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Welcome to the Family!:

Hospitality, Kinship, and Mourning in Vietnamese Diasporic Literature

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

by

Catherine Hong Nguyen

2018

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Welcome to the Family!:

Hospitality, Kinship, and Mourning in Vietnamese Diasporic Literature

by

Catherine Hong Nguyen

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo, Co-Chair

Professor Shu-mei Shih, Co-Chair

My doctoral project *Welcome to the Family!: Hospitality, Kinship, and Mourning in Vietnamese Diasporic Literature* is a comparative study of Vietnamese immigration that focuses on the representation of adoption and sponsorship through the respective figures of the war orphan/unaccompanied minor and the family member left behind in Viet Nam through a reconsideration of hospitality and kinship. As privileged yet complicated forms of displacement and family formation, adoption and sponsorship provide significant and distinct articulations of the refugee because they reconfigure the relationship of immigrant-guest to include kinship affiliations. By including the dynamic of kinship alongside the immigrant and refugee as a guest, I consider the moments where adoption and sponsorship as ways of family formation and nation building too often fail. Furthermore, the recurring failure of both adoptee and sponsored

to assimilate and integrate into the host family and nation, I contend, allow for and serve as critiques of American multiculturalism and French republicanism and the demands of gratitude and debt exerted by such inclusion via kinship. Examining contemporary writers Aimee Phan, Bharati Mukherjee, Monique Truong, Angie Chau, and Linda Lê, the dissertation explores how Vietnamese diasporic narratives in English and French treat the breakdown of the family to question and work against dominant figures of the model minority and the ever-grateful refugee. These works challenge the imposed discourses of gratitude and hospitality to consider how such failure of the adoptive and sponsored family may provide expression for the loss of family and homeland and provide possible mourning of such neoliberal trauma. I engage with critical adoption studies' sociological critique of American Cold War policies and critical refugee studies' reappropriation of the displaced refugee who enacts his/her own politics by approaching the understudied Vietnamese diasporic literature through a humanistic and comparative transnational lens. Therefore, my dissertation proposes a reading of the Vietnamese diaspora through the distinct configurations of the adoptee and sponsored to reconsider and also move beyond the Vietnamese refugee.

My dissertation begins by considering the 1956 repatriation of the Vietnamese of French Indochina to the French *métropole* alongside the 1975 evacuation of Vietnamese and Amerasian children in Operation Babylift. By examining French and American documentary films, I consider how techniques of framing and editing of these films fail to destabilize the Western master narrative embodied in French and American subjects that forgets and erases the imperial project. Moreover, while the documentaries attempt to reveal and remember these Vietnamese populations of mass migration, they in fact reproduce and impose gratitude as the refugee's only available discourse. Because of the failure of the genre of documentary films to voice the

Vietnamese diasporic experience, I therefore turn to literary and fictional works, whose moments of breakdown, violence, disease, and uneasy feelings provide alternative ways of engagement and representation. Consequently, my two subsequent chapters focus on adoption and sponsorship stories and how they employ counter-narratives of criminality and violence and of afflictions and racial difference. I contend that while these failed adoptions and sponsorship fail in their purpose of reforming and integrating the refugee into the adoptive or sponsored family, these narratives in fact articulate alternative histories that are rooted in the specificities of the Vietnamese immigrant Other and significantly, allow for the expression and exploration of mourning and loss inherent in war, displacement, and kinship. My project closes with a return to the comparative and transnational with an examination of Vietnamese American and French works on sponsorship, which operates through the restoration of kinship ties of Vietnamese family member left behind with his diasporic family in France and the United States. This more intimate model of family created through delayed reunion still undergoes the challenges of reconstituting the family in a new country and therefore often results in failure. The figure of the sponsor stands in for the reemergence of the past and the trauma of empire and war within the space of the adoptive country. Ultimately, the breakdown of the family constructed through adoption and sponsorship confronts the impossibility of mourning that arises from neoliberal projects of salvation constructed through and by family building.

The dissertation of Catherine Hong Nguyen is approved.

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2018

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This work has been realized through the support and time of my advisor and committee members. Working with my advisor and mentor Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo has been a tremendous privilege. As the best interlocuter of my work I could have ever asked for, Thu-Huong has provided astute direction and keen insight that has shaped my work and my thinking towards ways I would have never imagined. Shu-mei Shih, Eleanor Kaufman, and Rachel Lee have been all a source of support and guidance, and their inspiring work challenges me to be a better scholar. To have a committee composed of these women scholars has been an honor.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Introducing Our Guest, the Adoptee

When I was growing up I wanted to adopt, because I was aware there were kids that didn't have parents. It's not a humanitarian thing, because I don't see it as a sacrifice. It's a gift. We're all lucky to have each other.

– Angelina Jolie

Adoption has been increasingly in the spotlight in the past decade. Adoptee characters and adoption narratives dominate media from TV series to films. To name only a few major instances: NBC's 2016 hit series *This is Us* has as one of its main protagonists the African American adoptee Randall Pearson; ABC's sitcom *Modern Family* that features Vietnamese adoptee Lily as the adopted daughter of the gay couple Mitchell Pritchett and Cameron Tucker; and the Marvel cinematic universe includes Loki as a transracial/transspecies adoptee who is adopted brother and rival to Thor. In the reality spotlight, celebrities have increasingly turned to adoption. Both intercountry and transnational adoptions have been a way for celebrities to adopt to build a family and to construct a family that is often intentionally diverse and international in its makeup. Notably, singer Ricky Martin announced his intention of adopting children from around the world in 2007: "Ricky Martin wants kids — perhaps adopting 'one from each continent' if possible. 'It's something we want to begin to create this year, a family of many colors'" ("Ricky Martin"). While Ricky Martin has yet to adopt children for his "family of many colors" and has instead chosen surrogacy instead, his desire to have a family is tied to how adoption is conceived as not only an alternative way of family building but one that allows for personal choice as to what kinds of children to include in the celebrity family.

Transnational and transracial adoption thus takes part in two discourses. The first is a desire for kinship realized through alternative family building and through the construction of

kinship relations through affiliation instead of blood ties. The second is an understanding of multiculturalism and humanitarian aid tied to the discourse of rescue and salvation, where the adoptee is often constructed and identified as either an orphan in need of rescue or as an abandoned child in need of family. Transnational and transracial adoption therefore epitomizes the ultimate form of acceptance and of welcoming the other into one's family and home and into a country of adoption.

Of particular interest to this dissertation are the adoptions of Vietnamese children by both American and French celebrities because of French imperialism and American military engagement in Viet Nam that produced Viet Nam as one of the leading countries for international and transracial adoption in the late twentieth-century. The desire to construct a family by way of transnational and transracial adoption and the act of adoption itself drives the logic of adoption as the rescue and the salvation of Vietnamese children born of war in the last days and the post-war period of the Vietnam War.

For Angelina Jolie, she frames her decision to adoption as coming from a sense of gift. She says, "When I was growing up I wanted to adopt, because I was aware there were kids that didn't have parents. It is not a humanitarian thing, because I don't see it as a sacrifice. It's a gift. We're all lucky to have each other" (Cohen). For Jolie, the gift is the adopted child who provides the means to construct a family. As a single woman, Angelina Jolie first started her family with the adoption of Cambodian Maddox Chivan in 2002; this was followed by her and Brad Pitt's adoption of an Ethiopian supposed-AIDS orphan girl Zahara Marley in 2005 and abandoned Vietnamese infant Pax Thien in 2007. The fact that the Jolie-Pitt adopted children are in fact children born of war or of crisis belies Jolie's vision of adoption as a gift because the

notion of adoption serves to underscore it as an act that occurs from the loss of parents and family and as an act that is in fact humanitarian rescue.

Of Jolie's adopted children, two are from Southeast Asia, specifically Cambodia and Viet Nam: Maddox Chivan and Pax Thien. Here, I examine the act of renaming the adopted children enacts the logic of rescue and salvation that denies history of war and loss that I find troublesome. Their names point to a certain acknowledgement at the same time elision of the American imperial violence in Viet Nam and Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. While the practice of renaming adopted children, especially infants, is common, Jolie's choice of names for her adoptive children reinforces the narrative of adoption as one rooted in humanitarian efforts and as one that reconciles with America's military power and violence present in the region. Jolie changes her children's birth names of Rath Vibol to Maddox Chivan and of Pham Quang Sang to Pax Thien. The name Maddox derives from the Welsh "son of Madoc" with "mad" meaning "fortunate," and Chivan is Khmer for "life." Pax is Latin for peace, and Thien is Vietnamese for heaven and sky as well as divine. Both names combine a European tradition alongside a name from their specific Southeast Asian background, perhaps signaling Jolie and Pitt's honoring the children's background at the same time claiming them as Jolie-Pitt children. With the meanings of a fortunate life and a heavenly peace/peaceful sky, the names of Jolie's adopted boys set out to position adoption as a means to better the lives of these orphaned and abandoned children born in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnam War. Highlighting their fortunate lives full of peace, the act of (re)naming the children serves to elide the violence of American imperial war and military history in the region to promote adoption as a better way of life. In this way, Jolie's celebrity adoptions provide a narrative where she is not only moved by the humanity of the children's fate but also motivated to provide humanitarian



aid through adoption as a specific form of kinship building that rescues these children from the orphanage.

The French are one of the largest adopting populations of Southeast Asian children and of Vietnamese children in particular. I focus on the two most famous—and scandalous—French adopting celebrities couples: Johnny Hallyday and his wife Laeticia and Jacques Chirac and his wife Bernadette Chirac. Famous singer Johnny Hallyday and his fourth wife Laeticia adopted two Vietnamese girls: Jade in 2004 and Joy in 2008. Speaking in terms similar to those used by Ricky Martin, the Hallydays were motivated to adopt multiple children to fulfill their dreams of a large happy family because of Laeticia’s inability to bear children. Laeticia explains: “Mon mari, si je l’écoutais, on adopterait plein d’enfants” [My husband, if I had listened to him, we would have many adopted children] (Alibert, my translation). In fact, the Hallydays were planning to adopt a third child from Viet Nam, this time a boy, but their efforts to adopt were put on hold because of Hallyday’s increasingly poor health. Their desire to have a large family by any means, here specifically through adoption, speaks to the privileged nature of kinship and family building. For the Hallydays, the process of adoption for Jade and Joy were supposedly expedited by then French first lady Bernadette Chirac, who mentioned Johnny Hallyday’s desire to adopt from Viet Nam to the Vietnamese minister of justice during a French diplomatic visit to Viet Nam: “Connaissez-vous Johnny Hallyday? Vous savez, sa femme et lui ne peuvent pas avoir d’enfants” [Do you know Johnny Hallday? Well, he and his wife cannot have children] (“Johnny et Laeticia Hallyday,” my translation). Unlike many French couples who often have years-long wait to adopt from Viet Nam, the Hallydays only had to wait a few months: Jade was born in Vietnam in August 2004 and then quickly brought to France in November 2004. Within six months of expressing their desire to adopt a child from Viet Nam, the Hallydays were able to

adopt Jade within a quick three months. In an article on Madame Chirac's controversial intervention and preferential treatment for the Hallydays, Jade's adoption is framed as a celebrity tale of a rags to riches: "Two weeks ago, she was an abandoned three-month-old baby in an orphanage in one of the poorest regions of Vietnam. Now, Jade Smet, or Jade Hallyday as she will inevitably be known, is on the front page of French celebrity magazines in a Christian Dior baby suit. A star is born. Or rather, a star is adopted" (Lichfield). The timeline not only speaks to the expedited nature of Jade's adoption but falls into line with a fairy tale à la Cinderella, where the abandoned, orphaned girl is transformed into a star, dressed in Dior and ready for the spotlight. This kind of narrative frames adoption as always being the best option; it constructs the adoptee as the abandoned, orphaned child from an impoverished Viet Nam to be rescued and therefore, the act of adoption as providing a better life with doting parents and with material wealth and opportunities. In the *Gala* article on the Hallyday adoptions, it describes Vietnamese as the prized country for the French who are seeking adoption, saying: "[le Vietnam] un pays alors considéré par des centaines de couples comme l' 'eldorado' des Français en mal de progéniture" [(Viet Nam) is considered by many French couples as the "Eldorado" for those in desperate need for children] ("Johnny et Laeticia Hallyday," my translation). This framing of Viet Nam as an Eldorado and as a country that can provide progeny for the childless French brings to light a colonial nostalgia, where the French colonial can hold Viet Nam as *Indochine* in a paternalistic embrace. Moreover, the controversies surrounding the preferential treatment of the Hallydays point precisely to the privileged nature of adoption as an acceptable, even encouraged, form of immigration in stark contrast to the often dismissible nature of refugee migration—where many European countries including France are hesitant towards or even refusing to receive refugees of the current European migrant crisis/Mediterranean refugee crisis.

That Madame Chirac's intervention enabled the Hallydays to adopt Vietnamese girls is odd given her husband and her treatment and dismissal of their Vietnamese foster daughter Anh Dao Traxel (née Duong), a Vietnamese refugee who arrived in France in 1979. At the time, Jacques Chirac was the mayor of Paris, and the Chiracs took in Traxel as a 21-year old boat person. Fostered for two years, Traxel stated that she was very close to the Chiracs and considered them as her "famille de cœur" [family of the heart] and as her second parents, with her own children even calling the Chiracs "papy" and "mamy" [grandpa and grandma] (Jamet; "Adopted girl"; my translations). In 2005, Anh Dao Traxel came into the spotlight to defend Jacques Chirac during a period of major political setbacks and to publicize her forthcoming memoir *La Fille de Cœur* (Flammarion, 2006) ("Adopted girl"). The praise for the Chiracs' generosity and hospitality, however, did not last when Traxel in an about face the Chiracs for having distanced themselves from her and even disavowing her. Furthermore, she positions their act of fostering her as a political move, one that was brought up only when having a Vietnamese refugee foster child served them: "j'ai le sentiment d'avoir été utilisée à des fins électorales. J'étais une image à qui on demandait ensuite de rentrer dans sa boîte" [I felt used at the end of the election. I was an image that they asked for then quickly returned to its box] (Jamet, my translation). Traxel's despair underlines how the act of fostering is often used to better one's image. Similar to how Jolie's international adoptions bolstered her future positions of Goodwill Ambassador and later Special Envoy of the UNHRC, the UN Refugee Agency, the Chiracs' fostering a Vietnamese refugee gave Jacques Chirac a better humanitarian image. Traxel speaks about how Mme Chirac no longer recognizes her, believing Traxel to be a former neighbor. This estrangement between foster family and foster child reveal the impossibility of fully incorporating the Vietnamese refugee into the French household and, here especially because of

Chirac's later presidency, into the French nation. The fact that the mayor of Paris at that time and then president of France completely disavows Traxel and their fostering Traxel is powerfully tragic. While Traxel's comments come at a convenient time where additional press coverage serves to publicize the release of her second memoir *Chiracs, une famille pas ordinaire* (Hugo Duc, 2014), she reveals the failure of fostering and of adoption where she remains the stranger to her foster family. This runs against the narratives epitomized by the Jolie adoption of Pax Thien and by the Hallydays' adoption of Jade and Joy. As such, Traxel's changing relationship with the Chiracs, or lack thereof, comments on the failure and impossibility the idealized conception of adoption as the ultimate form of hospitality—the welcome of the Other into one's home and nation—and the reality of adoption as fraught with in/difference.

