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Contested Terrains: Family, Intimacy and War Memories

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

in

Ethnic Studies

by

Linh Thuy Nguyen

Committee in Charge:

Professor Yen Le Espiritu, Chair
Professor Sara Clarke Kaplan
Professor George Mariscal
Professor Kamala Visweswaran
Professor Kalindi Vora

2016

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2016

DEDICATION

For mom and dad.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Contested Terrains: Family, Intimacy and War Memories

by

Linh Thuy Nguyen

Doctor of Philosophy

University of California, San Diego, 2016

Professor Yen Le Espiritu, Chair

Contested Terrains: Family, Intimacy, and War Memories—is a multi-genre analysis of Vietnamese refugees families and the memory of the Vietnam War. Sociological analyses of the second-generation typically center family dynamics as either the predictor of social outcomes of adaptation or the source of conflict within the family.

I engage family as a mode of inquiry, rather than a unit of analysis, to explore alternative experiences, discourses, and artistic renderings that move beyond state-sponsored social science narratives about assimilation and intergenerational conflict. I challenge the ways these discourses naturalize these problems within the family, and examine these dynamics as expressive of larger structures of racism and the legacies of war. Turning to Vietnamese American second-generation literature, poetry and art as sites of alternative knowledge about family and war, I challenge the social scientific construction of the family as the site of successful assimilation, and instead theorize the refugee family as the site of critical inquiry and knowledge about the Vietnam War.

Engaging cultural studies and literary methodologies in my close readings, I critically historicize the Vietnamese family as productions of a particular historical moment at the nexus of the Cold War—US intervention, and the mobilization of civil rights, I call attention to the racialized meanings embedded in the figure and the ideological functions that refugees and the war have been called upon to serve.

My dissertation's contributions to ethnic studies has been to examine both the family and Vietnamese refugees within the larger historical and racial contexts from which they emerged, and trace the ideological function of the continued assertion of refugee success. This dissertation also brings together the social science literature on refugee adaptation, feminist and queer critiques of heteronormative family formation, and ethnic studies scholarship on critical refugee studies.

Introduction: Locating the Refugee Family

How have we paid our moral debt for failing to win? By resettling Vietnamese refugees fleeing the lands we ravaged, “one of the largest, most dramatic humanitarian efforts in history” according to Roger Winter, director of the U.S. Committee for Refugees.

Chomsky "Visions of Righteousness" 1980: 23

I circuitously came to this project through my own questions about what is knowable. This dissertation emerges from the difficulty of teasing out the particulars and universals of my own family life and family life for the second generation. My story of not knowing is not unique—history classes in the United States omit the invasions and wars and the violence that have brought so many different immigrant and refugee groups to American shores. When I began to ask questions about how my parents came to be in the United States, I realized that large pieces of history were missing. I found the more glaring omissions in the thousands of sociological studies on Vietnamese refugees I analyze in my research. The children of these particular refugees had been incorporated as Asian Americans, and were lauded for the cultural values that led to their success and their correspondence to traditional bootstraps narratives. But these social scientific studies do not explain the anxieties or heavy silences that I experienced as part of the normal dynamics of my family.

What is cultural in a broad sense and what is specific to one’s specific family is nearly impossible to tease out within a context of being born in a time and place different from one’s parents, much less living through conditions such as war that one can scarcely imagine. As I read second-generation Vietnamese American cultural texts, I noticed the ways they were consumed with discussions of conflict, silence, and distance. Discourses unseen and unheard in the social scientific project reducing the refugee family to a

homogenized unit of American society. My project emerges at the gap between two distinct but complementary fields of literature: sociology of immigration, which was concerned with adaptation and assimilation, and second-generation cultural texts. If the sociological literature has argued that the Vietnamese had resettled and were successful, why then was the second-generation obsessed with tracking down the ghosts of their parents? Even when the war was not spoken of, experiences within the *locus* of the family revealed the ways that past experiences continued to inform second-generation understandings of the past and of present family dynamics. Given these varied factors, I decided to conduct research that reads these haunting experiences and the legacy of the war through the framework of the ideological construct we call “the family.”

Immigration Studies

Immigration studies in the United States reflect the needs of the state to understand, analyze, and manage the issue of migration; as “bearers of cultural difference,” immigrants pose a threat to the imagined homogeneity of American society (Espiritu, 2010: 659). Drawing from the Chicago School of sociology, immigration in the United States was interpreted as a social process, and assimilation was posited as the end point of the social trajectory for migrants. The city of Chicago had witnessed the migration of European immigrants, as well as the movement of blacks to American cities. In this living laboratory, theories of a universal “immigration experience” were developed and applied to both European immigrants and blacks. In an attempt to further cleave apart race from biology, the Chicago School turned toward cultural definitions.

Attaching cultural difference to the raced bodies of minorities and immigrants, Robert Park tethered immigrants of color racially to their place of origin and original cultures, constituting them as permanently foreign, and constructing the “‘immigrant problem’ as a signifier of cultural difference” (Ibid 659-660). Park theorized that all racial problems could be solved through assimilation, arguing that “[a]ll our so-called racial problems grow out of situations in which assimilation and amalgamation do not take place at all, or take place very slowly” (Park, 1928: 890). Park’s Americanization cycle understood racial and cultural difference as a developmental cycle with a natural progression, culminating with complete incorporation into society. Touted as the endpoint and solution to the “immigrant problem,” assimilation was deeply rooted within a nationalist frame.

Defining Refugees

Although inchoate forms of international refugee policy existed before World War II, contemporary definitions of “refugee” can be traced through the various Refugee Conventions, laws and institutions formed to address the issue of refugees, displaced persons or forced migrants in the second half of the twentieth century. As anthropologist Liisa Malkki points out, the object of refugee studies is unstable and developed without major conceptualizations.¹ The legal definition presented in 1951 and subsequent Cold War treaties—distinguishing refugees and immigrants through the notion of choice—

¹ Malkki extends Jeremy Hein’s critique that research on refugees was premised on a reductionist definition in which refugees were distinguished from immigrants in terms of economic versus political forms of migration (1995: 496).

hinges on the recognition of a fear of persecution. Malkki notes that “refugee” as a specific social category and legal problem on a global scale did not exist in its full modern form before this period. Refugees were previously classified as “displaced persons,” a preferred category which implied the possibility of returning home (Malkki 498). Refugee law developed in the framework of Human Rights as the task of managing mass populations and coincided with the founding of the United Nations (Malkki, 500). If the issue of “Who is a refugee?” defers to international governing bodies and receiving nation-states, the ability to determine who is and who is not a refugee is connected to the state’s ability to define and police its population through political, moral, and racial trajectories.

For the United States and the West, the ideological function of refugees has been represented through their depiction as “freedom fighters”—Cubans, Koreans and Vietnamese refugees were upheld as representatives in the fight against communism. Of course, attitudes toward these racial minorities shifted once the cloud of ideology dissipated and the legacies of racial hierarchies began to construct refugees of color along black and white racial lines (Ong 81). The refugee flows generated by U.S. intervention in the Vietnam war² represent one of the most comprehensive and organized efforts to deal with the issue of refugees and resettlement in the United States, a political and ideological move which served to draw attention away from the American failures in the

² A note on terminology. Though commonly referred to as the Vietnam War, I acknowledge the various appellations. As such my choice to use the term “Vietnam War” does not reflect a position on who may lay claim to such a title, but rather reflects a colloquial understanding of the time period and general understanding of events surrounding it. For example, in Vietnam it is known as the American War. Noam Chomsky has referred to it as the American War as well.

region and toward American willingness to provide humanitarian assistance, as Chomsky's quote asserts. In the case of the massive population of displaced German Jews and Jewish refugees after the war, refugee resettlement was implemented by the Jewish community at home in the United States as a result of overwhelming pressure to overcome its anti-Semitism and restrictionist attitudes. In the Vietnamese case, it was also a "politics of belated rescue" although notably it was the "after the fact" temporality of rescue that allowed the United States to rearticulate itself as victors in spite of the military defeat in Vietnam (Loescher and Scanlon 2; Espiritu 2006: 421).

Refugees are discursively externalized from "the national order of things." In effect, they become natives gone amok with their pathology tied to their uprootedness (Malkki 1992). The trajectory of the refugee experience, or refugee flight, has been linked to the fields of development, anthropology, and functionalist models of society, thus emphasizing a pathology produced through uprootedness as though refugee status itself produces a psychological condition which needs to be corrected and/or healed. These discourses situate the problem in the refugees themselves rather than the conditions that impel refugee flight or produce psychological distress and trauma in the first place (Liu, 1979, Stein 1981). Indeed, we see the ways this knowledge was produced in order to address displacement as a 'problem,' rather than the other way around (Grewal 2005: 160).

Focusing on the development of refugee research and research on Southeast Asians in particular in the context of U.S. intervention in the Cold War, my work situates the construction of Southeast Asians and Vietnamese refugees as subjects with a specific relationship to the United States within the emergence of area studies as a Cold War

knowledge project. The westward flow of refugees is indicative of the direct tethering of military policy to humanitarianism or the seamless movement from war to humanitarianism (Espiritu 2015). The very same airplanes used to drop bombs in Southeast Asia were used to “rescue” 2500 (Vietnamese and Amerasian) Operation Babylift orphans and transport them to the United States in April of 1975. The repurposing and resignification of military barracks as refugee camps is another example of this move from war to rescue. Refugees were not only constituted as an object to be studied, but this humanitarian response allowed the United States to portray itself as the benevolent rescuer that was able and willing to prescribe solutions to this crisis of mass displacement. As many scholars have recently suggested, defining refugees is also a matter of the construction and redefinition of borders and an effect of the modern state system.

Critiquing National Frames

Anthropologist Aihwa Ong has studied refugees in terms of racialized state technologies of citizen-making that articulate a racialized developmental continuum of refugee-to-citizen (2003). Immigration scholar Rachel Ida Buff distinguishes the ideological and legal difference between immigrants and refugees in the context of racialized state control, arguing that the cultural work of Cold War immigration policy solidified the ideological distinction between political and economic migration:

The notion that those arriving from Communist regimes seek freedom and deserve refuge... public discussion of immigration policy since the cold war has reified the racial distinction between the figures of the noble political refugee and the craven economic migrant...both deportation and immigration policy have been crafted out of the continuities between these

two groups. Refugee and immigration policy purportedly act to shelter those fleeing totalitarianism over those motivated solely by economic gain. This cold war distinction has long functioned to underwrite US foreign policy, so that, after World War II, displaced persons fleeing the Iron Curtain were preemptively viewed as seeking freedom, just as the 2 million Iraqis currently petitioning for refugee status must be denied to bolster the illusion of progress there (2001: 526).

Coinciding with major wars, economic turbulence and territorial sovereignty which ultimately rests decisions upon receiving nations to accept or deny refugees, the regime's present manifestation and more humanitarian focus may define and grant refugee status but is limited when nations refuse to bear the costs of resettlement.

Refugee status and citizen making are both premised upon fixed racial and cultural understandings of normativity. Although refugee and immigrant identities have been shaped and regulated by these ideologies, they have also contested and reshaped the meanings and boundaries of their own identities and interactions of the state. By and large, refugees have been understood and depicted as victims compared to immigrants who "choose" to migrate. The legal classification of "refugee," "displaced person," or "stateless person" is also a matter of degrees. Lowe has argued that the juridical and discursive figuring of Asians as "alien" "illegal" and finally "legal" is a mode of surveillance, discrimination and the production of nationally recognized identities. So too have the legal classifications of refugees served the purpose of delimiting the boundaries of the nation state and established a hierarchy of desirability (Lowe, 1998: 36). The legal distinctions of each category are articulated in degrees of freedom: migrants are understood as making choices versus refugees who are forced to migrate. The ability to distinguish between true refugees versus immigrants and economic migrants gained significance with the economic conditions of global capitalist restructuring where "the

economic collapse of the 1970s led to tightened restrictions throughout the West, and refugees from the developing world were often seen as disguised immigrants claiming refugee status to facilitate access to receiving nations” (Barnett 2002: 249). Receiving refugee status translated into material benefits. In the case of the first waves of Vietnamese refugees, welfare benefits and job training were two such benefits not granted to those only able to attain immigrant status. The distinction between war refugees and those fleeing dictatorships and U.S.-backed regimes which have produced instability and violence has been called into question, revealing the ways that the designation of the legal category “refugee” is part of the arsenal of the state technologies of subjection. Whereas immigration restriction was based racially upon implied understandings of desirability and fitness, the moral posturing of the refugee served ideological functions alongside the policing of immigrants due to economic motivations. The labor and capital of the refugee existed in the body of the refugee itself.

The notion of refugee flows to western countries is part of the rhetoric of salvation and rescue perpetuated by the West, as well as a means of generating apprehension about the changing American demography as racialized migrants and refugees from developing nations threatened to stall the “natural progress” of American society. The reality is that many refugees remain in camps that Western countries, in cooperation with the United Nations, had constructed in bordering countries in order to deter nonwhite immigration to the West. Many refugees were internally displaced, fleeing to neighboring countries in Asia and Africa, and remained many years and even decades in camps before repatriating instead of being resettled in third countries (Grewal 173).

As I mentioned above, Southeast Asian refugees are the most studied cohorts in U.S. history. In contrast to earlier restrictionist immigration and refugee policies, the influx of masses of Southeast Asian refugees resulted from the United States' involvement in the failed war in Vietnam. Southeast Asian resettlement is significant for several reasons. First, the humanitarian response enacted by the 1975 Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act allowed the United States to articulate itself as the benevolent rescuer, able and willing to prescribe solutions to the crisis of mass displacement and taking responsibility for the refugees but denying responsibility for the devastation caused by U.S. aggression and the U.S. military defeat. Secondly, the increased migration and various acts passed in order to assist refugees were partially responsible for the boom in research on the Indochinese cohorts. The interests of policy collided with the rise of social science as a discipline with a wider reach in elite intellectual circles. As Michael Latham has noted,

As the Cold War continued to expand beyond the borders of Europe, Vietnam rapidly emerged as a pivotal 'test case' of American power... Vietnam became a high-stakes laboratory in which social scientific theories of modernization, nation-building, and 'internal war' might be developed and deployed... that research... was not a matter to be divorced from military exigency... social science and violence were to go hand in hand (2002: 437).

Research on Southeast Asian refugees, therefore, coincides with the cultural production of Cold War knowledge through humanitarian intervention, scholarly research, film, and media. As Malkki reminds us, "the modern, postwar refugee emerged as a knowable, nameable figure and as an object of social-scientific knowledge" (498).

Domains of Knowledge

Research produced in the 1950s and 1960s was premised on establishing causality between refugee flight or forced migration and the transition to communist regimes (Skaran, 23). The construction of refugees as a domain of knowledge represents the functioning of a statecraft in which the nation constructs itself as an authority on international political issues through its participation in governing bodies that decide on issues of refugees. The United States' involvement and influence in the U.N. is related to the ways the United States is cast as a refugee accepting nation despite the fact that many refugees do not resettle in the West. In other words, academia has linked refugees to the nation-state and "large displacements of people have affected the ways nation-states imagine themselves as discrete geopolitical entities and how modern statecraft regulates refugees in order to exclude them from territorial citizenship" (Ong 27). Though most of the research and emphasis on refugee flows is based in the West, most of the world's refugees remain in the third world (Grewal 188; Malkki, 1995: 503).

It is my contention that the influx of Southeast Asian refugees coincides with the shift linked to capitalist restructuring that began in the 1960's and articulated the Cold War and the containment of communism not as part of a project of U.S. economic dominance in Asia in the 1980s but as part of a global moral and humanitarian effort. My focus on Southeast Asian refugees as a field of study is a result of the "overdocumented" nature of the field, resulting from state funding meant to temper and prepare the United States for the "refugee crisis" presented by the mass influx of refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. I argue that this "overdocumentation" resulted from anxieties generated by the American military failure in Vietnam. The need to contain the anxieties

about Southeast Asians and the Vietnamese in particular produced a domain of knowledge that not only redefined refugees but deployed refugees as a domain of self-knowledge about the state itself.

Refugees from War and Critical Refugee Studies

The history of U.S. colonialism and war in the Philippines, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam, and the racialized immigration from these sites obliges us to rethink the history of the United States as a history of empire.
–Lisa Lowe (1998: 42)

At the state level, social concerns about immigration and the issue of refugees overlapped in terms of issues of assimilation, acculturation, of generational concerns. Sociology has not completely distanced itself from the models of assimilation-as-end research. For example, even while Min Zhou acknowledges the hybrid nature of acculturation and challenges notions of a unilateral movement away from inherited cultures toward American ones, her study of Vietnamese second generation acculturation, posits "additive or selective acculturation, rather than subtractive or indiscriminate acculturation" as the "normative path to social mobility" (2001: 220). As much as her work reflects the desire to understand the immigrant experience in a pluralistic way, she does not abandon the goal of normativity or critique acculturation as the endpoint of migration or a guarantor of success. Instead, she asserts that there is not a single pathway but rather various pathways toward those ends. Her study argues that acculturation is multifaceted in nature, and she contests the idea that immigrant children simply abandon the identities of their parents. Ultimately, however, she does not challenge normative desires of assimilation or the effects of the racial structure of the United States as part of

the process of acculturation of Vietnamese youth: "acculturation involves multiple dimensions as well as multiple directions" (220).

Vietnamese refugees have been celebrated for their "model minority" status; their success has been "weaponized" and used against racial minorities in order to particularize their material disadvantages and decontextualize a history of racialized inequality (Espiritu 2006: 146). At the same time, Vietnamese success must be contextualized in the shift away from the welfare state "toward [an] emphasis on [the] individuals' civic duty to reduce their own burden on the state" (Ong 82). This is not to disprove their model minority status but perhaps recast it as a survival technique in a moment where the dismantling of welfare provided no alternatives (Ibid). In recent years, Southeast Asian American Studies and critical refugee studies have emerged to contextualize the conditions of empire and war and the refugee as a position of social critique. This positioning reveals the ways that Vietnamese Americans have been viewed from the American perspective through the lens of a failed war.

One response to these discursive projects was to reposition and prioritize Vietnamese and Vietnamese American histories, lives, and agency. The emergence of this revisionist body of research was greatly influenced by cultural studies. Scholars such as Lisa Lowe demonstrated the ways in which culture is a site of contestation and resistance for dispossessed communities (1998). The turn to culture made possible the interrogation of how contests of power play out for individuals that are marginalized legally, politically and/or economically. Both Lowe's focus on Asian immigration in the United States and Jodi Kim's *Ends of Empire* (2010) situates Asian American cultural texts in the context of Cold War knowledge production. These scholars position Asian

Americans not just as immigrants or citizens but also (and most importantly) as “postimperial exiles or ‘refugees’” who are simultaneously a product of, witnesses to, and implicit critiques of imperialist and gendered racial violence. In these ways, cultural representations of Asian Americans function as a window into the Cold War history of imperialism and war (6).

Understanding Southeast Asia as a postcolonial imaginary is a means to reiterate the connections between the formation of the countries of Southeast Asia as continuations of colonial and imperial regimes of power (Ngô et al. 2012: 672). Southeast Asian American studies and critical refugee studies necessarily engage a transnational lens, understanding the flows of people and capital as circuitous. They critically trace the *longue duree* of history in U.S. imperial formations given that immigrants and refugees live transnational lives and are part of far-ranging diasporas, a fact that has gained importance in the era of globalization. Immigrants do not simply abandon original ties to the homeland, but are able to reconnect to them, and engage these connections in meaningful and creative ways. Demonstrating the ways that identity restricted to nationality, refugees are not forever displaced but able to establish connections to countries of origin while making relationships within their countries of resettlement.

Yen Le Espiritu’s call to engage the refugee as an analytic, “not as a legal classification—but an idea,” constitutes ‘refugee’ not as a social or legal category but as a site of social critique. Critical refugee studies then become a framework that seeks to get at “the imperial forms and forces that endure beyond the cessation of military intervention and occupation” (Espiritu, 2006: 411; Nguyen 2014: 25). Cathy Schlund-Vials’ framework of refugee orientation makes visible juridical formations that exist

outside the traditional confines of the contemporary nation-state (2012: 17). Her focus on the “memory work” of 1.5 generation Cambodian Americans and their culturally specific modes of remembering as a contrast to official and state-recognized modes of remembrance reveal cultural memory as a site of contestation. Cambodian American cultural production instantiates a refugee orientation that makes visible juridical formations that exist outside the traditional confines of the contemporary nation-state. Mimi Thi Nguyen’s critique of U.S. humanitarianism as “the gift of freedom”—a gift that is not given freely but instantiates a bondage that must be demonstrated through eternal gratitude—show us the discursive and medico-juridical mechanisms that shuttle refugees from war to refuge, from racial anachronism to new friend of freedom. Her analysis of the indebtedness of refugees is revealed in their willingness to give up everything to thank America and is exemplified in the case of Madalenna Lai (1). Nguyen, Espiritu and Eric Tang have demonstrated the ways that refugees have become the solution to the international racial project of empire—by articulating refugee resettlement as a necessary outcome of the war. Nguyen demonstrates how the figure of the refugee as the subject of freedom becomes the justification for liberal warfare. My project begins by turning this latter assertion on its head and argue that the figure of the Vietnamese refugee family has served to “solve” domestic racial problems emerging from the Civil Rights movement through the articulation of the Vietnamese as a model minority family.

Critical refugee studies contextualizes the role of the state and its relationship to war, race, violence, and empire to show how the conditions of possibility for humanitarian rescue are produced in the first place. Rather than focusing on histories of immigrant lives and essential traditional cultures, this field seeks to understand the way

that the figure of the refugee is a political figure, a limit, and a liminal position that enables critique. Transnationalism presents the possibilities for identifying processes, epistemologies, and historical events that decenter the national frame and demonstrate the always already interconnected and contingent nature of the events of history (Briggs et al. 2008: 125). The work of critical refugee studies can be understood as a matter of framing or positioning (Espiritu 2010: 662) that decenters the nation-state and destabilizes the fixity of national boundaries and the construction of (im)migrants and refugees as stable and knowable identities. Malkki proposes centering “exile” instead of “displacement” in order to reveal the significance of “uprootedness” as a denaturalizing stance that views the position of the refugee not as a pathetic and pathological one but a position that offers a critical perspective on relations of power, sovereignty, citizenship and nationality (1995: 517).

On Methodology

My project critiques the nation-based, problem-centered analysis and production of the refugee, and troubles the ways that social science analytics explain experiences such as discomfort and silence within the space of the home. It calls attention to the ways that the Vietnamese are framed in contrast to domestic racial subjects in the United States, thereby rendering them “exceptional” in national conversations about race and poverty (Tang 2015). Finally, it asserts that examining refugee families as subjects of knowledge makes possible alternative epistemologies of the war and the persistence of war in family trauma even after the state has defined the “post-war.”

As cultural studies scholar Lisa Lowe argues in *Immigrant Acts* (1996): “the legal and political forms of the nation have required a national culture in the integration of the differentiated people and social spaces that make up ‘America,’ a national culture, broadly cast yet singularly engaging, that can inspire diverse individuals to identify with the national project” (2). The illusion of the United States as a nation of immigrants has overshadowed both the history of immigration restriction (Ngai 2004), racialized and sexualized discrimination (Canaday 2009), as well as U.S. complicity in driving flows of immigrants and refugees out of countries and toward the United States itself. My project intervenes at this last intersection to demonstrate that the large-scale resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees was made possible through a national culture which articulated the nuclear American family as the ideal form of social organization.

I engage cultural studies techniques such as close reading practices to analyze a wide range of texts, including sociological surveys and official reports, film, novels, poetry and art. Centering the ways that family is a site of power relationships bound by acts of intimacy, I draw on Lisa Lowe’s broad definition of intimacy which include colonial intimacies’ “precarious affections: awkward familiarities, unsolicited attentions” to get at how intimate relations may also be borne of war and violence (2006:15). Attending to the intimate also enables “a call to question cherished assumptions: that the intimate is located primarily in the family, that the family is a ready model for, and microcosm of, the state, and that affective ties are inherently tender ones” (15-16). In other words, looking at the family as a site of intimacy, between family members or between refugees and the state, I argue that the ontological position of refugees produces different types of intimacy. Here I develop a dialogic between the

social scientific objectification of the refugee family and the experiential knowledge of refugee families. As objects of knowledge, the production of intimate knowledge of refugees was necessary to articulate truth claims about sociological data sets; in contrast, as the subjects of their own knowledge, intimacies of refugee families reveal alternate concerns over history, memory, and personal relationships.

Culture is a site of political contest where the marginalization of immigrants through the implementation of restrictive laws and forced assimilation is not absolute. Law, schools, families, churches and other social structures “are the regulating sites through which ‘immigrants’ are ‘naturalized’ into ‘citizens’ or through which ‘immigrants’ are disciplined as ‘aliens’ and ‘foreigners’” (Lowe, 173). This is to say that they are sites of contestation where “immigrant acts” demonstrate the dialectical relationship between dominant and subordinated groups in the realm of culture. Indeed “**culturemaking**” must be understood as “a social, historical, and transnational process that exposes multiple and interrelated forms of power relations and that articulates new forms of immigrant subjectivity, collectivity, and practice” (Espiritu 659). In short, we must acknowledge the significance of racial difference for organizing discourses of the nation state and the production of racial knowledge. But we must also understand the ways that this knowledge produces the conditions for contestation and renegotiation of relations of power.

Centering Family

I argue that the *Vietnamese refugee family* became an important figure for domestic politics in the United States after the 1970s. Historian Robert O. Self has argued that 1960s social movements “challenged the idealized nuclear family by demanding

rights not imagined by existing legal and political institutions” (2012: 5). Throughout the 1960s, New Frontier, and Great Society liberals like President Johnson and Daniel Patrick Moynihan believed that economic policies would make the idealized nuclear family attainable. Structural reasons for inequality were displaced by these policies of “breadwinner liberalism” (4). Studies such as the 1964 Moynihan Report reflect the sensibility that African American poverty was due to the failure to realize stable nuclear families. In response to these classic liberal policies and the resultant conservative backlash throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, the family became a contested site of ideological power.

Struggles over gender and sexuality necessarily fixed on the place of the family in American politics and culture. The white middle-class nuclear family headed by a patriotic and heterosexual male was central to political contest throughout this period. The idea of that family conveyed such power it is best thought of as a national mythology (4).

