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Recalling the Refugee: Culture Clash and Melancholic Racial Formation in *Daughter*
from Danang

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
Requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in

Ethnic Studies

by

Linh Thuy Nguyen

Committee in charge:

Professor Yen Le Espiritu, Chair
Professor Sara Clarke Kaplan
Professor Kalindi Vora

2012

The thesis of Linh Thuy Nguyen is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012

DEDICATION

With love, for má, ba, and my 6 chị em.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Recalling The Refugee: Culture Clash and Melancholic Racial Formation in *Daughter
From Danang*

by

Linh Thuy Nguyen

Master of Arts in Ethnic Studies

University of California, San Diego, 2012

Professor Yen Le Espiritu, Chair

Mainstream reviews of the documentary *Daughter from Danang* cite the trope of “cultural clash” as an explanation for the failed reunion of Heidi Bub, a Babylift orphan, with her Vietnamese mother. Other analyses of the film have highlighted the mixed-race status of the protagonist as well as her identity as a transnational adoptee as a means of analyzing structures of race and workings of US empire through the film, situating it within the context of the Vietnam War. Drawing from this body of critical work and denaturalizing the culture clash narrative, this paper intervenes to analyze the film through the paradigm of the refugee, via critical refugee studies. Through this framework, I connect the film to the notion of historical and collective memory through a

generational refugee perspective. Viewing the psychological as a space allusive of the afterlife of war, I frame the notion of desire for reconciliation outside of the cultural clash narrative in a way that contextualizes Bub's connection to her resettlement in the United States, as informed by her racial formation in the south. I conclude that through the lens of refugee studies, we are able to recognize the site of trauma not just in Bub's failed reunion with her mother, but rather, in the everyday lived experiences of violence through assimilation and racial illegibility, in addition to racial melancholia within the black / white racial economy of the US south.

Introduction: A Refugee Story

...much of the writing, art, and politics of Vietnamese refugees, is about the problem of mourning the dead, remembering the missing, and considering the place of the survivors in the movement of history. This problem is endemic to refugees, for whom separation from family and homeland is a universal experience.

Viet Nguyen "Speak of the Dead, Speak of Viet Nam:
The Ethics and Aesthetics of Minority Discourse"¹

Reflecting upon his parents' mementos from Vietnam, black and white photographs of grandparents, "universal signs of our place in the world as refugees,"² Viet Thanh Nguyen begins a meditation on questions of haunting, memory, social justice, aesthetics and ethics. Nguyen, writing from the position of a second generation Vietnamese American, expresses that children of refugees are implicated in a tangle of identification with a past we can't truly know, but can never shake; we make and make sense of new identities in between worlds. Describing the tasks of mourning, remembering, and negotiating history, it is taken for granted that we have ties to a collective historical memory and trauma that color our experiences of the places our parents come from, and the places they/we have been re-settled, a liminal position from which arises the possibility of critique of the truly unsettled nature of refuge and resettlement. It is from this perspective of critical in-betweenness that the ideological construct of United States benevolence can be challenged, revealing the US involvement in Southeast Asia as an epistemological project in line with imperialism and US empire, rather than a benign narrative of rescue and liberation in which wretched refugees were saved from the evils of communism.

¹ The New Centennial Review, Volume 6, Number 2, Fall 2006: 8.

² Ibid.

This thesis analyzes the documentary film *Daughter from Danang* which focuses on the return story of a Babylift “orphan.” Following the “Fall of Saigon”³ – the United States’ defeat and the “official” ending of the Vietnam War⁴ in April of 1975, over one million people fled Southeast Asia.⁵ Days after the evacuation of US troops, diplomats and high-ranking allies, Operation Babylift was implemented. This controversial policy, in which over 2,000 Amerasian children, fathered by American servicemen, were “evacuated” from Vietnam, was a public relations move, a last-ditch effort to portray the role of the United States in favorable light.⁶ *Daughter from Danang* is unique from other Vietnam films⁷ in that it does not focus on events of the war or on (American) veterans, but is centrally preoccupied with the return story of a mixed-race Amerasian woman named Heidi Bub and her journey to Vietnam in search of reconciliation with her Vietnamese mother.

³ Yen Le Espiritu explains the use of scare quotes surrounding the term the “Fall of Saigon” indicating how the term is US-specific, overemphasizes that specific date in the history of the war, ignoring the conditions preceding and following the day/date, and that Vietnamese communities have different terms for that day. “The ‘We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose’ Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the ‘Fall Of Saigon’” *American Quarterly* (Volume 58, Number 2, June 2006) 329-352.

⁴ Just as authors including Nguyen, Espiritu and Katharaya Um note, “Vietnam War” is a misnomer as other Southeast Asian countries including Laos and Cambodia were involved. For the purposes of coherence I will continue to use this phrase, though I am aware of its inconsistencies and ellisions.

⁵ Ruben Rumbaut, “A Legacy of War: Refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia” *Origins and Destinies: Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in America*. Sivia Pedraza and Ruben G. Rumbaut, eds., (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1996): 316.

⁶ Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010): 203.

⁷ By Vietnam War films, I refer to films that directly or indirectly represent the Vietnam War. Marita Sturken “Reenactment and the Making of History: The Vietnam War as Docudrama,” in *The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997) See also: Edwin Martini *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007): 40-77. Martini argues that Vietnam War films normalized the war for US audiences, depicting graphic violence, and perpetuating images of militarized masculinity and sexuality, Vietnamese savagery, and US heroism.

Twenty-seven years after the end of the war, the film functions for many who were not even born at its close as a point of entry with the topic of Vietnam and its people. As Marita Sturken argues, docudrama because of high accessibility and circulation become a “primary source for historical information.” As such, the narrative tropes of reunion and closure have the effects of renegotiating perceptions and interpretations of the war, this film can be viewed alongside the other Vietnam War docudrama, as it relies on a “reenactment of the original drama, [where] coherence and narrative structure emerge, and fragments of memory are made whole.”⁸ The editing or stitching together fragments of memory, from both the perspective of Bub and her mother attempt to redeem and make whole.

The film’s significance lies in the continued preoccupation with “that war” and its refugees, as the promise of closure impacts the way people understand, and experience the Vietnam War. Bub’s denied positionality as a 1.5 generation Vietnamese American and refugee⁹ is overshadowed by the film’s problematic framing as a story of culture clash and so-called truthful depiction of the effects of war and the inherent differences between Vietnam and America. The generational perspective is also effectively erased when Bub is only discussed as a transnational adoptee – rather than a refugee.

Maintaining her connection to refugee status points to her necessary failure to assimilate

⁸ Marita Sturken defines docudrama as a cinematic form resulting from the “melding of historical fact with dramatic form.” *Tangled Memories*. 85.

⁹ 1.5 generation refers to immigrants that arrived in receiving countries as children. As being in between first generation (those who immigrated as adults) and second (the children of the first generation), 1.5 generation Americans have an ambiguous relationship to both their country of origin and the one where they are resettled. They must navigate between cultures in ways that first generation (with firm a more or less firm cultural identity) and second (raised in another country) are not required to. Ruben G. Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes, eds., *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). See also: *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight and New Beginnings*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006)

as an American as part of the conditions of possibility that inform her desires for reconciliation, or as I argue, her desires for legibility, in the first place. My project draws upon and responds to the work of scholars of critical refugee studies¹⁰ responds to Aihwa Ong's assertion that, "...little scholarly attention has been paid to refugee experiences of displacement, regulation, and resettlement abroad. Instead, most attention is paid to the threat refugees are perceived to pose to the nation-state."¹² In line with this intellectual genealogy I posit my re-reading of this film as means of conceptualizing refugee experiences after they arrive and are resettled into lives and identities in the US. This thesis gets to the afterlife of the war, where the literature on refugees drops off, where traditional sociology has sought resolution to issues of resettlement through models of assimilation. I am interested in what ways the violence of the events of war, displacement, resettlement and assimilation creates certain kinds of dysfunctional and impossible subjects.¹³

Calling Bub a refugee subject reconnects her to the conditions and aftermath of war, which allows her to have war memories, acknowledges her continual subjective displacement, as she moves from refugee to citizen, and demonstrates how the legacies of

¹⁰ For a few examples, see: Katharaya Um "The 'Vietnam War': What's In a Name." *Amerasia Journal*, (31:2, 2005)134-139. Museum of California, 2005, Viet Nguyen (previously cited) and *Race and Resistance : Literature and Politics in Asian America* (2002), Mimi Thi Nguyen *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012).

¹² Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding*, 78.