I begin with these three stories of celebrity adoptions to underscore the uneasy discourse surrounding adoption that is too often considered in a positive and productive light and that is simply reduced to acts of charity. In my reading of adoption in Vietnamese diasporic works, I consider adoption as the means for hospitality and welcome to be enacted as a privileged form of family building and alternative kinship formation as well as citizenship via displacement and immigration, and as a practice of Western intervention and exploitation that seeks to recuperate the military loss of the First Indochina War and the Vietnam War and therefore to (re)produce the dominant discourse of humanitarian rescue. As transnational and transracial adoptions are more than a celebrity trend, I argue that they reveal specific individual and psychic concerns as well as greater historical and political implications, such as non/belonging, difference, and citizenship. Here, I take part in Mark Jerng's project in *Claiming Others* that tracks adoption alongside American race relations:

transracial and transnational adoption in this sense highlights specific articulations of a familial nation-form throughout U.S. history as it is transformed through a set of historical crises around race relations. Transracial adoption appears more prominently in literature, public discourse, and social practices during precisely some of these large-scale national traumas focused on the formation of its citizenry and the question of national and racial belonging: Native American removal; slavery and emancipation; the height of Jim Crow/segregation; and the Korean and Vietnam wars. (xii)

While Jerng provides a sweeping yet in-depth engagement with transracial adoption in the United States, my project focuses on the large-scale trauma of Viet Nam's long history of military occupation and resistance, especially the French defeat in the First Indochina War and the American loss of the Vietnam War. I open with celebrity engagement with transnational adoption of Vietnamese children because what is often considered private—the family, parent-child relationships—are often made public in the case of celebrities and their families. Not only are celebrities given easy praise for their opening their family to welcome the orphan, their adopted children become token figures for humanitarian aid. I focus on the adopted children themselves and ask if in fact their position as adopted and as adopted by public figures in fact is a position of privilege. What I find is that their privilege is employed to make manifest American and French charity and compassion. As such, these children unwittingly play a role in the United States' and France's efforts to demonstrate benevolent and sympathetic American- and Franco-Vietnamese ties. The public narratives promote adoption as an exemplar act of assimilation, but in fact, there remain very real concerns of race and discrimination, of non/belonging and citizenship, and of loss of family that reveal and speak to the long history of

French colonization and American military imperialism in Viet Nam. For this project, I consider how transnational adoption and sponsorship represented in documentary films and fictional works present paradigm of hospitality fails in order to fully consider how the histories vexed past of war, loss, and displacement complicate family formation and nation building.

My dissertation examines contemporary Vietnamese diasporic literature through the figures of the adoptee and the sponsored Vietnamese family member because they are privileged yet complicated forms of immigration and family formation. Adoption and sponsorship therefore provide significant and different articulations of the refugee because, as forms of family building, they emphasize kinship affiliation within the configuration of the immigrant-guest that complicate further issues of belonging and citizenship. I read narratives of adoption and sponsorship through a reconsideration of Jacques Derrida's theory of hospitality. Engaging with hospitality, I critique Derrida's focus on the host to shift analysis over to the figure of the guest, who here is configured as the adoptee and sponsored family member. Through Derrida's theoretical framework of hospitality, I explore how the forms of kinship of Vietnamese adoptees and sponsored family members are not only produced by the acts of welcome that is extended by adoptive families and nations but also open to interrogations of loss and mourning that is contingent in the very act of adoption and sponsorship. My reading of the adoptee and the sponsored complicates critical adoption studies' focus on alternative kinship and critical refugee studies' attention to the refugee.

The taking in of refugees and immigrants operates on a national and public scale, through which the welcoming of the Other is a political move that positions the United States and France as hospitable nations worthy of admiration. This is particularly important because both Western powers need to reshape their military losses in Viet Nam and to reimagine their position as

colonial and neoliberal empires. The act of welcome in the case of adoption and sponsorship is then reconfigured within the intimate and private spaces of the home and family. Kinship therefore serves as a metaphor for the nation's desire to assimilate racial difference, historical and military losses, and uneven geopolitics and global economics into a singular narrative of a happy and welcoming family and of a happy and benevolent nation. What belies these acts of welcome and hospitality are the losses engendered by both host and guest. For the host as adoptive parent and family, the loss can be infertility and the inability to conceive a family as well as the loss of a child by miscarriage or otherwise; loss is derived from an impossibility to reproduce and to fulfill the desire and promise of a family. The host as the adoptive nation has loss situated in military losses—France's defeat in the First Indochina War at Điện Biên Phủ and the United States' abandonment of South Viet Nam and defeat in the Vietnam War. The act of welcoming a Vietnamese, Amerasian, or Eurasian child into the American and French family is that attempt to recover from both personal loss and political defeat.

In my work, I contend that the Vietnamese Other is best represented through the figure of the adoptee and the sponsored and their obligation to be grateful for this welcome, the hospitality of family and nation. The adoptee and the sponsored as guest are also constructed through loss. The adoptee is only legally able to be adopted when the adoptee is an orphan or is abandoned by his/her parents. As such adoption is contingent on the loss of parents and family; the sponsored is the family member left behind so that the sponsored's loss is the loss of family albeit temporary. As privileged forms of immigration, adoption and sponsorship is contingent on loss; the act of leaving Viet Nam and of displacement constitutes a loss. In the act of adoption and sponsorship as acts of hospitality, the adoptee and sponsored are given the gift of the family, a new family, a different family precisely because of the very loss of biological and first families.

Because of this reconstitution of the family, the adoptee and sponsored are expected to be grateful as beneficiaries of hospitality. To be unhappy and to mourn the loss of one's parents and to mourn their displacement from Viet Nam disregard and challenge the promise of the family and nation that welcomes them with open arms.

Because of the expectations and demands of gratitude produced by adoption as an act of rescue and salvation, how does the adoptee even approach let mourn loss when mourning is read as being ungrateful and thankless? Within the framework of hospitality where the American family extends a welcome and adopts the Vietnamese child, the American host saves the adoptee from war-torn Viet Nam and from a life of poverty and hardship. Consequently, the (well-behaved) adopted child is expected to be grateful and obligated to act accordingly. However, when the adoptee attempts to mourn his/her loss of family and life in Viet Nam, the adoptee-guest's act of mourning is considered ungrateful and the adoptee hostile. Therefore, I argue that the loss of the Vietnamese diasporic subject as adoptee and sponsored can only be articulated through and worked out as inhospitable acts; it is precisely through the rejection of kinship and the breakdown of the family that the adoptee can possibly find a way to mourn and therefore critique the benevolence of the adoptive family and host nation. Ultimately, the guest's inhospitable act calls into question the very structure of hospitality and welcome.

### **Towards a Theory of the Adoptee-Guest: Reframing *Daughter from Danang* Through Adoption and Hospitality**

To clarify the argument of and framework of hospitality of this dissertation project, I use the acclaimed yet controversial documentary film *Daughter from Danang* (2002) as my starting point of my analysis of hospitality, kinship, and mourning. I examine the film to demonstrate



how adoption is not only an important alternative method of kinship formation but also, in fact, a model of Derrida's impossible hospitality. Directed by Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco, *Daughter from Danang* follows Heidi Bub, a Vietnamese adoptee, as she returns to Viet Nam to reunite with her birth mother. Focusing on Bub and her construction as daughter, adoptee, and guest, I make interventions into critical adoption studies—a field that is social sciences-dominant and is primarily focused on the transnational Korean adoptee—and into Derrida's hospitality often constructed as host-centric to consider the adoptee as guest within this welcome of hospitality.

*Daughter from Danang* frames Heidi Bub within multiple kinship relations: as an adoptee and as a daughter who reunites with her birth mother. Born Mai Thi Hiep in 1968, Heidi Bub is the product of her mother's relations with an American serviceman. Fearing that her daughter would be in danger of persecution because of her mixed-race identity, Mai Thi Kim gave her daughter to an orphanage. As such, Mai Thi Hiep does not fit the usual definition of an orphan whose parents are both dead; rather, she is what Eleana Kim terms an "eligible orphan who has lost one parent to death, abandonment, or separation, with the remaining parent legally releasing the child for overseas emigration and adoption" (269, fn. 4). Jodi Kim employs the similar yet slightly different term "'social orphans' who are legally produced and made available for adoption as such" (169). Given her circumstances, Mai Thi Hiep can be considered an eligible and social orphan. In the reality of the last days of the Vietnam War, Bub was grouped together with the other orphans, evacuated from Saigon orphanages, airlifted through Operation Babylift in April 1975. In the United States, Mai Thi Hiep is renamed and becomes Heidi Bub when she is adopted by a white single mother in Pulaski, Tennessee, a White-dominant city and the birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan. Bub grows up in a strict household and is told by her adoptive

mother to not reveal her Vietnamese/mixed-race identity and to pass as white American. Later, Bub is disowned when she decides to leave home for college. Bub grows up, gets married, and has her own family of two children; but the rejection by her adoptive mother spurs her to seek out her birth mother. Given information provided by the Holt Adoption Agency, Bub finds her mother Mai Thi Kim and travels with the documentary crew back to Viet Nam. The reunion is fraught with emotion, and her joy of being reunited with her biological mother and family is short-lived. Bub is overwhelmed by her mother's overly affectionate actions but moreover, taken back with her birth family's large request for money. In the end, Bub believes that her birth family is more interested in her as a source of continued financial support rather than having a relationship that provides Bub with answers to her past; consequently, Bub leaves despondent and does not continue contact with them. In the end, Bub rejects the promise of her birth family.

Critical work on *Daughter from Danang* frames Heidi Bub as the adoptee and Bub's story as the typical return journey in search of her birth mother. In their critique of the documentary, Gregory Paul Choy and Catherine Ceniza Choy contest the filmmakers' claim that the film addresses the broad themes of "cultural clash, family drama, and war casualties" to reframe it within adoption studies. They argue that *Daughter from Danang* reduces Heidi Bub to a character rather than the central subject of the documentary. This act of rendering Heidi powerless, Choy and Choy contend, continues to exert American war violence on Heidi herself and in the space of Viet Nam: "we argue that while the filmmakers intended to critique the ongoing impact of the Vietnam War in both Vietnam and the United States, *Daughter from Danang* inadvertently perpetuates the violence of the war through the exclusion and the silencing of adoptees' agency and subjectivity" (223). In place of this silencing, Choy and Choy endeavor

to give Bub personhood and voice by bringing the act of transnational and transracial adoption to the forefront. Nevertheless, their attempt to situate *Daughter from Danang* as an adoptee-driven narrative seems to fail because they cannot reposition Heidi's story in a way that accounts for the complex desires and experiences of transnational and transracial adoptees in their search for their birth parents.

Pushing the critique of *Daughter from Danang* even further, Jodi Kim positions the documentary film within her larger engagement with "Asian American cultural productions shift, reframe, and critically extend dominate Cold War culture and historiography by showing the ways in which they stage the Cold War as a geopolitical, cultural, and epistemological project of gendered racial formation and imperialism undergirding U.S. global hegemony" (4). In her analysis of adoption, Kim argues that American imperialism produces different reactions towards adoption and how it differs in Korean and Vietnamese adoption narratives, where the former allows for a possibility and the latter, an impossibility. Kim uses Korean American Deann Borshay Liem's *First Person Plural* as a counterpoint to *Daughter from Danang* to argue that: "While *First Person Plural* [. . .] displays the formation of a new geography of kinship and the subsequent disidentification with that kinship by Deann Borshay Liem, *Daughter from Danang* displays how a newly reconfigured kinship might be foreclosed altogether" (204-5). The foreclosure and impossibility of "new geographies of kinship" steams from the ongoing and persistent loss on which Bub's adoption is predicated: the sexual exploitation of Vietnamese women by American servicemen, the abandonment of Amerasians, the loss of the Vietnam War and the attempt to reconcile such loss through taking refugees and adoptees. As such, Kim defines *Daughter from Danang* through the "irreconcilable collisions (which cannot be reduced to 'culture clash') and limits of knowledge" that "[reveal] how a transnational and transracial

adoption such as Bub's is kind of lingering collective imperial violence that refuses to be assimilated within or sutured to contemporary discourses of 'healing' and reconciliation in the prolonged aftermath of America's war in Vietnam" (206; 206-207). The difference between the Korean War as a "Forgotten War" and the Vietnam War as the war America lost is what allows for or precludes the reconfigured forms of kinship through transnational and transracial adoption. In Bub's defiance against her American adoptive mother who rejects her and Bub's own rejection of her Vietnamese birth mother, Kim reads *Daughter from Danang* as a narrative that already forecloses the "'healing' and reconciliation" and makes known the losses from irreconcilable trauma.

While Choy and Choy's and Kim's focus on Bub as the adoptee in their examination of transnational adoption, David Eng instead concentrates on the mothers of the adoption. In *Feelings of Kinship*, he works through on the dilemma of having two mothers and not enough room for the both of them as part of the discourse of racial melancholia. Eng defines racial melancholia as the process whereby "identifications and affiliations with lost objects, places, and ideals of both Asianness, as well as whiteness, remain estranged and unresolved" (17). Moreover, Eng uses a "poststructuralist reordering of psychoanalysis that could accommodate the possibility of two mothers" and that considers the racial melancholia of the Asian adoptee taken into a white American adoptive family in his reading of Borshay Liem's *First Person Plural*. Eng gestures towards *Daughter from Danang* in a footnote, saying that "The film is an elaborate and painful disquisition on the adoptee Heidi Bub's successive rejection of two 'bad' mothers—first her adoptive mother and then her birth mother" (217, fn. 52). Similar to Jodi Kim, Eng points to foreclosure; here, the possibility to "accommodate the possibility of two mothers" is not viable precisely because Bub rejects both.