The relationship between family and nation has long been recognized as a metaphor for the “bounded integrity of nations.”³ Cultural studies critic Anne McClintock has demonstrated the ways that nationalism is figured through the imagery of the familial and of domestic space, noting that nationalism has been forged through gendered and sexualized notions of kinship. As an organizing trope for nationalism, she argues, “The family as a metaphor offered a single genesis narrative for national history while, at the same time, the family as an institution became void of history and excluded from national power. The family became, at one and the same time, both the organizing figure for national history and its antithesis.” (357) In other words, family is a means of both

³ Relative Values 1

naturalizing and justifying hierarchy and imposing a linear temporality of genealogy and progress.

Within the context of the Immigrant Act of 1965 and family reunification, Asian and Latino communities were reframed in terms of the supposed population boom and rise in immigration after the Act's passing. As Self argued, the family's significance became increasingly ideological as media and sociological studies emphasized this as a site of intervention. But the significance of family was also material, as questions attempted to discern concerns such as: what are the conditions of their lives? where do they live? what is the cause of their poverty? Family was understood as both space and time bound and but also transcendent of these barriers; intergenerational, non-kin families, transnational families challenged the formation of the nuclear family. In examining family from this perspective, I am able to ask new questions, such as how is history and memory (dis)embodied in family through sociological discourse to immigration laws to the literal space of homes? Family as a unit of analysis, that indicated a heteronormative household, becomes a site for working out the contradictions of Post-Cold War militarism and liberalism in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

In centering family, not as a unit of analysis, but rather a set of relations of dependence (Butler 2002 13-14), I ask how the family becomes the site of contests over political power and knowledge through cultural production. My approach is informed by feminist analyses that emphasize the significance of the political stakes of various articulations of family. As Cynthia Enloe argues, "To craft only a gender analysis without an accompanying (informing) feminist analysis is to turn away from the workings of power" (2010: xii). In a supplementary move, I build upon McClintock's

interpretation of the trope of family to reveal the ways the rubric of family has been mobilized by the state to naturalize racialized and gendered national hierarchies for those who arrive without families.

In other words, how does the idea of family make possible different articulations of power, access to history and memory, and render some knowledge forms legible while erasing others? How does state violence manifest as family trauma? In the period with which I am concerned, Vietnamese refugees are the image through which U.S. national identity re-writes itself, and family is the site where the contradictions of U.S. style democracy, capitalism, imperialism are contained. I argue that for second-generation Vietnamese Americans, the children of refugees, the family is a critical site of inquiry where a shift occurs from refugees as objects of knowledge to refugees as subjects of knowledge, thereby making possible alternative epistemologies of war, intimacy, history, and memory.

Chapter Overview

There is perhaps no single event in this century that has had such power to disunify the American public, disrupting traditional unities of 'community,' 'nation,' and 'culture.' It radically altered these unities not only because of the traumas of death, loss, and the breakdown that the Vietnam War brought and has come to symbolize but also because the national understanding of the war was formed by and formative of the contemporary crises in understandings of racial groupings, class identities, and notions of masculinity and femininity. (Lowe 3)

In Chapter **One**, I examine social science survey literature as cultural texts that generate official knowledge about Vietnamese refugee families. Tracing how family became the unit of analysis for analyzing Vietnamese refugees, I argue that this

articulation of family was critical to articulating the figure of the grateful refugee. By casting them as immigrants and situating their success in the stability of the cultural and family unity, sociologists produced the refugee family as an object of sociological inquiry and target of policy measures. In the context of President Johnson's war on poverty and the subsequent rise of Neoliberalism (resulting in the dismantling of the social welfare state in the 1980s), the trope of family became a critical site for racializing the Vietnamese refugees as naturally successful and contrasting them to African American and Latino/a families. This ideological move enabled the incorporation of the refugees into the nation with little adjustment to social policy and without any attention to structural racism. Through sociological metrics which exclaimed educational success and occupational attainment, Vietnamese refugees were celebrated as the newest immigrants and enfolded into the rising narrative of U.S. multiculturalism. The media and scholarly obsession with Vietnamese refugee achievement overwrote the failed military policy that had brought the refugees to the U.S. in the first place.

Chapter **Two** investigates those factors that are external to the celebrated normative family I outline in Chapter One. Here, I analyze the documentary film *Daughter from Danang* (2002) and the novel *The Gangster We are All Looking for* (2003). In these texts, family is not the guarantor of success but rather a space of domestication—transracial / transnational adoptees and resettled refugees are made to fit in the space of “home” in the United States. This chapter reiterates the significance of critical refugee studies for making sense of the position of those characters “with/out family,”—those who do not arrive with intact families—refugees rather than immigrants. State family-building projects through adoption and resettlement work to mediate and

produce formations of kinship that adapt to the middle-class heteronormative model, but simultaneously, other structures of affiliation and dependence emerge that reinforce, destabilize, and reveal the workings of empire, race and war. The (af)filations produced by the conditions of war exceed and make transparent state attempts to enfold and include them within a national narrative of family.

Chapter **Three** approaches the transnational family as a site of intergenerational memory of the war. Disrupting narratives of generational conflict, I analyze GB Tran's graphic novel *Vietnamerica* (2011) and the potential that comics offer as an archive for memories of the war, a cultural site not unlike the war itself where photos and artifacts do not exist. The genre of comics makes it possible for Tran to render family as both spatial and temporal site of transnational and intergenerational history, exceeding the U.S.-based framework of refugees that begins with resettlement.

Chapter **Four** reads the war through the family as a site of history, memory, trauma and mourning. Taking the gendered and racialized family unit from sociology, I articulate these kin-relationships as the site where day to day interactions evidence past experience and trauma that continues to be carried and transmitted across generations. I ask, why would trauma and the war be such a point of interest in these literatures if families were in fact able to successfully adapt and assimilate? How does silence transmit experience and knowledge about the war in mundane daily interactions? In dialogue with Chapter One, this chapter examines the ways that assimilation rather than war can be understood as a site of the violent enactment of power. Second-generation art and poetry reflect the unfinished nature of refugee resettlement and point to the ways that assimilation itself is a form of force and coercion.

My study concludes, then, with questions that still haunt the present moment.

Why would issues of trauma and the war be so prominent in these literatures if refugee families were in fact successfully adapted and assimilated? How does silencing the experiences of war result in the transmission of the experiences of the war in daily life through family dynamics throughout multiple generations?

Chapter One: Grateful Refugees and Families for the State

“I couldn't imagine what the refugees would look like,” said Taft... the door opened and out stepped the first family: a handsome man, his gorgeous wife dressed in a long, flowing, flowered Vietnamese *ao dai*, and three polite, well-groomed children. They were followed by another equally attractive family, and then another. The crowd responded with admiration.¹



Figure 1: “Couple with child coming off a bus. Fort Chaffee (Ark.)”²

¹ Larry Clinton Thompson, *Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus, 1975-1982* McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers (2010)

² 1970-1980 UC Irvine, Southeast Asian Archive Date accessed 1.25.2016.

The influx of over 130,000 refugees in 1975 constituted the single largest cohort of refugees admitted in the United States and “one of the most massive evacuation and relocation efforts in history” (Montero 1979: 33).³ In the photo above we are told, another “handsome,” “gorgeous,” and “polite” family steps off a bus at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, the second of what would be four resettlement camps in the United States. The words are those of Julia Taft, head of the Interagency Taskforce for Indochina Refugees tasked with resettling the first wave of refugees, providing testimony of her first experience with the Vietnamese in the United States. Taft recalled the similar response of former commandant of the Marine Corps and the head of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and Leonard F. Chapman, Jr.:

When I went up to Indiantown Gap I **was sure the Vietnamese refugees were going to carry spears and wear no clothes. When I saw these people and I realized what loving couples and families they were, I was so proud of my country and I knew that we should do everything we could to help them...** for Taft, the visit to Indiantown Gap and the reaction of Chapman was the moment she knew that the resettlement program for Vietnamese could succeed.⁴

Chapman’s surprise at the apparent modernity of the Vietnamese families reveals the pervasive racialization of Vietnamese as primitive during the American War in Vietnam. The Vietnamese thus became legible and eligible for resettlement only as properly dressed and well-mannered families. The physical attractiveness of the Vietnamese refugee family, and their heteronormative family structures, solidified their status as modern subjects who had rejected communism and thus should be incorporated into

³ The distinction between refugee cohorts will be discussed in the latter half of the chapter.

⁴ Thompson, *Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus*. Emphasis mine.

American society. This image of the “good refugee” not only roots the Vietnamese within the heteropatriarchal family; it also justifies U.S. intervention in Vietnam in the name of saving beautiful and deserving families. With a man, wife and “three polite, well-groomed children” and other equally attractive families that followed, a lost war could now be rewritten as a success.

In this chapter, I analyze the state’s investment in the discursive rendering of the “good Vietnamese refugee family.” I argue that *refugee families* constituted a two-pronged solution for the United States: to blunt critiques of its international racial project of empire⁵ and its domestic racial problems in the 1960s and 1970s. As Yen Le Espiritu (2014) and Mimi Nguyen (2012) have shown, the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s and 1980s helped to resolve the contradictions of the US empire by rearticulating the failed war in Vietnam as successful and moral. On the domestic front, discourses on the model minority refugee families managed the structural critiques articulated by racialized communities during the civil rights movement. I will demonstrate that sociological studies on refugee adaptation drew upon policy reports such as the Moynihan Report in order to situate refugee families and Vietnamese culture as the solution to the racialized poverty faced by Latino/as and African Americans. I identify three epochs in the construction of the refugee family as an instrument of state

⁵ In Amy Kaplan’s Presidential Address to the American Studies Association in 2003, she discusses the post 9/11 shift in usage and meaning of the word empire, from potentially critical of the operations of power to a term that celebrates U.S. exceptionalism. She ends by calling for a transnational turn in American studies in order to destabilize and denaturalize U.S. imperial power, translating “empire” is thus a strategy for situating the U.S. within transnational circuits of empire (2004).

policy. The first period established the ideological stakes of the family construct in US immigration and official state policy; the second consigned refugees as the objects of (self-affirming) self-sufficiency surveys; and the third identified the refugee family as the reason behind refugee success.⁶

In what follows, I outline the progression, development, and ideological significance of the refugee family within social science discourse and public policies. 1964-1975 was a moment in which the significance of heteronormative and reproductive family was most evident in immigration and antipoverty policies. Therefore, the construction of the refugee family was significant and necessary to the conception of the grateful and successful refugees, enabling refugees to be incorporated into the nation. One question that must be addressed, then, is how and why did the family emerge as the preferred unit of analysis in studies of adaptation and acculturation?

I: Racial Knowledge and Racialized Families

Little more than ten years after Lyndon Johnson declared in his 1964 Presidential address, an “all-out war on human poverty and unemployment in these United States,” the end of the proxy war in Vietnam brought the realities of the war to American soil. The refugees were the material evidence that a failed war had indeed taken place. At the same time, the economic requirements needed to manage hundreds of thousands of

⁶ Though I treat them as three distinct moments for the purposes of tracing the significance of family to social science on Vietnamese refugees, I acknowledge that these moments overlap and there is not such a clear linear movement from one to the next. Epoch one is roughly 1964-1975; two examines 1975-1980 and the final period is 1980-1990s.

Vietnamese refugees posed a challenge to a declining welfare state. The refugee situation thus emerged at the nexus of domestic policy measures and the decades of international warfare, merging domestic and international concerns in unexpected ways. Concerns over poverty and racial inequality collided with the introduction of a large and racially distinct population who largely arrived as dependents of the state. The War on Poverty's anti-poverty policies, primarily the Economic Opportunity Act focused on federal investments in job training programs, education, community development and public assistance, and social science research on ways to alleviate poverty, which was defined as low labor market productivity (Haveman 14). The significance of this definition and the managerial science perspective adopted by the newly formed Office of Economic Opportunity would make empirical studies of economic well-being central to shaping poverty research (Ibid 37). By the mid 1970s, dramatic shifts toward self-sufficiency were being institutionalized at the federal level until economic crises and stagflation challenged Johnson's Great Society spending on social projects (Ibid 4).

The contradictory message of refugee assistance in a moment of contraction of the welfare state was made possible through discourses of anti-communism. The United States had lost the war in Vietnam, but in "rescuing" Vietnamese refugees and bringing them to its shores, it proved that the hardships of communism drove a people to abandon their homelands in search of freedom.

As scholarly experts on the social processes of modernity, social scientists rationalized and standardized the grateful refugee as the rational conclusion of the war.⁷ As exemplified in Taft and Chapman's effusive reactions to Vietnamese families arriving in the camps, the newly-arrived refugees were to be modernized and saved from communism through the process of refugee resettlement. The grateful refugee paradigm rendered the American war in Vietnam successful; it also deployed and maintained a heteronormative capitalist-imperial gaze over the Vietnamese family. The "success" and justification of the American war was buttressed by the production of knowledge about refugees and their success in collusion with governmental and private foundation funding. The research on refugee resettlement, which incentivized social scientists through government grants, emerges as a continuation of the War on Poverty funding regimes, that inserted the Vietnamese as yet another racial group to be studied and a problem to be solved along with other racialized populations.⁸ Among the concerns of the War on Poverty, welfare received the most public attention. As with other populations of color, the concerns of the majority of the studies focused on Vietnamese assimilation and adaptation, re-inscribing narratives of the melting pot, and anticipating barriers to integration.

⁷ Historian David Paul Haney has argued that the Johnson administration's Great Society played a significant role in solidifying the relationship between social scientists and government. and public policy beginning with anti-poverty research. *The Americanization of Social Science: Intellectuals and Public Responsibility in the Postwar United States*. Temple University Press, 2008: 238.

⁸ Haney argues that increased funding from governmental agencies and independent foundations informed and incentivized the research agendas of economists and social scientists and led to the social sciences gaining legitimacy as a field of social relevance rather than merely elitist expertise (5).

The War on Poverty research engaged with similar economic concerns around the supposed difficulties of integration for other racial minorities.⁹ Moving away from critiques of long standing structures of inequality, researchers on Puerto Rican, Mexican American and African American poverty attributed poverty to the groups' "unstable" family structures rather than to the legacies of racism, sexism, classism and other technologies of discrimination.¹⁰ The perceived failure of immigrants and people of color to complete Chicago school sociologist Robert E. Park's cycle of race relations was interpreted as the individual's failure to incorporate American values. At their core, debates about welfare concerned the failure of populations to properly assimilate to American culture. Cultural studies and queer theorist Roderick Ferguson has analyzed canonical sociology to reveal the ways that sexual difference was used to pathologize African Americans, specifically African American women. He argues that Daniel Patrick Moynihan's highly contentious report, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (1965) had constructed the Black family in a way that made it bear the contradictions of capital:

As the family was imagined as that institution that prevented many African Americans from 'moving ahead,' family became that institution that determined the direction of mobility, socializing its members to competitive ideals and practices and granting them the equality of results only as the family yielded to heteropatriarchal dictates (121).

⁹ Rob Van Horn and Philip Mirowski, "The Rise of the Chicago School of Economics and the Birth of Neoliberalism" discuss the rise of the Chicago school of Economics to the development and dissemination of neoliberal economic theories, simultaneously the Chicago school of sociology featured prominently as the figureheads of American sociology. *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (2015).

¹⁰ For an examination of the production of the Latina family as pathological see Laura Briggs 2003.

Historicizing the Moynihan report and alongside the emergence of third world liberation movements, Ferguson argued that the figure of the black matriarch was leveraged as a warning against non-normative sexualities.

Research and policy concerns of this era, best characterized by the Moynihan Report, are echoed in the numerous refugee studies, which were obsessed with occupational and economic-based indicators such as income, family size, and educational attainment. Ferguson's critique is useful for its transnational focus: it contextualized black lesbian movements within the larger context of third world liberation and world-wide struggles for decolonization. Significantly, the emphasis on refugee family as a unit of analysis must be situated at the nexus of domestic transnational considerations of the refugee regime as an apparatus in conjunction with, rather than as distinct from U.S. aims to maintain control of economic markets and assert global hegemony during the Cold War. Throughout this period, the backlash against collective movements to secure rights along the lines of race, gender and sexuality was consolidated at the site of family. The Great Society reforms were an attempt to make the heteronormative family the solution to socially generated problems such as poverty (Self, 2012). Historian Robert O. Self has termed this turn to idealized family "bread winner liberalism" and explains that "the white middle-class nuclear family headed by a patriotic and heterosexual male was central to political contest throughout this period. The idea of that family conveyed such power it is best thought of as a national mythology" (4).

Simultaneously, concerns over family played out at the level of immigration. Though family reunification had been at the heart of immigration policy since federal management in the late 19th century, the Hart-Celler Act, more commonly known as the

Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, codified this preference in immigration policy.¹¹ Feminist immigration scholar Eithne Luibhéid demonstrates the state's investment in heteronormative reproduction, pointing out that the state family was defined as "a cultural unit which contains a husband and wife who are the father and mother of their child or children."¹²

The elevation of family as a preferential category for immigration re-invented the ways that the nation cast its citizens as productive units under capitalism.¹³ This racial, class and gender project¹⁴ of self-sufficiency embodied in the notion of family reunification has materially and metaphorically re-entrenched the notion of an ideal and idealized American family, re-establishing the contours of belonging through kinship and marriage simultaneously inscribing heteronormativity and Anglo and European culture as the norm. The Moynihan Report and the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 reveal the state's relationship to the family as a racialized mode of capitalist self-

¹¹ Luibheid cites text from the 1890 Immigration Act in order to demonstrate a longer legacy of family's significance to immigration policy: "nothing in this act shall be construed as prohibiting any individual from assisting any member of his family or relative or personal friend to migrate from any foreign country to the United States for the purposes of settlement here" (2002, 2).

¹² Here, she quotes anthropologist David Schnieder (*American Kinship: A Cultural Account*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 33

¹³ Luibheid makes this connection in a footnote: "The use of the heterosexual family as an instrument of racial purpose, evident in the 1965 [Immigration and Naturalization Act] also cropped up in Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family...released the same year*." (178 fn109)

¹⁴ Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant define racial projects as "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines." They "do the ideological 'work' of making links" between structure and representation. (*Racial Formation in the United States: from the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 56.

sufficiency.

II. Ensuring Refugee Self-sufficiency

A decade before the arrival of Vietnamese refugees, the Civil Rights movement had called the country to task, asking for reconciliation of the images of equality with the realities of discrimination, segregation and unequal opportunity for African Americans and other groups of color. In contrast, Vietnamese refugees entered the country during a race-relations crisis driven in part by backlash against civil rights mobilizations. In the context of concerns over family emerging from both the post-1965 immigration and the vilified Latino/a and Black families, I suggest that racialized frameworks of family-based research were applied to the newly-arrived Vietnamese refugees.

Examining initial refugee survey literature by the Department of Health Education and Welfare (HEW) alongside the Moynihan Report reveals the “regulative function of the family”¹⁵ to maintain control over and vilify populations of color. According to Moynihan, both welfare use and women in the workforce signaled pathology for African American families. The report offered neither alternatives nor structural analysis of the need for work or assistance. Instead, it presented individualized criticisms of black matriarchs and their emasculating behaviors that caused black men to abandon families. Connecting economics, geography and non-heteronormative family arrangements that included female heads of household, the Report had argued that “at the center of the

¹⁵ Chandan Reddy, “Asian Diasporas, Neoliberalism, and Family,” *Social Text* 107. Reddy analyzes the figure of the “gay Pakistani” in a U.S. asylum case, arguing that it emerges as a regulatory figure of racialized sexuality dependent on racialized notions of family and kinship.

tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure” (28). In other words, saving the patriarchal family structure itself was critical to correcting the social disorder of the black community. Fourteen percent of black female headed households were receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). According to Moynihan, this signaled a “steady expansion” of its use and was a measure of “the steady disintegration of the Negro family structure over the past generation in the United States” (Moynihan 12).¹⁶

From 1975-1980, the U.S. government, through the HEW, commissioned numerous studies of the refugees to ensure their successful adaptation. This period of data collection was mandated by the 1975 Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act (PL 94-23), an Interagency Task Force (IATF) made up of twelve federal agencies, was established to oversee the first years of evacuation and resettlement. This body of official knowledge, consisting of surveys and studies commissioned by and presented to the state, manufactured a type of intimacy between the state and refugees through a regime of continual surveying and surveillance. Refugee homes and families became sites accessible to the state for the production of knowledge through mail and telephone follow-ups that were repeated every 90 days.¹⁷

¹⁶ The racialization AFDC and the Black family structure may be further explained by the fact that African American women had finally gained some access to welfare programs in the mid 60s through War on Poverty reforms (Roberts 1996: 1568).

¹⁷ HEW commissioned IATF and ORR surveys contacted the same sets of families and heads of households via telephone every three months, annually from 1975 to 1979. These surveys sometimes referred to as the Opportunity Systems, Inc. (OSI) wave surveys (for the agency that was paid to conduct them) were commissioned by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, or simply named the survey by wave (first wave, second wave, and so on). These surveys are among the first surveys of refugees since their arrival. The data from these surveys informed the annual report by the Interagency Task Force for Indochina Refugees which was submitted directly to

The aim of the HEW surveys was to examine how quickly refugees achieved economic self-sufficiency. Systematic examination of the surveys reveals the term “household” as the most commonly repeated word, in addition to other obvious terms such as “employment.” HEW wave surveys from 1975 – 1979 collected simple data, rather than asking questions about expectations or feelings, they proceed in the manner of census data, the surveys count refugees, and organize them neatly by age, gender, family size, income and employment status. “Family” indicated a heterosexual kin-based unit in which there are male-headed households with a wife and children is established as the base unit throughout the studies. The surveys used the nuclear family as the site of inquiry, made clear by the designation of a male head as the informant for the surveys. The bulk of each of the HEW wave surveys are appendices, prefaced with a brief overview of findings. For example, the first wave survey for example, consists of twenty-four pages introducing the study, methodology and findings, followed by more than thirty pages of tables in the appendix.¹⁸

Each of the wave reports focused on economic opportunity to provide evidence that the refugees did not constitute economic burdens through dependency on public assistance. The overwhelming financial concern may also be explained by HEW’s oversight of the project. The Department’s purview included a wide range of activities ranging from licensing the polio vaccine in 1955 to administration of social security and

Congress, as well as other social scientific analysis on the question of resettlement and adjustment. Following stipulations in the 1980 Refugee Act, the duty of producing survey data and annual reports became a responsibility of the Office of Refugee Resettlement.

¹⁸ Meanwhile the amount of public assistance that was being received by families in the first wave survey: “fewer than one in three (32.0 percent)” was downplayed.

educational programs.¹⁹ Because the social security administration was part of HEW, the Department was charged with generating the policy and research for President Johnson's antipoverty initiatives that dominated the domestic political stage between 1965-1980, as well as temporarily managing refugee resettlement.²⁰ The focus of the HEW surveys reflect the concerns and methods of earlier antipoverty research.²¹ "The aim of such antipoverty studies was to solve the issue of poverty through modeling "social mobility" based on fixed categories of "culture," rather than larger structural analysis of what led to the conditions of poverty in the first place. The surveys produced a circular logic that situated the male head of household as both the cause and effect of poverty. In turn, reinforcing both the heteronormative family unit dependent on a male head of household and the U.S. refugee "problem" as indicated by the design of the metrics. This model and the studies it gave rise to contributed significantly to the development of quantitative models to explain social problems (Haveman 121).

More significantly, the near obsession with economic efficiencies can be read as the reinforcement of traditional middle-class ideals of self-sufficiency in anticipation of neoliberal political and economic shifts from the mid to the late 1970s. The first six HEW surveys from 1975-1979, argued nearly the same thing: refugees did not constitute

¹⁹ <https://www.ssa.gov/history/orghist.html>

²⁰ HEW was one of the departments that made up the Interagency Task Force on Refugees in preparation for arrival, until the Office of Refugee Resettlement was established following the Refugee Act of 1980.

²¹ One such example is The Socioeconomic Life-Cycle model developed by Otis Dudley Duncan and Robert Hodge (1963). In their assessment of male social mobility, the researchers developed a simple linear algebraic model based on white males to measure whether or not background such as race and father's educational level could be improved through interventions via education. Robert H. Haveman, *Poverty Policy and Poverty Research* (1987): 110.

economic burdens and that: “th[e] findings are consistent with the increasing rate of employment and overall progress toward self-sufficiency” (Montero 52). The assertion of intact family dynamics was made possible by initial reporting that over eighty-four percent of households had three or more family members (Ibid 107). Heads of household in the First Wave (October 1975) survey held more white-collar jobs than subsequent cohorts, though most experienced under employment: 60.6 percent of Vietnamese who held white-collar jobs in Vietnam now worked blue-collar jobs, and only 20 percent of former professionals were able to secure professional level employment in the United States (Montero, 39-41). The shared ideological concern over employment speaks directly to the Moynihan report’s calculus of unemployment and the black family’s inability to be incorporated into American society. And yet, when read side by side, the HEW and Moynihan draw drastically divergent conclusions about female employment for Vietnamese versus African American women:

[Vietnamese women] had a strong work ethic. A high percentage of Indochina refugees is [*sic*] in the labor force. The high number of females in the labor force is significant, because the refugees have come from societies where women traditionally have not worked outside the home. This further suggests a strong desire among refugee families to become self-supporting.²²

Whereas the Moynihan Report had used the statistic that over one-fourth of black families were headed by females to castigate the breakdown of the family (9), these reports concerning the Vietnamese argue the opposite. In the first instance, black female workforce participation signaled the breakdown of the family; in the second instance, it

²² HEW: Refugee Task Force, Report to Congress March 15, 1976 in Box 13, folder “Indochina—Refugees Report” of the Ron Nessen Papers at Ford Library: 5.

signaled perseverance and self-sufficiency. Additionally, the way that the first wave report framed public assistance use in negative terms, as “60% of the refugee families reported that they were not receiving any type of federal assistance” indicates that the 40% of families that are on public assistance is not characterized by researchers for HEW as weakness of their racialized family structure (1975: 21). The attempt to frame the number in terms of a majority number **not** receiving assistance appears to be devoid of racial implications, likely in large part because of a discourse that repeatedly asserted Vietnamese success.

