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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Run Away, Girl; Runaway Daughter:
Refugees, Families, and Gender in Vietnamese American Contemporary Memoirs

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Asian American Studies

by

Justine Trinh

Thesis Committee:
Professor Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, Chair
Associate Professor Dorothy Fujita-Rony
Associate Professor Julia H Lee

2018

DEDICATION

To

Ziggy - Boop :) <3 *Amavi te. Amo te. Amabo te semper. Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo.*

Emily - in transit(ion): a story of self-discovery--to be determined...
“To them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness” (Jefferson, 1776).

Xavier - Je t’aime. Je suis Jean Baptiste Favre. J’ai une énorme baguette.

Ann - This is some Sirius business.
“My carry-on item was a parka” (Meyer, 1).

Judy Wu - “O Captain! my Captain!” (Whitman, 1865).
Robin Williams - I miss you...

To μητέρα πορνεία Ἀπόλλων
“Communication is a two-way street pal! You see this... that's the 'SEND' button.”
From πατήρ πορνεία Διόνυσος

Jon - my best friend who has been with me at almost every step of my academic career and
Choice. I would not be where I am at if it weren’t for you.
“The years had created an icy distance that would inevitably thaw with repeated close
encounters” (*Choice*).
To your dearly departed frisbee hat. I loved you so...

To Achilles. Oh how you inspired me.
“so let wars disappear from gods and men
and passionate anger, too” (Homer, Iliad, Book 22)

And lastly,

To Vietnamese American Runaway Daughters

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Run Away, Girl; Runaway Daughter:
Refugees, Families, and Gender in Vietnamese American Contemporary Memoirs

By

Justine Trinh

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Irvine, 2018

Professor Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, Chair

This thesis focuses on runaway daughters from Vietnamese American refugee immigrant nuclear families and asks, “Why do the daughters choose to leave the household?” I attempt to answer this question using a critical refugee studies framework in combination with intersectional feminist studies, specifically erin Ninh’s *Ingratitude: The Debt Bound Daughter of Asian American Literature*. I position the runaway parallel to the refugee as both figures try to escape institutions that produce that produces docile and subservient bodies, i.e., the family and nation. My thesis analyzes these themes through two contemporary memoirs, *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui and *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* by lê thi diem thúy, both of which have a runaway daughter who attempts to escape the filial pressures of a Vietnamese refugee family. My thesis analyzes why these young women reject the forced gifts of life and obligation from their parents.

The title is a play on words. The first part is the imperative “Run away,” which is a command to the girl to run away from the nation as a refugee. It is only later that she runs away from her family, which makes her a “runaway daughter.”

Run Away, Girl; Runaway Daughter:

Refugees, Families, and Gender in Vietnamese American Contemporary Memoirs

What causes Asian American daughters to leave their homes and everything behind? What possesses them to run away from the people who gave them everything including their lives? For this thesis, I focus on the female runaway figure and connect this act of willful yet forced departure from the family with the refugee experience of escaping from a wartorn and politically repressive nation. As I juxtapose the runaway and refugee figures, running away from a family parallels fleeing a nation and provides insights into the power dynamics within the structure of the family and nation. In making this argument, my intention is not to define runaways as refugees per se but rather to say that runaways occupy a similar status to the refugees. Whereas the refugee is escaping her nation or homeland, the runaway is fleeing from her family. The runaway thereby becomes similar to refugee: both make the personal choice to leave but yet are forced into that condition.

Hence, in order to compare the runaway and refugee, my thesis provides three forms of analysis. First, I examine the linguistic roots of the words. Following my discussion of etymology, I will draw from both critical refugee studies and intersectional feminist studies to make comprehensive the pressures placed onto Asian American daughters and therefore the reasons for their severance from the family. I will define critical refugee studies by borrowing from Yen Le Espiritu's concept in her book, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and the Militarized Refuge(es)*. I wish to use a similar framework to focus on the runaway. In addition, I draw upon intersectional feminist studies, particularly erin Khue Ninh's *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Studies*. Specifically, I look at the intersectionality of identity, gender, and kinship structure. Although I work with ideas she discusses throughout the book,

such as the debt daughters must repay to their parents, I focus on her chapter, “The Caring of Jailers,” which explicitly addresses runaways. However, I offer an alternative reading to the idea of disowning the runaway and what Ninh calls the “gift of life.”

Finally, these frameworks that illuminate the connections between the gendered experiences of runaways and refugees will then be utilized to analyze *The Best We Could Do* (2017), an illustrated memoir by Thi Bui, and *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003), a fictionalized, postmodern memoir by lê thi diem thúy. The genre of memoirs is a platform that allows for the runaway to discuss her experiences in a public forum that was once denied to her through a patriarchal system the silenced her. I call these works memoirs rather novels, because memoirs have a truth-telling aspect inherent to the genre. Although *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* is fictionalized, the narrative borrows many details from the author’s life. In contrast, a novel may seem realistic, but the genre conventions do not always convey or emphasize a sense of authenticity; what happens in novels is not always expected to have actually occurred. While *The Best We Could Do* is told from Bui’s point of view and foregrounds her thoughts and feelings, I focus on her older sister, Bích, who ran away from the family, and how her choice mirrors the idea of the refugee fleeing for her life. In the same vein, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* chronicles the challenges of a Vietnamese refugee family, told from the unnamed daughter’s point of view. Eventually, the narrator decides to run away and escape her family due to growing emotional pressures and physical violence. Just as the refugee escapes from the nation-state, so too does the runaway flee from the family unit.