Eng's psychoanalytical approach takes into account race and difference in a way that moves towards a consideration of hospitality. Focusing on Borshay Liem's comments about her feeling of being a "temporary visitor," Eng brings up the rhetoric of hospitality to consider the adoptee as a guest within the framework of immigration:

the rhetoric of hospitality, the problem of host and guest that comes to overshadow Borshay Liem's psychic existence on both sides of the Pacific. [. . .] Her rhetoric of the guest invokes the refugee discourses that characterize much of the history of Cold War politics in the Asian-Pacific, particularly Korean and Vietnam. This rhetoric connects transnational adoption with U.S. political and military affairs concerning the containment of communism, while linking it to a contemporary discourse of asylum seekers under international human rights discourse and treaties. (131)

For Eng, hospitality speaks to the different instances of immigration from transnational adoption to the Cold War refugee to contemporary asylum seeker as well as the political context for hospitality that is rooted in positioning the immigrant and refugee as the guest and "temporary visitor." Eng briefly touches on the privileges of such hospitality, saying that "this trope of hospitality and benevolence, bestowed and withdrawn at the will of the host, describes well the material conditions and psychic predicaments of the transnational adoptee" (131). Through the mention of hospitality, Eng uses the position of the guest to interrogate the adoptee's psychic predicament of loss and racial melancholia with regard to the two mothers.

I use Eng's positioning of the adoptee as the guest within the rhetoric of hospitality to construct hospitality as a theoretical framework that provides the means to reframe kinship and to provoke critique of the host's seemingly benevolent act of welcome and family. Where earlier

critics read the adoptee as part of the adoption triad of birth mother, adoptee, and adoptive mother, such a reading limits the engagement with kinship to the filial, familial, and maternal. Heidi Bub is always constructed as the titular *Daughter from Danang*; she is Ann Neville's adoptive daughter and Mai Thi Kim's biological daughter. From the position of the daughter, Heidi Bub struggles in acting out against her mothers, burdened with the guilt of being abandoned and welcomed and abandoned yet again. As such, the refusal against her two mothers results in psychic and emotional disconnect and loss. When Bub is read not as an adoptee-daughter but as an adoptee-guest, these unfilial, rebellious acts remain still unfilial and rebellious but in a way that allow for the possibility of mourning multiple losses: Bub's being given up by her birth mother, being renounced by her adoptive mother, and finally, her own rejection of both of her mothers.

Because other frameworks of cultural difference, Cold War epistemology, and psychoanalysis repeatedly reduce Bub to the figure of the daughter, they cannot adequately explain Bub's hostility against and rejection of her mothers. To read Heidi Bub not only as an adoptee and a daughter but as a guest allows for a deeper and broader understanding of her behavior and actions. Therefore, I shift readings of *Daughter from Danang* as the culture clash and the unfilial daughter to the question of hospitality and the guest's attempts at the work of mourning. Through kinship as hospitality and mourning, Bub's violent and inhospitable acts reveal the underlying uneven relations of geopolitics, race, and gender—that is, the loss occurring between host and guest, between birth and adoptive family and adoptee, and between the United States and Viet Nam.

I turn to Derrida to build an interpretative framework that recasts the adoptee as guest. I define adoption is a form of hospitality, as it entails the welcoming of the guest into the host's

home, reread as the welcoming of the adoptee and Vietnamese Other into the adoptive family and nation. In reading Derrida, Judith Still illustrates how the relationship between adoption and hospitality, saying: “Adoption (offering an indigent person shelter, warmth, food and other benefits, particularly education, over a long time period) could be treated as a form of hospitality – and Jacques Derrida’s work on hospitality [. . .] encourages his reader to see adoption (or the substitution of one child for another) as a critical model” (*Enlightenment Hospitality* 215). Hospitality as the act of welcoming the guest—the stranger, the Other—into the host’s home. This act, I contend, is fully realized in the case of adoption, where the adoptee is more than welcomed into a home, she is welcomed into the family. Adoption, therefore, is the more intimate act of hospitality because of the incorporation the adoptee-guest within the host family. In a broader context, adoption as part of immigration situates hospitality as the taking in of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers by the host nation. In this way, adoption highlights the personal and intimate as well as the legal and political aspects of the welcome that binds host and guest.

In my work, I use Derridean hospitality to consider further how family and kinship are intimately tied to the nation. I bring Derrida into this conversation to better understand how the legal-political and historical processes produce Vietnamese adoptees and sponsored family members as (un)privileged refugees, immigrants, and citizens. Reading adoptees and the sponsored as figures of the guest, I argue that they highlight how hospitality and mourning are interlinked in their construction as impossible and how mourning and loss characterize the relationship between host and guest. For the host, loss is tied to the inability to have a child biologically as well as tied to France’s and the United States’ attempt to recuperate what has been lost: empire and military defeat. While for the guest, the loss is located in Viet Nam as

both the site of and the imagining of family and nation. Significantly, the guest as adoptee locates the loss not only with Viet Nam but also with racial melancholia, where the adoptee stands in for the host's loss so that the host can mourn the private and national loss of empire and where the adoptee always figures as the Other and as the sign of difference, never fully assimilated into family and nation. My work on adoption and empire draws on Derrida's work on hospitality to examine the demands of hospitality and the host-guest relations; nevertheless, I use the guest as the basis for my engagement with hospitality in order to address the lack of discussion around the guest in host-centric discussions of hospitality because hospitality requires both parties of host and guest.

Derrida's work on hospitality has provided an important theoretical framework for critical discussion on immigration as well as the politics and ethics of the Other. In *Postcolonial Hospitality and Manifeste pour l'hospitalité*, Mireille Rosello and Mohammed Seffahi engage with Derrida's hospitality in contemporary discussions of immigration politics. And it is precisely because Derrida positions the host at the center and the agent of hospitality that his theory of hospitality has become so influential in current debates on immigration and human rights. Emphasizing the host's responsibility, Derrida defines the laws of hospitality as deriving from a pure, unconditional hospitality. In doing so, Derrida attempts to provide an ethics of hospitality that shifts immigration away from xenophobic and restrictive practices towards policies that serves to welcome the guest-stranger-Other. Nonetheless, Judith Still critiques this dominant reading of hospitality through the host, saying: "In my view, one of the many problems with the reception of Levinas's work on hospitality is that it can encourage a self-flattering (since we readers perceive ourselves as hosts), even if guilty, focus on the host. Yet hospitality could be argued to be constructed between *hôtes* (host and guest) – you cannot have a host alone"



(*Derrida and Hospitality* 9). Here, Still employs Derrida's play on the French word *hôte* as meaning both host and guest to reveal the underlying assumption that the host is the sole actor in the practice of hospitality, with the guest being the object of such actions. However, even this falls short of a more comprehensive analysis of hospitality, and I propose a reconsideration of hospitality to reassert the guest's position and agency within hospitality.

Calling for an understanding of hospitality that is pure and unconditional, Derrida defines the act of hospitality as the responsibility and ethical imperative of the host. In Derrida's pure hospitality, the host welcomes the guest and does so without making any demands of the guest, such as asking for his name or identity. As such, unconditional hospitality is a kind of pure ethics of welcoming the Other, any and all others: "If I am unconditionally hospitable, I should welcome the visitation, not the invited guest, but the visitor. I must be unprepared, or prepared to be unprepared, for the unexpected arrival of *any* other [ . . . ] If, however, there is pure hospitality, or a pure gift, it should consist in this opening without horizon, without horizon of expectation, an option to the new comer whoever they may be" ("Hospitality, Justice" 70). The act of "opening without horizon" is the host's act of opening up his house to the unexpected guest without any expectation. In this unconditional hospitality, it is the host who is the fundamental actor who is the master of his home—the master of the nation—who invites the guest—the immigrant and the foreigner—into his home. For Derrida, unconditional hospitality touches on the impossible, and it is one of his aporias, where the impossibility of the pure Law of hospitality and unconditional welcome actually allows for the possibility of a more ethical conditional welcome.

For conditional hospitality, its possibility is realized yet again through the figure of the host; conditional hospitality only reiterates Derrida's host-centric hospitality. Where the

unconditional Law of hospitality is singular and absolute in its welcome, the laws of conditional hospitality is many and plural, made up of laws that identify citizenship and legal status and name and identity. As such, there are many demands made of the guest that limits and restricts the very welcome extended to the guest. The laws of conditional hospitality are therefore set by the host and host nation and as such are attempts to work towards an unconditional hospitality for Derrida: “We often forget that it is in the name of unconditional hospitality, the kind that makes meaningful any reception of foreigners, that we should try to determine the *best* conditions, namely particularly legal limits, and especially any particular implementation of laws” (“Principle of Hospitality” 67). The unconditional serves as a model of ethics and an ideal model for the conditional as hospitality is put into political and legal action by the host nations. The laws of hospitality are formalized into laws of immigration and citizenship that are created and implemented by the host/host nation in an effort to limit and regulate rather than invite and welcome. Therefore, the host and host nation are the active agents of hospitality with little or no mention of the guest.

For my work on Vietnamese diasporic literature, I use act of hospitality to the welcome of the adoptee at both the familial and national level. The adoption of Vietnamese children into American and French adoptive families and the sponsorship of Vietnamese family members into Vietnamese American and French families are the private act of hospitality while the laws allowing for transnational adoption and the Orderly Departure Program occur at the level of political and national hospitality. For the United States, the welcome extended to adoptees and the sponsored is part of the larger global displacement and taking in of Vietnamese refugees at the end of the Vietnam War. The opening of America’s borders to Vietnamese boat people is often read as an act of reconciliation and an act to compensate for the political and military

upheaval and the uprooting of large numbers of Vietnamese. In a similar way, France's hospitality towards Vietnamese refugees and immigrants is motivated in an effort to recuperate from the colonial history and defeat in Viet Nam. These political acts of permitting entrance and settlement of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants in the United States and France reinforce the nation as the arbiter of hospitality and even more, as the benevolent host. Within the Derridean discourse of conditional hospitality, the American and French welcome of Vietnamese adoptees and refugees do not focus on the guest but rather on the host, the country who welcomes refugees with open arms.

This continual insistence on the host and the ethical responsibility to welcome the guest begs the question of who is the guest of such hospitality? I turn to the guest because the guest, while not discussed thoroughly, is an intrinsic participant in the act of hospitality as the subject of immigration laws and policies. More than just considering the guest as the object and subject of hospitality, my work seeks to reframe the guest as an active and an integral actor in hospitality. In discussing hospitality, Derrida does not ignore the guest entirely but positions the guest in a passive role. The guest occupies the position of the stranger and the foreigner and therefore the Other, who makes possible the host's encounter with the Other. Hospitality is predicated on the welcome extended to the guest and therefore cannot occur if there is no guest for the host to welcome. Derrida defines hospitality as a relational act and thus as an encounter with the Other. Derrida's guest is the absolute Other and therefore situates hospitality as occurring between the host and guest in terms of Levinas' irreducible face to face encounter, with the face to face as an original ethics ("Hospitality, Justice" 68). Derrida considers the Other as "indefinitely other because we never have any access to the other *as such*. That is why he/she is *the* other. This separation, this dissociation is not only a limit, but it is also the condition of

relation to the other, a non-relation as relation” (71). If the guest is the Other, then the act of hospitality is the host’s irreducible encounter with the guest. Yet this encounter is positioned as the host’s ethical responsibility to receive the guest as Other; the guest remains ambiguous and only outlined as the Other. In her critique, Judith Still underlines Derrida’s lack of engagement with the guest, saying that “work on Derridean hospitality typically focuses on the instance of the host as subject while the details of the guest are not sketched in – to some extent it is philosophically appropriate that ‘he’ should be a blank space” (*Enlightenment Hospitality* 214). Derrida’s lack of definition of the guest and his being a “blank space” speaks to the guest as the object for whom the host can define himself. However, as the guest is a vital, intrinsic participant in hospitality, the guest should not remain merely an object or the “blank space” upon which hospitality can be enacted and defined. If the guest is indeed the “blank space,” then the guest’s blankness speaks to Levinasian ethics, where the Other is not one to be defined and not reducible; the irreducibility of the Other prevents the self, here host, from owning the Other or employing the Other for self-definition.

Nevertheless, I challenge how “it is philosophically appropriate that ‘he should be a blank space” in two ways (Still, *Enlightenment Hospitality* 214). First, if we were to remain within philosophical discourse, then the guest should neither merely be a figure upon which the host can enact hospitality nor an instrument through which the host can mourn private loss and the loss of empire through the act of hospitality. Second, in the case of adoption and sponsorship, the guest is not a blank space to be filled, but the guest is already filled with the historical, historical, socio-political, racial, and gendered contingencies and specificities that render guest neither of the self nor the same but of the Other and of difference. In this way, hospitality is transformed from an encounter between host and guest to a site of where knowledge is constructed through

the interrogation of alterity. I contend that the guest, rather than the host, is the producer of such knowledge. The reconfiguration of the host-guest dynamic then comes to restructure the way in which we approach the adoptee, an approach that is new to both critical adoption studies and critical refugee studies.

The guest of the Vietnamese diasporic narratives is not a “blank space” or a blank Other; rather race, gender, culture, and long histories of empire and oppression and of war and displacement fill the outlines of the guest. The adoptee-guest is outlined and overfilled with history and the specifics of the adoption. In my work, I focus on the guest as Vietnamese; the displaced—a refugee, an immigrant, an adoptee, the sponsored family member; men and women, children, families; they seek refuge from the imperial violence and from political instability; they seek asylum as from persecution as American sympathizers or as ethnic Chinese; they pursue better economic opportunities abroad; they form families and communities in the United States, in France, and their adoptive countries. Here, the guest is Vietnamese American, Vietnamese French, the adoptee, and the sponsored family member.