¹³ I am drawing on Mae Ngai's use of the term, which she uses in describing illegal alienage. It is however applicable in use, as a mixed-race Vietnamese American woman contextualized in the black white racial economy of the United States she is legally and politically, "a person who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved" except for moments of ambiguous passing. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004): 5.

thee war remain with refugees. Assimilation and granting of citizenship may change the political and legal statuses of subjects, but this violent act of incorporation by the receiving nation-state only compounds effects of the remnants of war. Through the framework of Aihwa Ong's "racial bipolarism" I will demonstrate how Bub's subjectivity as informed by her mixed-race status in a bipolar racial economy must also be included in readings of her desire for reconciliation and acceptance by her Vietnamese family. Finally, I will turn to Anne Anlin Cheng's "racial melancholia" to argue that the film is a rich site for analysis when our question shifts from "Why couldn't she be reunited?" to "What animates her desires for reunion in the first place?"

(Not) Just Another Vietnam Film

Critically acclaimed, the film received the Grand Jury Prize at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival, toured a circuit of over 60 US film festivals, had a brief 20 city theatrical release, and was taken up by PBS and co-presented by Independent Television Service (ITVS) and the National Asian American Communication Association (NAATA) in 2003.¹⁴ From its emergence at the film festival circuit, to limited theatrical release, and then finally onto television sets and online streaming media site hulu.com, *Daughter from Danang* has exceeded the goals of the filmmakers to reach as many viewers as possible. Tied to this wide release was the filmmakers' hope that the film would "become a vehicle for [Bub] to leave the door open and continue to search for answers about her past and her future."¹⁵ These desires for distribution apparently go hand in hand with the desire for Heidi Bub's reconciliation, but how and with what or whom is she expected to reconcile? The title of the film, *Daughter from Danang*, suggests that the primary preoccupation of the film will be the unfolding of the mother - daughter relationship. The sentimentalized narrative featuring the bond of maternal love is complicated by the fact that transnational adoption, 22 years of separation, assimilation, and physical distance spanning continents animates the desire for reconciliation. Reduced to a personal narrative and a daughter's desire for love, the film depoliticizes the context of war. ITVS describes the scene of cultural clash:

Heidi and her Vietnamese relatives find themselves caught in a confusing clash of cultures and at the mercy of conflicting emotions that will change

¹⁴ Lily Ng. "After Traveling the World, 'Daughter from Danang' Arrives at PBS." International Documentary Association. (March 2003). Date accessed: 12 March 2012
<<http://www.documentary.org/magazine/after-travelling-world-daughter-danang-arrives-pbs>>

¹⁵ Ibid.

their lives forever. Through intimate and sometimes excruciating moments, *Daughter from Danang* profoundly shows how wide the chasms of cultural difference and how deep the wounds of war can run — even within one family.¹⁶

After seeing and experiencing the poverty of her family and being asked for money by her sister Hien, her brother's request to financially support their mother at the end of the trip erupts in a breakdown, resulting in Bub's wish that she had never been reunited. This is the moment that gets cited as evidence of cultural clash.

Mainstream film critics have described the film as an “amazing story...[that] captures a reunion that starts joyously but disintegrates into a tangle of cultural differences and false expectations...”¹⁷ These “cultural differences” result in a clash which “manifests itself in the grasping emotional and financial neediness of the Vietnamese clan, which chafes against the emotional reserve (and scars) that lie beneath Heidi's Southern bubblieness....”¹⁸, and that “in the final 20 minutes, when the cultural and communication gap lead to a wrenching climax, it's obvious that the damage from the Vietnam War ... goes deeper than anyone might imagine.”¹⁹ One even goes further to theorize and cite “life in Vietnam” as the reason the failure:

once the euphoria of the reunion passes, things boil down to the nuts and bolts of daily life in Vietnam. ... Though her request for money would seem understandable, it is a dagger in the heart to poor Heip [Heidi], who has been waiting more than 20 years for a moment of “pure” love to

¹⁶ Date accessed: 14 March 2012 <<http://www.itvs.org/films/daughter-from-danang>>

¹⁷ Edward Guthmann, “Worlds Collide in Poignant Reunion in Vietnam It's Not All Joy in 'Daughter From Danang'” *SF Gate* (November 29, 2002) Date accessed: 14 March 2012 <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2002/11/29/DD235026.DTL#ixzz1uIpRvAIK>>

¹⁸ Ernest Hardy, *LA Weekly* <<http://www.daughterfromdanang.com/about/reviews.html>>

¹⁹ Elvis Mitchell, “Movie Review: Film Festival Review; Danang Round Trip, Sad All the Way”, *LA Times* (March 23, 2002) Date accessed: 14 March 2012 <<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9807E2D61F38F930A15750C0A9649C8B63>>

envelop her. The fact that it is tainted by stark reality and desperation sullies the experience, and that only adds to the mother's grief.²⁰

If these reviewers emphasize the function of cultural clash in the film it is because the filmmakers themselves have structured the film this way. When Dolgin and Franco, as personal friends of Tran Thoung Nhu (the journalist responsible for reuniting Bub with her biological mother) heard Bub's story, they saw an opportunity to capture the moment of reunion. The filmmakers explain, "If we joined Heidi Bub on her return to Vietnam, we would at least be able to capture the reunion and what we believed would be a re-connection by Heidi with her long forgotten Vietnamese roots. The cultural divide between Pulaski, Tennessee where Heidi had been raised since age seven and her family and background in Danang seemed rich in possibilities."²¹

The tropes of self-evident difference between Vietnam and Pulaski, and Bub's long-lost ancestry, are mobilized through the sentimentality of the return narrative – as the filmmakers and reviewers comments reveal, it is only through her return that she be able to access a connection to Vietnam through her mother. Sentimentality in the film functions to construct the narrative of culture clash through desires of reunion; this desire for reunion between Bub and her mother is allegorical of the desire of the US for reconciliation with Vietnam, a promise of unity (or (re)unification) at no real cost to Americans.²²

²⁰ John Petrakis, "'Danang' Explores the Long-Term Effects of the War," *Chicago Tribune* (February 14, 2003) Date accessed: 14 March 2012

http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2003-02-14/entertainment/0302140414_1_mother-danang-south-vietnam

²¹ Filmmaker Q&A Date accessed: 14 March 2012 < <http://www.daughterfromdanang.com/about/qa.html>>

²² This argument is a rearticulation of George Lipsitz' argument that films like *Rambo* which promote a "new patriotism" in which he critiques the "hope of healing racial wounds" through film and media,

Sentimentality, Failed Reunion, and Culture Clash: Racial and Gendered Representation

Emphasizing the mother-daughter love story in the context of Vietnam effectively de-politicizes the war and the context in which Bub is given up and adopted. This makes it possible to tell a story about the Vietnam War, that takes place in Vietnam without talking about militarism and violence or critically engaging the conditions that required Mai to seek work on the military base, and be propositioned by Bub's absent biological father.²³ That the main figures in the film are women renders them outside of a militarized masculinity (they are not soldiers nor directly engaged with soldiers), which makes them illegible within the gendered logic of war representation. Susan Jeffords argues that in "Vietnam representation," "women are effectively eliminated from the masculine narration of war and the society of which it is an emblem, either by the masculine point of view from which the stories are told or by themselves as exiled 'refugees' from US Social relations."²⁴ If we follow Jeffords' logic, the legibility of women as actual, not merely symbolic refugees, in the logic of war presents a subjective

through representations of mixed- race characters like Rambo or images of racially integrated regiments, which "promises a form of cultural unity at no real cost to whites." *The Possessive Investment In Whiteness*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998): 80

²³ The film only frames Mai's work on the military base as motivated by necessity. This necessity, though, is attributed to the fact that her husband left to go fight with the communists, rather than conditions created by US involvement in the war, conditions that are also part of a long history of militarized sexuality. Cynthia Enloe's brief overview of militarized prostitution in Vietnam shows that prostitution was organized by degrees from bar girls to massage parlors, and so on. "Prostitutes were made officially welcome to many US bases in Vietnam as 'local national guests.' The American base at Long Bin was a militarized city of 25,000 people. It employed hundreds of Vietnamese women on base as service personnel" in "The Prostitute, The Colonel and The Nationalist," *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000): 66.