I position the family as a parallel to the nation-state. Both the family and the nation are entities by which a subject measures their sense of belonging. Families commonly depend on the daughters for their reproductive, emotional, and at times waged labor, and their bodies are

representative of the family, leading to a greater effort to police female bodies. Moreover, women who reject their natal family and the preparation to marry them into another family overlap with those without a nation. Vietnamese American refugees, for example, left behind their homeland in order to pursue life anew in a promised land. In reality, they do not belong to any land, new or old. As a consequence, they remain in a stateless condition that is not desired. Following this logic, if they are unable to trace back their origins, then this lack of belonging signals family and nation are necessary to be fully realized as human beings.

For a child to reject her family is to reject her upbringing and everything she knows much like the refugee rejects the nation-state, particularly because she relies exclusively on her parents and their experiences. In addition, in patriarchal and patrilineal societies, a daughter's sexual purity tends to be policies, since her body is essential for the collective reputation of her family. However, the purpose of this training and disciplining is to create a marriageable daughter, someone who then transfers her sense of belonging and labor to her husband's family. From birth, a daughter understands her position as a child relative to and dependent upon the family. Without a family, then, it is impossible to come to terms with her identity because she is always defined as a daughter of the family she has left, regardless of time, place, and person. The position of the runaway as a daughter is particularly important, because daughters are considered both essential and expendable to the family.

The nuclear refugee Vietnamese American family is my main focus because it elevates the conflicts of the runaway daughter within its family structure. Many refugee families are already fractured and dysfunctional, traumatized by war, death, and at times poverty. Violence is already inherent in shaping these families, and the conflicts in these kinship networks are furthermore heightened following the change in status from Vietnamese citizen to Vietnamese

refugee. Additionally, the nuclear refugee Vietnamese American family acts as an institution that produces docile subjects in the same manner as the nation. The docile bodies created by the family (the daughter) and the nation (the citizen) seem as though they have independence, but in reality, they are subjected to regulations by the higher authorities that permit them that same independence. Following this logic, the daughter is unable to act with agency due to expectations within the family that she must behave in an acceptable manner, much the same way the refugee is unable to act outside of legal and societal parameters. Under the nation, docile bodies that have perceived independence must show good citizenship in order to maintain their inalienable rights. If a docile body shows itself to be a “bad” subject, then repercussions (like incarceration) ultimately remove those rights without returning them. The daughters’ behavior reflects upon the family. If they are seen as good daughters, the family’s status is elevated. However, if a daughter shows herself to be a “bad” daughter, then she is disposed of and no longer considered to be a part of the family because girls are “singled out to be threatened with and trained on cautionary tales of other daughters who stray from the paths of sexual purity [and domestic filiality] and meet some combination of madness, death, or disownment; their lives and bodies are routinely ordered and restricted by measures to which their brothers are never subjected” (Ninh 128). Furthermore, the social constraints placed on daughters parallels those on refugees. Refugees must abide by a narrative of “good refugee,” which upholds the benevolence and savior position of the host country and emphasizes success and assimilation. If they do not, then they will be deemed a bad refugee, a subject based in ingratitude that does not recognize that the host country has bestowed upon them life and liberty (Espiritu, 116).

The typical understanding of the family in 21st century United States tends to idealize family as a site of nurturing, symbiotic relations between parents and children, in which the

parents and the children exist in a symbiotic relationship. However, the etymology of family indicates otherwise. According to Richard Saller, “[f]amilia was never used to mean ‘father, mother and children’ in our sense of ‘family’ today. It did have a technical, legal usage akin to ‘family’, but in common parlance most often meant ‘slave staff’, exclusive of the master’s family.... The usual word for ‘family’ in the classical period was *domus*, which carried the general sense of ‘household’ including domestic slaves” (67). The historical origin of “family”¹ included servants; the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists this as the primary definition, in spite of it being out of date in contemporary American society. This means the family is still conceptually tied to docile bodies and can enact a power structure in which the parents remain at the top and all others below; the masters of the household authorize the provision of the material resources for the children, servants, and dependents to live. Although servants and slaves typically produced the material sources as well, the masters controlled the resources and distributed the necessities of life at their discretion. This happened regardless of blood relations. As a result, although common modern conceptions of the family highlight a mutually beneficial relationship between parents and children, there nonetheless exists a power dynamic in which the older, wealthier, and more experienced adults are authority figures that command their children, officially declared dependents under the government, to obey. A family may be happy and may have both the parents and children equally contributing or interacting, but that does not erase the fact that the parents tend to hold the power in the relationship.

Let us consider the connections between “runaway” and “refugee,” which stand as outliers to the conceptualization of the good daughter of the family and the good refugee of the

¹ The servants of a particular household or establishment, considered collectively. In later use only in phrases, as *family of servants*, etc. Now *rare* and *hist.*

² An **ablative of place from which** is a grammatical construction used in Latin. A noun can be declined in six ways such as an ablative, and each declension has certain connotations. An

nation. The etymology of the words “runaway” and “refugee” reveal how these categories of identity are linguistically related. *OED* defines a runaway as “a person who runs away; a fugitive, deserter, or escapee. In later use, the word described a child or teenager who runs away from home.” The word “runaway” is defined by the word “fugitive.” Both “fugitive” and “refugee” have the root *fug*, which stems from the Latin verb *fugio, fugere, fugi, fuitum*. *Fugio, fugere* means “to flee, to take flight, to run away.” The words themselves convey a sense of escape, which is a type of exile. *The Cassell’s Latin Dictionary* entry for the verb uses the Latin phrase, *a patriā*, which commonly follows *fugio, fugere*. *Patriā* comes from the term, *patria, patriae*, which has a dual meaning of fatherland or nation and father or family. Latin nouns can be declined into six cases, or categories, with each case having its own purpose, much like a verb can be conjugated to reflect the subject.² In essence, the Latin etymology of “runaway” and “refugee” denotes a sense of movement from a place. With the addition of the preposition *a*, which means “away from,” *a patriā* means “away from the nation” or “away from the family.” As a result, *patriā fugio* means “I run away from the nation” or “I run away from the family.” The definition can be attributed to both runaways and refugees, and the words “runaway” and “refugee” both share an etymological closeness to each other. The importance, however, lies in the fact that the runaway has always been defined by the family, so her decision to leave the household becomes a declaration of independence from the family. The fugitive or refugee moreover leaves as a means of denouncing the state, willingly or not. Vietnamese refugees