By late 1979, according to all measures deemed significant to HEW, refugee resettlement was a success, this despite the reality of downward mobility for Vietnamese in the workforce (Montero 39). This “refugee exceptionalism” – the discursive removal of refugees from discourses of the underclass, argues that eventually refugees would achieve successes promised by liberalism, even though empirical evidence disproved this (2010: 14-15). Additionally, by marking refugees as exceptional, 40 percent Vietnamese welfare use coupled with a moral responsibility to help refugees made it possible to argue that refugees were becoming self-sufficient.

What is significant to this equation of success? The largely in-tact nature of Vietnamese families, enabled researchers to construct Vietnamese families in proximity to middle-class white family structures, through a significant representation of male heads of heteronormative two parent households. This is most clearly evidenced by the stark juxtaposition of Vietnamese family success against the black families presented in the Moynihan Report. It was important for social scientists to argue that female heads of households and their high workforce participation meant perseverance in the face of

devastating of conditions. Because women working meant less reliance on welfare and public assistance for refugees, it could not be read as pathological in the strange and convoluted way that working and welfare were articulated for black families.

Darrel Montero's synthesis and analysis of the HEW documents was published as *Vietnamese Americans: Patterns of Resettlement and Socioeconomic Adaptation in the United States* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979).²³ Montero developed a three-phase theory of spontaneous international migration to explain the data sets from the five waves of HEW surveys and concluded that the Vietnamese would experience accelerated assimilation and smooth pathway to integration compared to previous Asian populations in the United States.²⁴ Montero collapsed the experience of the Vietnamese within the category of Asian American, and argued that successes of previous groups, such as the Japanese and Chinese had set precedents and expectations for Vietnamese to succeed. The first set of surveys on refugees was significant to the image of refugee self-sufficiency which was coupled with conservative backlash against the Great Society programs, that accelerated the decline of the welfare state. As the 1970s gave way to economic deregulation in the 1980s, the family unit would become a significant site to

²³ His book has been referenced by many scholars of adaptation and acculturation. For examples, see: Caplan et al, 1989 (analyzed later in chapter); Jon K Matsuoka, "Differential Acculturation among Vietnamese refugees" *Social Work* Vol. 35, No. 4 (July 1990), pp. 341-345; Robert M. Jiobu. *Ethnicity and Assimilation: Blacks, Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, Mexicans, Vietnamese and Whites*. New York: State University of New York Press (1988).

²⁴ Montero argues that French colonialism and US intervention have provided familiarity with Western culture which should serve as cultural capital for refugees, 60-62.

absorb the externalities of neoliberal restructuring.²⁵ After the 1980 Refugee Act created the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), the HEW Wave reports were replaced with ORR reports that examined all refugee populations in the United States. The Refugee Act of 1980 assured continued funding for the study of refugees demographic and program data by establishing the ORR and mandating annual reports to Congress and recommendations to the President. As refugees aged, their children's success represented the next concern for immigration officials.

As I argued in the first section, Park's assimilation cycle contributed significantly to the study of immigrants and domestic populations of color in the United States. He and his colleagues also uniquely shaped the reception of Asian and Asian American populations in the country. Park's 1928 Pacific Race Relations Survey attempted to assess the "Oriental Problem" of Japanese assimilability. The large Japanese population on the West Coast presented a problem for whites who feared the self-evident "foreignness" of Japanese culture and language. The survey revealed however, that Japanese and their tenacity and willingness to assimilate into American cultural norms made them a "model minority." I argue that in the racialization of Vietnamese as yet another group of Asian Americans, the model minority formulation is adapted as the "successful refugee" narrative.²⁶ The problem-oriented approach to immigrants, which

²⁵ Chandan Reddy makes this argument in relation to the function of the family for new South Asian immigrants, entering the United States after neoliberal restructuring has required the poor to take on the burden of social services through their own family and kin networks. *Social Text*, 109.

²⁶ Yu explains that the model minority derives from the perceived Oriental Problem, where fear of unassimilable Asians posed a threat to the culture and well-being of the West Coast (186).

was applied to Vietnamese refugees, therefore, would be resolved through years of extended research and ultimately enable the United States to occupy a role of “savior” within the literature of resettlement and adaptation (Espiritu 2014: 5-6). For the Vietnamese, the inverse of this argument would reveal itself through images of grateful refugees, whose successes were guaranteed by their ideal and idealized family structures. In short, these studies and surveys carried out the ideological project of asserting positive post-Vietnam war outcomes driven in large part by the successful assimilation of those who had been displaced.

III: Families for the State: Refugees as Immigrants

Popular media reports further suggest that what is responsible for the alleged miraculous economic progress of Vietnamese Americans is the cultural quality of their family life...within the stable, traditional, and hierarchical confines of their families, the Vietnamese are taught that cultural values that are integral to their success. —Nazli Kibria²⁷

On the popular media front from the 1980s through the 1990s, news outlets depicted the refugees as yet another immigrant success story. Analyzing *Newsweek* and *Time Magazine* stories, sociologist Nazli Kibria highlights the emphasis on the positive qualities of Vietnamese families, and their compatibility with American culture. The root of Vietnamese success lies in their determination to adapt,²⁸ their culture, and family structure. Simultaneously, social science research crystallized this assertion through numerous studies and reports on refugees in the decades following their arrival in the

²⁷ (1993: 7)

²⁸ “Safe Ashore at Last,” *Time Magazine*, 1/19/1981

United States. In part, the urgency in the academic research may have been a response to nativist doubts about the refugees: in 1979, 62 percent opposed the the admission of additional refugees.²⁹

The representation of the refugees in news magazines and studies constituted a project of U.S. multicultural liberalism that emphasized individualized success. The family may be the site of inquiry, but only in so far as the unit existed to support the economic self-sufficiency of its constitutive members. In this way, American liberal capitalism's triumph over communism is reaffirmed through the ongoing project of empire. And yet, in the context of economic downturns, the focus on the family as an intact unit has yielded incomplete and contradictory explanations about the reasons for refugee economic success.

The third and final phase that solidifies the "refugee family" as a social scientific construct occurs in the 1980s. The first epoch (1964-1975) demonstrated the ideological stakes of the family focus and its relationship to racialized capitalist regimes of self-sufficiency. The second period emphasized data collection and the repeated conclusion that refugee adaptation had been successful. In this section, I focus on two representative studies of the literature on the second wave of refugees (1980s-1990s), which reveal the synthesis of the previous epochs and the entrenchment of discourses of success (and thus gratitude) within the structure of the family itself. In mainstream discourses and in sociological reports, the family existed as an independent variable affecting economic

²⁹ 1979 New York Times reader poll: Question: "Do you approve or disapprove of the U.S. government's plan to double the number of refugees from Indochina admitted, to 14,000 a month?"

adjustment. The family structure became instrumental for state-sponsored narratives of refugee success. Challenging the episteme of family that is represented in canonical sociology's portrait of the Vietnamese refugee family, I assert that family structure is more than an independent variable; instead, family is a set of socially and historically situated relations and experiences.

Between 1975 and 1990, the federal government and private organizations spent millions of dollars to study refugee resettlement.³⁰ One of the first and most cited studies on Vietnamese refugees is William T. Liu et al's *Transition to Nowhere: Vietnamese Refugees in America* (1979). It has been criticized for taking up E.F. Kunz's (1973) kinetic model of immigration that describes refugees as billiard balls passively moved by external forces and lacking any agency of their own. This model emphasizes the "nationalistic tale of American pluralism, packaged into a narrative of refugee arrival, adaptation, and assimilation" that would come to dominate narratives about refugees throughout succeeding periods (Tang 63-64). The vast majority of studies emphasized the significance of various elements of assimilation and its significance to refugee success (Rumbaut, 1987, Hein, 1995; Haines 1982, 1989). Social scientists sought to explain why Southeast Asians were scholastically and economically successful while their neighbors, poor people of color, were not.

The studies I analyze here have made significant contributions to the field of Vietnamese American studies as well as research on second-generation immigrants and

³⁰ One only needs to read the acknowledgements of these many studies to locate funding sources, oftentimes, dollar amounts of grants and funding are listed. (Haney 17-18) For example, the sixth wave report (August 1979) for HEW (the only report that directly reports funding) lists an amount of 30,000 for that single report.

immigration studies in general. *Boat People* and *Vietnamese Americans* were funded by social science research organizations and relied upon the development of quantitative survey methods to reach their conclusions. The twenty-year period of Southeast Asian immigration may be marked by different waves of refugees bringing with them various educational and economic as well as ethnic backgrounds, but is characterized by a continuity produced through the state's approach to refugee resettlement. The passing of the 1980 Refugee Act represented a shift away from the ad-hoc policies of 1975, but nevertheless reinforced the original goals of resettlement—what was called 'effective resettlement' or economic self-sufficiency which was to be achieved as rapidly as possible (Robinson 134).

The cohorts that followed from the end of 1978 to the early eighties—the so-called “boat people” did not flee in planes or arrive in reception camps in the United States. They were poorer refugees who were provided fewer resources for resettlement and shorter support timelines (from 36 months to 18) than earlier arrivals. By 1980, the United States saw the arrival of Mariel Cubans and Haitian asylum seekers in Florida, coupled with domestic inflation and recession. According to sociologist Ruben Rumbaut, “The confluence of these events in turn contributed to an accompanying political climate of intensifying nativism, racism, xenophobia, and ‘compassion fatigue.’” The economic context produced a bifurcation within the discursive field that distinguished between the first wave of largely well-to-do Vietnamese refugees and later more heterogeneous cohorts of refugees, resulting in a distinction between the earlier refugee success (Rumbaut 1996).

In a marked departure from the initial resettlement surveys, these newer

sociological studies strongly incorporated Southeast Asians into existing frameworks of immigration. In these studies, refugees were repeatedly referred to as new immigrants; and the image of the idealized Vietnamese family as nuclear and intact—the self-evidently beautiful Vietnamese families that arrived in the first wave—had been replaced by the view of the new arrivals as rural, resource poor and coming from broken families. Casting them as immigrants, they were folded into narratives of assimilation and integrated into the state. The actual foundation of this particular migration history—a violent and unnecessary military intervention—gave way to narratives of making it in America. From the 1980s onward, resettlement studies such as Zhou and Bankston’s reiterated Park’s cycle of assimilation (220). The title of a volume (one of many) on the refugees exemplifies this: *Refugees as Immigrants* (1985). The editor David Haines introduced the volume as research on the adaptation of these refugees as just one more in the long line of immigrants to the United States. By collapsing the refugees into the immigrant narrative, Haines and his academic colleagues erased the conditions that generated their movement to the United States in the first place.

The Boat People

In 1981, the Office of Refugee Resettlement contracted sociologist Nathan Caplan for several policy reports. His contributions included studies of refugee self-sufficiency that would have direct consequences on Reagan-era policy agendas regarding resettlement. Caplan, Whitmore and Choy began a five-site survey of Southeast Asian refugees and in 1989 published *The Boat People and Achievement in America: A Study of Family Life, Hard Work, and Cultural Values*. The study analyzes Vietnamese, Lao,

Cambodian and ethnic Chinese populations, and offers a series of generalizations about the second wave of Southeast Asians as though they formed a homogeneous population with shared family structures. Today, Caplan's study has become canonical to Vietnamese and second-generation immigrant studies.

The research questions that drove the work by Caplan and his colleagues presumed refugee success. The introduction to the volume establishes "cultural patterns" as indicative of the success predicted by the research, despite the pan-ethnicity of this cohort of immigrants:

The refugees have now begun to share in the Asian-American success stories we have become accustomed to find reported in the news media. They have made these accomplishments despite having entered this country only with what was on their backs... Their only resources were the cultural patterns of their societies... With this living framework, they were ready to pursue their lives in new circumstances. (Caplan, et al 4)

Although Caplan studied groups of Lao, Cambodian and other "Indochinese" refugees together in order to argue that "culture" and "family" are the roots of success, it draws upon the trends in the sociology of immigration that take for granted the desirability of assimilation and adaptation to American society.³¹ Caplan et al evaluated cultural values, drawing definitions from Southeast Asian literature, history and anthropology. In hierarchized value matrices, the identified three categories of significance: first, "culture-wide Confucian-Buddhist" values, second "family-based orientation" or family support and finally, individual based goals (42). By defining households as nuclear families or extended family units with a nuclear core, and applying this formulation of family to their

³¹ Later studies would reveal that the breaking up of the family structure resulted in the creation of a Southeast Asian "underclass." See Aihwa Ong. *Buddha is Hiding* and Eric Tang *Unsettled*

values matrix, Caplan et al's study affirmed the heterosexual family unit as central to Vietnamese and Southeast Asian success in the areas of educational, and economic achievement.³²

The Boat People is based on interviews of second wave refugees,³³ a much more diverse cohort of than the first wave. Because they were relatively less intact as family units, less educated, poorer, more rural, illiterate, and had less English proficiency, second wave refugees renewed concerns of dependency on welfare and other state programs. Moreover, red flags were raised concerning the assimilation of the second wave given that many of these refugees were resettled in largely poor Latino and Black neighborhoods (unlike the wealthier first wave refugees). The renewed fear of dependency, still grounded in the culture of poverty thesis, made experts worry that the refugees would adopt the "bad habits" of their impoverished neighbors. Despite the disparity in family structures of the subsequent waves, the Caplan study argues that a core set of traditional values and the cultural significance of family to refugees would lead to inevitable success.

As Caplan and his co-authors explained, "[we] place great confidence in [their] explanation of the role of cultural values as implemented through family life-style...these values of practical significance to achievement are, if not identical, congruent with what have been viewed as mainstream middle-class American beliefs about getting ahead"

³² Nathan Caplan and John Whitmore also conducted the *Southeast Asian Refugee Self-Sufficiency Survey* for the Office of Refugee Resettlement in 1985.

³³ Though there is disagreement in the specific cut off between waves of immigration, it is generally agreed that those who did not experience US-based refugee camps, coming largely by boat versus airplane after the initial 1975 cohort are considered part of the second wave.

(Caplan et al 178). Tying these values to traditional and hegemonic American values must be read in contrast to the ‘others’ who “choose” to remain incompatible with the mainstream. Clearly, the Caplan study repeats the narrative about immigrants in America. It reinforces the perceived meritocracy of the American society, and argues that not only have the refugees earned their place but also “have shown the strength of the system by their ascendancy at a time of severe economic recession, when few would have expected them to succeed and some questioned this country’s capacity to support them” (Caplan et al 150).

As we have seen, the Caplan study of Southeast Asian refugees was based on the analysis of survey data culled from interviews, and argued that Southeast Asian refugees (including Vietnamese, ethnic Chinese, and Lao) as a group were succeeding in the United States. The study constructed normative values based on a 9/10 percentage rating by informants. Values rated “Important / very important” consisted of: family loyalty, freedom, morality and ethics, carry out obligations, restraint and discipline, perpetuate ancestral lineage, respect for elders, cooperative and harmonious family. The study’s authors effusively praised refugee cultural values for their ability to overcome obstacles through their family values (89).

But what is the basis of success for these “boat people,” a group that has been so traumatized and faced so much devastation before arriving in the United States? Based on area studies research about Southeast Asia, Caplan identified three main dimensions of the cultural values of Southeast Asian refugees: 1) education and achievement, 2) a

cohesive family, and 3) hard work (42).³⁴ Accordingly, Southeast Asian “ways of life” were said to be rooted in “family-based orientation characterized by reciprocal support and respect featur[ing] centrally in their formulation” (42). For the study headed by Caplan, the family and its traditions and “core values” constituted the site of salvation for the refugee.

It should be noted that sociological research in the 1980s reflected funding regimes that structured the relationship between social science and policy-making. In the words of feminist sociologist of Maxine Baca Zinn, “social reforms of the times favored the modern family as a way of combating social problems” (71). In other words, the Reagan era oversaw the reanimation of conservative understandings of the family. Zinn also argues that in failing to recognize race as a foundational technology that determines social structure, sociologists of the family relegated race and ethnicity as secondary elements of culture for explaining the particularities of experience, thereby disavowing the ideological and material impact that race and ethnicity have on shaping life opportunities. A manifestation of this is a narrative of assimilation, “focused primarily on the apparently universal yearning for the freedoms and comforts of middle-class life in the West.”³⁵ Today in the early 20th century, studies of the second generation of refugees

³⁴ Feminist historian Tani E. Barlow’s reveals that area studies-based approaches to constructing a “Southeast Asian culture” stem from early Cold War methodologies of social science. If area studies is about regionalization, spheres of influence and sovereignty, then the legacy of Southeast Asian Area studies for refugees in the United States requires their rendering as compatible with U.S. capitalism via American cultural values. “Colonialism’s Career in Postwar China Studies.” *Positions* 1:1 1993, Duke University Press.

³⁵ See literary theorists Rick Berg and John Carlos Rowe (7-8).

reproduce this deracialized knowledge about Vietnamese and continue to construct them as model minorities fit for American society.

Growing Up American

In their award-winning and generative study, *Growing Up American* (1998), sociologists Min Zhou and Carl Bankston III examine the adaptation of the children of Vietnamese refugees in the community of Versailles Village, New Orleans. Building upon earlier research that asserted the significance of the ethnic values to adaptation (Haines 1985), the authors extend the argument to community and wider kinship networks to demonstrate that the social capital available to Vietnamese families vis-à-vis a larger Vietnamese community is critical to answering the question of why Vietnamese youth are successful in the face of other minority delinquency.

Following the professional footsteps of the *The Boat People*, Zhou and Bankston's work also was funded by a research foundation,³⁶ and has become canonical in contemporary sociology focused on the assimilation process. Published nearly a decade after the Caplan et al volumes, *Growing Up American* built upon many of the same arguments. The authors maintained that the cultural values of the Vietnamese were a source for positive assimilation. They also situated Vietnamese families within a larger context of community to which they attribute the significance of cultural transmission and tradition. As with *The Boat People*, they concluded the “[f]indings from our study,

³⁶ The Russell Sage Foundation's mission statement cites a dedication to using social science to “diagnos[e] social problems and improv[e] social policies.” Russell Sage Foundation Website: <<http://www.russellsage.org/about>> Date accessed: 01.01.2016

which are consistent with prior research on the Vietnamese refugees, indicate a positive relationship between the acceptance of traditional family values and school performance” (Zhou and Bankston 223). Here children of refugees were framed as second-generation immigrants: the benefits of assimilating to American society and cultural values were unquestioned. Significant for moving away from a strictly cultural explanation for the success of Vietnamese children, the authors turned to the structure of community as an extension of the family and a support system to explain how it was possible to succeed where other racial minorities had failed.

The authors’ research site—Versailles Village, Louisiana—is significant because of the proximity to other minority groups, primarily black families. It thus became the perfect test case for examining the “positive” cultural values of the Vietnamese, those values that would lead to successful assimilation and occupational and educational success. These are the same values that the researchers juxtapose with the “negative” cultural values of their underclass neighbors:

Vietnamese children are pushed toward educational success by their parents but at the same time are pulled by the oppositional youth culture that surrounds them...If they strive to meet their parents’ expectations for academic achievement they are likely to be ostracized as ‘uncool,’ ‘nerdy,’ or ‘acting white’ by their American schoolmates, mostly members of racial minorities. If they submit to peer pressure... they are likely to adopt the cultural ways, including the language and behavior, of the underclass. (Zhou & Bankston, 221)

Demonizing the cultural traits and behaviors of black and brown minorities in the community and constructing them against the traits and behaviors Vietnamese Americans, the authors conceptualize structural inequality as a matter of individual choice. By relying on conservative ideologies about “deficient” versus “functional”

families, Zhou and Bankston asserted that it was imperative that Vietnamese youth be inculcated with strong traditional values so that they do not fall prey to the cultural attitudes of disrespect and delinquency that their black and Latino neighbors embody:

Becoming integrated into a low-income, disadvantaged neighborhood means becoming part of a social group that is alienated from middle-class America and that integration offers few opportunities for becoming part of the American mainstream...Through their families, young people become part of the ethnic community, and the ethnic community enables them to bypass the troubled, marginalized neighborhood that surrounds them and to concentrate on the chief opportunity offered them, public schooling (229).

Here, as in studies of the family from the 1960's, the difference between the larger marginalized community and these Vietnamese families had to do with the ways they embraced both the traditional nuclear family and heteronormativity:

“Though very poor, the Vietnamese displayed one characteristic not usually associated with poverty: the overwhelming majority (81 percent) of families in Versailles Village were married-couple families” (Zhou and Bankston 81).

Women function as an indicator of social break-down and social disorder and therefore are central to scholarly depictions of refugee success. Zhou and Bankston cited a lower number of female headed households 6 percent for Vietnamese families versus 55 percent for African Americans. They conclude that even though these refugees resided in the poorest neighborhoods and had few opportunities for skilled labor, the intact and hierarchical family structure would be the antidote to future problems: “They might... be able to overcome these [economic] limitations with the social capital formed in their intact families and their ethnic community” (81). Whereas Tang’s “refugee exceptionalism” demonstrated that a dismissal of Southeast Asian poverty as a temporary

condition justified inequality against other people of color in the ghetto, Zhou and Bankston's argument deploys exceptionalism as not only a raced, but also a gendered and patriarchal structure.

Although social scientists maintained their focus on economic conditions for refugees, the use of cultural explanations for success in *The Boat People* and *Growing Up American* constructed the Vietnamese family itself as the source of that success.

Vietnamese refugees became the objects of analysis and the family became the unit of inquiry. Conclusions about good or bad family values reveal the sociologists' reliance upon noneconomic measures such as broadly defined cultural values to explain how and why some individuals and their families faced poverty while others did not (Haveman 1987). In other words, these studies gathered statistics, but then opted to draw conclusions from difficult to prove facts.³⁷ The listing of race, gender, and immigration status as descriptive cultural categories of analysis erased structural constraints that organize economic, social and material resources (Zinn, 1990: 73). In this way, the scholarship overlapped with conservative explanations for poverty, that is, redirecting the focus away from the role of the state in perpetuating structural inequality and towards the community's responsibility to "fix" bad cultural traits (Tang 60).

³⁷ Haney ties this shift in research to the political climate in the moment: "As consensus broke down in the United States with the escalating commitment in Vietnam and the disjuncture between the promise and the limitations of the Great Society, radical sociologists challenged their discipline's faith in the efficacy of liberal social policy and interest group-based political decision making, which they insisted were grounded not in empirical certitudes but in ideology" (Haney, 20).

As later studies of Vietnamese refugees would argue, Vietnamese as the new model minority would serve as the evidence against structural critiques of poverty and racism. Their “traditional” ability to transcend circumstances of poverty, fulfilled the promises of assimilation and made good on Park’s race-relations cycle.³⁸

The study of Vietnamese resettlement and its overemphasis on family and cultural values has yet to be situated alongside the racialized legacy of these sociological studies of assimilation. How did this knowledge come to explain refugee success via assimilation through incorporating them into liberal capitalism? The ideological explanation for their success cited cultural explanations supported by sociological data attempted to explain outcomes in terms of success or assimilation. In effect, the Vietnamese experience, the most studied cohort of immigrants /refugees to that date, could not be read as anything else.

Conclusion

Maxine Baca Zinn’s critique of sociological research on the family as being unable to conceptualize the structural aspect of the racial formation allows us to see the problem with Caplan and his colleagues’ constant reassertion of traditional core values.

³⁸ The obsession with Vietnamese families, and the emergence as model minority follow from a trajectory of racialized sociological studies dating back to Park and his Chicago school associates. Henry Yu reveals the “race relations” theories on assimilation were developed through Park’s interactions with Asian Americans during the West Coast Race Relations Survey of 1924. Yu argues that the survey of Asian Americans, produced an American Orientalism, a fascination with Asian Americans ability to culturally assimilate and a simultaneous fixation of them as forever foreign because of their skin and physical appearance, as well as an “Oriental Problem” in which “they were stuck in the gears of the assimilation cycle.” (Yu, 187).

The basis of their argument about Southeast Asian achievement is essentially an argument about the modernity of these supposedly inherent values, a modernity that allows refugees to use their cultural values in order to transcend inequalities faced by other communities of color. Even as sociologists produced quantitative evidence to prove the success of refugees, they simultaneously relied on culturalist explanations. In maintaining that feminism must grapple with race and ethnicity at the structural level, Zinn's analysis of different economic shifts demonstrated how families have been reshaped by concrete social locations that determined both family and racial formations.³⁹ The study of Vietnamese refugees, therefore, continues to rely upon the understanding of refugee resettlement as a family affair. The ideological construction of family is a socially and historically specific concept, rather than an a priori category of analysis.

This chapter's goal has been to uncover the ideological significance of the stable, knowable Vietnamese family, and reveal how sociology has produced expert knowledge that detached refugees from the conditions of war, placing them instead within the racial formation of the United States as merely one among many ethnic minorities. The singular focus on antipoverty efforts, and the conservative cultural explanations sidestep race as a central organizing logic of peoples' lives, social locations, material conditions. What is left out are the lived experiences that far exceed these sterilized calculations of well-being and success in American society. I contend that this shift is part of a concerted

³⁹ Zinn also points out, "Most contemporary feminist thought takes great care to underscore class, race, and gender as fundamental categories of social organization, but when it comes to family patterns, race and ethnicity are used as elements of culture, not social structure. Descriptions of cultural diversity do not explain why families exhibit structural variations by race" (1991, 73).

effort to claim the refugees as immigrants and enfold them into the ‘nation of immigrants’ narrative and detach them from the realities of their displacement.

Exemplifying this shift, the studies by Caplan, Zhou, and Bankston focus on the refugee family and the second generation, respectively, by analyzing their incorporation into American society relative to other racial groups.

The authors of these studies employ instrumentalist understandings of family. As Caplan and his co-authors write, “The family is the major vehicle by which the Indochinese define and come to grips with the world they face” (178). Family structures are variables that lead to increased social capital and are necessary to support economic success in a moment when increased federal investment in communities and families has predetermined failure for other minority groups. When treated as an independent variable that can be used to predict outcomes for refugee adaptation, the family is called upon to reinforce the aims of the state and reproduce possessive individualism; the discourse on the family in traditional sociology is racialized and ideological. In other words, the family is called upon to be the missing piece in stories of inequality, and thereby to reinforce hegemonic values such as heteronormativity.