Importantly, the political enactment of hospitality is only afforded to certain guests and grants them with certain privilege, particularly within the American and French immigration context. Adoptees and the sponsored who are the focus of my project have access to a kind of privileged immigration and thus a privileged hospitality because of the framework of kinship through which these two occur. By virtue of family building, adoption and sponsorship make easy the welcome of the Vietnamese Other into the nation. Special exceptions were made for mixed-race Vietnamese of American and French descent; Amerasians and Eurasians were granted special visa or expedited paperwork so that they could be placed into adoptive families, following Operation Babylift in 1975 and the Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1988. This

national and political act of granting mixed-race and Vietnamese children privileged forms of immigration and citizenship inscribes hospitality also at the level of kinship, in particular because their immigration as mixed-race children configures them as those who needed to be recuperated and not left behind. The host families offer their homes and their hearts to these Vietnamese children—some because of personal loss or infertility while others in charity as a way to save and rescue them from a war-torn country or to make amends for the American military participation in the Vietnam War. Significantly, these acts of hospitality as adoption only occur because of the specific identity of the guest as mixed-race/Vietnamese children. In a similar yet different way, sponsorship privileges family reunification and structures the host-guest relationship as one occurring within a family. The overfull blank space of the guest, therefore, allows for a more concrete examination of hospitality, one that is socially and politically as well as familially rooted.

Working through the guest within hospitality, I take issue with Derrida's figuring the guest as the threat against the host. Derrida states that the host is the master of the house, and thus, the guest's entrance threatens the host's mastery and may go so far as to hold the host hostage within his own home. This hostage situation is surprisingly part and parcel of hospitality; he explains: "Et plus radicalement, ce déplacement [de l'hospitalité par l'hostilité] tient au fait que la loi de la hospitalité [. . .] conduit à une situation où l'hôte invitant, accueillant, devient l'invité de son invité. Il se trouve en situation d'être reçu chez lui grâce à la médiation de celui qui arrive chez lui" [Even more radically, this displacement (of hospitality by hostility) speaks to how the law of hospitality conducts a situation where the inviting and welcoming host becomes the guest of his guest. The host finds himself in a situation where he is received in his own home because of the mediation of the one who arrives in his home] ("Responsabilité et

Hospitalité” 140-141, my translation). Here, the very threat of the guest actually inverts the position and relationship of host and guest. This upheaval in the positioning of hospitality does not restructure agency *per se*; the guest only threatens because he enters the home, which is still predicated on the host’s initial welcome. Nevertheless, I would read this as the possibility of the guest as an actor, where he can assume the position of the host with his agency and his responsibility. The idea of the guest as threatening, moreover, allows for the presence and the ambivalence of hostility within hospitality that I will take up to read the breakdown of the adoptive and sponsoring families.

In the 2000 *Angelaki* article “*Hostipitality*,” Derrida brings to light the ambivalence of hospitality and hostility through the neologism *hostipitality*. Using *hostipitality*, Derrida includes the very inherent possibility of hostility within the act of hospitality: “*Hospitalität*, a word of Latin origin, of a troubled and troubling origin, a word which carries its own contradiction incorporated into it, a Latin word which allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, ‘hostility,’ the undesirable guest” (3). Here, Derrida defines hospitality as inherently tied to welcome and benevolence instead to its opposite hostility; when he positions hostility as the undesirable guest, Derrida then transfers this undesirability to the very figure of the guest. As such, the guest is rendered as undesirable, hostile, even violent. Within this relationship of hostility and hospitality, the host, however, can claim to be innocent of any wrongdoing, especially when the host is always called to enact the pure, unconditional hospitality. This displacement of agency and responsibility onto the guest is an act that renders the guest as actor. Too often Derrida seems to place the guest in the position of possible hostility, of risk and of threat against the host, whereas the host remains the victim of such violence and such inhospitality.

I would argue that *hostipitality* is a relation of hostility and violence between both host and guest, not solely the quality of the undesirable guest. If there is indeed a reversal in the positions between host and guest, then both are implicated as agents and actors of both hospitality and hostility. In the case of Vietnamese adoptees and refugees, the hostility and undesirability characterize not only their situation of hospitality but also the host's nation's welcome or lack thereof. The influx of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants 1975 marked them as an undesirable population. Such numbers of poor refugees overwhelmed refugee camps in Malaysia and Indonesia and processing camps in the United States. Because of their very undesirability, they faced hardship as well as racism, discrimination, and exploitation by American and French hosts. The hostility of hospitality, therefore, does not solely lie with the guest but rather with the host as well. Therefore, hostility characterizes the conditional hospitality by the United States and France towards Vietnamese refugees, adoptees and sponsored family members.

Along with *hostipitality*, mourning introduces a different kind of hostility. Derrida complicates hospitality by tying it to the work of mourning in "*Hostipitality*" in *Acts of Religion*, saying: "We have often spoken of mourning, of hospitality as mourning, of burial, of Oedipus and Don Juan, and recently even about the work of mourning as a process of hospitality, and so on" (358). If the work of mourning is tied to the process of hospitality, then the work of mourning may be part of the process of hospitality and the process of welcoming. To mourn is, to a certain extent, to welcome the loss of the Other and at a point, to work through the loss; perhaps, mourning is the opportunity to welcome, in Levinasian terms, the irreducible Other who has been lost. For Derrida, mourning touches on the impossible; nevertheless, the work of mourning must be done in the attempt to and in light of improbable mourning.



For my project, how the process through which mourning is an act of hospitality epitomizes the relationship between the host and guest, between adoptive families and adoptees, between parties who both experience loss. As a specific relationship of kinship, adoption occurs because of loss on the personal and national levels. In terms of personal loss, the family's mourning may be attributed to the loss of fertility, the loss of any biological progeny, or the loss of one of their own children. Moreover, the family stands in for the nation's attempt to work through the colonial and military losses, the loss of French empire and Indochina at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 or the American involvement and loss of the Vietnam War. The welcoming of the Vietnamese child, particularly that of the Amerasian or Eurasian child, therefore is the act of mourning on the part of the American or French adoptive families. The United States and France, as the national family, receive the child that represents the loss of Viet Nam, the marker of empire, into its home. The host family and nation, therefore, use the Vietnamese adoptee and the guest as the instrument through which the host can enact mourning through hospitality. The welcome and the adoption attempt to reconcile these national and military losses in providing a home and better opportunities for the child. In the discussion of loss, this work of mourning as acts of hospitality nevertheless center on the host.

The guest, I argue, is an integral participant in the work of mourning and the welcome of hospitality. Within the national structure of citizenship and the familial structure of adoption, the guest is the mixed-race Vietnamese adoptee. For the adoptee, loss is rooted to Viet Nam, the geographical location of birth and the emotional, cultural location of family and identity. Furthermore, upon adoption, the adoptee's loss is also rooted in racial melancholia as well as being the host's lost object. The guest's welcome into the house is, in actuality, the act of mourning and hospitality on the part of the host. How then can the guest mourn his very loss of

family nation when the adoptive family and nation offer kinship through hospitality? If Derrida defines the guest as undesirable, threatening, and hostile, then the guest can only act out in those terms of violence and inhospitality. The host's welcome expects the guest to appreciate the generous act of being adopted into the family and the new opportunities now afforded to the guest. The act of welcome is the saving, charitable, humanitarian act. To mourn his/her loss of his/her own family, culture, and nation, the guest goes against the host's hospitality; for the guest, to mourn is therefore inhospitable or hostile. Because of hospitality bestowed upon and to the guest, the very act of mourning is all but impossible.

The guest therefore is situated more within melancholia than mourning. Whereas the host can mourn through the welcome of the lost object of the Vietnamese other into the family and into the nation, the guest cannot mourn through hospitality because of his/her very position as adoptee, refugee, and sponsored. Regulated as the lost object, the guest can only assert his/her subjectivity and agency by calling into question the host's violent mourning. For the guest, violence and hostility are the ways to attempt the work of mourning within the impossible state of melancholia, highlighting *hostipitality* as the form of hospitality. In a sense, *hostipitality* defines the situation of the Vietnamese adoptee and refugee: the hospitality of the host nation and family produces its very opposite, the hostile Vietnamese Other. And yet, the guest remains involved in hospitality only to reveal the host's hostility and inhospitable welcome. As such, melancholia and the possible work of mourning is seemingly foreclosed to Vietnamese adoptees because they are refused a site for mourning, deprived of the site of the subject of mourning: Viet Nam. In the effort to integrate the children into adoptive families and assimilate them into the host society and culture, these adoptee-guests are denied the site of Viet Nam, its language and culture, and are denied the idea of their former family and familial ties to the nation. Often, they

feel burdened with the necessity to conform and to pass as American or French as well as with the debt of gratitude for being rescued and welcomed. Consequently, the ambivalent welcome and hostility from the host deny the guest the possibility of mourning. The Vietnamese Other, therefore, resides in a state of impossible mourning and melancholia in the face of the host's attempts to recuperate their loss of empire—France's and America's military defeats—through the act of hospitality and adoption. Moreover, in face of the host's *hostipitality* and in face of impossible mourning, the Vietnamese guest questions the process of hospitality and proposes hostility and inhospitality as an alternative articulation of the work of mourning.

From this framing of hospitality and hostility by way of the Vietnamese adoptee, I return to Heidi Bub and *Daughter from Danang*. My work repositions Heidi Bub as adoptee and guest and reconceptualizes what may be conceived as cultural conflicts as acts of *hostipitality*—hospitality, inhospitality, and hostility—and as attempts to work through the loss of Viet Nam and of her birth mother and family. Her unfilial behavior towards both her adoptive mother Ann Neville and birth mother Mai Thi Kim makes manifest her loss tied to Viet Nam and her personal loss of family through abandonment and rejection by both mothers. She does not hold any affection for her adoptive mother because Neville forced her to pass as a white American girl with a tan at the cost of disavowing her own mixed-race Vietnamese identity. While such passing may stem from the fear of discrimination in Pulaski, Tennessee, the birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan, Bub cannot reveal and thus is denied her mixed-race and Vietnamese racial identity. Bub therefore can neither mourn the loss of her birth mother nor the loss of her own racial identity. Furthermore, Bub is rejected and disowned by her adoptive mother. Bub is thrown out of the house when she does not keep curfew and later disowned when she decides to leave home to attend college against Neville's wishes. Her resistance against Neville is not merely a

teenager's rebellion. Rather, Bub is an adoptee acting out, and her hostility is directed towards the host who has adopted her and has put strict conditions on the hospitality. This familial rupture therefore signals Bub's own attempt to open up some possibility of mourning her own personal loss, as she is driven to search for her biological mother from the unresolved loss of her adoptive mother. Bub is taken aback by the out-pouring of affection by her birth mother Mai Thi Kim; at one point, she complains about how her birth mother is always clinging to her and sleeps with her, that Bub is never alone even for a moment. Mai Thi Kim's behavior is the complete opposite of Neville's rejection and disowning Bub. The tipping point for Bub is when her birth family asks her to provide financial support for them. Rather than an unfilial reaction, her breakdown and decision to distance herself from her birth mother and family is her attempt to work through the feelings of hostility brought about by the host's demands—the birth family's expectations of Bub's taking financial responsibility and providing monetary support. These demands do not allow her to process or even work through the feelings of loss tied to her birth mother giving her up and the ensuing years of separation. As such, these moments of hostility from Bub arise only in response to the hostility enacted by the hosts themselves. Her Vietnamese family attempts to recuperate Bub as not only family member but moreover as financial support because of her American citizenship and upbringing. Perhaps, her Vietnamese birth family as host demands Bub to make up for and to compensate them for how America enacted and perpetuated imperial war, how American servicemen used and abandoned Vietnamese women, and the history of American military violence. As the adoptee-guest, she only has recourse to inhospitable acts in ways that manifest her feelings of loss as attempts to work through the mourning inherent in hospitality and adoption.

In this introduction, I reread Heidi Bub of *Daughter from Danang* to articulate the position of the adoptee-guest in order to set up my dissertation chapters that draw from Bub's experience and identity as a mixed-race Operation Babylift adoptee. *Daughter from Danang's* Heidi Bub is one of the Operation Babylift orphans who is adopted by an American family. As the major American humanitarian effort at the end of Vietnam War to save the Vietnamese and mixed-race children from orphanages in Saigon, Operation Babylift is a crucial moment in not only critical adoption studies but in my reexamination of Vietnamese refugee immigration through the mass migration of children. In Chapter 1, I compare Operation Babylift's mass immigration of children to the United States with the mass repatriation of Indochinese families and Eurasian Vietnamese children to France. I argue that the documentary films on Operation Babylift and the French mass repatriation articulate the evacuation and repatriation of mixed-race children as an act of hospitality that demands narratives of gratitude to be articulated and reproduced by these very children. These documentaries, I contend, participate in the reproduction of the Western master narrative of rescue and benevolence that erases the imperial project and recuperates the military defeat in Viet Nam. The form of the documentary film disavows the imperial war that is the state of exception that produces the racial order—the very conditions that produced mixed-race children and refugees—and extends the neo/colonial racial violence into the country of resettlement. To contend against such disavowal of imperial war, I turn towards fictional works that express and articulate hostility and *hostipitality*, thereby offering alternative ways of negotiating loss and mourning.

The failure of hospitality and the failure of adoption that is rooted in being disowned in the case of Heidi Bub by her adoptive mother Ann Neville is what Chapter 2 examines further through the narratives of Kim and Vinh in Aimee Phan's *We Should Never Meet*. Kim's story

parallels Bub's, where Kim is an Operation Babylift orphan who is placed into an American adoptive family who ultimately rejects her. In the sending back Kim after adopting her and the disowning of Bub, adoption as a form of privileged and intimate hospitality is defined as impossible and as an aporia. I tie the Derridean aporias of hospitality and the gift to these repeated breakdowns within the adoptive family, the foster family and the welfare system, and even within the Vietnamese American community. Like Bub who rebuffs both her adoptive mother and her birth mother, Kim and Vinh refuse possible kinship with Vietnamese American maternal and paternal figures. Even more, they act out through the violent acts of theft and home invasion and consequently reject any form of hospitality and kinship. Through the figures of Kim and Vinh, the failed adoptee and the failed foster child, I consider a politics of hostility as the means to critique the aporias of hospitality, affiliation, and gift and therefore propose a way to break through the expectations of the guest and their burden of debt that is constructed through the gift of hospitality and kinship. Furthermore, I use criminality and violence as forms of hostility that seek to reveal the unsuccessful hospitality and the failed adoption to provide counter-narratives critiquing of American empire and racism and discrimination in the host nation.