² An **ablative of place from which** is a grammatical construction used in Latin. A noun can be declined in six ways such as an ablative, and each declension has certain connotations. An **ablative of place from which** communicates a sense of movement and takes the form of preposition such as *a, ex, and de* (which all denote “away from” but there are subtle changes in the movement, i.e., using *ex* would denote out from), the movement with a noun declined in the ablative case. *A patriā* is **ablative of place from which** means “away from the nation.”

escape because they cannot live in their homeland, but in acknowledging this, they also imply that they are no longer part of that homeland.

Given this connection between the words “runaway” and “refugee,” critical refugee studies offers important insights into the analysis of the runaway because it highlights contradictions within the liberal democratic state. Critical refugee studies looks at the refugee not as an object of investigation, but rather as a subject position with agency as well as a category that illuminates a set of issues and questions regarding the nation-state (Espiritu, 10). Moreover, the displaced refugee provides insight into nationalist politics because they refute the perceived natural order of things. The nation-state presumes citizenship as the normative mode of belonging, and the state assumes the right to determine both physical entry into the nation and the political rights of citizenship. However, the refugee’s lack of citizenship contradicts the “professed commitment of the liberal democratic state to universal individual rights” (Espiritu, 11). The refugee flees or deserts his or her home nation due to issues of security, economic stability, and pursuit of happiness. This falls in line with the founding remarks on which the U.S. is based: “[I]n the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another” (Jefferson, 1776). For the sheltering nation to deny them entry would contradict the promise of the liberal democratic state. As a result, the conceptualization of the refugee unveils the contradictions of the nation-state. Additionally, the refugee enters into a condition of statelessness, which illuminates the limits of the nation-state model. Refugees do not belong to their home nations; they also are not necessarily welcomed by nations that grudgingly host refugee camps or offer settlement. The refugee narrative is often harnessed to illustrate the promise of a liberal democratic state, yet the liminality of refugees also illuminates the failures of these states.

However, when the refugees arrive at the new country, they are caught within what Mimi Nguyen coins as the “gift of freedom” in her book, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*. Nguyen argues that refugees are given the gift of freedom, but it is a forced gift and bounds them to the giver, i.e., the empire. The refugees must be grateful to the nation which has granted them freedom, the same nation which enacted atrocities, bombed their home nation, and created their refugee status. The ones who do survive the war and escape to the United States are thus seen as the “lucky ones.” For that, the refugees must be grateful to the empire for giving them the gift of freedom, while ignoring the unnamed gift of being made into refugees. If the receiver rejects the gift, she is seen as ungrateful. Drawing from Jacques Derrida’s work on the gift, Nguyen articulates that the gift is a transfer of one possession to another that shapes the relation between giver and recipient that engenders a debt (7). To accept the gift means to enter into indebtedness. By saving the refugee, the United States forces the refugee into debt for the gift of life. By accepting this gift/debt, the refugee gains access to citizenship and national belonging. Consequently, she owes the empire for her life, her citizenship, and her freedom. In order to convey her gratitude, she must be economically and culturally successful or else she will be considered a failure as a subject of the new host country.

In a similar vein to this conceptualization of refugees in critical refugee studies, the runaway’s resistance to the supposedly foundational role of the nuclear family exposes the contradictions that underlie the idea of family in the first place. As previously elucidated, the family is more commonly defined as a group of people who are connected through kinship ties such as blood, marriage, or adoption, frequently sharing the same household in 21st century American society. The family is an economic and social reproductive unit connected via affective ties and obligations. In the same way that the nation-state is able to decide who

becomes a citizen and who is excluded, the patriarch and matriarch commonly have the ability to determine who belongs to the family unit and who is excluded; the balance of power shifts as this is a function of generational privilege.

Despite their promise of love and acceptance, then, families do not offer the same promise of equality as liberal states because of their traditionally hierarchical nature. Within most families, there is a strong social tendency for parents to hold more power than the children, no matter how much the children age. The children tend to be unable to shed their junior status, even when they mature into adults, and the parents require assistance and are no longer the dominant breadwinners. It is still not equal because of the emotional and financial obligations of the adult children, but the dynamics do shift slightly. Similarly, refugees themselves undergo a period of probation within the nation, but like children, they cannot discard their refugee status even after they become citizens. Although as refugees they have a right to belong to the nation, yet they are always seen and remembered as the perpetual foreigner, as the refugees and not the citizens. Hence, both the refugee and the runaway figure occupy this position of statelessness where they are defined by the nation/family they left behind, but can never escape despite settling into a new nation/family of their own. They can never attain separation nor independence from the nation/family due to the emotional tensions between the desire for affective connection and the aspiration for autonomy.