By reinterpreting the language of the Caplan study and rearticulating “family” so that it is an analytic and no longer a heteronormative-state bound unit, I argue that we may now understand more fully the operations of the state and the stakes of producing knowledge about refugees and their intimate lives. Rather than accepting the claims of earlier studies as proof of the assimilability of the Vietnamese, a closer reading reveals the significance of state intervention through sociology in order to establish ideal family ‘types’ that can be either pathological or successful. We may view older studies as stories

about state intervention rather than generalizable predictions about how second-generation immigrant or refugee children will fare. The context of the failed war is significant to informing the motives of why such studies were conducted and the ways their outcomes confirm international policy such as large-scale resettlement. In focusing on the emergence of the refugee family in this survey literature, I demonstrate how official knowledge of refugees was constructed in relation to racialized discourses of pathology based on canonical sociological studies about African Americans, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. The overemphasis on success produced the Vietnamese as yet another group of immigrants, and argued that they have been successfully included in American society because of their compatibility with pre-existing American values.

This incorporation affirms the myth of the United States' benevolence and is used to discredit structural critiques of inequality, simultaneously distancing Vietnamese refugees as a population that is in the United States due to failed war, and reinforcing domestic racism. Additionally, the metrics for measuring success can be contextualized as an ideological maneuver designed to allow Americans to move on from the war. In this chapter, I have demonstrated that state-sponsored discourses of family have defined it in relation to the heteronormative family as a reproductive unit necessary for liberal inclusion into the nation-state and the political and economic system of capitalism. The remaining chapters articulate alternative epistemologies of family. We will see the family as a set of relationships (non-normative families) and as a mode of temporality--a site of knowledge that exceeds state narratives of assimilation. In Chapter two, I will examine the significance of "family" as the site of alternative non-kin family formations for those who have been violently displaced, split up and re-arranged as a result of war.

Chapter Two: Family Beyond Nation: Domesticating Refugees

Nationalism and the Domestic Sphere: Bounded Integrity of Nations

The relationship between family and nation has long been recognized as a metaphor for the “bounded integrity of nations” (Franklin and McKinnon 1). As chapter one demonstrated, concerns over the ends of the Vietnam War and refugee resettlement were resolved at the site of the family. This chapter attends to refugees as the excess that lies outside of the normative frame of the heterosexual and intact family. The construction of the *refugee family* was central to the production of the narrative of grateful refugees. The trope of family became a critical site for racializing the Vietnamese as naturally successful compared to African American and Latino/a families, enabling refugees to be incorporated into the nation with little adjustment to social policy and without any attention to structural racism. Through sociological metrics which exclaimed educational success and occupational attainment, Vietnamese refugees were celebrated as the newest immigrants and enfolded into the rising narrative of U.S. multiculturalism. The media and scholarly obsession with Vietnamese refugee achievement overwrote the failed military policy that had brought the refugees to the United States in the first place (Espiritu 2006; Mimi Nguyen 2013; Tang 2015). This chapter is concerned with how the refugee reveals the work of state family-building projects to mediate and produce formations of kinship outside of the middle-class heteronormative ideal. How do other family structures emerge from, reinforce, destabilize and reveal the workings of empire, race and war? And how do the (af)filiaions which emerge from the

conditions of war exceed and make transparent state attempts to enfold and include them within a national narrative of family? If the family, for the state, is a biological (re)productive unit that can be mobilized toward self-sufficiency and neoliberal success via assimilation, then how do we make sense of the state's relationship with those who split as a result of the war? In addition to the beautiful and successful Vietnamese families that arrived in the first wave, others also arrived in the United States; among them adoptees and untethered individuals whose family ties had been severed by the war and the chaotic resettlement that followed.

In this chapter I am interested in the significance of two other refugee figures, the **transracial / transnational adoptee** and the **refugee with/out family**. Drawing from the notion of family as an organizing trope—naturalizing power and an institution in both colonial and postcolonial nation building projects, I focus on refugee resettlement in the United States as a project of nation building through family (McClintock, 1995). Building upon Ethnic studies scholar Jodi Kim's analysis of Asian American cultural texts as a site of critique of the global circuits of empire arising from United States' interventions in Asia, and her assertion that the Cold War is a site of continual knowledge production, I focus on the contradictions that emerge from the Vietnam War and the trope of the family in cultural texts about resettled refugees and refugee adoptees. The incorporation of refugees into the United States points both to the refugee as marker of the historical life of empire, as well as the open-endedness of the project of empire, as refugees become domestic racial subjects through the rubric of family. The structure of "family" marks simultaneous inclusion of the bodies of the adoptees and refugees and the exclusion of their histories. War and empire serve as the conditions of possibility for adoptees and

resettlement policies, but are also productive of a various forms of agency and interdependence that fall outside of the nation's calculus of family.

The Kinship of Orphans and Adoptees

As sponsorship-based resettlement policies and transracial / transnational adoption are family making policies of the state, I examine the ways that the trope of family for those not neatly enclosed in the heteronormative family reveals the ways that the family as an institution is historically produced, rather than natural. For Amerasian and "orphaned" Vietnamese children, state policy to resettle, adopt and to accept these orphans as American citizens was put in motion in the days immediately surrounding the ending of the war.¹ Concerns over the legitimacy of kinship² reflect anxieties about the constituency of the nation-state, making the issue of nation/family an issue of national

¹There are so many stories of disruption, re-arrangement and loss of kin and non-kin family relationships. In Vietnam, "Wells pointed out that while there were only about 20,000 children in orphanages last year (about 1700 scheduled to for adoption by foreigners) there were 880,000 children who had lost at least one parent and needed some kind of assistance." (Congressional Hearing, 134)

² Once situated primarily in anthropology, kinship studies has expanded to include scientific, feminist and cultural studies investigations and draws productively upon the tension of kinship as both a theoretical concept and a social category (Franklin and McKinnon 1). A key topic in social and cultural anthropology is the study of kinship, which has view human relations to other individuals (through domains between generations, marriage, and siblingship) or as a form of social organization (Bronisław 1930:19–29). Kinship also is studied on the symbolic aspects and how symbols and meanings on gender, personhood and sexuality (Peletz 1995). Moving from the self-reflexive turn attributed to feminist critics such as Gayle Rubin (1975), and David Schneider (1984) contemporary deployments of kinship are contradictory. Significantly, these divergences reveal how kinship as a concept and a social category naturalizes various ideas and power structures (Franklin and McKinnon 1).

memory.³ This chapter engages Judith Butler's work on kinship not just as blood relations, but "as a set of practices...that emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency" (11). Centering refugees and the conditions of dispersal, rupture and war as the conditions of possibility for family building projects of adoption and resettlement, I seek to decenter the imagined stability and benignity of nation and the heteronormative family.

Americans learned about Vietnamese refugees in newspapers and on television in the days after the war. Local news carried stories of refugees settling into small towns and large cities as they were dispersed across the fifty states. Following the "Fall of Saigon"—the United States' defeat and the "official" ending of the Vietnam War in April of 1975—over one million people fled Southeast Asia. Named Operation Babylift, the controversial policy was implemented within days of the evacuation of U.S. troops and high-ranking allies; over 2,000 Amerasian children who had been fathered by American servicemen were "evacuated" from Vietnam as a public relations move, a last-ditch effort to portray the role of the United States in favorable light. With the Fall of Saigon also came coverage of the downed cargo plane on April 4, 1975 carrying around 300 passengers including the first group of 250 Amerasian orphans to be adopted by American parents in accordance with U.S. policy. The death toll included 78 children and the surviving orphans were eventually flown to the United States. Despite the plane

³ Butler makes this connection through an analysis of the separation of same-sex marriage and kinship relationships in France. The conflation of kinship and marriage have "become sites of intense displacement for other political fears... about new demographics, and about the very transmissibility of the nation" (2002: 21).

crash, the United States continued its mass evacuation of Amerasian children until April 30, 1975 resulting in over 2,600 infants and children airlifted from Vietnam.⁴ The news coverage of the tragic events of the crash and the comparatively relatively small operation compared to the 130,000 refugees resettled in the United States would be the subject of a disproportionate amount of focus in the years following the war. News of the inaugural flight's deadly crash seemed to dictate conversations of the adoption program, some condemned the policies, while others lauded the expediency and momentum of the resettlement of war orphans, under the name of humanitarianism. In mainstream newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, stories that endorsed the adoptions discussed the feelings of adoptive parents and their fears and anxieties about the fates of their adopted children.⁵

A 1976 *Los Angeles Times* article entitled, "And Then They Were 10. The Seeley Clan and How it Grew"⁶ captures the binary nature of the debate on transracial and transnational adoption. The first side represents perspectives used by white experts:

⁴ <http://www.afhso.af.mil/topics/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=19872> Date accessed: 5.1.2016

⁵ Searching *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* under terms "Vietnam AND babylift" between 1975 -1990 yielded: twenty-two and twenty-seven articles respectively. Of these articles, the three most represented categories of stories: 1. reported the couple of public cases where Vietnamese family members fought for their children back; 2. emphasized adoption as positive, from the perspective of adoptive parents, and 3. discussed the crash. Only three of the forty-nine stories discussed the racial and cultural differences between the children and their (usually) white adoptive parents; they asked how these American parents would raise these children in the face of difference and highlighted behavioral issues brought on by a combination of the experiences of war and the shock of transnational adoption.

⁶ Cimon, Marlene. Nov 7, 1976; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times pg. E1

including adoptive parents, social workers or scientists who speak on behalf of adoptees of the positive impact of adoption; the other perspective argues that children of color suffer when placed in white families.⁷ The binary nature of the debate sets it up as a conversation in favor of family as universal good or a particular kind of negative outcome – outwardly imposed racial segregation.

Allied with the former view that adoption with any willing family was a preferable alternative to children without families, the story naturalizes the family as a place of belonging:

Jim and Jo Seeley had four children when they decided to adopt for the first time. They didn't make a big deal out of it. It was just something they really wanted to do that seemed natural and right.

As a “natural and right” thing to do for the Seeleys, the institution of family operates as an organizing principle of society. The moral argument in favor of saving children dominated discourses of the orphans, allowing middle-class American families to become a site for the domestication: turning refugee adoptees into American citizens.

The family of ten included other transnational and U.S.-born children of various racial and mixed race ancestry. The most recent addition to the family, was a six year-old mixed race Amerasian child, “the child of a Vietnamese woman and a black American serviceman,” renamed Todd. He arrived in the Seeley family after being rejected by

⁷ This latter perspective argues that Microaggression, pressures to assimilate and an inability of white parents to understand the unique experiences of their children of color lead to social workers advocating for same-race placements for adoptees. The other main argument favors love and quick placement. Proponents of this view argue that these pressures supersede any other negative outcomes and are critical for the healthy development of children. This also easily lends itself to a conversation which suggests that the mixed race family is a site of hope for “multicultural utopia” (*Outsiders* 4).

another American family. In his six months with the Seeleys, Todd had a difficult time adjusting to life in the United States, and exhibited a number of emotional and behavioral problems, such as physical outbursts and resistance to physical affection, though in the story Mrs. Seeley says. “He was wild, but he’s 90% better today.” The reporter goes on to connect his breakdowns to his past: “Todd doesn’t talk much about Vietnam, but he remembers. ‘One day when we were outside, a helicopter flew over the house and he dove into the bushes,’ one of his sisters says. ‘And thunderstorms wipe him out.’” But the framing of Todd’s issues as “behavioral problems” reveals the ways that the experiences of war have been internalized in the bodies of these children and domesticated at the site of family—as personal issues to be overcome.

In his examination of transnational / transracial adoption, queer theory scholar David Eng asks, “How is the otherness of the transnational adoptee absorbed into the intimate space of the family? How are histories of imperialism and globalization, as well as disparities of race, gender, class, and nation, managed or erased within the privatized sphere of the domestic?” (2010: 94). Discourses of transnational / transracial adoption in mainstream news uphold the notion that the universality of love and family will overcome any difficulties and counter criticisms of the appropriateness of adopting war orphans. In this way, Eng argues, the family is made to absorb the adoptee and the histories of displacement which made the child available for adoption in the first place. I argue that this absorption is a means of domesticating and aggressively enfolding not just transnational adoptees, but refugee adoptees as well into U.S. families, as well as privatizing and individualizing these histories, relegating them to the private sphere to be dealt with as “behavioral problems” or issues of adaptation to life in the United States.

Building upon Eng's attention to the ways the site of the family absorbs difference, I argue that articulating the adoptee not as a transnational / transracial adoptee but rather a refugee calls attention to the ways that war cannot be absorbed by the family, and is in fact in excess of it.

Orphans and non-intact families were dependents of the state until they were able to enter the custody of another family, or become self-supporting. Both the state and media outlets presented refugees as the victims of their circumstance, a people who are swept up and washed along a migratory route that ended in the United States—the innocence of leaving not by choice but by historical forces serves as the moral justification for rescue and aid by the United States. In chapter one, I showed that refugees who passed as beautiful heteronormative families were praised in media reports and sociological studies. Those who did not fit neatly into these structures, however, were disciplined in order to become compliant subjects of the U.S. nation-state. Taking up Anne McClintock's definition of domesticity as “both a space (a geographical and architectural alignment) and a social relation to power,” I argue that transnational and refugee adoptees were emplaced not only in the United States national family but also in one of its privatized families through adoption and resettlement policies (34). I also suggest by focusing on refugee adoptees, this rearticulation of family which is premised upon relations of dependency is a means of mediating and effacing the war through the domestic sphere.

Daughter from Danang: Transracial Adoption and Failed Reunion

Transnational and transracial adoptions exceed and make transparent state attempts to enfold refugees within a national narrative of family. The critically acclaimed documentary on a Vietnamese refugee adoptee, *Daughter from Danang*, received the Grand Jury Prize at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival, toured a circuit of over sixty U.S. film festivals, had a brief twenty 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. Featuring transnational adoptee Heidi Bub (“Bub”) and her birth mother Mai Thi Kim (“Mai”), the documentary opens with their retelling of the circumstances of their separation, set against the backdrop of the controversial Operation Babylift. After estrangement from her adoptive mother as a young adult, Bub is impelled to return to Vietnam in search of reconciliation with her birth mother, Kim. However, the sentimentalized narrative emphasizing the bond of maternal love is complicated by the fact that transnational adoption, 22 years of separation, assimilation, and physical distance spanning continents coalesce and animate the desire for reconciliation. Independent Television Service (ITVS) describes the scene of **cultural clash**:⁸

Heidi and her Vietnamese relatives find themselves caught in a confusing clash of cultures and at the mercy of conflicting emotions that will change their lives forever. Through intimate and sometimes excruciating moments, *Daughter from Danang* profoundly shows how wide the chasms

⁸ Critical work by Fiona I.B. Ngo, “A Chameleon’s Fate: Transnational Mixed Race Identities,” (2005) and Jodi Kim refuse this trope and the conclusion of inevitable failure. Kim dispels the culture clash myth not as an attempt to recuperate the film, but to analyze the moments that cannot be accounted for by the trope of culture clash or individual selfishness, as she emphasized the excess, the “‘impossible contradictions’ constituted and engineered by transnational, transracial adoption.” (251)

of cultural difference and how deep the wounds of war can run—even within one family.⁹

After experiencing the poverty of her family and being asked for money by her sister Hien, it is her brother's request for financial support of their mother at the end of the trip that triggers her emotional breakdown, resulting in Bub's wish that she had never been reunited. This moment gets cited as evidence of cultural clash, as an *L.A. Times* review claims, supposedly "manifest in the grasping emotional and financial neediness of the Vietnamese clan" (Hardy 2002). Universalizing the family reunion in the context of Vietnam effectively de-politicizes the war and the context in which Bub is given up and adopted.

For Heidi Bub, the instability of family is precisely what propels her journey to Vietnam in search of a relationship with her mother: she is given up by her birth mother, adopted by a single woman and abandoned as a teenager. At the close of the film, after reuniting with her family, Bub is rendered ungrateful and the unsuccessful reunion is the result of personal failure. She is an unsympathetic character because it is her personal failure and inability to transcend culture, race and the past that prevents reconciliation with her birth mother in Vietnam.¹⁰ Her desire to find her Vietnamese family challenges the successes of the adoption program and her inclusion as a United States citizen. Jodi Kim has argued that "'new' transnational and transracial geographies of kinship find an 'old' genealogy in America's Cold War in Asia" which includes the breaking up of families and forced transnational connections with family members (203). Bub's

⁹Available online at: <http://www.itvs.org/films/daughter-from-danang/>.

¹⁰ See Kim's analysis of "ugly American" *Ends of Empire* page #

experience shows what the refugee exposes: at the nexus of both U.S. domestic and global war, the refugee is the excess of what is containable or what is trying to be contained, which is the immigrant family. The notion of family that is proposed by the film and critics represents a refusal to acknowledge the ways that, “ideologies of kinship become embedded in and signifiers of relations of power that draw lines of hierarchy and exclusion, bring about relations of dominance and subordination, and generate a range of violences in the heart of kinship” (Franklin and McKinnon 18). Kinship is not necessarily a loving or safe space, and it is not equally attainable for all, precisely because of the relations of power and dominance of the United States. For Bub and many other Amerasians, this included the conditions of war, specifically occupation by American soldiers in Vietnam that govern her conception, her mother’s decision to give her up for adoption, and the material reasons she and her mother remained out of touch for so long.

Daughter from Danang is a film about the Vietnam War that takes place in Vietnam without any mention of militarism and violence and lacks critical engagement with the conditions that required Bub’s biological mother Mai to seek work on the military base and form a relationship with Bub’s absent biological father. As women, Bub and Mai are rendered 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. In the context of such “Vietnam representation,” this illegibility, according to Susan Jeffords, produces women as “refugees” within U.S. social relations.¹¹ However, the reality of Vietnamese women as actual and not merely

¹¹ Jeffords’ use of the term ‘refugees’ is coincidental pertinent. Her analysis is rather

symbolic refugees, in the logic of war, presents an impossible subject position; as racialized and gendered subjects, these women are doubly exiled. Bub's existence as a mixed-race Vietnamese woman in the United States inflects the possibilities of reconciliation in ways more complex than the cultural clash narrative can account for.

In the opening vignette, interviews between mother and daughter are crosscut. Bub explains her desire for reunion, while her mother recaps the events which lead to giving her daughter up. Mai says, "When I gave birth to her, she had no father, so I gave her my last name. And I named her Hiep because it means united... united with her mother."

In Mai's case there was an ambiguous relationship between herself and Bub's biological father, "Her father was generous and loving. He brought food for her brothers and sisters. I did it for my children, for food and clothes." She continues, describing how she came to work at the military base and how the relationship began, "My boss knew I was scared, so he approached me slowly. He called the interpreter over to tell me that if I loved him, he would take care of me and all my children. He left four months after I got pregnant."

Mai Kim makes clear that the arrangement was made necessary by the material conditions of war. Bub's father's 'loving' nature is contrasted by the unequal dynamics that both required Kim to go to work on the base and rendered her vulnerable to his

problematic; she argues that within the discourse of warfare, women become refugees in U.S.-social relations, ignoring the ways that refugee subjectivity is constructed racially with respect to structures of power informed by relations of empire and colonialism (1989: 186).

sexual advances. Within the constrained choices presented to Kim, her sexual relationship with Bub's father was a matter of survival, "for [her] children, for food and clothes." Her encounter with the soldier on the military base is a direct result of the economic restructuring of war which produced the conditions of militarized sexuality¹² and, if not rape, coercive relationships many Vietnamese women endured or engaged in. Jana K. Lipman argues that the ability to appeal to the American-ness of the Babylift orphans depended on the ability to construct kinship of Amerasians "as biological Americans who could be brought home" through the self-evidence of (most often) white American faces (2011: 33-38). In pleas to save these children of American servicemen, the contours of the belonging and of the nation were established through whiteness and American paternity. As Lipman demonstrates, incorporating adoptees into the national family makes invisible the conditions of militarized sexuality and rape that stem from the war and ask how the possibility for kinship has been restructured by these conditions.

Between Vietnam and America

Transracial adoptees have been appropriated by colorblind neoliberal multiculturalist discourses. The volume *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption* (2006) emphasizes the transnational and transracial aspects of international and domestic mixed-race adoptions to "reveal transracial adoption as the intimate face of colonization, racism, militarism, imperialism and globalization" (7). Operation Babylift is

¹² The film only frames Mai's work on the military base as motivated by necessity and does not contextualize the United States' role in establishing and managing prostitution: "Militarized prostitution in Vietnam was organized by degrees from bar girls to massage parlors, and so on" (Enloe 2000: 66).

made possible only through appeals to whiteness and belonging to the national family, as Lipman's study of representations of Vietnamese Amerasians in popular culture reveals. In pleas to save these children of American servicemen, the moral responsibility was premised on inclusion within the nation via whiteness and American paternity. Decades later, the Homecoming Act¹³ would renew this effort, but under the banner of saving our Americans (Vietnamese children with American faces) over there.

The notions of inclusion and belonging were exemplified in Bub's curated responses by her adoptive mother, Anne Neville, who is absent throughout the film and also in Bub's life. Bub recalls to the camera: "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." The disavowal of Bub's "Oriental" roots and the reaffirmation of her whiteness presents a hypochondriac-like relationship to Bub's subjectivity. Hypochondria, used here as theorist Anne Cheng defines is as the "fear of racial contamination," is a form of melancholia which presents itself as a mode of perception and reception to the dual socialities that demanded Asian Americans to assimilate as well as maintain cultural difference (92). These demands made upon the Asian American subject, who is called upon to at once assimilate, yet maintain cultural

¹³ The Amerasian Homecoming Act was introduced in House on August 6, 1987 and enacted in 1988. The act "Provides for the admission as an immigrant into the United States (for two years beginning 90 days after enactment of this Act) of an alien residing in Vietnam who: (1) was born in Vietnam after January 1, 1962, and before January 1, 1976, and whose father was a U.S. citizen; or (2) is the spouse, child, or mother, or has acted as the next of kin (with specified limitations) of such an alien.

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”—hence, Bub is read as ignorant (71). 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” (78). Hypochondria also manifests itself as a concern with authenticity or origins, because the fulfillment of assimilation does not manifest itself as protection or complete incorporation for the assimilated subject, but rather allows this subject to live with tremendously conflicted social demands. 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: it is not a smooth process of seamless interpellation, but a process that constantly rubs the subject up against the limits of “proper” subjecthood. This preoccupation with origins lies at the heart of the film, but it registers itself on the level of desire, desire, which I argue, is constantly misunderstood and misread by reviewers as a desire for idealized and sentimental love. 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 as a racial minority.

Moreover, neither the film nor reviews of the film directly engage the trauma of abandonment by her adoptive mother, or more generally of her assimilation—the erasure

of her Vietnamese heritage through passing as American, as doing so would radically call into question the “rescue and liberation myth” and the outcomes of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. The reunion narrative between Bub and Mai, 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 “over there,” not in their present or future in the United States.

In high school, she sheds her “Oriental” – looking straight black hair for perms and Heidi says, “Nobody knew.” This apprehension in her inability to pass is one place where her racial ambiguity is present. The casual assertion that Bub is assumed to be just white American, in her love of bologna and the de-racialization of her “suntanned skin” affirmatively ties American citizenship and inclusion to her ability to pass as white.

Her inability to be properly domesticated—to properly exist in relation to power, manifests in her experiences of racism, which prevent her from being fully interpellated as a white-passing child from South Carolina, her search for belonging, which I argue is motivated by her domestic experiences of racism becomes the reason for her failed kinship (McClintock 34). If we engage Bub’s complexity as not either an American, a Vietnamese American, a woman of color in the South, an orphan, adoptee, or a refugee, but the interaction of all of these, we can think about her desire to go to Vietnam as something beyond a sentimental desire to connect with the past—but as an aversion to the present, her life in the United States, and her everyday experiences of racism. Situating her as a refugee resists temporalizing the war as only in the past and reframes her experience in the South as a transnational experience. As a mixed-race Vietnamese

American woman, she will always be racially tied to her Vietnamese origins, and though the fact of her return to Vietnam implicates a transnational relationship in the simplest sense, the South itself also becomes the place where histories of war, racism and social conflict coalesce. By focusing on her life in Pulaski, I ask why the fascination with reunion rather than her experiences growing up in the U.S.? Even though we discover that Mai Thi Kim gave up her daughter to save Bub's life, this is seen as one of the most wrenching details in the story. If we situate her relationship with her white 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 psychic violence enacted daily through Bub's life, that her assimilation and experiences of racism in the United States inform her desires for motherly love and reconciliation. In this way, adoptions reflect Butler's assertion that "...it is not possible to separate questions of kinship...from the fictions of 'bloodline,' as well as the national and racial interests by which these lines are sustained" (Butler 15).

As depicted in the film, 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. This gap relies on the construction of Heidi Bub's "Southern bubblyness" or her inability as an American to understand her birth family's request for money against her family's "emotional and financial neediness." The images in the film of her naiveté of the difficulties of her family members' lives are constructed and naturalized as mutually exclusive 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 being “emotionally and financially needy,” which at once constructs them as greedy and conniving. But the judgment that reviewers tie to this construction is excused because her family’s financial neediness is equally implicated in understandings of Vietnamese family formations: the poverty and request for money is a natural part of being Vietnamese, “cultural” facts used to explain away unfavorable behavior, but do not engage the realities and aftermath of the war. That neither party could transcend these differences only works to further naturalize these ascribed characteristics through readings of the film.