The adoptee, moreover, embodies a difference that is difficult or even impossible to assimilate into the adoptive family and nation. Recounting her childhood, Bub describes the realities of racial difference and discrimination as a mixed-race Vietnamese adoptee in the American South. Bub recalls how her adoptive mother Ann Neville forces her to pass as a white American with a tan. The notion of difference speaks to Bub's childhood of having to pass as white American; as such, *Daughter from Danang* reveals how hospitality is never unconditional. Not only is hospitality conditional but moreover it is constructed within social and political

contexts that obscures the material conditions of discrimination and racism. Reading Bharati Mukherjee's "Fathering" together with Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth*, Chapter 3 considers adoption and the formation of kinship through affiliation through the un/happy family and the inventive family, through affect and affiliation. Focusing on transracial adoption, I consider how the adoptee body is constructed as racially different and as embodying difference; I use the framework of dis(-)ease to acknowledge how adoptee difference is embodied as racial difference at the same time as feelings of uneasiness because of such alterity. Like previous adoption narratives, "Fathering" and *Bitter in the Mouth* interrogate the breakdown of the adoptive family because of the inability to incorporate both the adoptee's difference and the adoptee's embodied trauma of loss and imperial war. Furthermore, Eng and Linda, respectively, reject forms of kinship to propose what I call affiliation by affliction, a relationship that considers difference and alterity as well as an interrogation of American multiculturalism enacted through hospitality.

While *Daughter from Danang* is an adoption story, the premise of the film is Bub's finding and reuniting with her birth family; the narrative is the reconstitution of the birth family and its resulting breakdown. Bub is able to meet her birth mother only to have the family reunion fail to be a happy one. Not only is it a failure, Bub's family reunion resides in impossibility as Bub ultimately does not keep in contact with her birth mother. In a different trajectory of family reunification—from Viet Nam to the France and the United States rather than Bub's return to Viet Nam, narratives of sponsorship also articulate the impossibility of the reconstitution of the original family. I close with a return to the comparative and transnational with an examination of Vietnamese French and American works on sponsorships in Chapter 4: Linda Lê's *Les trois Parques* and Angie Chau's *Quiet as They Come*. This more intimate form

of family created through delayed reunion also results in failure, highlighting how the past and trauma of empire and war can reemerge in the space of the adoptive country and thus confronting the impossibility of mourning that arises from projects of salvation that seek to disavow the persistence of imperial war. I return to Derrida to locate sponsorship with the site of the aporia, the site of the specter and its haunting, and within a “time out of joint” and within Eric Tang’s refugee temporality. The specters of *Les trois Parques*, King Lear and *Quiet as They Come*’s Duc open up to reveal the demands of racist incorporation and assimilation, demands that a happy family reunion in fact seeks to disavow.

*Daughter from Danang* closes with the heartbreak of Bub who struggles to cope with the experience of the reunion with her birth family, the failure of the trip, and the unexpected demands of her family. It ends with the notion of an irreconcilable misunderstanding between Bub and her birth family. There seems to be no resolution for Bub except for her no longer replying to the family’s repeated requests for financial assistance. The last words are said by Bub: “I guess I have closed the door on them. But I didn’t lock the door. It’s closed, but it’s not locked.” The image of the closed but unlocked door epitomizes the lack of resolution. And I consider this lack of resolution productive in so far as it does not forcibly inscribe the adoption narrative and the family reunion narrative into a neat happy ending. My own work refuses this happy ending and seeks to problematize the welcome to the family. The adoptee comes to represent different articulations that render multiple and plural the refugee and im/migrant. I conclude with the many iterations of the adoptee and the sponsored to refuse a singular, happy ending: the adoptee is the ungrateful and the rejected, the hostile and violent, the scarred and afflicted, and the one left behind, brought over, and disappeared.



## CHAPTER 1

### Where Do We Go from Here?:

#### Narrating and Documenting Vietnamese French and American Mass Immigration

I grew up not far from Sainte-Livrade, in the South West of France, but I never heard of this camp until 15 years ago, when a Vietnamese friend of mine who was living in Hanoi told me about its existence. I could not believe that nobody around me had ever heard of this community. I started to do some research about transit camps for repatriated people from Indochina and discovered that there was no book, no film – just a few old articles in the local papers.

– Marie-Christine Courtès

The current available statistics on the Vietnamese overseas—*người Việt hải ngoại* or *Việt Kiều*—illustrate that they number among the millions, with the largest population in the United States (1,548,449 [U.S. 2010 Census]) and in France (approximately 300,000 [Cochez]).<sup>1</sup> For the most part, Vietnamese Americans and Vietnamese French arrived in different and various waves of the boat people and refugees as well as sponsored migrations; all of this occurring predominately in the aftermath of 1975 and lasting up until the recent present. Of significance, however, are two historical moments of mass displacement and immigration of Vietnamese mixed-race children and how they remain in the shadows of the more publicized, documented, and commemorated migration of the Vietnamese boat people. Consequently, I interrogate two specific moments of elision in this chapter: the first, the repatriation of Indochinese French families and Eurasian children from colonial Indochina to the French *métropole* in the period of 1956-1965; the second, the Operation Babylift the humanitarian evacuations that brought

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<sup>1</sup> The U.S. 2010 Census data indicate that there are 1,548,449 Vietnamese Americans, and a recent French article in *La Croix* estimated approximately 300,000 French of Vietnamese origins since the French Republic prohibits census distinctions of race and religion. But this is also an indication that France and French culture does not conceive of race as such; rather than race, the terms used are cultural origins and ethnic background that appears as designations of race in various studies, such as *Trajectoires et origines*.

Vietnamese American/Amerasian children to the U.S. and into American adoptive families in the last weeks of April 1975.

These two movements occur historically at the end of two separate, though arguably connected, imperial and military engagements: the first, the fall of the French colonial empire of Indochina in 1956 after the French defeat at Điện Biên Phủ that ended the First Indochina War; and the second, the fall of Saigon that signaled the end of the Vietnam War or the American War in Vietnam in 1975. Furthermore, they not only concern the mixed-race population but moreover, produce two moments of mass migration, whose narratives, I argue, are subject(ed) to the master and national discourses of French forgetting and of American silencing that marginalize the specific experience of the Vietnamese refugee. In face of erasure and silencing, these narratives are the subject of and take the form of documentary films, which attempt to produce counter-narratives through which Vietnamese refugees voice their individual stories of immigration and displacement, of arrival and difficulties of settling down. Nevertheless, the documentary form fails to fully articulate these counter-narratives and often results in a disavowal that denies the history and violence of colonialism and that imposes stories of gratitude or promote assimilation and integration. As such, this chapter reads as its primary sources documentary films produced around these narratives and moments of French Indochinese repatriation and the American Operation Babylift.

In particular, examining these nonfiction filmic narratives, my analysis focuses on the framing technique and the *mise-en-scene* of history and of the various documentary subjects in the genre of the nonfiction documentary. As such, I seek to neither recount the experiences of such privileged and particular migration nor generalize the nature of the segregation and racial discrimination against the mixed-race/Eurasian/Amerasian population. Rather, I seek to examine

the role of narrative, of narrating and framing the specific experiences through the larger historical forgetting of French Indochinese repatriates and, on the other hand, the overt publicity and coverage of the American Operation Babylift. I do this by examining the genre of the documentary film and specifically analyze French films Véronique Lhorme and Marc Nardino's *Les Enfants de Noyant (et d'Indochine)* [The Children of Noyant (and Indochina)] (2005) and Philippe Rostan's *Le Petit Vietnam* [The Little Vietnam] (2008) alongside American films Janet Gardner's *Precious Cargo: Vietnamese Adoptees Discover Their Past* (2001) and Tammy Nguyen Lee's *Operation Babylift: The Lost Children of Vietnam* (2010). Such documentary narration of immigration, I argue, only claim to provide testimony on the part of the refugees and adoptees but, in the end, actually situate and inscribe them into the master narratives of French citizenship and American humanitarianism that forget and silence. In turn, the films disavow histories of colonization and military violence that produce these specific instances of mass immigration as well as histories of the hardships and difficulties of life in the adopted countries.

Because the documentary film (re)produces the rhetoric of repatriate and adoptee in a way that disavows imperial violence, the conditions for their immigration, and their experiences as refugees and immigrant, I propose a turn towards alternative modes of memory and narration that participate in Yên Lê Espiritu's project of re-engaging the figure of the refugee and Viet Thanh Nguyen's call for flexible strategies. I conclude the chapter with a consideration of literary ethnography's multiple narratives and multi-media form through Dominique Rolland's and Clément Baloup's work that allows for the potential of fiction to provide counter-narratives and alternative articulations of the repatriate and adoptee experience that include the critique of the state of exception that constructs their stories in disavowal and forgetting.

## **The Documentary Form and Frames of Memory and Migrations**

The documentary film takes as its premise the narration of “nonfiction accounts of real people and events” (Sikov 90). Among other categories of documentaries, the ethnographic documentary centers on such nonfictional narration of real people and real events in the attempt to document and record the life experiences and customs of everyday life of particular groups of people.

Despite being accounts and narratives of the real, the French and American documentaries are significant because in the act of editing and creating a cohesive narrative arc, they produce an often singular and reductive vision of the many narratives of immigration from Viet Nam to France or to the United States. The documentary form allows for multiple experiences to be narrated precisely because of the presentation of multiple points of views from various agents and actors. Yet these different and differing accounts are integrated and incorporated into a cohesive, singular narrative as fashioned by the documentary filmmaker. The action of collecting and compiling personal narratives and accounts is a significant act of ethnography and of documentation; however, what is important and imparts truth and meaning is the very framing, the setting up and integration of these disparate experiences into one unifying documentary account. The editing and the voice-over narrations are the techniques of framing the multiple into a single master narrative. Documentary films, despite their claim to a disengaged and objective lens towards their subjects, propose a specific and particular interpretation of these migration histories. As such, I propose a critical reading of four documentaries films on the repatriated Vietnamese of Indochina and on the Vietnamese and Amerasian children of Operation Babylift to examine especially the framing of both history and

the documentary form with regard to the disavowal of the narrative experiences of the Vietnamese refugees and immigrants.

In her meditation on meaning and the documentary form “The Totalizing Quest of Meaning,” filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha addresses the question of framing in terms of truth and the power of the filmmaker, saying: “Filmmaking is after all a question of ‘framing’ reality in its course” (101). Filmmaking and, thus, framing are modes through which the filmmaker exercises the power to position what is real and what has meaning and consequently, what is not real and what is meaningless. For Minh-ha, framing is how filmmaker derives power; she continues: “On one hand, truth is produced, induced, and expanded according to the regime in power. On the other, truth lies in between all regimes of truth” (90). Truth and meaning in films, therefore, are manufactured. The filmmaker is not a neutral observer who presents reality as it is; rather, the filmmaker’s decisions in framing are acts that “produce, induce and expand according to the regime in power.” This is very much what is at the heart of Minh-ha’s denunciation of ethnographic films, a subcategory of the documentary film; she says: “One of the areas of documentary that remains most resistant to the reality of film is that known as anthropological filmmaking. Filmed ethnographic material, which was thought to ‘replicate natural perception,’ has now renounced its authority to replicate [. . .] Thus, the recording and gathering of data and of people’s testimonies are considered to be the limited aim of ‘ethnographic film’” (102). This specific denunciation of ethnographic film is focused on the genre’s replication of a natural perception that completely undermines any presentation of reality. The seemingly natural and accepted point of view attributes both truth and reality to what is actually framed through and by the filmmaker’s intentions. Minh-ha’s reading of documentaries, and of ethnographic documentaries in particular, then underscores their falsity

but at the same time, does not invalidate their meaning. As the rapport between truth and meaning are aligned, Minh-ha challenges the “regimes of truth” by looking to the possibility of “truth that lies in between,” or perhaps beyond the “regimes” of dominant, hegemonic discourses. For Minh-ha, access to the “truth that lies in between” is “[thus], to address the question of production relations as raised earlier is endlessly to reopen the question: How is the real (or the social ideal of good representation) produced? Rather than catering to it, striving to capture and discover its truth as a concealed or lost object, it is therefore important to also keep on asking: ‘How is truth being ruled?’” (97). Looking at the in between therefore considers the construction of truth as created by the filmmaker through framing and through production relations, one that allows for a critical challenge against such “regimes of truth” and thus, for the possibility of alternative discourses.

Truth, especially in documentary films, is tied to memory and remembrance, where to remember is to at the same time recover and to (re)present a truth. In the field of memory studies, documentaries have served as cultural objects and the focus of cultural production that inform discourses of memory, remembrance, commemoration, and history. Media studies scholar Holger Pötzsch positions the genre of film within the subfield of cultural memory, what he defines as “social memory practices that are carried out in, and through, cultural and aesthetic expressions” (207). Works of fiction as well as films—documentary, docudramas, and fictive films— provide importantly different processes for collective remembering (208). Pötzsch, moreover, draws attention to the limits of cultural memory studies, where “an early focus on storage and archiving of historical has been increasingly replaced by attention to the ways certain accounts are mediated and remediated, and their contents negotiated” (207). The mediation and negotiation of historical content recalls Minh-ha’s notion of framing; documentaries, as a genre

that is more realistic and more historically aligned, therefore become subject to and subject of “‘framing’ reality in its course” (Minh-ha 101).

Significantly, framing the reality of Vietnamese mass immigration through the moments of French Indochinese repatriation and American adoption airlifts is one that mediates the reality of displacement and migration into the disavowal of memory and experience of such immigration. The documentaries that I examine, importantly, do not address, present, or document either the migration from former French Indochina to the *métropole* or the journey from the orphanages in Saigon and into the arms of adoptive families in American airports. Rather, the documentaries leave the very experience of im/migration as a gap, an aporia. The French documentaries mention the migration only in historical terms and only briefly discuss the families getting of buses into the heart of France in the dead of winter. M. Kathryn Edwards provides a more thorough summary in her description of the repatriates’ disorientation: they travelled for several weeks, “first by boat to Marseilles, then by train to Agen, and then finally by bus to the reception center” (116). For Operation Babylift, the American documentaries do not offer much on the process of immigration because only the take-off and eventual landing in the United States matter. The trajectory of the last-minute flight from the Saigon airport to the stopover at the Clarks Air Force Base in the Philippines and the arrival in the United States are not addressed at all while the hardships, precarious and ill-prepared conditions are merely mentioned in passing. The narrative disavowal of the very journey of immigration speaks to Ali Behdad’s discussion of the historical amnesia with regard to America’s immigration history, he proposes that “the idea of forgetting as a form of historical disavowal” and that “the forgetful representation by the United States of its immigrant heritage is part of a broader form of historical amnesia about its violent formation” (xii). The documentaries’ disavowal of the

Indochinese repatriates' and the Operation Babylift children's act of immigration to France and to the United States is furthermore the disavowal and the forgetting of the "violent formation" of these subjects as repatriates and orphans/adoptees. The long history of Western imperial oppression of Viet Nam through French colonization and the First Indochina War and through American military intervention and the Vietnam War is what produces the conditions for the mass migration of these Indochinese and Vietnamese populations. Furthermore, such elision of migration and displacement renders native the presence of the former Indochinese in France as repatriated citizens and renders natural the adoption of Vietnamese and Amerasian children by White American families. This consequently positions the power of the documentary and its ability to frame into reality what is in service of the French and American master narratives of integration and assimilation.