Because refugees and runaways have severed themselves from their origins, they nonetheless exist in a liminal state that is never defined. They do not belong to the home nation/family yet they are defined by those entities, even as they live elsewhere. As a consequence, they are simultaneously dead and alive. This is similar to what Eric Tang coins as refugee temporality in his book, *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City*

Hyperghetto (2015). Refugee temporality is defined as the refugee knowing that “with each crossing, resettlement, and displacement, an old and familiar form of power is being reinscribed” (Tang, 21). Refugee temporality entails a suspension of being and a position of statelessness which the refugee can never escape because of the cyclic system of displacement that is imposed on her by the state. Refugee temporality can be extended to runaways. Although they have escaped the family, runaways occupy a site of statelessness, where they cannot shed the runaway identity. With each resettlement away from the family, the runaway is reliving that escape and is unable to get unstuck.

erin Khue Ninh dedicates a chapter to the topic of runaways in her book, *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* (2011). Drawing upon Evelyn Lau’s *Diary of a Street Kid* (1989) and Catherine Liu’s *Oriental Girls Desire Romance* (1997), Ninh focuses on how second-generation daughters embody forms of capital investment. They are pushed into lucrative science and math fields in order to pay a never-ending debt to their parents. This justifies constant “disciplinary and surveillance mechanisms [that] are implemented in the family, as in any institution, with the aim of producing docile bodies” (Ninh, 98). The parents are producing model children, and these daughters are under pressure to become the model minority while living under the constant threat of disownment. The parents themselves have bestowed their daughters the gift of life, a concept that Ninh coins from Marcel Mauss’s work on “the gift” (Ninh, 103). Similar to Nguyen’s construction, the gift bounds the receiver and giver in a relationship, in which the receiver must repay the giver with something of equivalent or greater value. As a result, the receiver is indebted to the giver, for how can one repay the gift of life with something of equal or greater value? Ninh points out that the gift of life is a forced gift, one that the daughter cannot refuse and cannot ever repay. If she refuses to live her life according to the

dictates of her parents, she becomes the ungrateful subject. The threat of disownment frames the daughter in an unequal bind, where disownment must act on the expectation that the daughter cannot repay the debt. Despite being unable to repay the debt, some daughters will refuse to ever do so because repaying the debt evokes intangible structures of control and guilt that the daughter chooses to escape from in the first place. Disownment, at the same time, threatens the gift of life because the daughter does not have the means to care for herself and depends on her parents to provide for her the necessities of life, i.e., shelter, food, etc. In this instance, the runaway is similar to the refugee. In order for the refugee to act grateful to its savior nation, she must be successful. If she is not, the refugee is deemed a “bad” subject. For a daughter who is not the model child, disownment shows that she is disposable. However, the runaway rejects the gift of life and accepts disownment, choosing the possibility of her demise, whether it be financial or emotional. By leaving her family, she rejects her family, and also rejects “life,” and by extension, she rejects her assigned responsibilities and obligations of debt.

However, Ninh does not discuss the debt 1.5- and second-generation daughters tend to face within refugee families. The trauma and loss experienced by refugee families amplify the dynamics of debt for these daughters. Espiritu notes:

[H]aving witnessed their parents’ economic anxiety and experienced its tolls on all of their lives, many interviewees [1.5 and second generation Vietnamese children] felt deeply and personally responsible for realizing their parents’ dream of ‘making it’ in the United States....It had cost their parents too much to get here; it was their responsibility to fulfill their parents’ dream of family success via intergenerational mobility (160).

The refugees are seen as the “lucky ones” who were able to escape the oppressive regime and must therefore be grateful. In turn, their children are even more fortunate since they did not have to live through the war, and they have to be successful in order to redeem the sacrifices of their parents, i.e., the refugees. The refugees lost their home nation as well as their loved ones, so

it becomes their next generation's duty to succeed to make up for the families' loss and pain. This impossible duty places more pressure and guilt onto the children. However, the trauma of the war causes a toxic environment that forces the daughter to run away. The families inadvertently become a threat to the daughters in the forms of emotional abuse and physical violence. The pressure for daughters to succeed, and by extension for the family to succeed, overwhelms daughters to the point that the family becomes harmful. In order to survive, the daughters run away as a form of self-preservation, and the parents disown their daughters in reaction.

I examine the phenomena of runaways through two memoirs, a critical genre for examining identity and family. While other genres are also able to illustrate the complexities of family structure, the memoir in particular provides a unique platform, because it offers the daughters who run away (or those close to them) an opportunity to give their account, their story which has more often than not gone unsaid. In autobiography theorist Julie Rak's article, "Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity," she defines memoir as a blend of private and public that is highly gendered: "they [memoirs] contain writing about the self and about others; they are written by the most professional men and the least known, most private women" (Rak, 316). Memoirs offer a platform to retell past lives and provide opportunities for the authors to shape and interpret their own narratives. While Rak complicates the idea of memoir in relation to autobiography by looking at the history and reception of the two, she also shows that the memoir is more than a minor form of autobiography. Early theorizations of autobiography excluded the stories of women and people of color, and the dominant mode of autobiography in the Victorian era that was open to women was considered memoirs. Memoirs "allowed women to be in public discourse in terms of their relationship to

other people and communities” (Rak, 310). In the same vein, the genre allows the runaway to discuss her relationship to her family and community in a public forum that once was denied to her within the patriarchal kinship network that silenced her. In addition, memoirs are considered “a truthful report of a person’s thoughts [that] discloses the process by which selective memory defines and redefines personal history” (Jensen, 237). By viewing the genre through selective memory, a memoir narrative allows the daughter a platform to tell her side of the story and make clear the family condition from which she escaped. Memoirs allow for the possibility of an individual declaration of independence, if the authors offer different narratives from their parents’ account of the past. The daughter’s decision to run away from her home asserts adulthood and a separation of identity, so writing memoirs and running away become ways in which the daughter can assert her own adult voice and agency.