²⁴ In order to make this reading, Jeffords ignores the ways that refugee subjectivity is most always constructed racially with respect to structures of power and informed by relations to empire and colonialism. *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 186.

impossibility, as racialized and gendered subjects, these Vietnamese woman are doubly exiled.²⁵ This illegibility does not stem solely from the context of war representation, but is emblematic of the problem of representation in the first place. Cinematic representation as a discursive formation is constrained by its structuration in the phallic order – (woman as the object of desire, but more significantly here:) defined in relation to male subjectivity, as the negation of the male subject – in this case, not a soldier. Feminist film theorist Teresa deLauretis argues that because cinema as discourse, which like language and is already spoken (we cannot separate the codes from the structural order), it is always already implicated by racialized and sexualized power relations.²⁶ That the film centers on two women is not significant enough to distance it from its conventional narrative which relies on a specific set of racialized and gendered power relations, simultaneously mobilized and made invisible by the universal appeal of a story of heteronormative family and maternal love. The desire for a happy ending in reunion also works to dismiss and skip over the structure of racialized and gendered difference that made Vietnamese women available as laborers, partners and sex objects to American men. The mother-daughter relationship relies on and perpetuates romanticized and naturalized roles for women. Mai is recuperated from being a bad mother, she is able to explain why she gave up Heidi, and she is simultaneously “excluded from having any

²⁵ Jeffords argues that this masculinity is necessarily constructed against only feminized landscape and peoples of Vietnam, but neglects to factor in racialization in this part of her analysis. 43-45. For a brilliant and contemporary work regarding the representation of Amerasian children and the tethering of citizenship to paternity and whiteness, see Lipman, Jana K. “The Face is The Road Map:” Vietnamese Amerasians in US Political and Popular Culture, 1980-1988. *Journal of Asian American Studies* Vol. 14; no. 1. 2011.

²⁶ Teresa deLauretis “Through the Looking-Glass: Woman, Cinema, and Language.” *Alice Doesn't*. (1984): 8.

social existence as anything other than a biological mother.”²⁸ It is this impossibility to imagine Mai in her complexity that leads both to Bub’s disappointment, and mutually exclusive understandings of her Vietnamese family as greedy rather than loving.

The film begins with information about Operation Babylift, and at first appears critical of the US policy, but as Gregory Paul Choy and Catherine Ceniza Choy argue, these possible interventions are left unengaged and possibilities for addressing the issue of transnational adoption are lost as fixation on one private moment of conflict is informed by “rhetoric of salvation and happy endings.”³¹ This salvation is dependent upon naturalized and geographically exemplified difference. Bub is first saved from a possibly dangerous and disadvantaged life in Vietnam when she is adopted,³² then the filmmakers step in and imagine salvation in the form of her relationship to her family, which hopefully results in some happy resolution. The theme of reunion is primary to structuring the film as a narrative of reconciliation. As an adoption story, it relies on sentimentalized gendered tropes of healing which is concerned only with the relationship between Heidi Bub and her birth mother, emphasizing the separation rather than the historical events that animate it. The story of mother-daughter reunion, redemption, and love register affectively in a ways parallel to the narrative of cultural clash. The viewer is left feeling distraught because Bub could not overcome her emotions to respond to her

²⁸ Jeffords is analyzes a scene from *A Birth in the Delta*, in which American soldiers attempt to deliver the baby of a woman who has recently been killed from shrapnel. Jeffords argues that blurring of social and biological representation through reproduction is part of masculine appropriation of gender, though I think that her argument about the overdetermination of female reproductive capacity is applicable. Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America*. p.91

³¹ What Lies Beneath: Reframing Daughter from Danang” *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*, Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shun, eds. (Cambridge: South End Press, 2006): 224.

³² Espiritu calls this the “would-have-been” trope, which draws negative assumptions of refugees’ life chances if they had stayed in Vietnam. “We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose,” 342.

family's demands. The viewer's presumed understandings of the mutual exclusivity of love and money,³³ of the United States and Vietnam are simply planes neither we, nor Heidi Bub can traverse. Their understanding of culture relies on a static anthropological model, supported by "experts on Vietnamese" culture³⁴ who assert that this kind of financial request is "normal" or in other words authentically Vietnamese. Dolgin and Franco's desire to render this story filmically is constructed in a binary perspective, "introducing mother and daughter separately before we see the reunion, in the process illustrating the vast gulf between their ways of life and what each hopes to find in the other."³⁵ Through the cross cuts and the establishing shots of Vietnam and Pulaski, mother and daughter, the message is clear: these places, these women could not be more different.

Rather than citing any other explanations for the failure of her reunion, cultural clash as "manifes[t]... in the grasping emotional and financial neediness of the Vietnamese clan" situates the conflict within Vietnam and in the Vietnamese family itself, rather than any historical reasons for financial neediness, such as a long history of French colonialism, and/or subsequent US militarism. The narrative is racialized relying on observable phenotypic as well as material differences—differences relegated to the realm of culture, as evidence of the supposed gulf between the two women, and the two countries. The anticipated joyousness of the reunion is indeed part of what we understand as Bub's naiveté, her ignorance of the living conditions of the family members with

³³ For a perspective that challenges the mutual exclusivity of money and love and intimacy see Viviana A. Zelizer *The Social Meaning of Money*, (New York: Basic Books, Harper Collins Publishers, 1994).

³⁴ The Q&A section of the film's website asks: **Was the family's request for money unusual?**

Date accessed: 14 March 2012 <<http://www.daughterfromdanang.com/about/qa.html>>

³⁵ *SF Gate*

whom she reunites - she can only anticipate the possibility of unconditional love and healing from her mother. The very moment of her return crystallizes her Americanness, which is contrasted to her engagement with the foreign landscape, the “stark reality and desperation” that are intimated as cultural values of Vietnam. The potential and desire for reconciliation plays out in specifically place-bound and racialized understandings of cultural difference that only emerge as a result of the failed reunion. Because the trope of cultural difference manifests solely within the context of her return to Vietnam, only pain or damage resulting from her initial separation or subsequent failed reunion due to cultural difference, can be legible as moments of trauma. Neither the fact of the war itself, or moments that follow such as experiences of racism in the United States register as traumatic pain in the context of the return narrative. This clash is located geographically in Vietnam during the end of Bub’s two week long reunion, and also in the temporal mapping of the film, reducing the conflict to a personal story detracts from the ways the trope relies on essentialized understandings of the supposed cultural gulf between the two countries. The act of aestheticizing of trauma through the production of the documentary only renders our ability to witness Bub and her mother’s pain as situated after the war, an effect of the “a normative and moralizing periodization built into the post-violent depiction of violence.”³⁷ The form of the documentary itself, positioned temporally after the war always already erases and displaces the possibility of continual violence (i.e. assimilation, disciplinary technologies of citizenship, etc.) that emerges in the aftermath of the so-called scene of violence- the war itself.

³⁷ Feldman, Allen. “Memory Theatres, Virtual Witnessing, and the Trauma-Aesthetic.” *Biography*, Vol. 27; No. 1, Winter 2004: 164.

Neither the film nor the viewers explicitly correlate the failure of reunion to being racially Vietnamese (or mixed-race), but explanations and of culture abound. The constant repetition of the “culture” and “culture clash” is a feature of the multicultural foundational myth of the United States, which requires the disavowal of histories of racial subjugation. Indeed, “culture has become code for the unspeakable in the contemporary era.”³⁸ This move toward unspeakability emerges in Robert Park’s work in the Chicago School of sociology, where discourses previously articulated in racial terms, are supplanted by the language of “culture.” As culture has become a proxy for race, the narrative of cultural clash is then reduced to a conversation of racial clash, or racial difference based upon a “conceptualization of cultural identity—as bipolar and linear—[which] promotes a discourse of race in which ‘cultural difference,’ defined as innate and abstracted from unresolved histories of racial inequality, is used to explain or explain away historically produced social inequalities.”³⁹ As the discourse of race is supplanted by truth claims about culture, our understanding of culture becomes as static, depoliticized and phenotypically identifiable. Similarly, claims that minorities are culturally different rely on a notion of culture as unchanging, “the same despite experiences of dislocation, generational fractures, and upward mobility over time in the American nation.”⁴⁰ This fixed quasi-anthropological perception of cultural identity situates Bub and her Vietnamese family on a developmental continuum, Vietnam on one end and America on the opposite, not only are they bipolar and linear as Espiritu argues,

³⁸ Claire Jean Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” *Politics & Society* (27:1, 1999): 117.

³⁹ Yen Le Espiritu, “Migration and Cultures,” *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, edited by John R. Hall, Laura Grindstaff, and Ming-Cheng Lo (London: Routledge, 2010): 659.

⁴⁰ Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding, Refugees, Citizenship, the New America*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, c2003): 5.

but they are mutually exclusive –there is no turning back. From this line of reasoning, we assume that because she has been Americanized, she won't be able to understand supposedly inherent Vietnamese values, which make financial requests from long-lost family members acceptable. This moment is uncritically privatized, Bub's experience and reactions simultaneously blames her – she is an 'ugly American,' yet absolves her of responsibility for the outcome of her failed reunion – because she is American, she just can't understand. The ability to privatize the moment – as Bub's emotional reaction, and also to relegate the experience to insurmountable cultural difference, erases the context of her previous life in Vietnam, conditions of war, and her transnational adoption.