Melancholic Refugees, Family, Race, National Formation

Reading Bub as a refugee figure, rather than only as a transnational adoptee, engages her subjective position vis-à-vis the state and asks who is made to bear the costs of reconciliation or rescue. Situating Bub not only as a transnational adoptee,¹⁴ but also as a refugee, reveals the war as the condition of possibility for her “rescue,” while also unsettling the “state-citizen hierarchy,” as refugee status is antithetical to being a rooted citizen (Espiritu 2006: 422). Bub’s experiences as a U.S. citizen must be contextualized through her experiences of displacement and resettlement resulting from the confluence of race, gender, war and violence, which is washed over in the documentary’s universalizing narrative of a mother-daughter love story. Reading Bub as a refugee, “not as a legal classification, but an idea” redraws the connections to her coerced migration,

¹⁴ In *Ends of Empire*, Jodi Kim traces transnational adoption following the Cold War as part of a history of imperial violence.

not just as an adoptee or immigrant within the context of war and violence, focusing on the ways war remains with refugees (Espiritu 2006: 411). It is most instructive when we read the film's failures as a rendering of the complexities and unattainability 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 enmeshed within and reproduce structures of meaning making. Sentimentality naturalizes cultural difference and forces individuals to shoulder the blame for structural problems, hence readings of Heidi as selfish and immature. Rather than reading the experiences in the film as finished and aestheticizing the supposedly self-evident differences between Bub and Kim, between the U.S. and Vietnam, if we consider how they are inscribed in Raymond Williams "structures of feeling," then there exist possibilities for an alternative reading of the film and its ending. "Structures of feeling" are, according to Williams, "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, and dominant characteristics" (1977: 132). 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 of the historical and personal events that bring her back to Vietnam. Situating her as a mixed-race woman in the South, the product of transnational, transracial adoption by a single adoptive mother (who later disowns her), Bub cannot simply be read by audiences as an "ugly American," naïve and self-centered, with predictable thoughts and reactions. As 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, thus preventing that extraction from social experience which is conceivable only when social experience itself has been categorically (and at root historically) reduced” (133).

In order to foreground Bub’s complex sociality, the paradigm of the refugee acknowledges her subject position, a racialized position dependent on a state of perpetual movement and displacement, long after she has been resettled. This film’s narrative and mainstream film reviews function within part of a larger context of narratives and literature about the war, which, as Espiritu describes, “locates the Vietnamese ‘problem’ not in the violent legacy of decades of social upheaval, but within the bodies and minds of Vietnamese themselves” (2006: 410). Contextualizing Bub as a refugee disrupts this fantasy of possible healing through return and reconceptualizes trauma as “the condition that makes visible the relationship between war, race, and violence” 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. In the few reviews that attempt to qualify Bub’s emotional response and negative reactions to her characterization in the film, her position as a racial minority is often ignored. However, when it is, it functions to excuse her behavior: For instance, as *San Francisco Chronicle* film critic Edward Guthmann writes, “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—which 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” (2002). This “deracination” is a technology and effect of her assimilation in the United States.

In the plane on her way to Danang, Bub narrates in a voiceover, “It’s gonna [sic] be so healing for both of us to see each other. It’s gonna [sic] 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, and possibly of integration and inscription into dominant white social relations? Her desire to reconcile with her mother is always already untenable, as her legibility as a refugee of empire can never be achieved through gendered narrative of universalist heterosexual “family reunion.” Heidi Bub’s desire to return to Vietnam after 22 years of separation can be read as a melancholic desire for belonging, as she becomes fixated on reuniting with her lost mother as a result of losing her adoptive mother. The desire and rejection, identification and exclusion of racialized minority subjects in the U.S. constitutes a melancholic relationship, because the relationship of the U.S. and the racialized other is characterized by obsession/incorporation and repulsion. We can then think of how Heidi Bub is consumed as a minority subject, simultaneously absorbed and disavowed by the U.S. because 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 relationship 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 insistence 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 displacements. The film’s moments of irresolution as a narrative of homecoming are not Bub’s personal failures to overcome cultural clash, but, rather, moments that reveal the U.S.’s melancholic relationship to minority subjects, opening up productive possibilities to challenge the myth of U.S. benevolence through assimilation and multiculturalism.

Centering Bub’s refugee status and characterizing the forgetting of her Vietnamese heritage as an enactment of violence (re)situates the violence of the Vietnam War not just in Vietnam but 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 of it is not to Americanize her, but to reveal how the Vietnam war is an American war.

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 political critique of what Espiritu calls a narrative of “rescue and liberation,” a critique that re-centers the experiences and agency of those displaced, rather than the goals and narratives of the nation-state; and, following Cheng, “to ask what it means, for

social, political, and subjective beings to grieve” (7). It is, after all, a result of Bub “being rescued and liberated” that she is unable to reconcile with her family and have a happy reunion in Vietnam.

The framework of melancholic desire reveals Bub’s subjectivity as that of a racial minority in the United States, with the experiences of assimilation and racialization as the conditions that inform and make impossible the promises of reunion in Vietnam. The 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 forced removal from Vietnam and assimilation in the U.S., changing our understanding of her reaction¹⁵. Directors Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco’s understandings of Bub’s “long forgotten Vietnamese roots” decontextualize 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, details as mundane as her hair or eye color. The culture clash narrative fails to register her desires as anything but naïve. She is illegible because family was what failed her and reveals to her national violence — a critique that falls on deaf ears.

Reading the film *Daughter from Danang* through Cheng’s analytic of melancholia allows me to encapsulate the complexity of Bub’s experiences and resist collapsing her trauma into one single moment, and to ask why racial grief is formulated in terms of the

¹⁵ For more critical engagement with melancholia, see Eng and Kazanjian 2003: 5.

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 racial grief, getting to the material and psychic (and imaginative) qualities of racial dynamics in the United States. The framework of racial melancholia enables us to situate and understand her multiple losses—of mother, home, adopted mother. This chain of continual losses itself is enough to render Bub melancholic, as 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, particularly in the South. Through the framework of racial melancholia, I focus my analysis on Bub herself as a racialized subject within the context of the United States rather than the tale of failed reunion that takes place out of the U.S. and in Vietnam. Moving away from an obsession with successful reconciliation, this reading has the potential to challenge the United States nationalist project to remember and rearticulate the failed war in Vietnam as victorious and uphold the United States myth of “rescue and liberation,” instead situating the traumatic excess of Bub’s experiences within the violence of assimilation.

Resettlement, Rupture and Other Family

He didn’t remember that we hadn’t come running through the door he opened but, rather had walked, keeping close together and moving very slowly, as people often do when they have no idea what they’re walking toward or what they’re walking from... (lê 8)

The majority of sponsorships of refugee families in the United States were coordinated through voluntary agencies (VOLAGS) which were primarily faith-based humanitarian organizations. Catholic Relief Services and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (LIRS) were and continue to be among the largest organizations responsible for securing sponsorship through the members of their congregations.¹⁶ Ninety-nine percent of refugees arriving in 1975 were resettled through sponsorship through church groups or individual families.¹⁷ The quotation above directly challenges narratives of rescue and grateful refugees presented by media and humanitarian agencies. 1.5 generation (she arrived as a young girl) Vietnamese American author lê thi diem thúy's novel *The Gangster We Are All Looking for* (2003) is a fictional account of refugee resettlement, although the novel mirrors her own story. As a young girl, Le left Vietnam on a boat with her father, and they were resettled in the community of Linda Vista in San Diego, CA.

As the unnamed protagonist recalls, the sponsor had no conception of the refugees he was taking into his home. He neither remembered nor cared to reflect on the ways they cautiously walked through the door, wary of their new circumstances, rather than graciously and excitedly thanking him for taking them in. U.S. resettlement policies

¹⁶ Some of the responsibilities of sponsorship (in conjunction with one of the VOLAGS) included: "provid[ing] shelter and food, until the refugee becomes self-sufficient... assistance in finding employment and in school enrollment for children... medical costs or medical insurance" and assistance in acquiring housing once employment was secured. Department of the Army After Action Report: Operations New Life/New Arrivals U.S. Army Support to the Indochinese Refugee Program; 1 April 1975-1 June 1976; p 205/286

¹⁷ There were three other ways to leave camps: repatriation, relocation to third country, or demonstration of financial solvency by possessing \$4000 per family member (Montero, 37).

scattered the Vietnamese refugees across the country in order to minimize the impact of large foreign populations on any particular area.¹⁸ Dispersal of refugee resettlement centers in four distinct military bases in Arkansas, California, Florida and Pennsylvania also reveals the anxiety over how to incorporate large numbers of racially and culturally foreign refugees.¹⁹ At the close of 1975, all fifty states had received refugees. As immigration scholar Rubén Rumbaut has noted, “the 1975 Vietnamese refugees were more significantly dispersed than other immigrant or refugee populations” (1995: 324). Legal scholar Bill Ong Hing has argued that these policies were an attempt by the Interagency Task Force for refugees “to domesticate the refugees, easing their transition into and their burden on mainstream culture” (129). By 1980, many refugees relocated to towns with larger refugee populations such as Orange County, CA and Houston, TX resulting in conflict as “housing shortages, perceived job competition, and high welfare dependency became associated with many of these resettlement areas, only fueling hostility and resentment” (Ibid 130).

Those **with/out family**—those who did not arrive in complete family units forged new affiliations for themselves. Their experiences challenge the heteronormative structure of kinship that is the basis for the nuclear family. War and resettlement thus produced disruption, dispersal, death and movement of people from Vietnam, forging a radical reconfiguration of family in the process.

¹⁸ Bill Ong Hing has argued that this policy was intended to disperse the Vietnamese so that they “could be more easily monitored and manipulated... preventing alliance and mobilization” (129).

¹⁹ The bases were located at: Camp Pendleton, CA Fort Chaffee, AK, Eglin Air Force Base, FL, and Fort Indiantown Gap, PA (Zaharlick and Brainard 333).

The Gangster We Are All Looking For (2003) tells the story of a refugee family trying to make their lives in Linda Vista—an inland community of San Diego, while dealing with the ghosts of their pasts. The award-winning book was chosen as the book for the “One book One San Diego” in 2011, a program in which the entire county reads and discusses a book together. This acknowledgement emphasizes the significance of San Diego as a site of resettlement for the Vietnamese.²⁰ The region is also home to an International Rescue Committee center and the site of the Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton (one of the four temporary refugee camps).

The novel follows the protagonist through adolescence to adulthood, starting with arrival in the United States. The novel unfolds in non-linear fashion, beginning with arrival in the United States and moving seamlessly back and forth between past and present via memory between United States and Vietnam. It is ultimately a story of the unsettled nature of resettlement and the haunting aftermath of war. Though the refugees are resettled, their house—former Navy housing constructed during WWII—is not the site of joyous reunification, but a place where love intermixes with violence, miscommunication and brokenness. The family must come to terms with both the war

²⁰ By 1984 50,000 Southeast Asians were living in San Diego (Rumbaut, 1985). Roughly 50,000 were processed through Camp Pendleton between April to October, 1975. “Camp Pendleton’s Tent City Housed 50,000 Vietnamese Refugees” [http://www.kpbs.org/news/2010/apr/29/camp-pendletons-tent-city-housed-50000-vietnamese-/](http://www.kpbs.org/news/2010/apr/29/camp-pendletons-tent-city-housed-50000-vietnamese/) Ruben Rumbaut and Kenji Ima’s IHARP study notes that in 1983 there were 40,000 Southeast Asian refugees in San Diego, and was at the time the fourth largest refugee population in the United States. The other three were in Los Angeles, Orange, and Santa Clara Counties. (1988: 29) More accurate and earlier data in San Diego are more difficult to obtain, the earliest available data is the 1980 census, but this is not reliable as it does not disaggregate by ethnicity.

that separated them from their homeland and family *as well as* the resettlement conditions of the United States.

The novel opens: “Before the Red Apartment, we weren’t a family like we are a family now. Ma was standing on a beach in Vietnam while Ba and I were in California with four men who had escaped with us on the same boat. Ba and I were connected to the four uncles, not by blood, but by water” (3). lê begins by explaining the significance of space / place for her understanding of family. Ma didn’t make it on the boat the night that she and her father escaped. The physical absence of and geographic separation from loved ones was a common experience for many refugees from Southeast Asia. The conditions of escape after war and the frantic ad hoc nature of refugee policy meant that some family members got on boats, while others were left behind. An ocean away, still in Vietnam, Ma wasn’t yet part of the new family in America. Within these conditions of separation, water, not blood cements the relationship—the substance that separates her and her father from her mother simultaneously binds her to the four uncles. This queer family formation, emerged out of the refugee history, challenges the mainstream depiction of the refugees as intact nuclear families. Rather than pre-existent units, this family is a product of the specific historical conditions following the war, rather than naturally produced or bounded entity. The aftermath of the war is viewed with respect to the disruption and displacement experienced by families, but these conditions of possibility also reveal new forms of (af)iliation and relationships that develop to mutually support one another. These queer affiliations are not rooted in the political and economic, but in a shared past; they also “highlight[t] the breaks, discontinuities and

differences, rather than the origins, continuities and commonalities, of diaspora” (Eng 2010: 13-14).

The girl’s family, Ba and four uncles, were sponsored by Mr. Russell, a Navy veteran. They are reluctantly cared for by his son Mel, after his sudden passing before their arrival. Mel’s disinterest in the refugees is apparent, as his mother must remind him that taking in these strangers is what his father would have wanted.

They are welcomed to a single room filled with beds. The six share the room, as their relationship to the sponsor is drawn out in the confined spatial configuration of their new home. Feeling no kinship with Mel, they understand that they are guests:

Inside the bedroom, we all remained quiet in our places. Ba was standing with his back against the door. The four men were sitting on the two bunk beds and I was sitting on the double bed, my knees pulled up near my chest. One of the uncles took a deep breath and lay down on the bed. He was still wearing his shoes and let his feet hang off the edge of the bed so he wouldn’t get the covers dirty. (7)

They quietly shrink into the space. The discomfort is obvious, as one uncle keeps his shoes on in bed, making sure not to get dirt on the covers. This scene is representative of the larger sense of unbelongingness and discomfort that circumscribes the relationship between sponsors and refugees. The resettlement of the refugees in the distinct cultural and physical landscape of the United States is marked by this relationship of temporary welcome reserved for guests.

U.S. policies of resettlement and adoption deployed tropes of family through which the state exercised its power to make citizens from war refugees, through parole power or adoption law. After the initial refugee resettlement in 1975, refugees sponsored the immigration of family members through biological kinship and marriage.

Dependency through sponsorship was another form of affiliation that was sponsored by the state. For the protagonist and her father, family was also experienced as an imposition as they were forced to sit through church sermons with their sponsors that they did not have an interest in or understand, and were gathered up on hiking trips by Mel's mother, Mrs. Russell. Having decided to informally adopt the father and daughter, Mrs. Russell towed them along on drives up to the mountain to hike in the snow. Never quite understanding why she insisted on taking them, the narrator and her father envied the uncles who were free to spend their time as they wished, and who eventually found community among other Vietnamese men at the local pool hall.

The feelings of their contingent welcome and status as guests come to a head as Mel's generosity ends abruptly, when the narrator shatters a glass case filled with treasured animal figurines that Mr. and Mrs. Russell had collected. The lonely girl in a household full of men finds solace in sneaking into Mel's office, swiveling in the leather office chair, teaching the delicate glass animals the alphabet, sharing memories and nightmares with them. The young girl becomes fixated with a paperweight, holding the object as she walks through the room during her surreptitious visits. One day, she decides that the butterfly is trapped in the amber paperweight and her harmless play gives way to urgency when, "One Friday afternoon in December, a week before Christmas vacation, I tried to free the butterfly. The result was Mel told Ba, the four uncles and me to pack our things and get out. Ba said it wasn't my fault; it wasn't anybody's fault. Ba said these things happen" (31). Her identification with the trapped insect and the desire to fly free manifest in a destructive emancipation. Its deliverance is haunted with the smashing of the glass creatures resulting in the end of Mel's charity.

The novel progresses with seemingly mundane recollections: first sexual encounters, descriptions of the neighborhood, trips to the Chinese theater to watch movies. These moments are dotted, however, with recollections of violence, disappointment and fear. The young girl's memories reveal resettlement not to be a tidy and complete project, but one that is fraught and haunted. The demands of being refugees in the United States weigh upon them materially and psychically. As domestic racial subjects, the refugees must also deal with discrimination and lack of opportunity. The girl's parents struggle in working class positions, dreaming of jobs they would rather be doing and moving from one rental to the next. The characters in the novel challenge the myth of exceptionalism: their experiences are not marked by success but by the urgency of contingency and survival. With little-to-no language and job training, refugees were placed all over the country and pushed to seek employment as quickly as possible. Most, as a result of language and cultural barriers, experienced underemployment.²¹

The demands of living in a new country with a different culture and language presented many opportunities for confusion and misunderstanding. For example, an ignored eviction notice eventually forces the family to have to break into their own home to retrieve their possessions. Realizing that she had left a photograph of her parents tucked away in the attic of the soon-to-be-bulldozed house, Ma cries frantically:

Ma is sobbing. she is beating the dashboard with her fists. "I want to know," she says, "I want to know, I want to know...who is doing this to us?" Hiccupping she says, **"I want to know, why—why there's always a fence. Why there's always someone on the outside wanting someone...something on the inside and between them...this...sharp fence. Why are we always leaving like this?"** (97)

²¹ See Chapter 1, p. 12.

In her tears, Ma's feelings of desperation and lack of agency draw a line, connecting disparate moments into one narrative of disenfranchisement. She recalls her separation from her parents and guilt over defying them in choosing to marry Ba, separation from Ba and her daughter when the boat left without her, Ba's absence during his time in the army, and then re-education camp. All of these feelings of powerlessness are all collapsed together into a continuous string of displacements. Even in the United States, after resettlement, this refugee state of deferred arrival and continual dispersal follows them wherever they go.

Carrying the War

Ma says war is a bird with a broken wing flying over the countryside, trailing blood and burying crops in sorrow. If something grows in spite of this, it is both a curse and a miracle. When I was born, she cried to know that it was war I was breathing in, and she could never shake it out of me. Ma says war makes it dangerous to breathe, though she knows you die if you don't... War has no beginning and no end. It crosses oceans like a splintered boat filled with people singing a sad song (87).

The matter-of-fact tone in which the protagonist conveys mundane details of childhood and adolescence gives way to a ghostly past that both the protagonist and her family are unable to escape. The remainder of the novel is concerned with the ways that ruptures of war continually make themselves felt in the present in the dissonance and distance between all of the family members. The relationships that form and break through the novel—bonds that emerge with the uncles, the shared understanding among neighbors who complain, but would never report one another for housing violations. The protagonist's identification with her father's untethered and anxious nature and her eventual departure from home reveal the unsettled nature of assimilation. As these

refugees are visited and haunted by the past: the protagonist's dead brother and the fact that Ma did not make it on the first boat are apparitions that live among the family members.

Her father, the figurative “gangster” in the novel, experiences nightmares, insomnia, sudden crying, likely related to undiagnosed PTSD from his time in the South Vietnamese army and in re-education camps. He suffers from anxiety, rage and black outs. In his third job in the United States, he is a gardener. One day at a client's house, he begins digging a trench around a palm tree, entranced, he works until his hands are bloody, “When he remembers that no one asked him to do this, he packs up his equipment, pulls the lawn mower into the truck bed and drives away. He will never go back to that house again” (115). Even after he is able to finally work his dream job, he is unable to move beyond the past. The experiences of the war are inseparable from this present-day life as he is haunted with the weight of the war.

For the protagonist, the United States is experienced as a place where her family falls apart. Separated from grandparents and her deceased brother, they may appear to be a nuclear family: mother, father, child. But the imposition of this frame leaves out the past: life before, during, after the war—life before the United States. When Ma finally comes to join the family, they are not suddenly made whole. In the period after Ma's arrival, the protagonist's narration of a mundane adolescence and young adulthood is peppered with violent outbursts and fights between her parents and between herself and her father. She runs away multiple times before finally leaving for good before college. The strained relationship with her parents is evident in avoided phone calls and tense dynamics, as “father and I would sit at the kitchen table in the evenings and pass the

silence back and forth, like a hot smoke” (107). The United States is thus not a place for the type of reunification that is imagined through discourses of family reunification. It is instead a place where families and people fall apart. The protagonist inherits her father’s temper, but also internalizes his experiences of disenfranchisement, “Between us now there hangs the familiar smoke of small rooms crowded with people larger than their situation. People who, feeling they have no recourse to change the circumstances of their own lives, fold down, crumble into their own shadows” (122).

To think of lê’s family as a refugee family calls attention to the war and domestic racism which make impossible normative families. Though they have been resettled in the United States, they carried the war, the past and Vietnam with them to San Diego. “Years later, even after our family was reunited, my father would remember those voices as a sea wall between Vietnam and America or as a kind of floating net, each voice linked to the next by a knot of grief” (105).

lê thi diem thuy’s novel reveals both the unsettled nature of resettlement for Vietnamese refugees, and the ways that family as relations of human dependence can be forged in unexpected circumstances such as violence, war and displacement. As they are haunted by the experiences and memories of their past, the novel reveals the ways that family can be a site of the continuation of the war, rather than as site of “post-” war through resettlement. The reconfiguration of kinship also challenges the national significance of the family—allowing refugees to claim relationships which exist outside of heteronormative and productive definitions of the family unit.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have read cultural productions which center refugees who did not arrive in intact family units through the frameworks of critical refugee studies in order to demonstrate the ways that the trope of family has had material and discursive effects. The domestication of refugees without family within the national family of the United States has served to obscure the fact that humanitarian settlement stems from conditions of war and militarism in the first place. Reading adoptees and resettled families under the rubric of refugees, rather than adoptees or immigrants reveals the ways that “family” attempts to domesticate and contain the excesses of war and trauma. Focusing on these refugees reveals the heterogeneity of refugee experiences as a result of not just of U.S. empire, but white supremacist racial formation, and in excess of the national family.

Parts of chapter two are adapted from my master’s thesis-based article in *Amerasia Journal* 39: 3 (2013): 103-111, entitled “Recalling the Refugee: Culture Clash and Melancholic Racial Formation in Daughter from Danang.” The dissertation author is the sole author on this paper.

Chapter Three: Transnational Connections and Temporal Imaginings

In the previous two chapters, I have argued that sociology and refugee adoption and resettlement policy have used the rubric of family to naturalize Vietnamese refugee resettlement in United States as an expected outcome of the war. In this chapter, I analyze GB Tran's graphic novel *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey* (2010). Tran's critically acclaimed¹ novel is the first widely published (by Villard books, a branch of Random House, one of the largest publishing houses in the world) graphic novel by a Vietnamese American. Compared to other autobiographical graphic novels such as *Maus* (1980) and *Persepolis* (2000), the sizeable hardcover book tells the history of Vietnam through the perspective of a second-generation over its 288 pages. Analyzing *Vietnamerica*, I argue that transnational refugee families challenge the framing of family as a nation-bound nuclear unit, thereby disrupting U.S.-based sociological narratives of the Vietnamese that only begin with resettlement. Through the graphic novel form, Tran maps out intergenerational circuits of power and empire, and engages a refugee temporality that enables us to think of the structures of war and colonialism as the forces that shape the nature of kinship and family memory. Through various representational practices, his manipulation of space and temporality allow the reader to experience GB's family as a transnational journey. The graphic novel invites the reader to visualize the relationship between transnational family formations and colonialism and war, situating the U.S.-involvement in Vietnam as part of the historical trajectory of previous and ongoing colonial projects in the region. In this way, the so-called

¹ Selected as one of *Time Magazine's* Top 10 Graphic Memoirs of All-time in 2012. < <http://entertainment.time.com/2012/04/26/top-10-graphic-memoirs/>>

Vietnam War was not an exceptional event, but part of a continuous struggle in the country for independence against multiple colonial administrations.

Written from the perspective of a second-generation Vietnamese American, the graphic novel charts Tran's experience of coming to terms with the Vietnam War as an absent presence in his personal narrative. As the only child of his parents to have been born in the United States, Tran's understanding of his parents' past and personal history is circumscribed by both his parents' silence and his own stubborn disinterest in asking about the war.

Tran describes the work:

Vietnamerica is what happens when I realized to better understand myself, I needed to first better understand my parents. It's the 50-year journey of my family's trauma, tragedy, and triumph through Vietnam's wars, and **reinvention** in its aftermath as refugees in the United States. It's the unraveling of my family's truth and what's uncovered when I draw my past to write my future. —<gbtran.com> (emphasis mine)

Tran's attempt to "draw [his] past to write [his] future" is an act of transnational and intergenerational family-making, and opens up possibilities for memory, history and the acknowledgement of trauma that is not possible as just an immigrant family in South Carolina, where the Tran family was initially resettled. Refusing the narrative of immigration that began with his birth in the United States, the discursive and visual construct of the "family" in Tran's work exceeds the national frame that I have described in my previous two chapters. In Tran's own words introducing the book, his emphasis on the ways that his family was "reinvented" as refugees in the United States challenges this national framing of his family as an intact unit. The word "reinvent" points instead to the ways the Vietnamese refugee in the United States required the naturalization and

construction of a historical trajectory which made the arrival of refugees in the United States an inevitability.

The transmission of stories is primarily guided by informal interviews the main character conducts with his mother. It is within the dynamics of family that he comes to understand the larger historical context of his fraught relationship to his family and also the fraught relationship between Vietnam and the United States as but one experience of colonialism in Vietnam which also includes occupation by the Japanese and French. Thus, Tran's work is significant for not only understanding the ways that family memories reveal the larger historical contexts in which they occur. The family becomes both a collective transnational location and a site of individualized subjectivity that is able to trace the disparate circuits traversed by multiple members of his extended lineage.

Comics as Refugee Archive

Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey is visually stunning. The large hardcover book resembles a personal journal. Beginning with the cover, the reader encounters a collage of images, the dustjacket is a mash-up of the American flag and colors from the Vietnamese national flag. Images of GB's family's arrival in the United States appear next to an image of GB's first visit to Vietnam². Underneath this, there is an image of a face cobbled together with puzzle pieces, though the individual characteristics—someone's eye, another's mouth are indistinguishable. The book as physical object is a personal archive that the reader is invited to enter. The pastedown endpapers—pages glued to the

² I use GB to refer to the character in the novel, and Tran in reference to the author.

hard cover of the book that open and close the book, the first and last encountered by the reader—draw upon the conventions of a genealogical chart, depicting Tran’s family tree. Titled “The Cast,” the images are to be read across the page and from top to bottom: at the top, both sets of grandparents, below them his parents under their respective mothers and fathers, and finally below is GB’s generation. Friends and other significant characters such as his father’s childhood friend Do, and American friend Leonard (who was responsible for the family’s exit on one of the last planes on April 25, 1975), are included in the tree, but float along generational axes—there are no crisp black lines indicating blood relationships, they are instead placed next to those with whom they shared overlapping timelines. The floating panels represent relationships that are not marked by blood relations but by other bonds; their exclusion from the family tree would render the story of his family and their relationships incomplete. Then there are those figures that are more apparitions than active characters in the narrative. His father’s first wife, mother of his half-siblings, is drawn so that her hair partially covers her face, and nearly completely covers her name, revealing only an “H.” GB’s grandmother’s husbands’ names are also obscured, as their significance to his parents’ and thus Tran’s personal narrative, is tangential.