While *The Best We Could Do* and *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* differ in many ways, both explore the subtleties within the family structure and what led to the act of escaping the family. Both mediums, graphic and noveltic, forces the reader to infer certain aspects of untold stories. For example, in *The Best We Could Do*, actions happen off-grid, such as a mother calling the phone multiple times. The audience is not always able to see the character repeating an action after the first time, but the author leaves hints; the author uses onomatopoeia or offers suggestive, if not vague, statements such as “Má went through a period of denial” (Bui, 25). With a novelistic approach, the narrator/author decides what is shared with the audience and what is left unsaid. Again, in some cases, the author clearly describes what happens to her or her family. Other times, however, it is up to the audience to decipher what the author is hinting. Both approaches reflect the fractured nature of subjective experience, as expressed by lê thi diem thúy, the author of *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* in her statement that “memory, by its nature,

is very fragmented” (52). This quote accounts for the episodic and fractured nature of the memoir as well as her choice to jump between past and present.

The Best We Could Do is a graphic memoir by Thi Bui, a Vietnamese American cartoonist and lecturer at California College of the Arts. The illustrated memoir chronicles her family’s journey to the United States as refugees. Bui creates a narrative that follows her family’s path from Vietnam to the United States (eventually settling in San Diego) and the silences between family members which exemplify intergenerational conflict. Bui uses her memoir to attend to wounds left by the war and as a way to come to terms with becoming a mother herself. The memoir starts with the difficult birth of her son. Bui is reminded of her own parents’ struggles and their sacrifices. She also focuses on how displacement affects the family and how they all individually carry emotional trauma that leads to miscommunications and frustration between them. However, I do not focus on Bui herself but rather her older sister, Bích, who runs away from the family. Although this episode only spans three pages in the entire memoir of over two hundred fifty, it is nonetheless significant because it reveals the underlying family dynamics and pressures that continue to exist even as the family silences the event. The three pages also illuminates Bui’s position as both mother and daughter coming to terms and reconciling this episode, where her sister leaves the family as a daughter and her own mother has to confront the situation and its implications.

Bích is first introduced in the second chapter, “Rewind, Reverse,” when the author talks about her family’s response to her decision to live with her artist boyfriend in 1999 (24). She expects her mother to disapprove or disown her, but neither happens. Bui lets out a sigh of relief before providing the audience with more information about the family dynamics her two older sisters faced as teenagers. While her mother, Má, has a similarly muted reaction when Lan

moves in with her boyfriend (later husband), her mother's reactions are more extreme when it comes to Bích. Lan's decision to move in with her boyfriend occurred later than Bích's. In 1987, when Bích has a boyfriend whom the family refuses to acknowledge, her mother invades Bích's privacy by reading her diary and making her promise not to see the boy again. This goes on until Bích is driven to run away, and the father declares Bích dead to the family.

The mother exerts her power over the family as a part of an evolving patriarchal bargain. A patriarchal bargain is a tactic in which a woman chooses to uphold patriarchal norms at the cost of disadvantaging other women overall in order to optimize her own power and options. In her ethnographic study of the Vietnamese Immigrant community, Nazli Kibria discusses how coming to the United States allowed women to renegotiate their patriarchal bargain, gaining leverage power. Before immigrating, Vietnamese women accepted male authority in exchange for economic protection and authority over children (Kibria, 12). However, coming to the United States presented a different set of scenarios. As Vietnamese refugee men struggled to find employment or received lower wages in the U.S., Vietnamese women were able to renegotiate the patriarchal bargain and gain leverage power. When one of the woman in the study was being beaten by her husband despite being a "good" wife to him, the rest of the women ostracized him and convinced the rest of the community to follow their example (14). However, the "new" patriarchal bargain still enforced the normative family structure and dynamics. When it came to children, the women "expressed fears [of] children's defection from the traditional family system" (19).

Bích's mother shares the same fears and wishes to maintain the patriarchal family structure with which she is familiar. As part of the patriarchal bargain in Vietnam, she holds authority over her children; however, in the United States, she feels like she is losing control of

her daughter and, as a result, reads Bích's diary. The memoir implies that the diary is only meant for Bích to see, as it is a private record to express her thoughts. However, the mother crosses the private boundary to bring Bích's secrets out into the open for the family. The mother alienates her daughter by invading her privacy and takes on the role of the disciplinarian. In attempting to keep the family together, she ultimately causes her daughter to run away. In her act of fleeing, Bích exposes her desire for privacy, a yearning that is strengthened in a liberal democracy that separates the public from private. However, the separation of public and private does not exist within the family unit as the mother is able to assert her authority and read Bích's diary. Both the mother and Bích have different cultural conceptions of family which results in this rupture. The mother believes it is in her right to assert her power, while Bích feels like she is entitled to privacy. This intrusiveness is inherent within the refugee welfare state as well as the nuclear family that constitutes its foundation (Tang, 4).