The moment where her Vietnamese family is presented as desiring a transactional relationship based on money rather than an affective connection based on feelings of love all locate the cultural clash in the moment of her return to Vietnam, rather than in her experiences as a mixed-race Vietnamese woman in the United States.⁴¹ However, these social, psychic, and material conditions inflect the possibilities of their reconciliation in ways more complex than the cultural clash narrative can account for. She can only be an American because her mother is Vietnamese; these figures are mutually co-constituted. Her racial identity, which in the United States is tenuous, is solidified as not Vietnamese, once she is geographically located in Vietnam. The film relies upon dualistic tropes of culture, conflated with race, that interpellate her as American, because of the ways she clearly cannot fit in in Vietnam or with her Vietnamese family. The Vietnamese landscape and Vietnamese body become signifiers for cultural (read: racial) difference, embodying everything that is not American and Bub and Mai come to stand in for the

⁴¹ Fiona I.B. Ngô "A Chameleon's Fate: Transnational Mixed-Race Vietnamese Identities".

naturalized differences between Vietnam and the United States. Because she is an adoptee (rather than a refugee), the resultant discussion of the communication gap, damage, sadness and grief, tropes of healing and collective pain - can only happen as a result of the return to Vietnam. One can only conclude that the filmmakers' understandings of the inherent differences between Vietnam and Pulaski, TN are influenced by the reality of who quite literally lives with the effects of the war; the United States involvement in the ground war in Vietnam left devastating impacts on the landscape and people of Vietnam. This is why Bub cannot be understood as Vietnamese in Pulaski, TN, and why her pain and trauma can only be articulated in terms of motherly love and return – she can't claim war memories of a place that she left. The loss of forced assimilation coupled with the inability to completely assimilate, because though she looks like “an American with a suntan” as described by a family friend, the “oriental” in her still renders visually and the impossibility of both completely assimilating or even being able to express or embody her racial difference produces a melancholia in Bub that manifests itself in the desire for reconciliation and return to Vietnam. (I will return to the theme of melancholia in my conclusion.) “Her long forgotten Vietnamese roots” necessarily come at the cost of her assimilation in the United States and her adopted mother's warning that she is not to talk about where she came from.

In the Filmmaker Q&A on the film's website,⁴² the filmmakers explain their inspiration to make the documentary. As personal friends of Tran Thoung Nhu, the journalist responsible for reuniting Bub with her biological mother, they saw an

⁴²Ibid.

opportunity to capture the moment of reunion. The universal theme of conflict and love in the mother-daughter relationship is likely what marks this film's appeal to a wide audience, but this sentimentalization and universalizing of Heidi Bub's relationship with both her adoptive and biological mother minimizes the her continual losses and displacements. The filmmakers envisioned the possibility of reunion, "We all believed that the reunion would be a healing story, a kind of full-circle coming home. The war in Vietnam was long over and we could create a film that, we believed, would ease the collective pain that is still connected to the war."⁴³ The film ends two years after the reunion, and Bub hasn't spoken to her family. So exactly for whom is the war over? And what sort of healing or reunion would be possible for Bub and her mother in a story where the pain of loss as a result of assimilation is central rather than the violence and loss directly tied to war? If Heidi Bub, as a minority subject, was allowed to actually mourn the lost relationship with both her mothers and her displacement from Vietnam, a completely different set of desires (beyond simply reuniting) would emerge. When we center her wish to return as a means of negotiating and making sense of her life in the United States as a mixed-race woman from Vietnam, as a refugee the framework of racial melancholia reveals that the experiences of assimilation and racialization both inform and make impossible the promises of reunion in Vietnam. Then request for money within that chain of losses can be read differently, not as her misunderstanding of "Vietnamese notions of love" but as yet another loss or displacement, a point of fixation for her melancholia resulting from her removal from Vietnam and assimilation in the US,⁴⁴

⁴³ Date accessed: 14 March 2012 <<http://www.daughterfromdanang.com/about/qa.html>>.

⁴⁴ Jodi Kim has analyzed this moment as an epistemological conundrum. *Ends of Empire*. 205-206.

which would change our understanding of her reaction. Dolgin and Franco's understanding of Bub's "long forgotten Vietnamese roots" decontextualizes her experiences of racialization in the United States - forgetting is tied to her ability and necessity to pass as white. Uncritically citing cultural difference as the root of conflict in the film renders Vietnam and Heidi Bub's relationship to Vietnam as mere background information, a detail as mundane as hair or eye color. The culture clash narrative fails to register her desires as anything but naïve. As Choy and Choy argue, "the long-term effects of the war become overshadowed by Heidi's emotional breakdown at the climax of the film, a breakdown that can be and has been interpreted as indicative of her individual maturity and ignorance."⁴⁵

While mainstream film reviewers primarily focus on the trope of cultural clash, critical work by theorists such as Fiona I. B. Ngô and Jodi Kim refuse this trope and the conclusion of inevitable failure.⁴⁶ Ngô's analysis of the film focuses on the analytic of mixed-race identity, connecting miscegenation and mixed-race children to the context of the war and militarism. Ngô argues that Bub's relationship to this identity is marked by *différance*, a meaning that is distinct but deferred, exemplified by her precarious stability in embodying an Amerasian identity. Kim's "against the grain" reading of the culture clash narrative, frames the documentary in terms of transnational/transracial adoption as a means of connecting the adoption industry with militarism and the Cold War.⁴⁷ Kim's analysis draws refuses the individualized trope of "culture clash" arguing that as a transnational adoption story, it must be contextualized within a larger history of imperial

⁴⁵ Choy and Choy, "What Lies Beneath," 223.

⁴⁶ Fiona I.B. Ngô "A Chameleon's Fate: Transnational Mixed-Race Vietnamese Identities"

⁴⁷ Jodi Kim *Ends of Empire*: 193-236.

violence stemming from the Cold War. She argues that the moments that are made legible only as cultural clash are indicative of the inconsistencies, contradictions and epistemologies produced by the conditions and aftermath of the Vietnam War.

Transnational Adoption as a Disruption to Culture Clash

Focusing on Korea and Vietnam, Jodi Kim connects the transnational adoption industry in the United States with the Cold War, casting off the veneer of adoption as a private affair, forcing us to reckon with war as the conditions of possibility for these adoptions in the first place, and making a critical connection to US white settler colonialism.⁴⁸ Centering on the analytic of visibility and the possibilities of kinship, Kim argues that transnational and transracial adoption highlights the ways in which “new geographies of kinship” are read on the raced bodies and migrations of the adoptee. For Kim, however, refuses an altruistic reading of the adoption industry as enabling new family formations for adoptable non-white children. *Daughter from Danang* does not enable a new articulation of a kinship formation, but represents a story of foreclosed kinship. In *Daughter from Danang* the impossibility of traversing the path of kinship—as both birth mother and adoptive mother give her up—results in renderings of her failed reunion within the narrative of cultural clash.

Situating adoption within Cold War knowledge projects, Kim reads Bub’s reactions in Vietnam and following the reunion as an epistemological conundrum that is symptomatic of the disparate economies she and her mother occupy.⁴⁹ Because Kim’s analysis focuses on transnational adoption and the foreclosure of new geographies of kinship focusing on the relationship between Bub and her birth mother allow her to historicize the phenomena of transnational adoption and trace the function of imperial

⁴⁸ Jodi Kim “An ‘Orphan’ with Two Mothers: Transnational and Transracial Adoption, the Cold War, and Contemporary Asian American Cultural Politics” *American Quarterly* Vol. 61 No. 4, Dec 2009: 855-880 and “The War-Surplus of Our New Imperialism,” *Ends of Empire*.

⁴⁹ Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire*, 205-206.

power circuitously. Her discussion of their fraught relationship dispels the culture clash myth, not as an attempt to recuperate the film but is motivated by analyzing the moments that cannot be contained within the trope culture clash or individual selfishness, the excesses, the “‘impossible contradictions’ constituted and engendered by transnational, transracial adoption.”⁵⁰ Expanding on Kim’s assertion that transnational adoption following the Cold War is part of a history of imperial violence,⁵¹ reading Heidi Bub as not only an adoptee but a refugee turned citizen-subject situates her particular subjective formation in the context of the US involvement with Vietnam. Moving away from the analytic of adoption, my focus is on Heidi Bub herself as a subject situated in the United States. Building upon Kim’s work, my paper emphasizes the lived reality, the everyday experiences of refugees in the US, shifting the focus toward the aftereffects of war and adoption. I posit that her selective racialization, and her rendering as an ‘ugly American’ are implicit in the logics of refugeeism. She must both make sense of and make sense within the black-white social relations of the US South, and as a displaced person she must always be grateful to the benevolence of the United States and the material gains of her life in the United States.⁵² Additionally, drawing from Kim’s geopolitical analysis of the film, I center Heidi Bub’s experiences in the United States and read the film not only as allegory - the desired and failed reconciliation of mother and daughter, Vietnam and the US, but also understand that her desire for reconciliation with her mother is also a desire for legibility within the racial economy in the United States. If the complexities of

⁵⁰ Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire*, 215.