Situated in the genre of comics, as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer⁴” this work is literally drawn, mediated not only through his

⁴ McCloud argues that comics is the language of the intertextual combination of words and images on the page, as such graphic novel and multiple (and not singular) panel strips can be characterized as comics. Scott McCloud, 9.

memories but also the memories of others. It makes no claim to authentically render the truth because the medium itself is self-aware of the act of representation. In this way, the genre of comics is the perfect medium to narrate a larger history of the Vietnam War as mediated through the experiences of one family. The memories, experiences and the representations of events never occur outside of their particular historical moment or structure of power. As such, “experience and memory... are always already mediated and this mediation in turn is always shaped by relations of power.”⁵ The significance of Tran’s work lies in the ways his experiences and memory as a second-generation Vietnamese American are mediated by larger historical forces such as colonialism and war, which manifest in his lack of knowledge about the larger historical context. The genre of comics enables GB’s story to be at once specific and universal, as readers we are called upon to interact with the protagonists and create an emotional relationship with them. Because comics are dependent upon the participation of the reader, comic artist Scott McCloud suggests the “masking effect, in which the more iconic and less realistic rendering of characters allows us to both identify with and see through the experiences of the characters” (43). I argue that Tran’s work points to the mediated nature of knowledge about the Vietnam War; as such, the tracing of the routes of his family’s multiple displacements disrupts the U.S. narrative of benevolence. As Tran’s graphic novel exposes the context of colonial and imperial violence, the teleology of the immigrant success narrative is rendered impossible.

⁵ Fujitani, White and Yoneyama drawing upon Joan Scott “the Evidence of Experience” in their introduction to *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific Wars* (2001)

The author's self-representation also demonstrates the difficulty and uncertainty of knowing through the stylistic rendering of his images. For example, in this family tree, he is the only character not illustrated in a tight close up, nor is his image enclosed in a frame. GB's representation stands outside of the album while being a part of it; the upper half of his body is illustrated as he is barely able to hold onto the photos of family members and his own name. He is the reader's guide, but his inability to hang onto his own name placard, which is drifting off away from him speaks to the difficulties he will encounter in trying to narrate the history in a neat and cohesive narrative. Does he refer to himself as his adopted title, as GB or as his given name, Gia-Bao? Both names surround him; but both float away. Before the first page is even turned, the reader is given a preview of the transformations that GB will undergo as he narrates and understands himself through his family. Through the act of compiling the family tree, Tran actively places himself within the network of his family, in this longer intergenerational perspective of his family the designation "second generation" makes little sense.

The book begins with the funerals of GB's maternal grandmother and paternal father. Sparked by this trip to Vietnam, GB gathers the stories of his mother, grandmothers, and father in the presence of extended family in Vietnam. Transmitted to him in unexpected moments, over yardwork, preparing for dinner, and at his grandmother's funeral they arrive out of order, and often without context. But it is the relationship to the physical space of Vietnam and the space held with family members that allows GB to construct a web of memories across a transnational network that both includes and precedes his own life. Whether sitting at dinner with his mother or talking to before unknown family members, friends, each seemingly mundane moment has the

potential to trigger a flood of memories and stories. In these moments, he weaves together a family, rather than an individual history.

A Book Without Chapters: Refugee Temporality

Among Tran's many stylistic elements, one quickly notices his use of full color bleeds, panels that are not enclosed in rectangles, as is commonly associated with comics, or in any shapes. Rather, the images run off the page to the edges of the book. These bleeds have the effect of compounding a sense of timelessness, as "time is no longer contained by the familiar icon of the closed panel. But instead hemorrhages and escapes into timeless space."⁶

The book opens and closes with solid black bleeds, and though Tran uses gutters (the space between comic panels) to split up some frames, the lack of closure characterizes most of the book.⁷ The graphic novel also has no chapters. Chapters, just as enclosures, serve to demarcate an ending or the boundaries of a set of events before transitioning the reader to a distinct, but potentially related set of occurrences. However, by moving one vignette seamlessly into the next, without numerical or entitled chapters to mark the breaks between stories, Tran graphically conveys what activist-scholar Eric Tang has termed "refugee temporality." Rather than showing that the past was past,

⁶ In his groundbreaking guide to the analysis of comics, Scott McCloud provides a vocabulary and theory for analyzing the genre of comics. 103

⁷ Closure refers to the ways that images are visually separated from one another, usually through what is technically called the gutter, the lines which surround a frame in a comic. The effect of closure allows the reader to "obser[e] the parts but perceiv[e] ... In our daily lives, we often commit closure, mentally completing that which is incomplete based on past experience...closure is the agent of change, time and motion" McCloud 63-64.

marking one moment as distinct from another, and privileging the post-resettlement period, the use of bleeds and transitional pages marks how the “present unbroken [is] from the past” (Tang 74). From war to war, refugee temporality reveals the inadequacy of national time as a linear developmental time and national frameworks of family, as Tran’s family experience demonstrates an uninterrupted arc of displacement and dispersal from war, regardless of who the occupiers were.

Each section is demarcated by what I call “transitional pages,” rather than chapter titles and numbers. The majority of these transitional pages contain a small single image, surrounded by a solid color bleed to the end of the page and little to no text, followed by a facing page that is one solid color, often in black.⁸ The majority of these transitional pages mark thematic movements in the story, rather than closing off one moment of the story from the next.

The first one, a full page collage of overlapping faces, appears on the twenty-sixth page: Tran’s face on top of his mother and father’s recalls a Venn diagram. Father, Tri, is outlined in his sketchy style in blue; Mom, Dzung, is in red; and GB’s face emerges in black, overlaid in the center, half of his face over each parents’ faces, against a yellow background. GB’s open eyes are superimposed, one on top of each of his parents. Mom closed eyes and Dad’s sunglass-obscured eyes indicate to the reader that GB is able to see only through his parents’ eyes. Up to this point, the reader has followed GB on his inaugural trip to Vietnam and witnessed his ignorance at cultural traditions and lack of interest in details of family history. This image marks the end of that section, and the

⁸ These full color pages without images are also in white, red, yellow; colors that reference both the United States and communist Vietnam.

beginning of GB's awareness of how little he knows about his parents and their histories. It is at this point, overlapping with his parents, both because upon his first visit, he is the same age as his Tri when he left Vietnam but also, because he begins to understand himself through their experiences and pasts.

The narrative order of the book, starting with a return to Vietnam and ending with the request to go visit with his parents allows the author to trace his family's multiple displacements in the circuitous manner by which he himself learns about his past. The lack of chapters signal a refusal to mark the closure, allowing each of the stories to flow into and inform one another. In this way the author is able to transition us from one funeral to another, between mom's story, dad's story and GB's story. Tran disrupts notion of completeness—of end of war, and new beginnings associated with refugee resettlement.

Cultural studies theorist Anne McClintock takes up Walter Benjamin's insights on the paradoxes of modernity, where he argues that industrial capital takes up archaic images in order to establish what is new about commodities, to argue that Progress requires the invention of images with which to contrast "new" forms of enlightened national progress (358). She argues that the secularization of time allowed the national imperial project to project temporality across various sites, mapping out time spatially: imperial centers represented the forward progression of time, and colonies represented anachronism. National time followed evolutionary and "natural" hierarchies, it marched forward and reinforced a distinction between the enlightened and backward people against which progress was defined (359). National time refers to this teleology—the forward march of progress by and through the nation, reflected in the ability to string

together events and create a narrative of linear history. McClintock also demonstrates the ways that national time is gendered and organized genealogically, marking colonial subjects as children and officials as enlightened adults (359). If Progress was the public domain of men, and then the family itself (and women) were outside of history.

Building upon McClintock's argument about the gendered and racialized notion of time, I conceive of family time as a historical materialist relationship with the past. Concerning matters that are "outside of history" for the United States, such as Japanese and French colonialism in Japan, "family time" challenges the U.S.-centric forward march of time, which marks Vietnam as historical anachronism because of its resistance to United States imperial projects of modernity. Family time demonstrates the circuitous and circular nature of time—in re-told stories, and centrally locates the experience of time within the racialized and gendered bonds of intimacy which construct and characterize the experience of family.

This non-linear time is amplified through the practice of reading comics.

McCloud argues that in comics, time is always mediated by the reader's engagement:

In comics, as in film, television and "real life" it is always now. This panel and this panel alone represents the present. Any panel before this—that last one—for instance—represents the past. Likewise, all panels still to come—this next panel, for instance, represents the future. But unlike other media, in comics, the past is more than just memories for the audience and the future is more than just possibilities. Both past and future are real and visible all around us. Wherever your eyes are focused. That's now. But at the same time your eyes take in the surrounding landscape of past and future!⁹

⁹ *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* Harper Collins Publishers (1993) 104

The reader-dependent nature of comics lends itself to overlapping non-linear notions of time: the past and future are always part of the meaning that is interpreted from the present moment. The practice of reading comics requires the continual negotiation of time and space to reconcile figures, events and moments into a narrative clarity. We, along with GB experience the histories and memories of his mother as they are being narrated, and are thus able to hold onto multiple understandings of time simultaneously. The past is constantly mediated through the present, GB's second-generation perspective is the filter that we come to see and understand this larger arc of historical time in which Vietnamese families are more than refugees to the United States, but are transnational subjects with extensive, complex and rich histories of overlapping colonialisms, revolutions and decolonialisms. Tran reconstructs events and collects histories from a second-generation perspective to contextualize the protagonist and the lives of his family members. The literal (re)drawing of memories constitutes a memory project reflective of the aims of critical refugee studies, as it attempts to represent "the messiness, contingency and precarious nature of refugee life [which] means that refugees, like all people, are beset by contradiction: Neither damaged victims nor model minorities, they—their stories, actions and inactions—simultaneously trouble and affirm regimes of power" (2014: 3).

On some pages, images from past and present are juxtaposed, indicating the passage of time, but also continuity of experience. For example, during GB's trip to Vietnam, the family takes a cyclo tour through the city to visit the places where his older siblings and parents had lived and worked, respectively (64-65). On one page, his mother's voice floats along the side of the motorcycle as they pass through various

landscapes, pointing out significant landscapes and structures. On the opposite page, images of his father as a smiling young boy are juxtaposed with images of his torture by the Japanese Army. As a young man, while married to his first wife, Tri is kidnapped and tortured about information over his missing father's whereabouts. After the 1937 Sino-Japanese War, Japanese forces occupied Vietnam from 1941 – 1945 ostensibly in order to block China from accessing weapons and materials. In order to expand Japanese reach in Asia, the Japanese reached an agreement with France to maintain dominance over the north, sparking US fears over the closure of access to rubber and tin in Vietnam (Bradley 74).

These images that follow the tour of the past are prefaced with his father's words: "I didn't come here to be nostalgic and go 'oooo... ahhh...'" The author demonstrates how for Vietnamese refugees the complexity of national and international interests combined with the human costs of warfare and displacement result in ways of engaging the past beside nostalgia. In the images of Tri as a young boy, the apparition of his father is illustrated as a ghostly presence haunting both the positive memories of his childhood, and the painful experiences he was subject to as his father's son. Tri's father, Huu Tri was a leader in the Việt Minh, fought against Japanese, French, and finally American forces in Vietnam.¹¹ When Tri was a baby, his father went into hiding and cut off all contact with the family in order to protect them. His high-profile status, however, did not protect Tri or his mother Le Nhi from torture or interrogation about Huu Tri's

¹¹ Việt Minh is abbreviated from *Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội*, English "League for the Independence of Vietnam," also known as the People's Army of Vietnam commonly referred to as the northern communist forces. See Bradley (2000) for a history of the organization.

whereabouts, respectively. Holding these two temporalities on the same page denotes an interconnectedness of experience and time, in which the ghostly figure of Tri's own father loomed over the events of his life, as well as the ways that these experiences inform his disposition and attitudes about Vietnam in the present moment. Tri's disinterest in nostalgia suggests the ways that his relationship to Vietnam is symbolic of his relationship with his own father, evinced in his lack of nostalgia about revisiting the city he left behind. The genre of comics makes it possible to suture together these disparate temporal moments to convey the complexity of each of GB's parents' relationships to Vietnam. Each of these images on their own is not as meaningful as the totality of the images: by interspersing images of Tri's torture (as an adult) by Japanese officials over his father's whereabouts with images of Tri as a smiling child, Tran reveals the fraught nature Tri's his feelings for and memories of Vietnam, which are informed by the violence of war (regardless of who was in power) as well as paternal abandonment.

Familial Looks – Family Time

In *Family Frames* Marianne Hirsch argues that the photograph serves the social function of solidifying the ideology of family. Her interest in the form of the photograph lies in the perception of the photo as an “illusion of being a simple transcription of the real, a trace touched directly by the event it records,” and the ways that this perception “has the effect of naturalizing cultural practices and of disguising their stereotyped and coded characteristics” (Hirsch 7). Hirsch proposes that photographs are more representative of the ways we wish our family to be (as a result of the external imposition of conventions of family) than the reality of those relationships. She argues that the

family in photography, reveals the ways that the “family ideology” is situated within a constellation of social meanings. In the latter half of the twentieth century, as the family’s primary mode of self-representation, photography perpetuates family myths through a familial gaze. She emphasizes the external imposition upon the image of the family: even as we look at our own families in photos, we are subject to impositions of a national hegemonic ideal of family. From the gap in the lived reality and the perceived ideal of the photo, Hirsch proposes that rather than refracting the gaze, we adopt a “familial look,” in order to destabilize the hierarchies within both society and within the family itself. Hirsch thus describes the ways that subjects are situated vis-a-vis the institution of family through this mythology, as a “familial look is thus an engagement in particular form of relationship, mutually constitutive, mediated by the familial gaze, but exceeding it through its subjective contingency.”¹²

Tran engages the familial look, rather than a gaze (as the projection from a position of power) to represent how the family makes visible the ways that the institution of family is subject to larger social and historical structures such as colonialism and war. However, comics are not the same as photographs. The ability to mask yourself in the character and place yourself in the subjective position of the character—to inhabit the space of mother, father, son, and so on, depending on what scene is being rendered at that moment establishes a relationship with the reader that someone else’s family photography may not. The participatory nature of reading comics lends itself to both GB

¹² By establishing the relationship between the social and the individual, Hirsch is able to link private memory to collective memory through artifacts such as family albums and Holocaust photography (11).

and the reader's intersubjectivity through identification across time and space with various family members.

Tran's personal memory is only possible through the creation of this collective memory because no actual family photos exist. The writing of the past through this form is then a way of familial looking that at once acknowledges the mutually constituting relationships among individuals, families, and history. It is always already aware of the relationship between the lived reality of the past and its rendering through the social, historical and personal forces of memory. Because Tran is illustrating ostensibly what his mother is narrating to him, it is already an exercise in memory as a collective endeavor.

These pages also reveal the ways that for the Vietnamese diaspora as well as for the second generation, time was conceived of in relation to family: How many years apart? How long before one could be reunited? Would it be too late? To conceive of time in terms of family is not simply to conceive of heteronormative futurity. In light of war and the resultant destruction of familial bonds, to recognize disconnected nature of the universal figure of the individual is not an attempt to suggest family as a new universal, but to emphasize the situated, contingent and interconnected nature of social life, experience and history which refugee experiences make visible.

The nonlinear narration of family history is sparked by seemingly benign moments: his ignorance of the fact that one of his older sisters was his half-sibling; the lack of time frame for when his parents arrived in the United States; the insistence from his mother and grandmother that he learns about the past; and his father's stoic responses that GB just doesn't understand his own history or its significance.

Given the complex visual and textual structures and ideological terrain of Tran's work, therefore, we may read it as a rejection of teleology or linearity and a call for attention to the structures of power and violence that shape collective and individual life chances and memories. It is precisely the de-historicized stories and experiences of those who have been displaced due to colonial or imperialist wars that allow for the recouping and rearticulation of violence as humanitarianism. *Vietnamamerica's* rigorous engagement with history and memory allows him to chart transnational and intergenerational connections to family members and adopted kin. In the next section, the spatial experience of family allows GB to questioning the stability of the nuclear family and its confinement to the United States. His transnational family history challenges the immigrant narrative and explores the ways that memories and experiences of war do not end after resettlement but continue to live intergenerationally and transnationally.

“Virtually every household lost someone who tried to escape”¹³: Loss and survival as refugee experience

When GB visits Vietnam for the first time, he meets uncles and extended family members, which expanded his definition of family to encompass these transnational connections. A quarter of the way into the book, GB visits recalls his first visit to his mother’s childhood home. Above an image of his mother’s seated family is a sketch of a family tree in white. Maternal grandmother Thi Mot forms the base of the tree. Of the many offshoots of the tree, from her two husbands emerge GB’s uncles, aunts, cousins. Deceased members are crossed out in yellow, with a note indicating the cause of death, many of which were war-related (62). All sides of the conflict lost people; both sides of GB’s family lost members. But amid this loss, familial relationships were often forged out of conditions of dependence as much as, if not more than romantic concerns.

Both GB’s parents have half-siblings, the product of both grandmothers’ multiple relationships and marriages. Rather than existing as one-sided depictions of Vietnamese women, both grandmothers’ histories challenge discourses of the Vietnamese as conservative with “traditional” values. Tri’s brother Thanh is fathered by a French officer; Dzung’s younger brother Vinh has a different father. The confusing web of relationships is summed by the phrase, “Families did needed to do to survive” (60), which included sending children to live with distant family members, and forming relationships for potentially romantic and obviously practical reasons, to ensure material stability. The blended and mixed-race families within Vietnam and the internal refugee

¹³ *Vietnamerica*, 233

movement from North to South trouble the US-bound “intact family” structure. The family gets split up and reconfigured as a result of ongoing war in the country.

Transnationalism has become a significant mode of analysis in sociology and immigration studies in relation to the displacement of people and the circulation of structures of power. It presents innovative possibilities for understanding processes, epistemologies, and historical events in ways that decenter the nation state framework and demonstrate the always already interconnected and contingent nature of historical events (Briggs 2008: 125). More specifically, scholars such as Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal have argued for the significance of a transnational feminist project that deviates from older masculinist notions of internationalism. For them the term “transnational” instead of “international” allows us to trace circuits that are produced by complex political, economic, and social realities. As they put it, the significance of the term is its ability to “signa[l] attention to uneven and dissimilar circuits of culture and capital. Through such critical recognition, the links among patriarchies, colonialisms, racisms, and feminisms become more apparent and available for critique or appropriation” (2003: 73). Calling attention to the various histories and structures of power that have produced the uneven circuits of movement, I argue that transnational is a refugee concept. As Espiritu has argued, the field of critical refugee studies “reconceptualizes ‘the refugee’ not as an object of rescue but as a site of social and political critiques, whose emergence, when traced, would make visible the processes of colonization, war, and displacement” (2014: 174). Reading transnational as a refugee concept, pushes past national boundaries in order to make sense of uneven trajectories of power as necessarily interconnected with structures of war and violence.

In a complex tapestry of past and present, the war provides the conditions of possibility for both his parents' lives in the United States and the varied experiences of those who remained in Vietnam. However, material relationships are acknowledged without them being collapsed into sameness. The desire to create relationships with his parents—to whom he feels disinterested and disconnected becomes the reason to find out about stories of the war. The novel is not simply about the collection of or accurate reconstruction of these familial stories or memories. It is about coming into being of the subjectivity of transnational belonging through a shared history. GB moves from being a second-generation Vietnamese American to being a member of a larger transnational Vietnamese family—with all of the history that comes with it.

Intergenerational Conflict, Confusion and Silence

GB provides the reason for his lack of knowledge about his family's past: "My family's unwillingness to share the most basic facts was as much to blame as my decades of disinterest and insensitivity" (98). From the sociological vantage point, "unwillingness to share" and "disinterest and insensitivity" might be read as intergenerational conflict, to explain the ways that children fight for autonomy from their parents.¹⁶ The abrupt departure from their home country in the chaos of war and the need to resettle in a new country and deal with the material realities of survival make cultural transmission difficult. Dzung continually tries to engage GB to understand his past better, while his

¹⁶ James M. White, David M. Klein and Todd F. Martin. *Family Theories: An Introduction* Sage Publications 2014. The framing of intergenerational emerges from the application of conflict theory as an approach to the study of families.

father more subtly gifts him a book titled *The Vietnam War* as a high school graduation gift. I argue that GB's experiences of confusion, silence and conflict are in fact part and parcel of the decontextualization of Vietnamese refugees as immigrants in the United States, as simply refugees "fleeing communism" they are distanced from the fact of U.S. intervention which contributed to the destabilization of the country and break up of families.

Tran represents typical scenes of conflict: GB's fights with his parents, teasing his mother for her accented English, and making fun of traditional Vietnamese clothes. When his dad tries to teach him about Vietnamese culture, GB is visibly bored and disrespectful. He is ignorant of Vietnamese funerary traditions, wearing black to his grandmother's funeral instead of white; and he struggles with eating Vietnamese food, demonstrating in his younger years a preference for hamburgers and American food. In Vietnam he is also physically uncomfortable, frustrated by insects and the incessant heat. All of these scenes indicate the cultural shock GB experiences on his first trip to Vietnam as an adult. Rather than reading these as signs of intergenerational conflict or cultural mismatch, I read them as the experiences of the second-generation that includes confusion due the absence of familial and historical context.

The graphic novel genre makes it possible for Tran to construct and (re)construct a family and national history that actually performs the qualities of discovering one's family history. The disordered and fragmentary nature of his patchwork family history is not only an artistic choice, but reflects the actual memory making practices of many second-generation immigrants. No one sits down and tells these young people their life story from beginning to end. For example, the Tran family's last day in Vietnam is

juxtaposed on the opposite page with an image of GB's trip there with his parents. These leaps in time are also representative of the ways Tran gains access to his family's past: through bits and pieces and unpredictable, rather than cohesive and complete narratives; some moments are more concentrated and illuminating than others, such as the events surrounding his grandparents' funerals. At his maternal grandmother's funeral, he communes with his family and meets an extensive network of cousins and family members. After GB's paternal grandfather's funeral, he learns about grandfather's extensive military service from Japanese colonialism up to American intervention.

The confusion that one experiences in trying to hold all of the names and places of people one has never met is manifest in scenes such as his visit with his mother's family. As GB and his mother enter a courtyard filled with more than a dozen people, the first words on the page come from his mother, "GB, come here! There's family I want you to meet." Below, GB and Dzung's faces get progressively smaller as they are introduced to more and more family members and are crowded by the multiplying speech bubbles. The sketch-like rendering of all of these family members prevents the readers from distinguishing among the faces. The confusing sea of faces and the cacophony of multiple simultaneous conversations is rendered chaotically. The experience of viewing / reading these pages is just as confusing as the actual experience of meeting all of these people for the first time would be. The interplay of image, text and spatial organization makes Tran's transnational mapping of family possible in ways that written word cannot easily do. From the perspective of the second generation, the reader experiences GB's confusion as he tries to place each family member to a name and relationship. The scale and confusion of the family reunion—the frenzied meet and greet with an endless parade

of previously unknown relatives and family friends—is only made possible by the narrative and visual mixing that is particular to the form of the graphic novel.

In contrast to the sentimentalized notion of the intact family, Tran's work illuminates the confusing nature and lack of logic or organization involved in learning one's family history, which is often sparked by random memories or conversations. For example, during a game of Scrabble, his paternal grandmother, Le Nhi asks GB "Do you know how old your sister Lisa is turning next week? 24." His sister Lisa replies, "I'll be the same age Mom was when she left Vietnam with Dad." GB tries to construct a timeline of his parents' arrival to the United States, a thought bubble surrounding his head fills with calculations of years and ages. Finally, he responds, "Does that mean Mom was pregnant with Lisa before she married Dad?!" The bewildered look shared between Lisa and Le Nhi reveals GB's ignorance that his father had been married to someone else; and that he and his sister Lisa did not share a birth mother. The gaps in GB's personal history are indicative of the larger historical context that he lacks. The notion of conflict and focus on generational perspective efface the ways that it is precisely this gap that is necessarily absent from discourses of refugee resettlement, which are premised on beginning life in the United States, and the assumption of U.S. national time as the dominant frame of history.

"You can't look at our family in a vacuum": Historicizing the Vietnamese Refugee Family

The graphic novel begins and ends with an inscription in a book, a graduation gift from GB's father to him: "To my Son, Gia-Bao Tran, 'A man without history is a tree

without roots’—Confucius.” It is through the figure of his father, however, that Tran continually draws the reader back to his family history and a more nuanced reading of it. Twice, his father scolds him for applying a “myopic western filter” to a situation. The first is in the beginning, when they visit Tri’s father’s grave in Vietnam, what GB calls a “Vietnamese Arlington” a cemetery for war heroes. When GB comments that his father seems to know a lot about a man who was missing from his life, Tri criticizes his son for not being able to understand the relationship that he has with his own father: that distance and lack of communication did not mean a severance of their relationship. In another example, toward the end of the novel, when he finally takes his grandmother’s advice and tries to talk to his father, GB remarks that the war must have been difficult. His father’s reply is pointed: “Our family wasn’t alone. We weren’t a special case. Everyone suffered. Everyone had to do whatever they needed to survive” (239). Tri’s response to his son reveals the ways that the family is not natural, but rather something that is historically produced. The configurations of both sets of parents’ own families reveals the ways that the instability of colonialism shaped their family formations, resulting in the death of parents and the birth of half-siblings. GB’s experiences of his parents’ suffering, which defined them for him as detached emotionally and culturally, are situated within larger historical contexts of loss and survival in Vietnam and the United States.

Deciding to fly to Vietnam with his parents to attend his grandmother’s funeral, Tran’s re-connection to his transnational family opens up possibilities for memory, history and the acknowledgement of trauma, which is only made possible when GB literally begins his journey to Vietnam. That the book begins with this moment—his first flight to Vietnam, and the words “You know what your father was doing at your age?