However, in some ways, the situation is parallel for both Má and Bích. Má was once a daughter. Although the mother was raised in Vietnam and Bích grew up in the United States, it does not mean the mother's values are backwards or unfounded. The mother herself went through sexual transgressions within the paternal structures. This is evidenced by the birth of her first daughter that was less than nine months after her marriage, implying the parents had sex prior to being wed. However, the mother now upholds the patriarchal values and has different views from before. In addition, Bích's departure appears to cause harm to the family, as Má attempts suicide. It is important to note that the mother is the sole income provider of the family, while the father is unemployed at the time of Bích's escape. As a result, the family's survival depends on the mother to provide the necessities of life. By leaving, Bích rejects this gift, and her mother responds by attempting to take away the gift from everyone else in the family. Both

women exemplify daughters constrained by a system of filial debt and gratitude which factors into their desire for metaphorical and literal deaths. The suicide attempted is silenced by the family as Bui states, “We avoided ever talking about that incident... to the point that Má thought I didn’t remember it” (28). The silencing of the incident is a conscious decision to actively forget the mother’s attempt and by extension Bích herself. What should be Bích’s story is turned into a silence around the mother’s actions, recentering the story around the mother even though the proximate cause was the fact that her daughter had left the family.

While Bích chooses to run away, her father, Bô, asserting his patriarchal authority, decides whether or not she belongs to the family. He declares that he has the final say on how she is remembered. Bích does not have a voice in this decision, despite asserting her own agency in her decision to escape. Bích is now in a forced condition of statelessness, and she becomes a family reject; she is either dead or does not exist. Bô uses both terms when he tells Bui and her brother, “You don’t have a sister named Bích anymore. She is dead to us” (27). Like the refugees cast off from the nation, Bích is cast off from the family. In this case, the idea of disownment is a reactionary response. Bích is never threatened with disownment in the narrative, a threat that Erin Ninh focuses on in her chapter on runaways, but Bích is disowned once she leaves the family. Ninh shows that the verbal and emotional threat of disownment is part of the process of creating a normative subject. Those who do not abide by narratives of filial debt and gratitude are “constantly reinvoked as having been forgotten, that they may be excluded over and over again. Thus, they are erased as persons—stripped of their personal names—but renamed as the unnamed and unspoken, never released by the community to oblivion but suspended in the sovereign ban” (Ninh 133). However, the families in these memoirs are not part of this normative model; rather, they are outliers within the dominant narrative. Despite being outliers

to the idealized Vietnamese family, their experiences might actually represent what is typical within refugee families that are traumatized by dislocation. Within these actual families, the threat of disownership serves as a tool that keeps children on the path towards normalization, or assimilation. Nevertheless, Bich already rejected this path and by extension the authority of her parents. Therefore, disownment is no longer a threat, since she chooses to disregard parental authority. Instead, the parents are trying to reassert their authority by disowning her, when she has already in a sense disowned them.

I argue that Bích leaves because her life is being physically and emotionally threatened within the family. The family does bestow the gift of life to Bích. The parents risk the entire family in order to escape Vietnam for a chance at a better life for their children. The parents clearly value the daughters because they place themselves in danger to ensure a better quality of life for their children. However, by the time the family arrives in the United States, the members also have to deal with the traumas of the war and the pressures to survive, most often manifesting in the parents' threatening Bích's life: her mother crosses the private boundary with the diary and becomes controlling, and Bui hints at the father being violent. Her older sister, Lan, leaves because of problem with the father, and Bui states later on in the next chapter, "but the problem was we never knew when his anger would strike" (27, 72). In the same scene when Bui introduces her father's anger, we see images her younger brother being smacked when he is too loud. Rather than being verbally threatened with disownment, then, Bích's life becomes physically and emotionally threatened due to the father and mother's instability in the war's aftermath. While the parents bestow the gift of life through ensuring a better quality of life and providing food, shelter, and clothing, the parents themselves also physically and emotionally threaten the daughter's very well-being.

Each member of the family defines the family differently, though. The idea of family is not monolithic. While her father excludes Bích from his formulation of the family, Bui makes a conscious choice to remember the dead, i.e., her sisters, through her memoir and therefore reconstitutes the family differently from her father. In the family picture of all of Bui's siblings, Bích is represented in an in-between space to symbolize her near-dead status (29). Lan, Bui, and Tâm are in the foreground, representing the children who are still considered alive and part of the family. In the background, Bui depicts her dead siblings as shaded in to represent their dead status, although they continue to haunt the family. Bui expands on the haunting of the dead sisters. Her mother is still affected by them, and Bui calls herself a replacement to substitute for her dead sister. Bích inhabits both spaces at the same time, occupying a space of statelessness, where she is not shaded in like the dead siblings but also not in the foreground with her siblings. She does not belong to the family, but at the same time she is not dead.

This idea is also represented in Bích's geographical location as well. A few pages later, Bui maps out the geographical distance between the family (Bui, 32). Her mother lives in her backyard; her father lives in a senior apartment home four blocks away. Her siblings, Lan and Tam, also live in the same town with their own family. However, Bích lives with her husband two towns away from the rest of the family. In both instances, she is removed from the family, yet she is still relatively close, displaying her uncertain status within the family. She simultaneously does and does not belong. Thus, Bích shares a status similar to the refugee. Bích is defined by her family and chooses to be close, but she cannot and can never truly belong. She can never escape the family despite creating a family of her own, and she mirrors the statelessness nature of the refugee. She will be continuously defined by her family, which shows that despite running away, she can never flee.