⁵¹ Jodi Kim, “An Orphan with Two Mothers,” 871.

⁵² Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism, and the Boundary Event*: (London: Routledge, 2010): 30.

adoption manifest itself in concerns with kinship and familial formations, then contextualizing Bub as not only a transnational adoptee, but more importantly as a refugee enables me to engage her subjective position vis-à-vis the state.

Transnational Adoptee to Refugee-Citizen

...we know more about how scholars have constructed Vietnamese, but less about how Vietnamese have created their worlds and made meaning for themselves, including their own understanding of the Vietnam War and its aftermath.

Yen Le Espiritu, "Critical Memory Work" ⁵³

Refugees from the Vietnam War have formed the largest refugee population in the United States, as part of the largest resettlement program in American history.⁵⁴ There is an abundance of research on Indochinese refugee flight and resettlement, Rubén G.

Rumbaut has noted that Indochinese (from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam) refugees may be the most closely studied refugee cohort in US history.⁵⁵ The majority of this work includes government funded research projects to study factors that would impact assimilation and resettlement and track statistics such as occupational progress and fertility rates. From *Transition to Nowhere* (1979)⁵⁶ which follows the course of refugees from flight through resettlement, notable for distinguishing them from voluntary migrants, to Jeremy Hines' *Refugees from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam* (1995) which attempts to assess issues of refugee resettlement in a pluralist model, many of these texts, in illustrating the refugee population overemphasize assimilation, severing the refugee experience from US foreign policy which produces these populations in the first place.⁵⁷

Many of these studies inadvertently construct these populations as rather homogenous

⁵³ Espiritu, "Critical Memory Work": 2.

⁵⁴ Sivia Pedraza and Ruben G. Rumbaut, eds., *Origins and Destinies*

⁵⁵ Rubén Rumbaut "A Legacy of War: Refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia" *Origins*, 320.

⁵⁶ By William T. Liu, MaryAnn Lamanna, and Alice Murata, (Nashville Charter House, 1979), See also: David W. Haines, *Refugees as Immigrants: Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese in America*. Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1989.

⁵⁷ In her MA thesis, Ayako Sahara illustrates how reliance on immigration models has informed the way that much of the work on Indochinese refugees has been researched and analyzed. "Operations New Life/Arrivals: U.S. National Project to Forget the Vietnam War" (2009), 17.

and passive. Sociological models explaining family structure, psychological journals anticipating the psychic problems of refugees pragmatically anticipate government agencies responses to the needs of these refugees, but do little to reveal the lives and experience of refugees themselves. As the epigraph above reflects, the literature written about the reception and settlement of Vietnamese refugees is more revealing of the bureaucracy and myriad institutions which processed refugees from their flight, time in camps, settlement, and years into their stay in the new host country. Most importantly, as sympathetic as much of the literature on refugees is, it primarily constructs them not as social agents, but a group to which US social policy and services are applied.

Produced in sociological and psychology texts as the pathological subject needing saving, the refugee subject presents itself as a problem to be fixed as the production of trauma becomes naturalized in refugee bodies, which even when acknowledging the experiences which have impelled refugee flight and resettlement, has the effect of decontextualizing those very conditions.⁵⁸ Personality conflict, compounded by cultural and generational difference inflects the discourse used to describe the state of affairs of first generation immigrants and their children. The narrative of intergenerational and cultural conflict pervades analysis of most immigrant groups, where on the one hand a supposed lost culture is mourned while simultaneously parents are asked to modernize and become more understanding of their children's desires for autonomy and assimilation. Min Zhou introduces the significance of generational difference between

⁵⁸Yu-Wen Ying and Phillip D. Akutsu, "Psychological Adjustment of Southeast Asian Refugees: The Contribution of Sense of Coherence," *Journal of Community Psychology* (Volume 25, Issue 2, pages 125–139, March 1997) Ying and Akutsu do acknowledge the conditions of war, but their focus is primarily on assimilation and subjective coherence. Maurice Eisenbruch, "The Mental Health of Refugee Children and Their Cultural Development," *International Migration Review* Vol. 22, No. 2 (Summer, 1988), pp. 282-300.

first and 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans, she argues that for first generation refugees shared struggles in the process of resettlement, strengthens identification as Vietnamese,⁵⁹ whereas in her words, "one of the greatest challenges facing second-generation, or 1.5 generation, Vietnamese Americans is whether they will respect their family histories and conform to parental expectations or reject them."⁶⁰ This in-between state for 1.5-generation refugees, as not quite Vietnamese and not quite American requires negotiation between past and present.

Giorgio Agamben has famously argued that the refugee reveals a biopolitical crisis; as bare life or sacred life, "breaking the continuity between man and citizen, *nativity* and *nationality*, [refugees] put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty into crisis."⁶¹ The existence of the refugee, as a stateless person calls into question the notion of citizenship as well as human rights discourse, as rights can only be granted to citizens of the state. Building upon Agamben's work, Aihwa Ong calls attention to the ambiguity of refugee status and citizenship by tracing different understandings of being human as Cambodians traverse the status of refugee to citizen.⁶² Exploring "how the refugee and the citizen are political effects of institutional processes that are deeply imbued with sociocultural values," Ong focuses on refugees' experiences with institutional technologies (i.e. hospitals, welfare agencies) to chart their path to the US and toward

⁵⁹ "Hardship in Vietnam and the process of exile have become a central family myth, a shared story that shapes understanding, behavior, and identity formation. The difficulties suffered in Vietnam and in the movement from Vietnam to America have given Vietnamese children a strong sense of their own identity." "Straddling Different Worlds: The Acculturation of Vietnamese Refugee Children" in *Ethnicities*, 195.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 196.

⁶¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995) 131.

⁶² Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding* 27

citizenship.⁶³ Reading Bub as a refugee, “not as a legal classification, but an idea”⁶⁴ I redraw the connections between her migration within the context of war and violence, from a generational perspective, not just as an adoptee or immigrant.

In the following section, I demonstrate how my reading of the film departs from mainstream media reviews and even the filmmakers’ own conceptions of what the film renders visually. I argue that the film is a productive site when viewed not in terms of its failures to accurately represent Bub or her relationship to Vietnam - this conversation always hinges on notions of naturalized difference that manifest in the culture clash narrative. It is most instructive when we read the film’s failures as a rendering of the complexities and failures of assimilation and citizenship for racial minorities in the United States. I want to reiterate that my critique of mainstream reviewers’ reliance on sentimentality is that sentimentalized readings are not benign, but are both enmeshed within and reproducing structures of meaning making. Rather than reading the experiences in the film as finished, aestheticizing the supposedly self-evident differences between Bub and Kim, between the US and Vietnam, if we consider how they are inscribed in “structures of feeling” then there exist possibilities for an alternative reading of the film and its ending. “Structures of feeling” are “social experience still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting,

⁶³ Ibid, 79. I will return to this definition of refugee and its relation to citizenship in the final section of this paper.

⁶⁴ Yen Le Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1-2 (2006), 410-411.

and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies.”⁶⁵ Bub’s 1.5 refugee status can thus be understood as a structure of feeling, an ambiguous, fluid and in process subjectivity which cannot itself be extracted from the social and historical experiences that have produced it. Contextualizing Bub’s experiences, both those that lead to her search for reunion and how that reunion plays out, when understood as social experience, requires a more holistic view into the historical and personal events that bring her back to Vietnam. Contextualizing her as a mixed-race woman in the South, the product of both transnational, transracial adoption, and a single adoptive mother (who later disowns her), she cannot simply be rendered an “ugly American” with predictable thoughts and reactions. As Raymond Williams states, “we need, on the one hand, to acknowledge (and welcome) the specificity of these elements – specific feelings, specific rhythms – and yet to find ways of recognizing their specific kinds of sociality, this preventing that extraction from social experience which is conceivable only when social experience itself has been categorically (and at root historically) reduced.”⁶⁶ In order to privilege Bub’s complex sociality, I turn to the paradigm of the refugee –as a liminal subject position, and a political effect that is dependent on a state of perpetual movement and displacement, long after one is resettled.⁶⁷

The subjective possibilities for understanding Bub and her reactions to the film will always already be foreclosed by viewer’s for her to fulfill a properly (white) American female citizen subjecthood, which is disrupted by her failed reconciliation with her Vietnamese family - the moment that is cited as the moment of culture clash. This