Therefore, in this chapter, I highlight the discourses that pull these immigration narratives into forgetting and silencing that serves to disavow the history and conditions of imperial rule and violence that produce such migrations. The act of not mentioning the mass migration of French Indochinese/Vietnamese repatriates and Vietnamese/Amerasian children therefore frames the truth of these populations as citizens and therefore not immigrants or refugees. It is through the narrative framing and editing technique of the documentary film that inscribe the repatriates and adoptees to produce and participate in the discourse of forgetting and silencing the imperial and military present as well as narratives of difference and discrimination. Significantly, as narratives of events, documentaries take on the adoptive nations' discourses with regard to the disavowal of the repatriated Vietnamese and the American Operation Babylift Vietnamese. I do this by interrogating what Minh-ha calls the "regime of power" by focusing on how the



documentaries use framing and by looking to the moments of elision and disavowal that produces what Behdad calls historical amnesia.

Consequently, I examine the contested natures of such mass migration of Vietnamese children, where the discourse of forgetting in the case of the repatriates is analogous to the discourse of gratitude imposed on Operation Babylift adoptees. Even while the films contribute to the disavowal of the violence of empire and displacement, they also reveal how that narrative is imposed on the very stories and histories of the repatriates and adoptees who speak (out) in these documentary films. As such, I pose the question: where do they go from here? The comparative nature of this paper reveals the assertion of the dominant narratives in both refugee and immigrant contexts of France and the United States, whose respective discourses of republicanism and multiculturalism subsumes the possible counter-narratives of the Vietnamese. By bringing to light the discourses of disavowal that are enacted through citizenship and national hospitality, I hope to open the space to interrogate and find moments where “truth lies in between all regimes of truth” (Minh-ha 90). In doing so, I hope to find at these sites of suppression how certain memories are constructed to forget of the histories of military violence in Viet Nam and of histories of exclusion and discrimination in France and the United States, but at the same time, those memories produce signs of breakdown, excess, and of what does not quite fit neatly into the imposed narrative to then propose a different frame of memory.

### **Forgetting Indochina and the Reframing of the Vietnamese French Centres d’Accueils**

In this first section, I examine the French documentaries’ attempts to recount a history that was once forgotten: the mass immigration of French Indochinese repatriates. The release of the two documentaries would seem to be acts of remembrance through which the story and

memory of these repatriates would now come to the surface. However, these acts of remembering are in fact undermined by the insistence on forgetting because the documentaries remember only a past located within the French *métropole* while disavowing the past French colonial violence and the past/present of French republican violence against racial and ethnic difference.

Historically, the migration of repatriated French Indochinese occurred with the French defeat at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954. With the end of the French Indochinese empire in Southeast Asia and the Geneva Accords in the same year, those of French citizenship, in particular Vietnamese women and Eurasian children, were repatriated to France starting in 1956. M. Kathryn Edwards points out that the 30,000-45,000 repatriated were “by no means a homogeneous group” and consisted of Eurasians, naturalized Indochinese citizens, citizens of the “old colonies,” some European men with their Eurasian families, and single mothers with children (120). The repatriates were placed into Camps d’accueil des rapatriés d’Indochine (CARI, Reception Camps for Repatriates of Indochina), which were later renamed Centres d’accueil des Français de l’Indochine (CAFI, Reception Center for the French of Indochina) in the early 1960s, into what was to be considered temporary settlements. The principle CAFIs sites were Noyant in Allier, and Sainte-Livrade in Lot-et-Garonne along with other sites at Bias, Lot-et-Garonne; Le Vigeant, la Vienne; and Saint-Laurent d’Ars, Gironde (Simon-Barouh 3; Edwards 117). In my analysis of the documentary films, I will focus on the CAFI at Noyant, which received about 1,100 repatriates of Vietnamese origins.

The French republican and political discourse of citizenship inscribes the Vietnamese French and the Indochinese repatriates as forgotten precisely because of the term “repatriate.” The choice of designating the Vietnamese who immigrated to France as repatriates is significant,

especially given the definition of repatriate and repatriation as the return to one's home(land). Both the denotation and connotation of repatriate as well as the very act of repatriation are tied to the homeland and specifically in French, to the fatherland, *la patrie*—this emphasis on the fatherland will speak to the repatriates' citizenship defined through French paternity. In English, the term repatriate is “a person who has returned to his or her native country,” and the act of repatriation is “to restore (a person) to his or her native country; to return to one's native country” (“repatriate, v.,” *OED*; “repatriation, n.,” *OED*). Similarly, in French, the verb *rapatrier* possesses the same denotation of those who return to their country, to their homeland: “qu'on a fait rentrer dans son pays” [to bring one back to one's country; to return to one's country] (“rapatrié/iée,” *Le nouveau Petit Robert*). Where the Vietnamese immigrants are only French citizens in the legal sense, the designation of “repatriates” signifies the inclusion and absorption of these Vietnamese colonial/colonized within the juridical narrative of citizenship, one that denies and forgets the difference of these Vietnamese and Eurasian immigrants. The term repatriate itself inscribes the Vietnamese of former Indochina within the language of disavowal that does away with Indochina and Viet Nam, where they are “returning” to France as their country of citizenship and as citizens, where they will easily be reincorporated into the *métropole*; repatriation therefore attempts to forget the colonial juridical regime that had constructed them as colonial subjects and as the racial Other.

The term repatriate designates this population as returning from the Indochinese colonies to France; therefore, the act of repatriation is one where the home country calls back its own citizens, and where the citizen returns to his/her home country. This, however, is not the case for the Indochinese and Vietnamese refugees and immigrants. Despite being citizens of France, the repatriates considered Viet Nam as their home country—this sentiment was shared by the French

*colons* as well, who had spent most of their lives in the colonies—while their adoptive country or country of (re)settlement is France. Nevertheless, the discourse of repatriation occurs in the French official discourse precisely because these Vietnamese immigrants and Eurasian families are politically and officially defined as French citizens, their citizenship often given to them because of their blood relations with French *colons*. As such, it is significant to consider the discourse of citizenship that compels and produces the Vietnamese of former Indochina as French citizens. It is a process that absorbs the Vietnamese into legal French citizens by doing away with difference in terms of their colonial position, racial difference, and political and cultural identity as Indochinese and Vietnamese. Their alterity and difference remain as an excess produced by the colonial history of Viet Nam as French Indochina and thus, the very move to do away with this imperial history through the rhetoric of juridical citizenship and repatriation. I therefore focus on this excess of difference by considering how French jurisprudence ascribes citizenship through selective determinations of race as discussed by Emmanuelle Saada and through (French) paternal recognition by Christina Firpo.

French historian Emmanuelle Saada examines the question of race and citizenship through the figure of the abandoned *métis* Eurasian child and documents French legislation in particular, that bestows French citizenship to Indochinese presumed to be of French race. Specifically, she cites the 1928 decree as a seminal point in French citizenship, where race first enters the discourse of French citizenship precisely because of this mixed-race problem in the context of colonial rule. The 1928 decree stipulates that “any individual born in the territory of Indochina to parents of whom one, though legally unidentified, is presumed to be of the French race, shall be eligible to obtain, pursuant to the provisions of the present edict, recognition of French citizenship (*qualité de français*)” (Saada 1). This juridical discourse of granting

citizenship to mixed-race children of French descent, particularly in Eurasians in Indochina, interpellates them as French citizens rather than as colonized Indochinese or Vietnamese citizens. Furthermore, American historian Christina Firpo also positions Eurasians in a specific and particular mode of paternal citizenship; she says, “Eurasian children who had been legally recognized by their fathers were integrated into the French legal system and, usually, French society. Eurasians who had not been officially recognized by their French fathers, by contrast, were legally ‘indigène’ [the legal classification for natives]” (589). In the case of the repatriated, these families reflected the French patriarchal and familial mode of citizenship, where not only did the French *colon* recognize the Eurasian children but also made legal his relationship with their Vietnamese mother. French citizenship by French race and by French paternity functions therefore in the same way as the term “repatriate.” Consequently, French citizenship is only given with the recognition bestowed by the Frenchman, whether father or husband. With these two legal distinctions of race and paternity, the Vietnamese and Eurasians of Indochina are ascribed citizenship and are absorbed into France and its republican narrative. The granting of legal French citizenship to the Vietnamese women and Eurasian children positions them as figures to be elided from French (colonial) history and from French government responsibility.

Moreover, the use and imposition of “repatriate” and “repatriation” upon the Vietnamese inscribes them within the juridical, where the rule of law is suspended; here, the suspension is of one form of the racial order formed by colonial law in order to enact the law of French citizenship. Agamben defines the state of exception as “the suspension of law itself—as its original means of referring to and encompassing life, then a theory of the state of exception is the preliminary condition for any definition of the relation that binds and, at the same time, abandons the living being to law” (1). The state of exception is therefore the suspension of law or the

exception of extra-legal meaning. While for Agamben, such juridical order depends on the very state of exception, I point to how the state of exception within this discussion of the repatriates of Indochina as one that is an extra-legal racial order. In Saada's and Firpo's discussion of the racial distinction of French citizenship, what is suspended through laws and legislation is the racial difference of these *métis* children as Vietnamese/Indochinese and the colonial difference of the Eurasians as the colonized. The racial order as constructed by French colonization at the same time as disavowed by juridical citizenship exemplifies how the extra-legal racial order is suspended and is necessary for juridical French citizenship to happen. Even more, with French juridical citizenship towards Indochinese and Vietnamese colonial subjects, the state of exception occurs precisely at the moment where French law is no longer binding in the space of the now-partitioned Viet Nam at the end of French colonization and through the Geneva Accords in 1954. It is this racial extra-legal order that is carried over from the colony that is being disavowed in the same way that the law disavows its state of exception.

The state of exception is produced through the sovereign imposition of French citizenship and French identity within the republication model by way of the term "repatriate" and through the act of repatriation. The status of Indochinese, Vietnamese, and even refugee/immigrant is suspended along with the racial order of colonizer/colonized, with those involved reclassified as French citizens. With citizenship and mobility as possible modes of liberty and freedom, the sovereign reorganization of the Indochinese/Vietnamese into French occurs within this state of exception, as Leland de la Durantaye defining Agamben's concept, saying: "the state of exception is the political point at which the juridical stops and a sovereign unaccountability begins; it is where the dam of individual liberties breaks and a society is flooded with the sovereign power of the state" (338). As such, the framing of the Vietnamese of the CAFIs works

within this order, where the master narrative proposed by the documentary suppresses the plural memory and experience of displacement, diaspora, and refugee/im/migrant identity. The inscription of the memory of integration and of French citizenship with the republican model is thereby a juridical moment of exception. This moment reveals the state of the exception because it reveals the extra-legal order, where the republican juridical order in the *métropole*, in particular within the space of the CAFIs reproduces the colony as the space of exception where racial violence ruled. Any narratives that articulate the difficulties of settlement and integration in the *métropole* becomes erased along with the excess and the traces of colonial racial order that is itself being produced through the demands of integration in republican France.

Discussing the term “repatriate,” M. Kathryn Edwards reveals this very state of exception in her study of the repatriate camps as sites of colonial memory. In *Contesting Indochina*, Edwards acknowledges how many of the repatriates were “already French citizens and some families had been for generations” yet also points to how the repatriation process reproduces the colonial violence in Indochina in the space of the *métropole*. The first critique Edwards poses is about the term “repatriation” itself; she says:

While the process of transporting these French citizens from the colonies to the metropole was referred to one of “repatriation,” it should be noted that most experienced it as a process of immigration rather than repatriation. Repatriates were treated much like refugees in terms of housing, subsidies, and support they received. They were also subject to pressures similar to those exerted on immigrants and refugees to ‘assimilate’ into French society. It is thus perhaps more accurate to refer to their arrival in France as a “repatriation-immigration.”

(117)

In proposing the term “repatriation-immigration,” Edwards highlights how the repatriates were constructed and treated as refugees and immigrants; furthermore, she “engages with the discourse and politics of assimilation and integration within the camps and the means by which they were implemented and evaluated. The discourse of assimilation is particularly significant given that the repatriates were already French citizens and some for generations. Of interest are the perceptions of nationality and citizenship. The repatriates had expectations of being treated as full French citizens (*Français à part entière*) but instead were treated much like refugees while in the camps” (117-118). This expectation of being treated as full French citizens and the failure of such reveal how the repatriates even if juridical citizens were recalled into a position of refugees on whom the demands of assimilation and integration attempt to reaffirm at the same time disavow their racial and colonial difference. The demand for assimilation is where Edwards positions a second critique of how the CAFIs’ administration reproduces colonial power and violence: “The administration of the camps was entrusted to men who had experience in the colonies as soldiers or civilian functionaries, with a preference for those who had lived in Indochina. [. . .] Pierre-Jean Simon points to the obvious implications of this policy: it resulted in the transfer of colonial attitudes, prejudices, and conflict. [. . .] Many camp residents certainly felt that colonial structures had been transferred to the metropole” (125). The very use of camp administrators who were colonizers only serves to recreate the extra-legal order of violence and oppression for the Indochinese/Vietnamese within the CAFIs. Importantly, most of the CAFI residents were civilians and therefore making the reproduction of colonial rule even more significant. This combined with the demands for assimilation and integration highlight the state of exception where the extra-legal order of racial violence is transported from the colony and reproduced in the *métropole*.