The overbearing pressures on the daughter and the haunting of a past she cannot hope to reconcile is further complicated by the fragmented structure of *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, written by lê thi diem thúy, a Vietnamese American poet and novelist. While *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* is a fictional memoir, it borrows heavily from thúy's own familial and personal life journey. In an essay, lê thi diem thúy responds to the question if the memoir is autobiographical, "I was a boat child, I lost a brother, I ran away. I was born in Phan Thiet and grew up in Linda Vista. Those things are true. I traveled through a similar geography — war and its aftermath, growing up poor in America — but my body is not the girl's body and my memories are different from her memories" (diaCRITICS). Rather, the memoir is told out of order from the nameless narrator's point-of-view. The narrative begins when she is six and ends when she is twenty-six but oscillates between past and present throughout, trying to reflect memory itself. Like the author, the narrator escapes Vietnam on a boat with her father and lands in a refugee camp at Singapore before coming to San Diego. They are later joined in the United States by the narrator's mother, but as in *The Best We Can Do*, the silences among the three family members cause an unstable environment as they all try to deal with the trauma of the refugee escape. By the end of the memoir, the narrator decides to run away to escape the family.

In *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, the narrator makes an attempt to distance herself from the family by locking herself in the restroom when her mother and father are arguing with each other (66). However, despite the effort to isolate herself, she is still able to hear the family. Like Bích's diary, the restroom is a private space within the household. It allows a member of the household to claim a personal space, no matter how temporary. In a home, the living space is commonly shared by all members of the household, but the restroom allows for a family member to shut out the others temporarily. The bathroom is a place for embarrassing

biological functions that the other members are not supposed to see, hear, or smell. The bathroom is similar to a diary, because both serve as personal spaces in which humiliating or embarrassing events or thoughts can occur. They are supposed to function as a closed off space, which none of the other family members are supposed to hear or see. However, in both cases, the family reasserts itself. Bich's mother invades the diary, and the narrator's parents intrude into her thoughts through their fighting.

As Ninh observed, both the narrator's and Bich's mothers are trying to control their daughters through hyper-surveillance. For example, the narrator's mother lists superstitious warnings: "She was full of warnings that summer. 'If you dance with your shadow,' she'd say, 'you'll go crazy.' 'If you run around barefoot all summer, your feet will burn and fall off.' 'If you swallow fruit seeds, trees will grow out of your ears'" (47). This litany of instructions resembles Bich's mother's efforts to control her daughter. In order to produce docile subjects for the family, the mothers must watch the daughters and tell them what to do. For example, Bich's mother forbids Bich to see her boyfriend again in order to create the model daughter. Similarly, the narrator's mother offers a list of warnings with the purpose of molding the narrator into an obedient subject within the family. While the narrator perceives the list to be nonsensical, her interaction with her mother demonstrates how difficult it is for the mother to offer advice in a country that does not support her cultural values. For the mother, the United States upholds strange customs that she does not understand, while the daughter, who is exposed to these customs, believes her mother to be superstitious and backwards. As a result, the mother seeks to assert control over her daughter as a coping mechanism for her alienation from her new home. In both cases, the mothers' attempts to control do not create dutiful daughters but inadvertently

push them away. The daughters cannot reconcile the dichotomization of their cultural worlds and the attempts to control their lives. Instead, both Bich and the narrator choose to run away.

The narrator of *The Gangster* runs away when her life becomes threatened, and she can no longer live in the family. Although the reason is never clearly stated, the narrator's statement that she left her family is followed by the sharing of the memories of her father. The memories of father-daughter bonding are juxtaposed with episodes of when the father becomes violent. In one of these accounts, the narrator describes the father: "He becomes prone to rages. He smashes televisions, VCRs, chases friends and family down the street, brandishing hammers and knives in broad daylight" (116). In order to cope with the pressures of living in the United States, the father drinks regularly and becomes unstable and violent. Both Bích and the narrator of *Gangster* are subjected to paternal male violence. Paternal forms of control within the two families are physically violent, while maternal forms are emotionally manipulative. The violence of the war, as well as their lack of authority and control in the United States, fuel the emotional instability and abuse within these refugee homes. Both fathers struggle to find a job and cannot provide economic stability they initially had in Vietnam. As a result, they lash out in order to have a semblance of control, like when Bui's father hits her little brother. By asserting what power he does have, Bích's father is able to silence his son in order to have a quiet household.

This desire to assert control through physical violence is revealed when the narrative describes a past attempt to escape her father when she is her teens in the United States: "One night when my father was sitting on the couch looking sad and broken, he turned and realized there was someone where he had thought there was only a shadow. He came for me then because I had seen him. I leapt through the window and ran from the house, but before I could make it to the street, he caught me by my hair and pulled me back inside" (thúy, 117). The narrator's own

life is threatened, as the father physically forces her back into the house. By pulling her back, he compels her to remain in the space of the family, despite her attempts to flee for her own safety. Her life is physically threatened by her father, who is supposed to continually give the gift of life to obligate her to the family. The act of being pulled back symbolizes the narrator's debt to her father. However, the father and narrator initially leave Vietnam to ensure a better quality of life for the narrator, and he goes through multiple occupations in order to make a viable living. He prioritizes survival and settling down. By rejecting the gift of life, she would have been seen as ungrateful and not as the dutiful daughter. However, the giver himself is the one physically threatening the gift, and she must leave in order to survive.

