. Nguyen). The intergenerational stories highlight the enduring legacies of U.S. empire and military intervention that have been chronicled in Asian American studies and Critical Refugee Studies, especially at the nexus of labor and love that accounts for the outmigration of Asians to the United States (Choy, Espiritu). This thesis centers womxn of color feminist and critical ethnic studies methodologies, frameworks and understandings to think critically about the structures and systems that have shaped the past, present and futures of my family's lives.

By conducting oral history interviews and engaging with critical autoethnography, the thesis challenges what is constituted as evidence in the academy, displaying the ways in which our lives have been continually shaped by structures of violence that uphold neoliberal capitalist idealizations of U.S. empire (Cho, Abrams). Through this thesis, I work through the interpersonal, gendered and racialized violence that my family has experienced to complicate the simplified dichotomies such as the good/bad refugee (Espiritu, L. Nguyen, V. Nguyen). Research in the academy predominately comes from Enlightenment ideals of objectivity, but this thesis emphasizes how research can be a political tool of resistance. While I do not wish to cause retraumatization for my family, I am hopeful that by having our own family archive of interviews, photos and written memories we can draw further connections and understandings of each other to cultivate additional intergenerational love.

This thesis engages with scholarship and frameworks on the Cold War, Critical Refugee Studies, memory, womxn of color feminism, sentimentality as well as critical mixed-race studies

in order to recognize the narratives of three generations of Vietnamese American women. Currently, there is a gap in Cold War literature on the recorded histories of women who worked in hostess clubs during the Vietnam war, how they navigated these relationships and how they navigated motherhood during a time of extreme stigmatization in Vietnam and in the United States (Gustafsson, Collins). My thesis fills in these gaps and works through my grandmother, my aunts, and my mother's navigation of childhood, wifedom and motherhood to reveal the complexities of these positions and the ways in which they are shaped by a multitude of social factors and conceptions.

This thesis also adds to scholarship on intergenerational communication and memory since there is a gap in qualitative literature that inspects how intergenerational communication is conducted and how memory is passed down (Cai and Lee, Cho). Much of Asian American literature focuses on the violence of silence, while this thesis works through the absence of silence and reveals how unfiltered speech can also cause intergenerational violence, tensions and confusions (Espiritu, Dalgaard and Montgomery). There is also a gap in literature on the recorded histories of women who worked in hostess clubs during the war, how they navigated these relationships and how they navigated motherhood during a time of extreme stigmatization in Vietnam and in the United States (Gustafsson). My thesis is also in conversation with women of color feminism and Critical Refugee studies to reveal how feminist rage, resentment and love have shaped my family's histories. By exploring feminist affect, the thesis centers the importance of feeling and the ways in which feeling can be used as powerful tools of political resistance.

This research and work was written out of love and frustration for my family, in hope that one day our lives will go beyond surviving. Telling and writing down my family's stories are an

act of resistance, survival and resilience that could lead to futures of further intergenerational love for my family by revealing the power structures that currently do not allow us to live without resentment, anger and rage. In passionate fear and anger, I have written this thesis. I write it in fear that I will get the history wrong, in fear that I will not portray the memories correctly, and in fear that I will not be intelligent enough to make sense of the world I have been placed in. I write in anger that these stories have to be told, that my family's stories are filled with abundant instances of violence and that writing this thesis may not do anything for the futures of my family. Hopefully by sharing, acknowledging, and scrutinizing the systems and structures of violence that shape my family's stories, there could be a future where there will be an ending of continual war, violence and imperialism, in hopes that one day the world will allow us to live without fear and anger.

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