Constructed as repatriates and French citizens, these Vietnamese and Indochinese repatriate-immigrants were left and then forgotten for decades in the desolate CAFI sites. Their very presence in France disappears from the French public consciousness and from most narratives for over fifty years—the exception being two sociological studies published in the 1970s and a few early documentaries—only to reappear in the early 2000s. M. Kathryn Edwards has documented that “the media have expressed interest in [the CAFIs] very sporadically; in the realm of television, between 1972 and 2006 only a dozen news stories on the topic aired on the major French networks. Moreover, the image in the media of the camps and their residents has been overwhelmingly static [as the ‘forgotten’].<sup>2</sup> While national media coverage generally continues to be limited, local media coverage has been on the rise. In the realm of film and investigative journalism the camp has been the subject of at least ten documentaries” (138-139). Significantly, the reemergence of the CAFIs through local news coverage as well as through the documentary form seemingly coincides with the Conseil Général de Lot-et-Garonne’s decision to demolish the CAFI site at Sainte-Livrade in 2008. Importantly, the threat of the physical destruction of the camp reads as the threat of the ultimate act of forgetting, where the already ignored forgotten community will be completely forgotten with the physical destruction of the CAFI buildings and homes. The Conseil Général’s decision to demolish the CAFIs was in an effort to provide better housing by getting rid of the already substandard accommodations that were previously military barracks to construct new and up-to-code housing. Such recognition

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<sup>2</sup> M. Kathryn Edwards provides a partial listing: Pierre-Jean Simon and Ida Simon-Barouh, *Les genies des quatre palais* (1964); Pierre Andro, *Les oubliés de l’Indochine* (1972); Matthieu Samel, *Les fruits amers du Lot-et-Garonne* (1992), *Les enfants de Quan Am* (2004), and *CAFI: La mémoire fragmenté* (2014); Pierre Rostan, *Qué Huong/Terre natale* (2004); Marie-Christine Courtès and My Linh Nguyen, *Le camp des oubliés* (2004); Nora Genet-Lemque, *Saïgon-Sainte-Livrade: Aller simple pour l’oubli* (2007); Nadège Lobato De Faria, *Vietnam-sur-Lot* (2014) (258, fn. 111). In addition, I also include the two films I examine—Véronique Lhorme and Marc Nardino’s *Les Enfants de Noyant (et d’Indochine)* (2005) and Philippe Rostan’s *Le Petit Vietnam* (2008)—along with Marie-Christine Courtès, *Sous les doigts* (2015), which was notable in the animated short categories being shortlisted for the 2017 Oscars and earned a nomination for the 2016 César.

comes too late, as residents show their disapproval through a discourse of forgetting and of a remembering that comes too late, as one CAFI resident says: “It would have been a good plan 40 years ago, but to start worrying about us now [sic.] is a little anachronistic. We’ve been here for 50 years, why bother us now?” (“Feature: “Little Saigon”). Yet, faced with such decisive erasure, narratives of the repatriated Indochinese finally appear in the form of ethnography and documentary films in the late 2000s. The attempt to document and render textual underscores the elided and forgotten histories of the repatriates placed in the CARI/CAFIs. The camps as the site of disavowal makes apparent the many years of neglect and isolation, one that underscores the residual racial difference that arises from the exception to the juridical order of citizenship. Consequently, the CAFIs’ recent reemergence into public consciousness therefore sheds light onto the historical and political forgetting of racial difference and the reproduction of the colonial order exhibited through the separation and isolation of these repatriated Indochinese/Vietnamese.

Consequently, I argue that despite the political reparation that this mass migration of Indochinese Vietnamese is one that is politically as well as historically segregated; where, in the aftermath of arrival, these repatriated Vietnamese disappear from the French consciousness, only to erupt in recent memory through several ethnographic narratives to that seem to criticize such forgetting and neglect. Nevertheless, my examination of the nonfiction and ethnographic documentaries reveal the constant reframing of the Vietnamese immigrant narrative into the French narrative of disavowal. It is significant that the documentaries repeatedly only allow access to memory and recovery through forgetting and mediation, in a way denying French responsibility for the Vietnamese of the CARI/CAFIs at the same time renouncing the

Vietnamese memory of immigration and settlement and the extra-legal order of race in the site of disavowal in the very space of French *métropole*.

Véronique Lhorme and Marc Nardino's *Les Enfants de Noyant (et d'Indochine)* [The Children of Noyant (and Indochina)] (2005) and Philippe Rostan's *Le Petit Vietnam* [The Little Vietnam] (2008), these documentaries reproduce the social and political frame of segregation and of forgetting insofar as the documentaries are filmed and produced only after fifty years of silence and insofar as the documentaries insist on the act of remembering on the part of the documentary subjects and on the part of the audience. Of significance, these two documentaries focus on the site of the CAFI in Noyant d'Allier while the ethnographic nonfiction texts, such as Dominique Rolland's study *Petits Viêt-Nams* and Clément Baloup's graphic novel *Quitter Saigon*, focus on the other site of Sainte-Livrade. Significantly, the production of these documentary works in the late 2000s, perhaps as a timely response to the decision to demolish CAFI Sainte-Livrade in 2008.

Forgetting Indochina is already inscribed in the two documentaries themselves, when their opening sequences emphasize the space of France rather than the colonial space and history of *Indochine*; the documentaries resituate the history of the repatriates as originating from France and not from Viet Nam. Philippe Rostan's *Le Petit Vietnam* does not begin with the history of the Vietnamese and their departure from Indochina but rather begins with the history of the mining town of Noyant d'Allier. The history of Noyant d'Allier is grounded in the question of population, where it once was prosperous mining town with a large Polish mining population but now deserted after the mine's closure in 1943. The arrival of the repatriated Indochinese in 1956 signifies the restoration of a previously lost population; one immigrant group is replaced with

another group albeit not immigrants but French citizens. The French government with the local municipality reappropriated the abandoned miners' lodgings to house the coming thousands of repatriated Indochinese.<sup>3</sup> For Rostan's *Le Petit Vietnam*, the insistence on French origins and history of Noyant already overshadow the colonial and military histories that actually produce and initiate the Indochinese mass migration.

In a similar manner, Véronique Lhorme and Marc Nardino's documentary *Les Enfants de Noyant (et d'Indochine)* frames the narrative of the repatriates through the French frame, specifically the French sociological frame. The documentary begins with clips of the now adult CAFI children who speak of being a part of a sociological study: "[Il y a] les gens qui voulaient comprendre comment on vivait" [There were those who wanted to understand how we lived]. The footage of the adult repatriates intercuts with footage of an older French couple's driving on the country road. The voiceover identifies them as French sociologists Pierre-Jean Simon and Ida Simon-Barouh, who had lived with and studied the Noyant CAFI repatriate community from 1965-1966. The documentary therefore takes on and mimics the stance of the French sociologists who enter into the CAFI as outsiders to observe and document the repatriate community at the same time the sociologists themselves become the documentary's narrative device and mode of narration. The documentary follows Simon and Simon-Barouh as they reunite with their subjects of study forty years later. However, what is absent and unspoken is the life during the four decades between the sociologists' initial arrival in 1965 and their return in

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<sup>3</sup> Rostan's 2007 filmic move to begin the history of the CAFI not with the history of Indochina but with the history of Noyant's past economic and mining history echoes the earlier 1981 sociological work of Ida Simon-Barouh that also opens with the portrait of a dying mining town: "Village du Bourbonnais – l'actuel département de l'Allier – à vingt kilomètres au sud-ouest de Moulins, Noyant fut un village minier à l'activité intermittente. [. . .] Noyant déperit. [. . .] La municipalité, dès lors, chercha à redonner vigueur au village. [. . .] Elle était prête à accueillir toute entreprise et toute population désirant s'installer dans les corons déserts et les bâtiments désaffectés de la Mine" [A Bourbonnais village – in the department of Allier – twenty kilometers southwest of Moulins, Noyant was a mining town with intermittent work. (. . .) Noyant began to fade away. (. . .) The municipality, therefore, sought to revitalize the village. (. . .) It was ready to welcome any business and any population that wished to settle in the deserted *corons* (miner's housing) and the abandoned mine buildings] (1, my translation).

2005. The children are hailed as “having never changed” or “looking exactly the same,” and the exchanges between the Simons and the now-adult children force the recall of past events, including Ida Simon-Barouh’s reading of her field notes or reminiscing about her first encounter with the children and their families. As such, what is remembered and the time of memory only exists in the past of the sociologists’ encounter with the CAFI children. This moment of memory and recuperation as presented by documentary in fact is the moment of reinscribing the disavowal of any life outside of the prevue of the French frame. The emphasis then is the French view and construct of the CAFI that is segregated and stuck in the historical past. As a consequence, the French sociological gaze dictates the movement and logic of the documentary, subsuming within it, the personal narratives of the Vietnamese French children.

Furthermore, the title of the documentary, *Enfants de Noyant (et d’Indochine)* positions the narrative in the space of Noyant to privilege the children’s French citizenship and identification as repatriates over their ethno-cultural background and their origins in Indochina/Viet Nam that is only included as a parenthetical. The redefining and resituating these children from Indochina as belonging to Noyant emphasize the absorption of the racial Other into French citizen and as the subject of examination and ethnography by two French sociologists as well as by the French documentary filmmakers. Yet it is precisely because these children are immigrants and the racial Other who are located in the space of France that renders them repeatedly the subject of the ethnographic narrative and of the French sociologists and documentary filmmakers. Here, the excess of racial difference reaffirms the underlining racial order that is carried over from the space of the colony into the space of the CAFI and thus constructs the children both as subjects to this exceptional colonial order and to the documentary film.

*Enfants de Noyant (et d'Indochine)* follows Simon and Simon-Barouh as they reunite with the children of CAFI forty years later. The documentary therefore mediates the meeting and reception of now-grown CAFI children yet again through the sociologists. In the encounters, the French couple interviews the children of CAFI, rather than the documentary filmmakers themselves. Moreover, the interview-encounters between the social scientists and the CAFI children insist on the remembrance of the early years of hardship rather than engage with their history of displacement or with their later history of their adult lives. The demand for the constant remembering underscores the forgetting and casting aside of those repatriated into the CAFI. Despite being now grown up in their forties and fifties, the Vietnamese French are repeatedly interpellated as children and are only signified and represented as such, thereby ignoring and foreclosing any discussion of their experiences of discrimination and racism in the intervening years. *Enfants de Noyant (et d'Indochine)* then positions itself as both documentary and ethnography, where the documentary follows and films the social scientists in the practice of ethnography. The emphasis therefore lays not so much in the subjects of study—the children of CAFI—but rather the French sociologists' and filmmakers' view and construct of the CAFI that is segregated and stuck in the historical past.

The title of Rostan's documentary *Le Petit Vietnam*, however, underscores the importance and the profound reappropriation of Noyant as a "Little Vietnam" in the heart of (central) France. Unlike the parenthetical and putting aside the history of Indochina of *Enfants de Noyant*, *Le Petit Vietnam* insists upon the presence of the Vietnamese community in France. Yet, this insistence is still framed through and mediated by the French community members of Noyant in a similar way to how *Enfants de Noyant (et d'Indochine)* is framed by the French sociologists. The opening historical montage is followed by the narratives of the French

villagers and their first impressions on the Indochinese repatriates' arrival that emphasize how out of place the displaced Vietnamese are. Again, the opening sequences of the history of Noyant and the arrival frames the documentary through the gaze of the French citizen and of the French nation who has the dominant perspective in the way in which the remembering and the disavow of CAFI is constructed. The middle sequences of *Le Petit Vietnam* shift to the personal and individual narratives of the Vietnamese and Eurasian children, who recall the hardships of living and settling into a completely foreign place and culture. Nonetheless, the concluding sequences of *Le Petit Vietnam* reaffirm the French voice and narration in a way that forget and overlook the Vietnamese voice and experience.

The actual presence of the Vietnamese themselves and their experiences of CAFI fade into the republican redefinition of multiculturalism that the French residents present at the end of *Le Petit Vietnam*. What is called multiculturalism in Noyant is exemplified by the architectural and cultural construction of the Buddhist temple and by social and intercultural relationships through interracial marriages. Rightfully titled *Le Petit Vietnam*, the Vietnamese presence in Noyant is remarkable and noticeable, especially with the large golden statue of Buddha in Bourg. Constructed in 1983, the pagoda and Buddhist temple serves as signs of how well the Vietnamese of CAFI have settled in Noyant in particular and in France in general. In Edwards' work on the CAFI, she examines how the French repositions the CAFIs as a failed integration into a supposedly successful immigration through these markers of cultural difference; she states that: "That question of cultural identity is an interesting one, given that the pagodas, Vietnamese restaurants, and specialty grocery stores are now part of the local experience in Noyant and Sainte-Livrade and are even used as selling points to attract tourists. These same aspects of cultural identity were considered impediments to integration decades earlier" (136). Her

discussion of how the French reframe the CAFIs as a failed integration into a “successful” immigration is duplicated in Rostan’s documentary through the French voice/Frenchman who seeks to appropriate the CAFI narrative. With the reintroduction of the French voice at the end of the film, the Vietnamese experience and narrative becomes subsumed in the space and voice of France through the rhetoric of multiculturalism.

While the documentary’s subject is the CAFI repatriates, it is nevertheless a Frenchman who voices the concluding section of *Le Petit Vietnam* and who brings up the tension between past and present, between memory and commemoration. Jean-Paul Saint-Léger, who first appears at the beginning of the documentary as being skeptical towards the arrival of the Vietnamese in Noyant, becomes the voice that attempts to preserve and hold onto “*le petit Vietnam*”:

Noyant was a little Vietnam. Now it’s changed. They’re all Europeanized. They still eat rice and nước mắm [fish sauce]. But it’s not the same as it was. The first time I went to Vietnam, I felt I knew it because I heard so much about it. It was strange. I thought I knew every street. My trip was great because I could speak Vietnamese. [. . .] For thirty-five years, it was little Vietnam. But over the years there were less and less people. Mentalities have changed. It’s not like it was before. But we try to preserve the idea of the ‘*petit Vietnam*.’ The proof is that we married Vietnamese women and have mixed children.