In the *Gangster We Are All Looking For*, the narrator is unable to escape her family even after leaving. When the narrator describes her parents' lives and the community they live in, she reports that she is still discussed as part of the family despite living geographically across the United States; her parents reside in San Diego, while she chooses to live on the East Coast. However, she states that her parents' neighbors remember her: "It was known that my parents had a daughter who lived on the East Coast, somewhere near New York. Some people heard that she had run away and some people heard that she had simply gone away. That was many years ago and now the rumor was she was writing stories. No one has read them and no one had met her. They imagined that her English was very good" (148). The way the narrator is described within the community echoes how people might describe a dead child. The narrator haunts the community, whose members imagine the details of her life away from her family. None of the community members have met her or read any of her works. For all they know, she might not exist at all. In the community, she has become an imagined entity with no physical evidence of her existence. By running away, the narrator has become dead to the family, and she is treated as

such by the community members. Although she states that it is a well-known fact her parents had a daughter, it is in the past tense which suggests she is no longer their daughter or that she has passed away. The book itself switches from present tense to past tense to allow for the fluidity of memory. As a result, it allows for the reading that she is considered dead to the family in the same way that Bích is considered dead to the family. This is also reinforced when the community believes that she has “simply gone away” (148). However, the narrator also inhabits an in-between status when she states that “that was many years ago and now the rumor was that she was writing stories” (148). The community does not know if she is alive or dead, which allows for her to have a Schrödinger's cat³-esque status. Even so, she is still defined by the family. She is her parents' daughter despite trying to sever herself from them, and the San Diego Vietnamese American community still defines the narrator through the parents despite having never met her. Like Bích, she inhabits an absent position, one that is structurally similar to the stateless condition of the refugee who is neither dead nor alive.

Like the two daughters I have focused on in my thesis, I myself have run away from my family after being subjected to unending filial debt and pressures to succeed for over 20 years. “I gave you life; I can easily take it away from you.” My mother asserted this statement constantly throughout my childhood for the purpose of showing that she and my father had a claim on my life. Despite always using the first person, she spoke for both my father and herself as one collective being, which she maintained under the guise of family. She hounded me with this idea as a reminder that I had an obligation to the family and was indebted to her and my father for giving me life. This debt bound me to them and their ever-changing whims. This utterance, “I

³ Schrödinger's cat is a thought experiment created by Erwin Schrödinger in 1935. The idea is of a cat that is sealed within a box with a flask of poison and a radioactive source. The Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics implies that after a certain period of time, the cat is simultaneously dead and alive.

gave you life; I can easily take it away from you,” was a warning every time I misbehaved or had the intention to misbehave. “Misbehavior” included not sitting properly with my legs crossed daintily to not asking permission to drive to the local fast food joint. My life was a gift given to me, a gift that indebted me to them. It was a gift I could never fully pay back. By giving me life, they had control over what I did. To them, my future was set even before I was born: take honors and extracurriculars in high school, go to the University of California, Irvine (which they claimed was my dream school when in reality it was theirs), and earn a lucrative science degree. If I wanted anything that was against these preset conditions, I would be accused of being selfish and thinking for only myself rather than for the collective family, i.e., my father and my mother. The more I accomplished to repay them, the further I fell in debt. My accomplishments were tied to their sacrifices.

I ran away from my parents in an effort to escape these constraints, which threatened my own well-being and existence. However, despite living away from my parents, I am still defined by my family. My status as a runaway is a source of shame for my mother and father because it revealed the failure of our heteronormative family structure. On the surface, everything looked fine, and everything was materially provided for me; however, that was not the case when it came to emotional care. I was categorized as one of the “lucky ones.” My parents escaped Vietnam after the war to give me a better life. I did not have to live through war or its aftermath. I did not have to struggle as a Southeast Asian refugee in a new country. No, I was lucky to be born in the United States to be away from it all. My parents and the community see me as undutiful, entitled, and ungrateful despite the coercive treatment and expectations that are imposed on me.

The runaway figure is similar to the refugee, and by looking at them in relation to each other, they reveal the contradictions of the nation-state as well as the family structure. Both are fleeing from a system (nation and family). Both the nation and family have control of who belongs and who is excluded, and although the refugee and runaway choose to escape the nation/family, they are put in a forced condition as a rejected subject. The refugee and the runaway are placed in a condition of statelessness where they are defined by the entity they left, but they do not truly belong. They also show that they cannot truly escape the nation or family. They cannot truly run away or flee despite their intentions to as demonstrated by Bích in *The Best We Could Do* and the narrator from *The Gangster That We Are All Looking For*. Although they both attempt to sever themselves from the family, they are still considered a part of the family they had tried to escaped. They occupy a stateless condition where they both belong and are excluded; they are alive, and they are dead. They are in an indescribable in-between position. In addition the the runaway figure being similar to the refugee, the runaway decides to leave the family in order to ensure a possibility of their survival. Their disownment happens after they have left as a reactionary response. The threat of disownment is a verbal and emotional threat to their lives. However, in the memoirs, the daughters' lives are physically threatened by the people who are supposedly bestowing them the gift of life. The parents are haunted by the horrors of the war which cause their unstable and violent behavior and ultimately threaten the daughters' lives. The narrator's rejection of the gift of life, and the obligation and physical threats that go with it, allows her to seek another life. Ninh states in *Ingratitude*, "to reject the gift, is to accept abandonment, and the possibility of one's own demise" (104). However, these books demonstrate that for daughters to possibly survive and live, they must run away. Their experience parallels how the refugee must leave to have the chance to live. Both Bích and the

narrator of *Gangster* choose to reject the gift from their parents, and as Ninh states, they must accept abandonment and the possibility of their own demise. They both know that by staying within the confines of the family, they will continue to be subjected to violence. Thus, staying within the family represents a form of accepting the possibility of one's demise as well. While to run away is to reject the gift and to accept the possibility of one's own demise or essentially one's own physical and social death, the daughters reject the gift of life their parents provide because the parents are themselves the cause of danger. By leaving the family and choosing to reject gift of life, the two characters are opening up the possibility of survival and living. This option is one that would not have been available to them if they had stayed with the family. It is only afterwards when they are disowned by the family, and the runaways can no longer receive the necessities of life, i.e., food, shelter, and clothing from the family, that they gain the possibility of survival.

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