He...WE left Vietnam”—indicates that going to Vietnam is an act of emplacing himself spatially in relation to his own family and their history. This spatial experience of family both opens the story, and facilitates the building of deeper understanding of his own past that both GB and the reader experience as the novel progresses.

The transitions in the long graphic novel are initiated by these seemingly mundane memories like playing scrabble, which when put under the microscope, are the catalysts which connect back to a longer family history and also a history of Vietnam that includes the conditions of French and then Japanese colonialism more generally, and then U.S. military occupation. In this way the “story” begins long before him and continues through his life time; his personal “memories” are thus intertwined with the fraught historical memories of continual disruption experienced by both sets of grandparents.

Tran maps out a larger family timeline through the representation of both grandmothers’ experiences of war. Moving back and forth between grandmothers, he narrates their stories as simultaneous and over lapping. Le Nhi’s (paternal grandmother) story begins with her escape from My Tho to the jungles in the south during the Japanese occupation. We follow her movements back to her return to the city during the French occupation, where she finds her home occupied by a Colonel. She gives birth to the Colonel’s son, and moves to Sai Gon during the American occupation. Her story is juxtaposed with Thi Mot’s (maternal grandmother) story, which begins with Thi Mot hiding in the caves by Lang Son, without mention of where the family lived prior to the Japanese bombardment. After her first husband is accidentally killed by a French officer, she takes the family south to Sai Gon. Through Dzung’s (his mother) narration of the family's history, GB learns about each family's survival skills honed under Japanese and

French colonialism and United States occupation in Vietnam. In this circuitous way, he connects his grandmother's survival of the continuous wars to his existence in New York.

Traversing both the geographic space between the United States and Vietnam, as well as tapping into multiple generations of experiences and memories, Tran makes visible a transnational family network that expands the narrow American framework of his own life. The consequences and realities of a history of colonialism and military intervention in Vietnam are revealed through the people who remained, as well as through the memories of his parents, grandparents and half-siblings born in Vietnam. These stories coalesce in his rendering of his family's collective history and memory of the war that challenges the challenges the re-writing of failed war as successful through refugee resettlement. By emphasizing the uncertainty and chaos surrounding the U.S. war in Vietnam and the departure of millions of Vietnamese, Tran marks the trajectory of his family as but one of many possible outcomes, including being prevented from leaving, or ending up elsewhere.

Although the impetus for the graphic novel was self-discovery, what Tran in fact does is create an intergenerational map of the structures of war and colonialism, one that is spatially and temporally much more expansive than a U.S.-based frame of refugees enables. As Anjali Arondekar has written in response to Anne McClintock's analysis of recurring historical structures: "McClintock similarly refuses to conceive of time and history as a binary of before and after, with the post-colonial condition comfortably cushioned from an oppressive colonial past; she points instead to the urgent continuity of historical patterns. The plotting of time and histories, she argues, is nothing more than 'a geography of social power'" (37).

The emotional distance GB shares with his parents and siblings manifests as a map. Proceeded by a brusque conversation with his oldest sister, as the two travel to see their dying grandmother, Tran illustrates the separation of the family on the map. On the bottom panel of the previous page reads, “Mom and Dad left to keep the family together.” On the next page are three separate images: in the center there is a map in the shape of the United States. The key allows us to discern that a red zone in the shape of Arizona marks “parents Republic of Vietnam” and yellow zones indicating “Federation of Free States which includes New York, California, and Florida—the three states where the four siblings are scattered. Between these red and yellow zones, the rest of the country is black, “The Great Generational Divide.” This map of the continental United States is surrounded by a pale blue-grey, the “Sea of Cultural loss.” “The Great Generational Divide” and “Sea of Cultural Loss” indicate the significance of space to understandings of family cohesion and connection (97). In the center of the map, the text reads: “But in America, I doubt they imagined this fate for their kids.” In mapping the emotional separation through the physical distance of each of the family members, Tran reveals the ways that generational distance is experienced as both emotional and physical separation. GB’s geography also speaks to the ways that the actual geographical distance between family members is indicative of the social forces that have displaced them in the first place. The disconnection from the larger historical context, from family, shows how just as I argue through my reading of adoptees as refugees, the United States and not just Vietnam, is also a place of the post-war.

Tran and his parents’ memories are only accessed and embodied in the physical space outside of the United States. For Tran, as a second-generation American, these

memories existed as decontextualized, experienced as guilt, discomfort, frustration and anger until they are contextualized in the physical and psychic landscape of Vietnam itself. By forging a connection to the country of his parents' birth and the circumstances of war, Tran traverses space and time, contextualizing the reasons he has only decontextualized memories in the context of the United States. The contexts are only made accessible when he goes back to Viet Nam; memory is a spatial experience for GB. The graphic novel opens and closes with Tran on his first trip to Vietnam as he accompanies his parents to his grandparents' funerals. Coincidentally, they die within months of one another. Transported across oceans, the reader is also transported through time. Memories coexist in non-linear and circular fashion as he juxtaposes his renderings with his mother's narration, other family members' stories, and his own belated revelations.

Following a section depicting the family's resettlement in the United States, a page bridges this section with the story of their departure from Vietnam. In the center of the page, an airplane with what appears to be plumes of smoke emanate from the tail of the plane as well as the nose. Upon closer inspection, one sees the sepia-tone images at the tail contain familiar scenes associated with people and places from Vietnam, and warmth is projected through smiling faces in these scenes. The plane bridges this happy past in Vietnam to a painful and uncertain future. At the nose of the plane, images in a blue-grey tone connote pain and suffering, including an image of paternal grandmother, Le Nhi on her deathbed. The negative space between the plane and the two plumes resembles an hour glass separation of past and future (244). Tran signals the point of divergence from the happy past to the fraught future as the departure from Vietnam,

rather than the war itself, revealing the ways that discourses of separation from family supersede discourses of loss as a result from the war itself. In this way, the narrative of Tran's family is not, as most United States narratives of the war are, centrally pre-occupied with the "Vietnam War" as a product of United States involvement, but rather is focused on the ways that the rupture of family is itself the source of pain.

Conclusion: "Your Journey Has Ended!"

Next to this banner "Your Journey has Ended!" (243), a picture of the worn and tattered family is juxtaposed with the image a few pages earlier, a shiny hopeful family being welcomed to the United States. The five-year naturalization process, the difficulty of finding jobs, and the demands of learning to live in a new culture are illustrated in the visible fatigue of the Tran family. That this section takes place in the middle of the book betrays the sentiment that refugee resettlement signaled of the end of difficulty for refugees. Once in the United States, they had to navigate a new country and language and try teach their children Vietnamese culture. This story also de-centers the authority of American involvement in the Vietnam War as the most significant event of Vietnam's postcolonial history. The book ends with GB asking if the offer to go to Vietnam still stands revealing the ways that a refugee temporality—refusing to discursively mark off the end of war continues to inform their experiences and their identities in the United States. Rather than reproducing the discourse of the American Dream, his work uses the trope of the extended family to show how relations of power mediate the material experiences and historical memory of second generation Vietnamese Americans. By situating the "family" into the larger historical context, the novel renders impossible the

teleology of the immigrant success narrative due to the multiple generational experiences of displacement, war and colonial violence. In short, Tran's graphic novel works to disconnect from the overdetermined and overdetermining discourses of Vietnam, the War, the refugee, and the immigrant family. The representation of his genealogical tree, and the unearthing of lost stories that are only accessible to him through relationships to those still in Vietnam, exposes the history of United States military intervention. Now colonialism and military intervention are placed in the foreground, as is the significance of transnational relationships for Vietnamese Americans.

Vietnamerica reconstructs and collects events and histories from a second-generation perspective, which allows Tran to contextualize himself and the lives of his family members. However, his literal (re)drawing of memories constitutes a memory project reflective of the aims of critical refugee studies, in that it attempts to represent the complexity of lived reality through the repetition of the phrase, "individuals, not families, pick sides" (33). The sentiment that "Thi Mot (maternal grandmother) was apolitical-more concerned with providing for us and her community than siding with the French or Vietminh" demonstrates how families are not neatly divided along ideological lines of communist / anti-communist. As an epistemology of space and time, the refugee figure destabilizes regimes of power, calling attention to the contradictions and possibilities they produce.

As the Introduction and Chapter one argue, the United States was able to rearticulate the failed war in Vietnam as necessary and victorious through "resettlement," which was articulated as an act of saving refugees from the conditions of communism. The cultural productions tied up in rearticulating Americans as saviors of refugees, and

the self-evidence of the United States as the land of freedom and opportunity, foreclose critiques of the United States military intervention and role in producing violence, displacement and destruction. I argue that family is a site of spatialized and temporal connections which can reveal the situated and interconnected nature of social life, experience and history for the children of refugees. Tran's work as a cultural text by a second-generation artist contributes to the expansiveness of the refugee as an analytical paradigm, which challenges the enduring popular narratives that focus on the impact of the war on Americans rather than on the Vietnamese.

The significance of critical refugee studies is to reconnect the refugees to the war and the conditions of racist imperial violence. Espiritu's methodology relies upon critical juxtaposition, which I argue is also a critical historical materialist contextualization (142). If ahistorical juxtaposition enables the construction of the grateful refugee in the land of opportunity, and the naturalized understanding of Vietnam as poor and the United States as wealthy, critical juxtaposition rejects historicism and the universalization of the history of Vietnamese refugees as yet another immigrant story that culminates in the achievement of the American Dream. It is a rejection of teleology or linearity, a call for attention to the structures of power and violence that shape collective and individual life chances and memories. It is precisely the de-historicized stories and experiences of the displaced as a result of wars of imperialist conquest, racist capitalism that allow the recouping and rearticulation of violence as benevolence and humanitarianism. GB Tran's *Vietnamerica's* engagement with history and memory allows for an opening and a challenge to the immigrant narrative, showing the ways that the memories and experiences of war continue to live through the second generation, like Tran himself.

Chapter Four: Writing Family, Writing Trauma

In societies that experienced the Cold War as a violent civil war...the political repression and violence of ideological containment were waged most radically in the domains of family and kinship relations.
—Heonik Kwon¹

I first learned about the circumstances of my parents' journeys to the United States as a freshman in college. My oldest sister came to visit me at school in Santa Barbara, and in a Vietnamese restaurant where I struggled to order more rice in Vietnamese, she casually made reference to the path that brought my parents to the United States. Up until that point, I had not really thought about my parent's journey to the United States, and had no idea how they had ended up in Escondido, California. Over the years, my shock, lack of knowledge and naiveté motivated me to try to ask my parents questions to fill in the gaps.

At home, my father always expressed his frustration in Vietnamese, simultaneously lamenting the fact that he never had the time to teach us Vietnamese and blaming us for never understanding him. He would say in English that he couldn't understand us. When I tried to interview him for a video project, my father and mother sat stoically side by side. In turn, they flatly answered my questions: Where were you born? What year did you come to the United States? Offering up facts in detached English such as My Tho, 1956, 1982, I panicked at the hyperawareness of my ineptitude of how and what to ask, but also the possibility that I was too afraid to listen. The only times I mustered the courage to bring up the past, to scratch the surface of questions weighed on my family and my sisters' relationships to him, he never volunteered the

¹ (2010: 29).

answers I was looking for.

As a college senior, I tried to do a documentary film project on my family. In it, I attempted to make connections about my identity as a young Asian American woman in college and my family. My inexperience as a documentary filmmaker yielded nervous and forced questions with my sisters and parents. In a poorly framed shot, arranged in two large chairs side-by-side, I tried to capture the lost details of my parent's journey through my camera. Multiple attempts to interview my parents about the circumstances of their departure yielded abrupt answers in English only—and not in Vietnamese, the primary language spoken in our home. My inability to prod further and to ask the proper questions of my own parents makes me further question the reliability of sources of “official knowledge” like surveys, which are featured in canonical sociology. I wondered how surveys and interviews, central to the methods of sociology could possibly encapsulate and represent the experiences and lives of refugees. This moment and my project point to an epistemological rupture, not just to the impossibility of speaking but also the impossibility of asking and knowing.

Chapter one argued that assimilation literature emphasized solving the problem of adaptation and integration for refugees. For sociologists of immigration, problems that come up in the family are either rendered problems of assimilation or immigration: how do family dynamics or conflicts contribute to or stall the assimilation of family members and immigrant children? As these social scientists are primarily concerned with material success, assimilation is taken for granted as a natural and beneficial progression, and intervention is necessary only to prevent the “downward assimilation” to other minority cultures (Zhou 1997: 70-72). This chapter argues that the framing of family conflict as

cultural gap or intergenerational conflict prevents a generative investigation of experiences of trauma, silence, debt, melancholia, articulating them as internal to the immigrant family, rather than as manifestations of the excesses of US militarism, colonialism, imperialism. Challenging the premise of assimilation as the end goal, I argue that these conflicts instead reveal the violence of assimilation which manifests in family interactions, rather than unsuccessful adaptation. Feminist cultural memory is a generative method of inquiry, which “engage[s] in modes of knowing that are embodied, material, located, and thus also responsive and responsible to the other” (Smith and Hirsch 13, 2000).

Narrating Refugees

The experience of the Task Force evaluation unit indicates that the Indochinese refugees are, on the whole, making a satisfactory adjustment to life in the U.S. **with only minimal trauma to the individual refugee or local communities.** – 1975 Interagency Task Force for Indochina Refugees Report to Congress²

In 1975, the Interagency Taskforce for Indochina Refugees (IATF) was formed to resettle 130,000 Vietnamese refugees and to assess potential barriers to their adaptation. Under President Gerald Ford, IATF conducted reports analyzing self-sufficiency through employment, educational attainment and housing. The majority of the 1975 refugees were educated, skilled, had United States military connections and higher levels of English competency than the later cohorts of refugee who came under the Refugee Act of 1980. As a result, their employment and housing rates were comparatively inflated. As

² Emphasis mine, 49.

explored in chapter one, the oversimplified calculus of success in these reports is revealed in the quote above, which generates the hasty conclusion that adjustment to life in the United States was a relatively smooth and painless transition. Contrasting the “smooth,” “painless” transition concluded by reports from the IATF, my family and many refugees’ journey to the US were marked with turbulent and difficult transitions that many of state and privatized surveys and reports failed to capture.

I recall one winter holiday when my family was gathered around the table for dinner. The mixture of pidgin Vietnamese and pidgin English often makes for uncomfortable communication and heavy silences amongst my seven sisters and my parents. This day, and on only a few other occasions, my father penetrated the silence. Without provocation, he pulled up the leg of his pants, guiding our eyes past the crude self-administered tattoos from army buddies during his time in the Southern Vietnamese Army when he was just 15 years old. He drew our attention to a long-faded scar, a bullet wound acquired in wartime. He proceeded to lecture us about this wound, to tell us how lucky we were to have access to free education, because he never had these opportunities. We were left speechless by our inability to comprehend what we were being told, and shocked by the violence of the interaction. Speaking through his wound, my father communicates the simultaneity of violence and recovery: that the violence that was enacted upon his body serves as the conditions of possibility for our upward mobility and material stability and success in the United States. The urgency of the site of bodily harm is narrated as a tale of our luck, and a warning not to squander the opportunities afforded to us through public education and life outside of the confines of war. This jarring moment is the basis for the thesis of this chapter.

In these moments when my father exploded at us with memories of the war and life in Vietnam, the memories had weight and urgency, and we were too scared to listen. In many sociological studies of refugees, language acquisition has been posed as a point of conflict and a cultural gulf between parents and children, or for its potential as either a barrier to or facilitator of assimilation into American culture (Zhou 1997: 88-90). Beyond the state-centered frame of assimilation, I read this language barrier as the manifestation of alienation and/or distance within the family dynamic, rather than the cause of it. It is the residuum of surviving violence, symptomatic of the traumatic experiences that are sensed and transmitted through tone, body language, feelings, discomfort and silence, but cannot be legibly narrated.

The juxtaposition of violence and opportunity reveals an epistemological rupture—one that the positivist measures of sociological studies of adaptation cannot account for. This embodied knowledge is not transferred in verbal communication, but rather “the wound inflicted on the skin can be read as a sign of trauma’s incommunicability, a figure for the traumatic real that defines a seemingly unbridgeable gap between survivors and their descendants.”³ Beyond the message to work hard and succeed, my father reveals in the bullet wound on his leg the ways that the structures of violence and opportunity are co-constitutive. As literary theorist Elaine Scarry reveals, it is precisely the inability to communicate others’ pain that can become the ground for political urgency, refusing to pathologize refugees, but rather to pathologize war and empire as structures that produce broken families and traumatized people (Scarry 1985).

³ Here feminist literary theorist Marianne Hirsch paraphrases Roberta Culbertson’s thesis on embodied memory (2012: 80).

The wound on the skin says less, but tells more than the quantitative data of sociological information can possibly account for. How does one make sense of the complexity of an interpellation to take advantage of opportunity overlaid with scars of a war, which the United States was responsible for escalating? The mark on the body and my father's stern advice challenge social science power structures, as he moved from being the object of knowledge to a subject of knowledge. He tried to teach, but I didn't know how to listen. How do we make sense of the unexpressed experiences and memories of war and violence manifest themselves in day-to-day interactions and revealing moments that flash up, which are decontextualized and unintelligible, and cannot be contained within "official" knowledge? The hundreds of surveys conducted on refugee resettlement, assimilation and acculturation could not possibly convey the information of the wound on my father's leg. The issues of translation between my father and I haunt the transmission of history, both as a language barrier and illegibility of transmission through non-speech acts.⁴ In this chapter, I argue that treating silence and trauma as heuristics may allow us to trace circuits of meaning and understanding in the day to day experiences, conversations and absences that reveal the war as an absent presence in the relationships between Vietnamese parents and their second-generation children.

Reading war through family interactions and dynamics as that which inflects the mundane experiences and erupts as violent outburst, I challenge the stability of the state-sponsored heteropatriarchal and liberal capitalist formation of family around which

⁴ This notion is drawn from Trinh Minh-ha's experimental film *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989). Just as she troubles the reliability of translation in her film the experimental nature of this chapter will also trouble the reliability of historical memory and disciplinary expertise.

refugees are constructed upon their reception in 1975. I define family as a site of embodied knowledge, a lived set of experiences and relationships. From experience, family is also the site of political potency from which a collective memory is generated in order to attend to the past and to the urgency of trauma. Centering family, not as a unit of analysis, but as a racialized and gendered site of knowledge and lived-experience, also challenges a state-centered teleology of refugee experience, which begins and ends with resettlement. Shifting away from state-sponsored narratives of assimilation, toward the subjectivity of refugees (and their families), points to the violence of assimilation, which allows us to move beyond a cost-benefit analysis method of evaluation of the material outcomes of success toward the messy and immaterial affective ties and breaks that manifest in day to day experiences.

My inquiry emerges at the intersection between this sociological data and the cultural productions of second-generations Vietnamese Americans. In naming both the refugee and receiving community in the same sentence, the “minimal trauma” that is experienced by refugees according to the 1975 IATF report must then be contrasted with serious or critical trauma such as physical violence or death. The absence of visible disruption to daily life is read as satisfactory adjustment. If, in fact the process was characterized by “minimal trauma,” how then, can one explain the way the theme of trauma singlehandedly narrates intergenerational discussions of the past?

Memories of Refugee Daughters

April 30, 2015 marked the 40th anniversary of the Fall of Saigon and end of the Vietnam War. Leading up to this week, stories of the Vietnam War saturated radio,

television and other news media. Mainstream coverage of the 40th anniversary reflects a bipolar image of veterans and refugees lost to and rescued from war.⁵ Radio stations and news media dedicate hours of airtime to commemorative reporting. Typical stories cover men's tales of last days in war, wives and children mourning husbands and fathers, soldiers and refugees (often men) reflecting upon their lives in the United States. Some recall their last days in Vietnam, and grateful refugees celebrate their freedom in America. These stories rarely deviate from scripts of the war that are deeply gendered and nationalist. The Department of Defense has already begun planning the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the war, under the passage of the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act (Public Law 110-181 SEC.598). The coordinated effort to commemorate the war centers the sacrifices of veterans and their families, military agencies and service to the nation. The interactive timeline featured on the website re-writes the narrative of the war into one of masculinist heroism, as the military version of the war chronicles medals of honor awarded alongside military campaigns. The timeline makes no explicit mentions of Vietnamese people, whom they were supposedly there to liberate, or of Vietnamese casualties.⁶

Take Two, a radio show dedicated to “news and culture through the lens of Southern California” featured a series entitled “After Saigon,”⁷ a week of segments

⁵ <http://www.npr.org/2015/04/29/402642421/40-years-after-the-vietnam-war-families-still-search-for-answers>; <http://www.npr.org/2015/04/29/402834303/a-senators-effort-helps-bring-home-the-last-marines-killed-in-vietnam>; <http://www.npr.org/2015/05/01/403093395/how-the-fall-of-saigon-turned-san-diego-into-a-home-for-refugees>

⁶ <http://www.vietnamwar50th.com/timeline> Date Accessed. 2.29.2016

⁷ <http://www.scpr.org/programs/take-two/2015/05/01/42658/new-generation-of-vietnamese-artists-explores-past/>

dedicated to commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war. Airing May 1, 2015 on Los Angeles area radio station KPCC, the segment featured three second-generation Vietnamese American women artists. Already notable as the participation of three young Asian women who were born in the United States after the war, this break from normative Vietnam War narratives provides a stark contrast to the masculinist and nationalist commemorations.

Three daughters of refugees, a subject-position not usually considered a legitimate site of knowledge about the war, are called upon to discuss the ways the war has affected their poetry, art and lives. Trinh Mai, Lan Tran, and Cara Le answered questions about their artistic works and discussed their relationship to a war that their parents and grandparents lived through, one with which they had little to no direct contact. The themes that emerge in the conversation center around history, memory, trauma and violence. All three artists explore the ways war has informed their experiences of family. As the first artist introduced, Trinh is asked to discuss her parent's journey to the US. She fluently narrates the pit stops her parents took to the United States via the Philippines, Cuba, to land in Pennsylvania, then finally, the beaches of sunny southern California. The host then asks her to talk about a mixed-media portrait of her mother as a young woman, entitled "Ma Cured in Vietnam." She describes the piece as a love letter, celebrating her strength and perseverance. It is one of two pieces of her mixed-media art, that are featured on the station's website. Trinh is probably the most upbeat story teller, as she discusses her gratitude for her family and their journey to the US.

The host shifts to ask about the complex relationships that Vietnamese Americans have to Vietnam. In contrast to Trinh, Tran and Le's pieces are inquiries into pasts that

they have never been privy to. Lan Tran is a poet and visual performer. The poem she shares is a fictionalized account where she imagines what her father's first thoughts must have been when he saw airplanes set to work shuffling people across the 17th parallel during Operation Passage to Freedom, when Vietnam was split into North and South—one of many displacements for the Vietnamese. Her fascination with her father's past stems from a fear for the future of her own son. In the interview she wonders:

as a mother to imagine what would have to happen to my son to make him grow up into a man like my father, it really scared me...I wanted to write about the events that I vaguely heard about, or imagined or knew of in relation to my father that described the trauma, the heartache, and the hardship he went through. He could never talk about that. I think that if he had been able to discuss, [it] would not have resulted in him being such a[n]... angry violent man.

She does not discuss her father's violence until the end of the interview, when she vaguely mentions abuse in her family as a source of silence about her family's history.

For Cara Le, part of the violence of her experience is the lack of history. Not being able to answer the question from (white) peers and neighbors who asked "What was the struggle?" was the source of trauma itself for her. She says, "trauma for me is silence in the family. A lot of silence and what that silence has done." What Le narrates as the source of trauma—the silence itself is highlighted through questions, which presuppose her foreignness. Compounding her association with an unpopular war, naive white American questions are revealing of the complexity of racialized assimilation expressed a desire to know why she is there, in their neighborhoods, rather than where she belongs. The inability to feel at home as a result of silence reveals the ways that "homes are not neutral places. Imagining a home is as political an act as is imagining a nation. Establishing either is a display of hegemonic power. Similarly, having all these

markers laid out for one to step into as part of a naturalized socialization process is an indication of the power wielded by class, community and race” (George 1996: 6).

For refugees, just as other racial minorities in the United States, the space of home is not always a private oasis, but is often already violated through continual interventions of the state or experiences that haunt the family. Refugees carry the war with them, bringing their experiences to bear on the relationships, dynamics and day-to-day interactions, the silences, the discomfort, which are privatized within the family.

The poetry of Tran and Le both trace trauma. Based on both writer’s mention of trauma, one could define it as a disruptive experience resulting in persistent physical and/or psychic pain, but this definition is less significant than what following the trauma allows both women to do. Tran traces the route of her father’s anger and violence to the imagination of experiences of deep pain resulting from displacement and war. By using trauma as a heuristic, they center experience based knowledge or lack of knowledge of their families and their own personal experiences. This is a significant challenge to the ways that discourses of assimilation, adaptation and the second-generation have followed from linear mathematical models.

This understanding of trauma reveals the ways that assimilation and its calculus are themselves forms of violence. The effacement of the past has resulted in a glaring question in which she must continually articulate a relationship to past events that she did not experience and does not know. Additionally, as domestic racial subjects in the US, “Asian American assimilation highlights the fact that assimilation for the racially marked body brings a whole different set of problems” (Cheng, 69). The problems include washed over histories of colonialism and war. Le and Tran experience trauma, at the site

of familial experiences, and relationships. What theories of trauma are to explain the disparity in definitions, from the life-altering conditions of violent war that produce a volatile man from a once good natured child, to the disruption in continuity in which the lack of information of one's past manifests itself as a wound or traumatic experience?

Family and Postmemory

Family conflict becomes the site of transmission of a kind of history and memory that is felt but unarticulated, from parents to children. Rather than turning to a psychoanalytic history of trauma itself, I am interested in how calls to trauma can be manifested as a feminist call for collective memory. A feminist call acknowledges the political stakes of denaturalizing both social categories and historical understandings of the war, that “gender is an inescapable dimension of differential power relations, and cultural memory is always about the distribution of and contested claims to power” (Hirsch and Smith 2002: 6). Calling attention to the racialized and gendered dynamics of power embedded in memory, the cultural production of these three artists also articulates moves that “ta[ke] steps from ‘the margins to the center’ while eliminating boundaries of division that privilege dominant forms of knowledge building, boundaries that mark who can be a knower and what can be known” (Hesse-Biber 3). In other words, these women shift Vietnamese Americans and Vietnamese refugees from the objects of knowledge production to the subjects of knowledge production through collective postmemory.