⁶⁵ *Marxism and Literature*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977): 132

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁶⁷ Here I draw from Espiritu’s intro in “Toward a Critical Refugee Study,” 411.

plays out as a desire for her to be able to transcend her emotional pain, and step up to financially support her Vietnamese family, as evidenced by the disdain produced through her representation as an “ugly American.” This narrative and the mainstream film reviews function within part of a larger context of narratives, research or literature about the war, which “locates the Vietnamese ‘problem’ *not* in the violent legacy of decades of and social upheaval, but within the bodies and minds of Vietnamese themselves.”⁶⁸ As demonstrated, these popular readings of the film reduce the conflict in the film to one uncomfortable moment in the film, the failed reunion, which is dependent upon healing that is falsely imagined as possible only in the moment of return to Vietnam. Contextualizing Bub as a refugee disrupts this fantasy of possible healing through return, both because the trip itself does not ultimately result in healing and because the causal relationship between her trip and subsequent breakdown cannot encapsulate other traumas such as the trauma of her adoption or assimilation in the United States. Few reviews attempt to qualify Bub’s emotional response and negative reactions to her characterization in the film, though most do not engage her position as a racial minority. However, when race is mentioned, it functions to excuse her behavior, “She comes across as stiff, unfeeling at times, both awed and threatened by the differentness of Vietnam. We wonder at the protective function of her memory—recalls little of her early youth—but then learn that Bub’s adoptive mother performed a thorough deracination of her, even forbidding her to speak of her Vietnamese roots.”⁶⁹ This concept of “deracination” a technology and effect of her assimilation in the United States is precisely what I want to engage in the remainder of my thesis.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 410.

⁶⁹ Edward Guthman, “Worlds Collide”

In the plane on her way to Danang, Bub's voice over narrates, "It's gonna be so healing for both of us to see each other. It's gonna make all of those bad memories go away. And all of those last years not matter anymore." Personalizing the experience of separation from her mother, and the desire for healing which is exemplified in the return narrative functions in place of an inquiry into the conditions of their separation in the first place. One is left wondering, to which bad memories does Bub refer, the psychic or material conditions of war, the pain of separation, or possibly of integration and inscription into white supremacist social relations? Thinking through her tenuous relationship with her adoptive mother, and her desire to reunite with her birth mother in the context of her lived experiences of racism, exclusion and assimilation enables a reading of Bub that refuses essentialized understandings of cultural difference and benign accusations of Americanized ignorance. Centering her refugee status and the work of forgetting her Vietnamese heritage as an enactment of violence dramatically calls into question where the violence of the war becomes situated, it is not just in Vietnam, but it is also in her lived experience in the United States. As a means of grappling with the legacies of Vietnam not solely in relation to the country or the war, but also to the United States, the purpose of contextualizing Bub's rendering through the film and reviews is not Americanize her, but to Americanize the War.⁷⁰

Following Yen Le Espiritu's call to engage the refugee as a paradigm, calling Bub a refugee is not an attempt to redeem her in the film or reclaim her for the side of refugees, but rather to engage a subjectivity and analytic that functions as a social and

⁷⁰ I would like to acknowledge Yen Le Espiritu's coining of this phrase.

political critique of the narrative of “rescue and liberation.”⁷¹ It is after all, a result of her “being rescued and liberated” that she is unable to reconcile with her family and have a happy reunion in Vietnam.

⁷¹ The “rescue and liberation” is the justification for US intervention in Vietnam, asserting the success and moral authority of the US in intervening and “saving” those who resettle in the US as refugees from Yen Le Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study,” 422.

Between Vietnam and America: Not Black, Provisionally White

Anne Neville, Bub's adoptive mother, is absent throughout the film and also in Bub's life. We discover that Neville's strict parenting, possible physical abuse, lack of affection, and eventual disavowal of her adopted daughter shape Bub's search for her birth mother, and the hope that if she could find her, she could find the love she had been missing. Bub recalls returning home ten minutes late from a date to find the door locked; Neville subsequently disowns her disobedient daughter. This moment is easily read as teen drama, rather than an act of parental abuse, and it is apparent through Bub's emotional retelling of this event how deeply it is connected to Bub's desire for acceptance belonging. "My adopted mom, I'm not sure how she felt about me being Vietnamese. But she would always tell me I am not supposed to talk about this; this is not something you tell anybody. If anybody asks you where you were born, you tell 'em Columbia, South Carolina," Bub remembers to the camera. Neither the film nor reviews directly engages the trauma of abandonment by her adoptive mother, or of her assimilation, the erasure of her Vietnamese heritage through passing, doing so would radically call into question the "rescue and liberation myth" and the outcomes of the US intervention in Vietnam. This reunion narrative, situated within the discourse of "Vietnam representation" does not make it possible to privilege the lives and experiences of refugees and adoptees – they are only legible in relation to Vietnam and the war, as trauma is located both spatially and temporally there – not in their presents or futures in the United States. This inability to

recognize the everyday traumas of family and racial violence stemming from forced migration or assimilation and passing is a result of the overdetermining discourse of the war.

When Bub and her husband John explain that Pulaski is the birthplace of the KKK, it sounds like common sense that Neville prohibited Bub from revealing her past. But this measure, which might be interpreted as protective, isolates and, more importantly, erases her, as she becomes as “strictly all-American” which is proven through her love of bologna, her permed hair and her Southern drawl. Family friend, Brenda Lewis describes her, “Heidi’s features and her complexion and everything it’s just like an American that had a suntan. When she was growing up and now, I still look at her like a white American, because there’s really not much Oriental in her.” The assertion that Bub could be quantifiably identified as an American, “there’s not much Oriental” is simultaneously countered by the anxieties around her precarious Americanness. The excess, the racial markers which cannot be contained in white Americanness are simultaneously erased and domesticated in the assertion yes she is white, just like the rest of Pulaski, but “with a suntan.” Her Vietnamese identity is not only hidden, but also contained, aestheticized as surface level difference, understanding that deep down, she has proven her Americanness through her ability to assimilate and pass⁷² as white.⁷³ This

⁷² The term “passing” refers to an wide body of literature on miscegenation, mixed-race identity, and multiple consciousness, which includes the work of theorists such as WEB Dubois, among many others.

⁷³ “If the nation proposes American culture as the key site for the resolution of inequalities and stratifications that cannot be resolved on the political terrain of representative democracy, then that culture performs that reconciliation by naturalizing a universality that exempts the ‘non-American’ from its history of development or admits the ‘non-American’ only through a ‘multiculturalism’ that aestheticizes ethnic differences as if they could be separated from that history,” Lisa Lowe *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996) :9.

Americanness, however, will always be contingent and ambiguous, dependent on her performance and assumption of understood cultural cues, like her taste for bologna.

Lewis summarizes race relations in Pulaski, “One good thing about Pulaski -- the blacks and whites get along great. Of course they go to school together... they're allowed to eat together... so it's a little community that's bind together.” This assertion of the absence of any racial problems in Pulaski, as evidenced by the fact that black and whites “are allowed to eat together,” evokes language and imagery of the Jim Crow South, when blacks and whites had segregated schools, restarurants, waterfountains. It also reveals how Lewis’ anxieties about racial ambiguity, her commentary on race in Pulaski functions as a “middle-class America[n] seek[ing] to maintain their comfort level by encoding white-black oppositions in behavioral and discursive strategies that draw lines against those perceived to be culturally different.”⁷⁴ The black/white racial structure in Pulaski is complicated when Bub arrives, a former elementary teacher says, “we had black and white children there that had been going to school together for many years, but at the same time we had black children and we had white children and we had never had one like Heidi before.” That they had never had students “like Heidi” only causes a pause in social economy of black / white relations, because Heidi is incorporated as white. In high school she sheds her “Oriental” looking straight, black hair for perms, and Heidi says, “Nobody knew.” This apprehension in her ability to pass is one place where her racial ambiguity is evident. The casual assertion that Bub is just a white American affirmatively ties American

⁷⁴ Ong, 5.

citizenship to whiteness. It is because of her mixed-race status and the ambiguity of her facial features and her complexion that she is able to pass as white, and be accepted and legible as an American in Pulaski. As her family friends assert her whiteness the history of whiteness and citizenship, as well as a history of exclusion of racial minorities (particular Asian exclusion) contextualizes their anxieties over the question of Heidi's race. Twentieth century American racial ideology, which developed from the notion of a racial requirement to citizenship, which included a legal definition of "white" and the rule of racial inassimilability.⁷⁵ The boundaries of the legal definition of whiteness have been challenged and shaped throughout US history, as exemplified in the historic court cases of *Takao Ozawa v. U.S* (1922) and *US v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923), in which Ozawa and Thind argued their fitness for citizenship through both their assimilability and evidence of their "whiteness." Heidi Bub's difference is absorbed and made invisible; she is incorporated as a white Southerner. Though "the bodies of mixed- race characters defy the binarisms upon which constructions of racial identity depend,"⁷⁶ whatever potential challenge to the black / white racial economy, Bub could have posed is nullified and contained.

As an Asian woman in the United States, and particularly a refugee, her relationship to citizenship and the US is unique. Lisa Lowe argues that following liberal political theory, the individual subject must trade private interests for the

⁷⁵ This history of racial inassimilability is significant because it included Asians, Mexicans, Syrians and Indians. Mae Ngai *Impossible Subjects*, 37.

⁷⁶ Valerie Smith, "Reading the Intersection of Race and Gender in Narratives of Passing," *Diacritics*, Vol. 24, No. 2/3, Critical Crossings (Summer - Autumn, 1994), 45.

rights or benefits of abstract citizenship, but

For Asian immigrants from Vietnam, Korea, or the Phillipines, this negation involves ‘forgetting’ the history of war in Asia and adopting the national historical narrative that disavows the existence of an American imperial project. It requires acceding to a political fiction of equal rights that is generated through the denial of history, a denial that reproduces the omission of history as the ontology of the nation.⁷⁷

These immigrants, or refugees many must necessarily negate or ignore an entire history of war that has impelled their movement in the first place, as well as the history of racialized and sexualized violence and exclusion against which citizenship was historically constructed. The denial of history is manifest and continuously restaged in the repeated assertion of Bub’s whiteness or Americanness.

Aihwa Ong argues that the refugee is an ethical figure which calls into question the terms of citizenship, as “for minorities and disadvantaged populations, the lived meanings of citizenship are completely entangled with such systems of exclusion, selection, and judgment.”⁷⁸ Working through the reception and incorporation of refugee subjects into citizen-subjects, Ong demonstrates the ways that the racial bipolarism (the black/white binary) in the United States and orientalism function in tandem with other technologies of subject making. The simultaneous operation of bipolarism and orientalism both inscribes Southeast Asian refugees as necessarily inside of the existing (symbolic and material) black / white order, and perpetually external to it. The consolidation of whiteness and citizenship reinforces, “the concept of America as a specific racial identity [that]

⁷⁷ *Immigrant Acts*, 27.

⁷⁸ Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding*, 70.

has been and continues to be the measure against which all potential citizens are rated as either within or marginal to the nation.”⁷⁹

Adding a nuanced interpretation of the black / white racial binary, Claire Jean Kim argues that Asian Americans have been racially triangulated vis-à-vis Black and White, and contextualizes Asian American racialization within a “field of racial positions.”⁸⁰

This model of racialization envisioned as a field accounts for the shifting social locations of Asian Americans overtime, but maintains the position of Asian Americans as always triangulation between black and white. Read through the lens of bipolarism or triangulation, Bub’s self-identification as an “a Southerner”, and the fact that “she doesn’t openly identify as a Vietnamese American” takes on more nuanced meaning.⁸¹

The documentary is part of the PBS American Experience series, framed as another colorful story of US multiculturalism. But the true “American Experience” for Vietnamese Americans, as a people of color in the United States includes facing structural and individual racism on a regular basis. The effects of the war are not just located in Vietnam, but is carried psychically both with refugees and the American consciousness and representations of the war and the assertion that the war is over. Bub’s encounter with the US involves personal experiences of Southern racism, an experience that seems to be written off as personality quirk, experienced through this woman’s deep southern accent. If we engage Bub’s complexity as not only an American or a Vietnamese American or a woman of color in the south, an orphan, adoptee or a refugee

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Claire Jean Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” 106.

⁸¹ From Filmmakers Q&A, “ She doesn’t openly identify as a Vietnamese American, mostly, as she explains to us, because she just doesn’t feel like that’s who she is today”

but the interaction of all of these, we can think about desire to go to Vietnam beyond a sentimental desire to connect with past - but as aversion of present, her life in US and racism. Situating her return as a refugee resists temporalizing the war as only in the past, and re-frames her experience in the South is a transnational experience. By focusing on her life in Pulaski, I ask why the fascination with reunion rather than her experiences in the US growing up? Even though we discover that Mai Thi Kim gave up her daughter to save her daughter's life, this is seen as one of the most wrenching details in the story. If we situate her relationship with her adoptive mother as more than a teen conflict but also a matter of race, national belonging, and region we can also examine the way that the violence enacted daily through Bub's life, her assimilation and experiences of racism in the United States informs her desires for motherly love and reconciliation. These elements, just like the background information about the Vietnam War become less significant factors in her failed reunion than the so-called cultural differences between Vietnam and the United States that creates an unbridgeable gap. Heidi Bub's "Southern bubblyness" or her inability as an American to understand her family's request for money, and her family's "emotional and financial neediness" construct naturalized mutually exclusive, but co-constituted definitions of what it means to be an American and what it means to be Vietnamese. Bub is constructed in the film, and read by reviewers as bubbly and naïve, desiring unconditional love and reunification. Her birth mother and family are represented as having simultaneous desires, being "emotionally and financially needy" which once constructs them as greedy or conniving, but excuses this because her family's financial neediness is equally implicated into understandings of Vietnamese family

formations. That neither party could transcend these differences only works to further naturalize these ascribed characteristics through readings of the film. The sentimentality of the mother-daughter reunion is transformed, following its failure into a fixation on the reason for the failure, which is always cited as cultural difference.

Her “benevolent assimilation” into the United States is part of an ongoing legacy of racial formation. Ong connects the uplift of refugees to state disciplinary technologies that had been developed against Native Americans and honed on subsequent racialized minority populations.⁸² Her assimilation both enacts and is dependent on her legibility into the white supremacist racial economy of the United States. That Neville “did everything she could to make [her] American as possible” includes the erasure of knowledge about Bub’s own past, including knowledge of her birth family, of the war, and of her life in Vietnam. In one scene Bub and her family are attending a parade celebrating the Vietnamese victory over the Americans – what is articulated in American history as the “fall of Saigon”, Bub says, “The way I felt about the war when I was learning about it in school—I kind of kept it to myself. Inside, I just felt, just wanted to scrunch down in my chair and hide.” Bub’s desire to hide when learning about the war in school can best be understood by Ong’s argument that “Southeast Asian refugees were reminders of the US defeat in Vietnam.”⁸³ Her feelings of being incredibly visible as a Vietnamese person in the context of learning about a war that the US had lost directly challenge the assertion of family friends and Bub herself that she is Americanized or

⁸² Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding*, 73.

⁸³ Ibid, 82.

white. Her response reveals the way “the refugee itself is a challenge to the state.”⁸⁴ Bub feels threatened because her very presence, her realities of her existence, challenges the myth of the nation’s military and political acumen in their involvement in Vietnam.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 78.

Melancholic Refugees and Racial Formation

In what ways can we read Heidi Bub's desires and expectations for reconciliation within the context of her experiences of racial formation in the United States and read her desire to reconcile with her mother as also a desire for legibility in a racial economy that doesn't exist in Pulaski, TN? Reading Bub as a refugee enables me to understand this film as a narrative of not just adoption, but also the story of a 1.5 generation refugee that gets erased. Thinking through her tenuous relationship with her adoptive mother, and her desire to reunite with her birth mother in the context of her lived experiences of racism, exclusion and assimilation enables a reading of Bub that refuses essentialized understandings of cultural difference and benign accusations of Americanized ignorance. Centering her refugee status and the work of forgetting her Vietnamese heritage as an enactment of violence dramatically calls into question where the violence of the war and its legacies remains, it is not just in Vietnam and the bodies of the Vietnamese but it is also in the United States. By privileging Bub's desire in the context of her multiple losses, her desire to go to Vietnam exceed a sentimental desire to connect with the past - but can be understood as aversion of present, her life in US and experiences of racism. Situating Bub as a refugee figure resists temporalizing the war as only in the past and situated her experience in the South as a transnational experience. In seeking to return to her family, she literally traverses a circuitous path and in constructing and reconstructing her history and memories. The transnational nature of Bub's engagement challenges the understanding of one-way migration and the tidiness of assimilation for refugees. As a mixed-race Vietnamese American woman, she will always be (racially) tied to her Vietnamese origins, a relationship that transcends the national boundaries of the US.