In *The Generation of Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch, defines postmemory as a “relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of

stories, imagoes and behaviors among which they grew up.” (5) Postmemory is a useful concept for its expansiveness. It is not restricted to actual acts of memory-transfer, but also refers to the ways that postmemory’s connection to the past can be mediated not by recall but rather (or also) imaginative investment, projection, and creation. For the children of refugees, postmemory is a means to access cultural memory which is systematically denied and rendered illegible / impossible. Hirsch writes “Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated that can be neither understood nor recreated” (*Family Frames*, 22).

The cultural production of these artists exists as a kind of postmemory and the continued significance of past events to the present (*Generation of Postmemory*, Hirsch 5) as well as the not-memories or artistic renderings of events and histories, which manifest “as a structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove” (6).

With my family, conversations of the war are often marked by silence.⁸ Lacking consistent meaning, this silence does have a form, taking the shape of an affective block, a feeling, often represented as silence that informs relationships between children and parents. In *Body Counts*, Espiritu argues that for the second generation, memory often exists as a lack of knowledge. I also suggest that this lack of knowledge is embodied and experienced through different kinds of knowing. Though the children of refugees may not

⁸ Espiritu’s interviews of the second generation, which also reveal that “the war appears to have no consistent meaning for young Vietnamese Americans” (141).

have the dates and facts straight about their parent's and other family members' past lives, there are things that have been transmitted in non-verbal and less legible ways through body language, experience, discomfort, silence and other affective means.

In relation to the experiences of the children of Vietnamese refugees, the variety of experiences and the common experience of silence requires a way to explain the manifestations of post memory in relation to the affective and material ways that children come to experience the consequences of the war, both through larger structural interactions with racist violence and also through interactions among family members, specifically between parents and children. The connection through “imaginative investment, projection, and creation” at the site of family can be seen in the work of the three Vietnamese American female artists introduced in this section as they discuss their relationships to their families and the war.

The centrality of family to their experiences highlights the ways that the structure of the family is made to bear the traces of the past. Despite the lack of information of the war and the inability to disentangle the affective dynamics, emotional responses, and interpersonal relationships from a transmission of what happened and how, children feel the resonance of war experience in the home. What is cultural or particular to a specific family? What is representative of the events of war? The inability to fill in the gaps to these questions points to the ways that refugee experiences of the war were mediated by responses to material outcomes: literal bombs, loss of life, loss of family members, confusion, fear, and hardship. The psychic and the historical play out materially in the relationships between mothers and fathers, parents and children. Articulating three distinct relationships to history and trauma, triangulated through the experience of family,

these three artists reveal the gendered nature of the experience of history and memory. For Tran the difficulty of knowing versus not knowing is directly related to the domestic violence she experienced at the hands of her father. To point to family as the site of this memory or remembrance is also to call attention to the gendered dynamics of memory and commemoration. The radio segment, mixed media art, poetry—these are ephemeral and private when contrasted with the public and permanence of Vietnam War memorials. Challenging the permanence and masculinist forms of war commemorations, which always center on veterans, these second-generation women challenge the notion of authenticity of war stories and point to the significance of the telling of war stories in the first place.⁹ What does it serve to naturalize? And who does it serve to exclude or extol?

Second-generation literatures of Trauma

In *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996), literary theorist Lisa Lowe argues that the central theme of Asian American novels appears as a family narrative of cultural conflict (62). Lowe argues that to reduce Asian American culture in this way is to

obscur[e] the particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians. The reduction of the cultural politics of racialized ethnic groups, like Asian Americans, to first-generation/second-generation struggles displaces social differences into a privatized familial opposition. Such reductions contribute to the aestheticizing commodification of Asian American *cultural* differences, while denying the immigrant histories of material exclusion and differentiation (63)¹⁰

⁹ Thu-huong Nguyen-Vo “Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?” *Amerasia Journal* 31: 2005, 170-171 Her discussion of the gendered aspects of memory.

¹⁰ David Eng expands on this to analyze interracial adoption, “the tendency to reduce all social issues, including those resulting from institutional racism and economic

The “displace[ment] social differences into privatized familial opposition” naturalizes “conflict” as a fact within Asian American families, simultaneously making invisible the structures of power which contribute to and exacerbate such “conflict.” Lowe reveals the ways that the site of family is made to contain the contradictions of Asian American immigrant histories which include material exclusion, particularly in relationship to labor. Vietnamese American second-generation narratives are significant for the ways that the themes of trauma and family feature as a site of negotiation for history and memory about the Vietnam War (Pelaud 2010).

As I searched for literature on refugees, two threads emerge around the literature on Vietnamese refugees. The first, memoir and autobiography revolved around the fraught relationships between the second-generation protagonists and their parents, (Lac Su 2009) and the second, represented the complicated relationship between personal memory and history.¹¹ A burgeoning field of cultural and literary critique has already begun to critically assess the relationship between the war and refugee narratives,¹² resisting the assimilationist paradigms of the sociology of immigration. Viet Thanh Nguyen has argued that, “refugee discourse can be produced from the experiences of

exploitation, to first generation versus second-generation cultural struggles, threatens to displace them from the public domain and into the privatized space of the family (2010,: 121).

¹¹ See chapter two for my analysis of le thi diem thuy’s *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003).

¹² Included in history and memory of Southeast Asian diasporas and War is Cathy Schlund-Vials’ *War, Genocide and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work* (2012). The circumstances of these memory projects are unique in their relation to dictatorship and genocide, but significant for the insights it provides on the ways that refugee memory-work is in negotiation with the nation-state. See Bui 2015.

refugees while also producing objects of knowledge called “refugees”; a refugee discourse can also be the framework by which we read such experiences and the times and spaces that produce such experiences” (2012). Echoing Espiritu’s original call for a critical refugee studies to connect the conditions of war, race and violence, Nguyen’s refugee discourse de-centers both temporality and the nation-state (Espiritu 2006: 411). Through these frameworks, cultural productions of the second-generation can be read outside of narratives of intergenerational trauma of war in critical ways that re-connect refugees with the conditions of possibility for their displacement, rather than being collapsed into a universalized tale of the pain of growing up. Whereas Vietnamese American literary scholar Isabelle Thuy Pelaud asserts the place of a Vietnamese American literature within the framework of Asian American literature, I am instead searching for ways to make sense of a second-generation stories as part of the refugee aesthetic.¹³ Turning to poetry and art, I look for the ways that tensions—often cast as culture shock resist universalization. At once pointing to the particularity of the violence of war stemming from the Vietnam war, but also referencing the large ideologies of gendered and racial violence they get deployed in various ways which are manifested and experienced at the site of the family. As chapter one argued, the figure of the *refugee family*—as stable and heteropatriarchal—was touted as the solution to the domestic and global racial projects of United States empire. When studies shifted their focus generationally, toward the children of the Vietnamese, they continued to apply their

¹³ In “Speak of the Dead, Speak of Viet Nam: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Minority Discourse” Viet Thanh Nguyen articulates a relationship between the ethics, politics, and aesthetics in representing the pain or trauma of minority experiences (2006). In “Refugee Memories” Nguyen cites the term “refugee aesthetic” to describe alternative sets of

economic sociology of immigration analyses of assimilation to anticipate inevitable conflicts between parents and children, between “the old world and the new” (Ross 1914). Second-generation Vietnamese American literature has narrated these fraught relationships with their parents and their own histories in many ways in response to these paradigms. Some take up the “American Dream” qualities and treat intergenerational conflict (Zhou 1997) as part of the growing pains of assimilation, whereas others reject the assimilationist framework to consider the conditions of possibility for their parents’ lives in the United States (Lac Su).

For cultural studies scholar Marita Sturken, cultural memory has to do with the way that competing stories circulate and become dominant in history. In this way the experiences of the children of refugees also competes with multiple understandings and articulations of the Vietnam War and its outcomes.¹⁴ In the special issue of *Signs* entitled “Feminism and Cultural Memory” Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith argue, “Always mediated, cultural memory is the product of fragmentary personal and collective experiences articulated through technologies and media that shape even as they transmit memory”(5). Family dynamics are part of a repertoire of refugee experiences of war that are not legible through canonical social science except as generational conflict or cultural clash. “Unlike the traditional archives of history, the archives of cultural memory consist not only of the stories, images or documents of the past but also of the ‘acts of transfer’ without which we would have no access to them. Cultural memory is, in James Young’s

¹⁴ Sturken argues, "Cultural memory is a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history" (1).

words, ‘received history’; as ‘the combined study of both what happened and how it is passed down to us’” (Ibid 8).

Drawing from Eva Hoffman’s description of history passed down as fairytale, Marianne Hirsch explains: “These ‘not memories,’ communicated in ‘flashes of imagery,’ and these ‘broken refrains,’ transmitted through ‘the language of the body,’ are precisely the stuff of the postmemory of trauma and of its return” (31). My father’s staccato answers to my questions is juxtaposed with the “flashes” of history which are literally written upon his body through the machinery of war. This embodied knowledge is precisely what evades capture in canonical sociology’s rendering of the Vietnamese family. The sort of information that is captured in surveys is challenged by the embodied knowledge, which manifests itself in daily interactions, and uncomfortable bursts—as reference to the bullet wound, or in the jarring juxtaposition of POW camps and the abundance of life in the United States. This chapter examines the ways that war and trauma are manifested as alienation, disappointment, abandonment and familial violence. Without reducing experiences of trauma or conflating them with war, I argue that the manifestations of “cultural clash” stem from a legacy of the violence of assimilation as a result of racialized, gendered, classed and sexualized structures of violence, which are internal to the US nation-state.

Taking up the questions brought up in the gap between canonical sociology and second-generation cultural productions, I argue that texts by second generation artists, when read against canonical sociology of immigration reveal the ways that the discourses around family maintain the foreclosure of history and memory for refugee children. What are the ways the afterlife of war unfold in the home? How are stories told which cannot

be heard? What subjective positions and social realities are made possible through second-generation cultural production that is unavailable through sociology?¹⁵

As part of the second-generation, the child of refugees, clearly my ability to access the experiences of my parents does not mean I can fully grasp or represent it. My discomfort at asking and the impossibility of knowing reveal both the difficulty of communicating experiences of trauma and pain, but also the political stakes of taking trauma seriously. In refugee families, trauma signals not only past experience of war, but also the violence of assimilation. Tapping into memories isn't simply an act of receiving them in their pure form, but follows Ann Laura Stoler and Karen Strassler's definition of "memory-work." They argue that "by treating memory as interpretive labor, the focus is on not only *what* is remembered but *how*. Marking off a colonial, then, from a postcolonial now flatters out a set of intervening and cross cutting points of reference. Instead we emphasize an ongoing and uneven production process" (170). Stoler and Strassler's definition of memory as interpretive labor can also encapsulate the emotional labor involved in parent-children-sibling-spouse interactions. Each is shot through with the experiences of the past and present and cannot cleanly be untied from seemingly "non-historical" or things, like an uncomfortable dinner conversation that don't appear to have to do with memory.

In the following section, I examine one of the three artists' work – Mai's *Quiet* to

¹⁵ Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman examine the social history of trauma. They argue that in relation to the many iterations of trauma, "if we believe that it is neither possible nor desirable to eliminate all moral understandings, our task is not to distinguish between good and evil, but to critique the actual conditions that produce social realities." (2009: 280)

reveal the ways war shapes families, experiences, understanding, and the possibility of intimacy and the significance of silence.

Trinh Mai's *Quiet*

Trinh Mai served as the artist in residence for the University of California, Irvine (UCI) exhibit “Vietnamese Focus (I AM OC): Generations of Stories.” A collaboration with the OC parks, UCI Vietnamese American Oral History Project and the Southeast Asian Archive, the event marked the Fortieth Anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War and examined the lives of Vietnamese Americans and their impact on Orange County, California. The exhibit presented stories from life in Vietnam, to stories of escape, refugee camps, and new lives in California. Trinh’s many art-installations fill the Orange County Courthouse room, and spills outside just beyond the entrance. I analyze an installation piece entitled *Quiet*.

As part of the interactive displays of the exhibit, a short 25-minute documentary film by the Artists Odyssey Project called “Honoring Life: The Work of Trinh Mai” can be selected among three other short films about Vietnamese refugee history. For many of the scenes in the documentary, Trinh is positioned in front of her large installation piece entitled *Quiet*. Hanging from the ceiling of the courthouse room and positioned literally front and center, this installation is at the heart of the exhibition. Intended to honor the dead and missing of the war, the piece is composed of silk-screened photos and type-writer typed letters on white sashes of cotton voile. The letters are based on stacks of letters housed in the archives of the UCI Southeast Asian Archive. These documents



Figure 2: *Quiet* (Vietnamese Focus (I AM OC): Generations of Stories, Orange County Court House, Photo by author, July 2015)

search for missing family members, providing an image and information on their last whereabouts. Transcribed onto soft and fragile cotton, some are letters to lost loved ones. For example, Bac Hung, her uncle—her mother’s brother who never made it to the boat. On other sashes, she writes directly to the missing, at times conversing through the repetition / replication of the text of the actual letters, and with her own responses, acknowledging the fear that must have been experienced by the lost.

For example, recalling a letter sent in 1996, well after the end of the war, seeking information on a daughter lost along the way to Thai refugee camps, Trinh’s sash narrates: “She walked through Kampuchea, with others they made it to Thailand. they travelled on foot.” Trinh inserts her own note and a prayer for the missing woman,

“Spanning three countries on foot. Seeking for freedom. You will never live to see another war. May you be free.”

Trinh reflects on the lack of closure / loneliness and the young age of some of the people to whom she addresses letters and notes, “we are a people and these are my folks.”¹⁶ Claiming them as family, her affiliative acts of postmemory enfold the missing into a collective memory and collective embrace. Starting with her personal experience—her uncle lost in the war, the mourning process guides her to a more expansive and inclusive notion of kinship, “mov[ing] ...from familial to affiliative structures of transmission” (Hirsch 2012: 23). Through the sashes she articulates the fluidity of filial and affiliative relationships—through the performance of Buddhist funerary rites. Whereas the descendants of the dead would don white sashes, tied around their foreheads, to indicate direct kinship her sashes float, suspended in the sky, waiting to be claimed. She forges a connection between herself and these missing people, claiming family through common historical experience, as well as (inter)national and racial identification. As Hirsch argues, it is the condition of war and displacement that makes possible the identification with these missing and the desire to mourn them:

Affiliative post memory is thus no more than an extension of the loosened familial structure occasioned by war and persecution. It is the result of contemporaneity and generational connection with the literal second generation, combined with a set of structures of mediation that would be broadly available, appropriable, and indeed, compelling enough to encompass a larger collective in an organic web of transmission (2012: 36).

¹⁶ Quotations have been transcribed by me from the documentary, which can be accessed at: <<http://www.theartistodyssey.com/trinh-mai/>>

The “loosened familial structure” is precisely the point of identification with which Trinh posits an affiliative kinship allowing her to claim these lost as “her people.” The intimacy she is granted in reading the letters and viewing their images, and the loving gaze and care through which she memorializes their image corresponds through her typed letters allows her to forge a web of transmission or a kind of responsibility to the lost and the need to tell their stories.

In the documentary, Trinh reflects upon the significance of her artwork and the themes of loss and war. She seeks to tell the “[s]tories that are not complete — that’s part of our history—the unknowing. That’s why I strive to know these stories and pass them on. I’ve had somebody tell me the war is over, get over it. I don’t know war. I’m trying to understand these stories. Looking back is important this is who I am, my roots.” Trinh’s ability to connect stories across the lines of blood kinship resonates with Hirsch’s notion of “connective histories” which seek to connect histories to larger global and transnational structures of local, national, and transnational histories.¹⁷

The accusation of being unable to get over the war that is leveled at Trinh also hang over Tran and Le. As accomplished artists, by any measure of assimilation they seem to have achieved the desired outcomes for the second-generation. But their desire to dwell on the war challenges the narration of traumatic experience as derived from their inability to “get over it,” but rather, the impossibility to locate their trauma within the

¹⁷ On “connective history: “aims to think divergent histories alongside and in connection with each other” (2012: 21). Because Hirsch troubles the significance of direct filiative transmission, this notion allows postmemory to be more expansive in order to attend to the shared conditions of possibility for various significant historical events: “I see this connective memory work as another form of affiliation across lines of difference.”

experience of adaptation and assimilation in the United States. Refusing the narration of pain and trauma as always elsewhere, and in the war, the focus on the war reveals the ways that assimilation as discourse makes it impossible for these women to lay claim to psychic pain and loss.

The themes that emerge in Trinh's discussion of her work center around collective memory, history, and family. Her art is memory work that seeks to re-assert a subject that must both receive and transmit knowledge. She moves beyond bearing witness to articulate a relationship to communal past experiences of loss which allow her to deeply explore the dimensions of the war that manifest as missing family members and various experiences of family dynamics.

Discussing the use of names and likenesses in her installation, she says, "I hope they feel the love and can rest. It's out of respect and love. I'm mourning with the families. They were children, there were so many. I don't think I'll ever be finished telling my family's story. Their stories are so engrained and absorbed. Work has evolved into healing. They are me. I am my grandmother."

Rather than an inability to get over the war, Trinh Mai chooses to dwell upon the war to create a public history, countering the silence and lack of knowledge which surrounds it. Her installations and art pieces are part of a larger, on site archive—the artifacts in fact housed by the UCI Southeast Asian Archive. The exhibit is interactive, and requires people to step up to, and step into the art pieces in order to examine them closely. *Quiet* hangs directly above the entrance to the exhibit and the viewer must pass underneath it and witness the faces that mark the bottoms of the sashes. Her participation in creating this public archive is a feminist mode of commemoration that challenges the

hegemony of public monuments and highlights their militarist and masculinist nature. Drawing from Marita Sturken's reading of the Vietnam War Memorial as that which refuses the tradition of war memorial which "achieves its status by enacting closure on a specific conflict" (51). In its minimalist form, Maya Lin's Wall refuses to make a claim about the worthiness of the war or its pedagogical significance. In response to Maya Lin's controversial Vietnam Wall memorial, Frederick Hart's was paid more than ten times more than Lin to create a bronze sculpture of three men as a response to criticism of the wall memorial. In it, a black, Latino and white soldier stand together and look toward Lin's memorial. Hart's criticism of Lin presupposed that as a young woman, she could not know anything about the war, and thus could not represent it properly with a memorial. Asserting his expertise by having talked to veterans for three years, and asking them what they wanted, he asserts that knowledge and representation of the war and the proper way to commemorate it is the domain of men and particularly veterans (Sturken 55-56). Challenging the assertion that the domain of knowledge about the war is relegated to male veterans, Trinh's work as well as Tran and Le's reveal a feminist response to narratives of the war and appropriate commemoration. Their public and less permanent work generates affective engagement by witnesses/listeners, wresting claim of war away from veterans to emphasize the Vietnamese and Vietnamese refugees as those who have been ignored in veteran's discourses of the war. The small space and ephemeral nature of Trinh's exhibit invites the viewer to form an intimate connection with the art and the people that it is intended to represent.

Conclusion

Cultural anthropologists Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009) argue that trauma “lies not in the psyche, the mind, or the brain, but in the moral economy of contemporary societies...It is rather the product of a new relationship to time and memory, to mourning and obligations, to misfortune and the misfortunate. The psychological concept, trauma, has enabled us to give a name to this relationship” (276). The significance of the recurring theme of trauma in second-generation cultural production is a consequence of its conspicuous absence in social science studies. For Fassin and Rechtman, the significance of trauma has less to do with its authenticity, and more to do with the ways it can be used as “a tool used in a demand for justice.” (279) The continual repetition of the theme of trauma, in family dynamics—experienced as the violence of Lan Tran’s father or through the loss of history as articulated by Cara Le, or as the tangible loss through missing people is a form of postmemory and a means to acknowledge the significance of past experiences, and or past (and continuing) structures of violence.

It is also a significant means of interpellating refugees and their children as knowing subjects of knowledge, rather than passive objects of knowledge production, as they have all too often been cast through surveys and other sociological studies. The ability to point to or encircle¹⁸ trauma produces subjectivities in relation to the experiences of war racism and violence, rather than as objects of humanitarian or state-

¹⁸ Jenny Edkins explains the significance of bearing witness to the experience, ‘to encircle again and again the site’ of the trauma to mark it in its very impossibility” (2003: 15).

intervention. The significance of trauma “as a resource is, however, not simply a theoretical issue it is also an ethical one: in asserting the tactical dimension of trauma, we are recognizing the social intelligence of the actors involved.” (10) It is but one way to acknowledge the subjectivity of the survivors of imperialism and war. What is significant about “trauma’s” ability to signify a disparate host of events and experiences is the way that it inaugurates new subjects into a moral economy, from which it may be possible to make certain kinds of claims on experience. It is not a matter of creating a hierarchy of legitimate to illegitimate experiences, but to see how each experience which hails the language of trauma is constitutive of new subjects and experiences which demand some sort of reckoning.

Leaving Vietnam was described as fleeing communism, but leaving the country by plane, boat, and by foot is not in itself an act of ideological protest, but rather of material negotiation and struggle. These traumas are experienced through the body as well as the mind, so they are both psychological and material. These traumas are expressed and experienced in family dynamics and emotionally charged moments. My unsuccessful interview with my parents was structured by a national historical amnesia and about the war as well as a search for empirical truths in questions and answers. Seeking to answers questions about why I didn’t know about my family’s history, and what I should know about them, I was not able to hear the things that they shared with me on a daily basis through subtle interactions, body language or even uncomfortable interactions. In this chapter, I argued that the relationship between history and trauma was mediated through the material and affective site of family. I also argued that the historical memory of the children of Vietnamese refugees is a wrestling with the inaccessibility of cultural memory

to the second generation (primarily women). These second-generation narratives are significant not only because they complicate the grateful refugee narratives, but also because their fraught experiences are very much mediated by the promises of the American Dream. I contend that this attachment externalizes blame onto parents and the Vietnamese family itself, making ongoing questions of memory transmission, war, and trauma so tenuous.

EPILOGUE

In Vietnam, the landscape is aftermath—
tourist shops, sunbathers, packs of motorbikes—
there were still bomb craters
and in them, the grass grown in.
No one talked of the war, but history
was in the billboards, in the films
the tourists watched at the tunnels at Củ Chi.
At the War Remnants Museum, there were pictures on display:
Children born with defects—a child with no legs,
children with water-swollen brains.
— “Doc—” Cathy Linh Che

The poetry of Vietnamese American writer Cathy Linh Che reflects the weight of the past common in second-generation narratives of the Vietnam War. The second generation, the children of those who fled their homeland, have come to dominate the production of cultural objects that remember and re-member or make sense of the significance of the war. Che’s poem reveals the ways that the landscape and bodies in contemporary Vietnam are visibly marked by decades of violent warfare. In Vietnam, there is no need to discuss the war because in their daily lives people inhabit the aftermath of the war. Economic development takes place alongside bomb craters. A generation of children are marked by the effects of Agent Orange, visible wounds left in the wake of the American presence. For children in the diaspora, however, the war as an origin story is an unacknowledged fact. Beginning “In Vietnam,” Che contrasts the ways in which the war is not written upon the landscape of the United States, and thus the signs of this violent intervention must be sought elsewhere, in the day to day and mundane interactions with parents and extended family members.

This dissertation is a meditation on family. As the child of refugees from Southeast Asia, the intimate moments of my life were always shot through with

implications of larger historical and geopolitical forces. In my family, as in many families of refugees, the war existed as a ghostly presence, overdetermining the interactions with my parents and existing as a tangible, yet unknowable force. This project emerges in the space between the social scientific realm of the knowable—what can be rendered and produced as knowledge in studies about refugees, and what exists as traces of emotional disturbance, distance, and pain which linger in conversations and intimate interactions with parents and distant family members. I have argued that the cultural production of the second generation has challenged the discourses of assimilation and adaptation that marked the end of the war and refugee resettlement, as culture is a site of political power for those who many not have formal means to challenge structures of dominance. These critical approaches contextualize the significance of racial difference to the organizing discourses of the nation state and production of racial knowledge but also demonstrate the ways that this knowledge produces the conditions for contestation and negotiation. I have demonstrated the ways that the U.S.—centric framing of immigration and refugee resettlement have been challenged by intergenerational postwar memories and affective engagements at the site of the family. Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that for sociology, refugees as immigrants solidified the ideological place of family as a marker of assimilation and success. In Chapter two I argued that reading transnational adoptees and resettled refugees as refugees rather than immigrants makes possible an engagement with their complex experience as domestic racial subjects, and also reveals the ways the rubric of family is used to domesticate others into U.S. racial formations. In Chapter three, I demonstrated that GB Tran’s transnational perspective of family challenges national discourses of resettlement and U.S.-based narratives of the war and its end.

Finally, I demonstrated that second-generation cultural productions articulate family and kin-relationships as the site of history, memory and embodied experiences of the war. If history lives in and commingles with the present through the mundane material objects such as billboards and films in Vietnam, the diaspora history lives in the space of the family and plays out in the dynamics of interpersonal relationships.

In my investigation of second generational perspectives on the war as read through the site of family, I have discussed the ways that war is an intimate and daily experience and I have problematized the notion that war has a fixed ending. Carried by parents and passed from parents to children, there is no post- in the post-war. Played out in a never ending loop of interpersonal relationships, the family functions as a domain of racialized, classed, and gendered knowledge and power forever linked to the war that never ends.

Contemporary media coverage has represented the European refugee crisis in contrast to representations of Latin American refugees and children who have crossed or attempted to cross the border into the United States. The willingness to recognize some, but not other as refugees also reveals the global circuits of the postwar. In Syria, Guatemala and El Salvador, for example the unacknowledged role of the United States in these interventions mark these spaces as distinctly free of the temporal distinctions of war. Still, generations of refugees and their children are marked by displacement and the cultural productions of the second-generation challenges the temporal frames of war, as well as understandings of its impact. This project examines the ways that the Vietnam War and its memory have been navigated and reshaped by the second generation.

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