Reading the film through Anne Cheng's analytic of racial melancholia allows us to encapsulate the complexity of Bub's experiences and resist collapsing her trauma into one moment. Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" has been engaged productively by many scholars most notably because of the ambiguity with which he distinguishes the two affective responses to loss. The mourner is fixated upon a lost love object, but is able to move forward by replacing it/him/her. The melancholic is stuck, but then internalizes or consumes the object and incorporates its qualities into his or her own ego, a sometimes self-denigrating, and ambivalent relationship with the self and the object. The assertion that the melancholic "has a keener eye for the truth than other people who are not melancholic" points perhaps to the possibilities of introspection and intersubjectivity that the "normal" or nonpathological mourner does not access when his / her relationship to a lost love-object is over come.⁸⁵ Heidi Bub's desire for to return to Vietnam after 22 years of separation can be read as a melancholic desire for belonging, she becomes fixated upon the idea of reuniting with her lost mother as a result of losing her adoptive mother.

David L. Eng and David Kazanjian articulate a concept of mourning as a potentially creative and collective exercise - through the analytic of loss, they propose a relationship to history that demands a critical reckoning that ties what is lost to the residues of that loss. Tethered to what remains, a melancholic relationship with the past refuses to give up that very past, inciting sort of call to action as "the past is brought to

⁸⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953; 1974): 246.

bear witness to the present.”⁸⁶ Eng and Kazanjian summarize Freud’s distinction between mourning, which is the “normal affect”⁸⁷ or healthy response to loss versus melancholia, which is rendered pathological, as “a confrontation with loss through the adamant refusal of closure.”⁸⁸ This inability to give up the lost love object, which prevents the subject from moving on and letting go, is what Eng and Kazanjian seek to depathologize. Tying the notion of loss with Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” they engage a historical materialist reading of that connects past and present non-linearly, which initiates the radical potential of mourning, the refusal to forget and cede trauma to history. Eng’s and Kazanjian’s sense of justice is animated by refusing exactly what the filmmakers and mainstream reviewers desire, emphasizing instead, loss and impossibility of closure and the refusal to mourn or to let go.

Rather than moving on from trauma such as racial injury, the authors imagine a melancholic attachment to loss that is generative of possibilities for psychic, social and material change. Anne Cheng engages melancholy similarly - not to get at closure or the fantasy of healing from loss, but to ask why racial grief is formulated in terms of the desire to overcome such loss and what it would mean for racial minority subjects to grieve. Cheng examines the role of racial grief that is constitutive of subjectivity formation through what she calls racial melancholia, a “complex process of racial rejection and desire on the parts of whites and nonwhites that expresses itself in abject and manic forms,” based on what she calls racial grief - as a means of getting to the

⁸⁶ David Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003): 5.

⁸⁷ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 243.

⁸⁸ David Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss*, 3.

material and psychic (and imaginative) qualities of racial dynamics in the United States.⁸⁹ The desire and rejection, identification and exclusion of racialized minority subjects in the US is melancholic because of the US obsession / incorporation and repulsion of the racialized other. Cheng summarizes Freud's definition of melancholia, emphasizing the cannibalistic qualities of melancholia; it consumes the lost object.⁹⁰ We can then think of how Heidi Bub is consumed as a minority subject, simultaneously absorbed and disavowed by the US – she is only legible as a white American. Cheng argues that the consumption of the denigrated object, the incorporation of attributes of the object within the subject's ego instantiates a structure of loss as exclusion. This melancholic formation informs American racial formation—through the continual exclusion of non-whites from the imagined white national ideal and the uneasiness of loss as exclusion as evidenced by the contradictions of constant foreignness of non-white others and simultaneous claims to equality. Her “constant foreignness” threatens to surface physically in her “suntan[ned]” skin, though the assurance of family friends and teachers that black and whites “get along” would have us believe that her racial difference would not really matter. Bub, as a minority subject has a melancholic relationship to the United States, but is also melancholic because of her multiple losses and displacement. I argue that the film's moments of irresolution as a narrative of homecoming are not Bub's personal failures to overcome cultural clash, but are rather, moments that reveal the US's melancholic relationship to minority subjects, which open up productive possibilities of challenging the myth of US benevolence through assimilation and multiculturalism.

⁸⁹Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief*. (Oxford England; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000; 2001), xi.

⁹⁰Ibid.8

Drawing parallels between the hypochondriacal responses of the narrator in *The Woman Warrior*, between her obsession with cleanliness and fear of contagion and Asian American assimilation, Cheng argues that hypochondria is a “fear of racial contamination,” and another form of melancholia.⁹¹ Her articulation of hypochondria presents it as a mode of perception, of reception to the dual socialities demanded of Asian Americans: assimilate or maintain cultural difference. These demands made upon the Asian American subject, whom is called upon to at once assimilate, yet maintain cultural difference (as a result of visible racial markers) falls into a melancholic racial formation because of the necessary failure of these simultaneous and disparate subjective tasks. The demands to simultaneously overcome and embody racial difference lead to renderings of assimilation as “sentiment[al]/approval or the denial/disapproval of racial difference.”⁹² Cheng concludes, “...hypochondria is a *form* of assimilation: an intersubjective movement outward that may result in, but is in fact already conditioned by, the anticipation of some kind of intrasubjective failure.”⁹³ Hypochondria also manifests itself as a concern with authenticity or origins, as the fulfillment of assimilation doesn’t manifest itself as protection or complete incorporation for the assimilated subject, but rather

it allows this subject to live with the tremendous conflictual social demands, even as it keeps those demands alive. Insofar as assimilation displays a pattern of mastering, a ‘binding’ that works through anticipating and repeating a failed or painful experience of social entry and contact, it is also *the* form of cultural interpellation available to the racialized, immigrant minority: not a smooth process of seamless interpellation but a

⁹¹ Ibid., 92.

⁹² Ibid., 71.

⁹³ Ibid., 78.

process that constantly rubs the subject up against the limits of ‘proper’ subjecthood.⁹⁴

This preoccupation with origins lies at the heart of the film, but it registers itself on the level of desire, desire, which I believe, is constantly misunderstood and misread by reviewers as a desire for idealized and sentimental love. This sentimentalization / denial binary in various forms is echoed through reviews of *Daughter from Danang*. The desire for the racial minority to assimilate and make good on the promises of American liberal democracy hinges upon her desire or willingness to perform Americanness, but is foreclosed by her inability to embody the ideal because of her status a racial minority.

The framework of racial melancholia enables us to privilege the complex sets of emotions and expectations that Heidi Bub experiences throughout her journey to find and reunite with her mother. It also enables us to situate and understand her multiples losses—her loss of mother, home, adopted mother. This chain of continual losses itself is enough to render Bub melancholic, her love-object is continually lost, and this constant displacement is allegorical of her subject position as an illegible racial minority in the black / white racial economy of the United States, and particularly the South. Situating Heidi Bub as a racially melancholic subject situates the traumatic excess of Bub’s experiences within the violence of assimilation. By privileging as my site of analysis Bub as a racialized subject within the context of the United States, rather than the tale of failed reunion that takes place out of the US and in Vietnam or in obsession with successful reconciliation, racial melancholia as a framework opens up the potential to challenge the

⁹⁴ Ibid., 83.

US nationalist project to remember and rearticulate the failed war in Vietnam as victorious and uphold the US myth of “rescue and liberation.”

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to read this film against mainstream narratives of culture clash, by denaturalizing the notion of fixed cultural difference and read the film's excesses, the moments that could not be contained within the narrative of cultural clash as useful sites for interrogating cultural memory and racialization in the United States. Reading the film through the paradigm of the refugee, allows me to engage a generational perspective on refugee experiences in the United States. Heidi Bub challenges the image of the typical refugee, she is mixed-race and has been adopted and assimilated in the US South, her heavy southern accent and light skin betray her past life in Vietnam. Because she is mixed-race and she grew up mainly in the US, and she is not a dark haired Vietnamese woman with a Vietnamese accent, she deviates from what a normative refugee subject looks like, and her connections to the sexualized and militarized violence of the war are erased in the film. My intervention also centered her life in the United States as the motivation for her return, and focus on the melancholic desire for return or reunion. What if we locate the site of Bub's injury not in the failed reunion with her family, but rather in her initial displacement from Vietnam, and understand her desire for return in terms of her continual displacement - the impossibility of her mourning of her multiple losses, must her expectations always be rendered "false"? The answer is yes only when Bub is denied the possibility of having war memories or engaging the trauma connected to her displacement. I believe that the content and context of the film is relevant to second and third generations of Vietnamese Americans as they come to terms with the impacts, effects, and legacies of the war. But second and third generations have a

claim to the shared experiences of the war that Heidi Bub is denied because of her racial ambiguity and the context of her transnational adoption.

Reading Heidi Bub as a refugee ties her together with the history of Asian exclusion, and points to the heterogeneity of refugee experiences as a result of not just US empire, but white supremacist US racial formation, to acknowledge her complexity and to critically interrogate and engage the film not for what it can tell us about adoptees or the differences between Vietnam and the United States, but what it must make invisible make the rescue narrative possible.

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