While Vietnamese cultural identity and practices are now at the risk of being lost, it is the Frenchman who can save it. Saint-Léger’s patronizing speech is punctuated by the documentary footage: Saint-Léger and another Frenchman are dressed in black silk brocade, seated at the dining table and surrounded by their *métis* children and Vietnamese wives, who also wear



brocade traditional Vietnamese dresses *áo dài*. The paternalistic tableau of this French-Vietnamese family positions the Frenchman as the guardian of not only this particular family but the guardian of what is perceived to be Vietnamese cultural identity and traditions. The exotic nature of the image comes through the white Frenchmen's dress, which are brocade tunic shirts, and through the large jade Buddha pendant that Saint-Léger sports. Preservation of the little Vietnam of Noyant comes through cultural and blood *métissage* that can only be offered through the Frenchman; memory and commemoration, thus, lies in Saint-Léger's claim to authenticity and to his particular vision of the past. Saint-Léger's call to preserve not only the cultural history but also the "idea of a 'Little Vietnam'" in the space of the French *métropole* completely forecloses any possibility of a Vietnamese voice and forecloses access to the Vietnamese narrative of hardship and acculturation in Noyant d'Allier. More importantly, Saint-Léger reproduces the discourse of French citizenship as paternal recognition and republication salvation; Saint-Léger is the contemporary *colon* fathering *métis* children and the *colon* who preserves and holds the French imperial power over Indochina/CAFI. The complexities of multiculturalism and of the Vietnamese immigrant experience become reduced to an assertion of French cultural power in marrying the Vietnamese women and having mixed-race children.

With such a closing to Rostan's *Le Petit Vietnam*, the history and personal narratives of those who had immigrated as repatriates of French Indochina are recasted as objects of the new colonial rule in the French *métropole*. Their narratives of immigration and of the hardships of settlement are disavowed by the French narrative that subsumes it into disavowal and to propose a "successful" immigration (Edwards 136). Where do they go from here, the children of Noyant (and of Indochina)? From the reading of the French documentaries, these children now belong to France and France alone.

## **After the Spotlight: The Ever-grateful Vietnamese Orphan and Operation Babylift**

In comparison to the forgetting of CARI/CAFI repatriates and Eurasian children by the French government and public, the Vietnamese children of Operation Babylift survive in the memory of the United States as the defining humanitarian and magnanimous act that disavows and silences the contested American involvement in the Vietnam War. Operation Babylift was a humanitarian operation sanctioned by the U.S. government to evacuate Vietnamese and Amerasian children left in Saigon orphanages during last weeks of the Vietnam War in April 1975. The operation resulted in the mass migration of over 3,000 children, who were orphans, abandoned, or given up by parents in hopes of their escaping the end of the war and the fall of South Vietnam. Granted expedited passage and citizenship, the children were placed into American adoptive families as well as European and Australian adoptive families. Many adoptions were reported in newspapers and television broadcasts, resulting in the reading of Operation Babylift as a humanitarian success.

Despite the emphasis on the humanitarian nature of the operation, there are contested and elided histories of hardship and racism precisely because the discourse of charity and hospitality do not allow for failed adoptions, rejected children, or even cultural and racial discrimination faced by the adoptees. As such, the American framing of Operation Babylift as the escape from war, violence, and poverty and into hospitality and generosity of the American family and of American nation who welcomes these children with open arms becomes the dominant representation. This rhetoric in fact disavows and silences any opposing discourse that is not grateful or that is critically engaging past histories of war and empire. Moreover, I position the documentaries on Operation Babylift, like those on the French CAFIS, actually participate in the American-oriented discourse that, despite the sensationalism and press coverage of the event,

silence and forget the Vietnamese and Amerasian children and experiences that do not coincide with the narrative of what Mimi Thi Nguyen defines as the gift of freedom, specifically, the gift of the American family and nation through the hospitable act of adoption.

Unlike the mass migration of Eurasian children along with their families from former *Indochine* to the French *métropole*, Operation Babylift is the mass evacuation of Vietnamese and Amerasian children from Saigon and their mass immigration to the United States and into American families. Rather than families who were mass repatriated in the case of the CAFIs, only the children were the object of Operation Babylift's humanitarian aid precisely because of their helplessness and vulnerability. During the war period, many children found themselves the product of American servicemen's relations with Vietnamese women. These Amerasian children were often given up to Vietnamese orphanages run by various charitable institutions, both religious and secular, because of the fear of discrimination due to their being mixed-race. Other children were placed into these orphanages because their parents were unable to care for them, while others given up by their parents who hoped they would be able to leave Viet Nam and immigrate to a better place. Only a number of these children, therefore, were legitimate and legal orphans. Nonetheless, what is at stake is that these children assumed and occupied the status of orphans regardless of their actual familial status because this imaginary serves to justify the American and international intervention that would (dis)place the children from Viet Nam to the United States and elsewhere.

Furthermore, the imaginary and the discourse of the orphan child provides the means to appropriate them into the discourse of citizenship. American citizenship is gained through birthplace (*jus soli*) or descent (*jus sanguinis*), but these Vietnamese and Amerasian adoptees do not fall into either mode of American citizenship. Rather, transnational adoptees, according to

David Eng argues, are privileged immigrants and thereby privileged citizens, saying: “we come to recognize transnational adoption as one of the most privileged forms of diaspora and immigration in the late twentieth century” (1). In her historical analysis of Asian adoptions into the U.S., Catherine Ceniza Choy highlights how the transnational Asian adoptee is the legal exception to but the still the object of “historical legacies of anti-Asian sentiment in the United States—codified, for example in U.S. immigration legislation, which targeted Asians for exclusion during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; in U.S. naturalization law that rendered Asian immigrants ineligible for citizenship until the 19840s and 1950s” (4). The transnational adoptee therefore is at once immigrant and citizen, precisely because the adoptee immigrates directly into an American family and therefore into American citizenship.

This unique position and this privileged citizenship is precisely because of the transnational and Asian child is rooted in, as Choy states, “[the invocation] of moral responsibility of the United States in Asia” (11). Moreover, the exceptional citizenship granted to the Vietnamese war orphan is grounded within the discourse of kinship and the notion of the American nation as exemplified and imagined as the American family. Choy points to the discourse of bloodlines as a way through which American media roused the moral duty of American civilians; she writes:

The origins of Asian international adoption were inextricably linked to the adoption of mixed-race Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese children by American families in the 1950s through the 1970s. U.S. new media, social welfare agencies, and independent adoption organizations represented the mixed-race children from Japan, Korea, and Vietnam as an Asian social problem due to restrictive Asian traditions and values based on patrilineal bloodlines. While these images

racialized Asia as a backwards place in contrast to a progressive United States, social critics also complicated the East-West divide by invoking the moral responsibility of the United States in Asia. The ISS [International Social Service] believed that this international problem—a problem of racial mixture, Asian social discrimination, and U.S. accountability abroad—required a transnational solution. It could only be resolved through stronger social service in the Asian countries as well as international adoption by American families. (11)

The emphasis on the children's mixed-race blood and the simplistic understanding of Eastern cultures as privileging patrilineal bloodlines positions the discourse within kinship, where the rejection of mixed-race children by their Asian families is the very opening for American families to intervene and offer them salvation through adopted kinship.<sup>4</sup> In a time of restrictive immigration laws that limited the number of Asians immigrants to the United States, the moral responsibility of the American family to rescue and adopt Vietnamese Amerasians enters the juridical when President Gerald R. Ford accords funds for an emergency airlift evacuation of Vietnamese orphans. In his statement on April 3, 1975, President Ford aligns the nation with adoption, saying:

We are seeing a great human tragedy as untold numbers of Vietnamese flee the North Vietnamese onslaught. The United States has been doing and will continue to do its utmost to assist these people. [ . . . ]

I have also directed American officials in Saigon to act immediate to cut the red tape and bureaucratic obstacles preventing these children from coming to the United States. [ . . . ]

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<sup>4</sup> The attribution of “restrictive Asian traditions and values based on patrilineal bloodlines” is especially ironic given that, in the case of Indochinese Eurasians, French citizenship was tied to recognition by the French father and by the supposedly paternal *qualité de français*.

These 2,000 Vietnamese orphans are all in the process of being adopted by American families.

This is the least we can do, and we will do much, much more. (“Opening Statement”)

The President’s actions here highlight how the Vietnam War was an imperial war, one that was the state of exception to the juridical order of the United States. Ford’s press statement and his announcement of the airlifts is an extension of this extra-legal exception of imperial war. As such, the airlifted children are used to draw attention away from the moral consequences of imperial war as the state of exception and to redirect the narrative towards a discourse of rescue and recuperation that extends into the space of international relations, war, and most importantly, the realm of the family. Through the presidential statement, the American nation takes in these children as citizens in the same way that the American family will take them in as adoptees.

The moral vision of rescuing and taking in orphans at the end of the Vietnam War speaks to the particular discourse of what Mimi Thi Nguyen calls the gift of freedom. In examining the discourse of gratitude among Vietnamese refugees, Nguyen observes that their gratefulness speaks to “a benevolent empire bestows on an other freedom. [. . .] we find all the good and beautiful things the fit claims as its consequence—the right to have rights, the choice of life direction, the improvement of body and mind, the opportunity to prosper—against a spectral future of their nonexistence, under communism, under terror” (2). This is gift of freedom. And Operation Babylift is no exception. During the last days of the Vietnam War, America steps in to rescue Vietnamese and Amerasian orphans from an unknown future in a war-torn country under Socialist rule. Yet, Nguyen contends that the gift of freedom is two-faced; its other side “discloses [. . .] liberalism’s innovations of empire, the frisson of freedom and violence that

decisively collude for same purposes—not just because the gift of freedom opens with war and death, but also because it may obscure those other powers that, through its giving, conceive and shape life” (2-3). At stake is the gift of freedom and the debt that it entails. Yet, the documentaries on Operation Babylift that I analyze are inherently narrowly focused on the gift of freedom as a gift of American life, family, and citizenship, perhaps because of the commemorative nature of the two films, both made in celebration and remembrance of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the actual Operation Babylift.

Of the two available documentaries on the Operation Babylift, Janet Gardner’s *Precious Cargo: Vietnamese Adoptees Discover Their Past* (2001) is the first. The documentary revolves around the twenty-fifth anniversary of the babylifts at the end of the Vietnam War in April 1975. With the premise of commemorating Operation Babylift’s anniversary, the documentary follows and documents the Vietnamese American adoptees’ meeting other Babylift children and their return to Viet Nam. The framing of this documentary is conducted through the American point of view, however implicit, as the film’s context for the Babylift children’s journey is the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Operation. The title of the documentary, *Precious Cargo*, underscores how the Babylift children were viewed as and remain still the object of observation and documentation; the choice of cargo as the description of the children displaces and removes their agency and subjectivity as individuals and reduces them to the general unit of transportation. Furthermore, cargo, even if precious, still reinforces how the Babylift children were and remain still the object of war, American intervention, and American hospitality and humanitarian aid.

The other Operation Babylift documentary is Tammy Nguyen Lee's *Operation Babylift: The Lost Children of Vietnam* (2010), henceforth *Lost Children*. Nguyen Lee's documentary brings together the adoptees of Operation Babylift in a way that gestures towards and makes some room for their personal and individual narratives of life as a Vietnamese and Amerasian adoptee in the United States. The documentary nevertheless falls back on the trope of the return and discovery narrative, where the adoptees return to Viet Nam, yet again, for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of Saigon and of Operation Babylift. Very much located in the Babylift, this documentary attempts to locate and remember the lost children of Viet Nam. This positions the children then in the space of Viet Nam but also in the space of being misplaced and forgotten. Yet, the recovery of these lost children is only through American intervention and through the expression of gratitude towards American charities and adoptive families.

In the same way as the French documentaries on the CAFIs, both Operation Babylift documentaries open up with lengthy historical sequences and with a focus on the operation itself rather than the individual experiences and narratives of the Vietnamese and Amerasian children. With the description given on the DVD back cover, *Precious Cargo* illustrates the multiple political and national narratives that dominate the Babylift:

When the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam in 1975, one of their last acts was the dramatic transport of 2,800 South Vietnamese children into American homes almost overnight. This film [*Precious Cargo*] reveals the complex story of Operation Babylift. For the military, it seemed like a final act of redemption, to the Hanoi government, a propaganda ploy and for most Americans, a final compassionate gesture in a war that they wanted to forget.



With this description, Gardner's documentary situates the narrative of Operation Babylift already within the discourse of American military engagement and of American compassion and charity but without the children's discourse and narratives. The opening sequence of *Precious Cargo* duplicates this insistence such narratives, beginning with no mention of Vietnamese children and adoptees but rather with "Saigon 1975" and the social and military context that produced the Vietnamese children found in the orphanages: that they were born out of sexual encounters between American servicemen and Vietnamese bar girls and that they were born as mixed-race Amerasians during a time of war and conflict. This opening sequence is narrated by two Vietnamese reporters and by a number of American nurses and health workers of orphanages and adoption agencies. The discourse surrounding the circumstances leading up to Operation Babylift is one of fear and worry for the children: "the people with the least control of their own destinies were the children," "war was escalating, so orphanages flourished," "what would become of the children?" (*Precious Cargo*). The correlations between war and orphanage and between war and an unknown future for the children begin to underscore the need to intervene and save the children. While the French documentaries elide the history of French colonization and the space of Indochina, the American documentaries introduce and use the context of war and violence in service of justifying the need for the babylift and in the deployment of the discourse of rescue. The historical context does not, however, attribute blame on or critique against American military involvement but rather absolves the United States through the charity of the American service workers in Viet Nam and of the American families at home. As such, the narrative of rescue and humanitarian aid disavows the state of exception that is imperial war.

Like *Precious Cargo*, Lee's *Lost Children* also gives precedence to the historical; it opens with a title card of "april 1975 vietnam" that is followed by aerial footage of American

bombing of the Vietnamese jungles and villages and that is paired with the title sequence that has as an audio background of a helicopter rotor. The insistence of war serves to contextualize the conflict, violence, and danger from which the children need to be rescued. The title sequences are followed by narrations from American volunteers and workers of international charities and adoption services that attest to the poor quality of life, the lack of food and supplies, the country in turmoil, all of which lasts twenty minutes, nearly a third of the documentary. What is repeated over and over are the risks facing the children of the orphanages: “If the children were to stay, they have very little chance of survival. Rice was cut off [ . . . ] it was a matter of survival.” These American testimonies attest to the context of the threat of war, specifically against the safety and well-being Vietnamese children. Like *Precious Cargo*, *Lost Children*’s historical contextualization provides the discourse of danger and threat that produces and complements the adoption discourse of salvation and compassion that comes to dominate the Operation Babylift narrative.

The actual encounter and documentary of the Operation Babylift children in both American documentaries come out of and are in celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Operation Babylift in 2000. In Gardner’s *Precious Cargo*, the central event is both the Operation Babylift that occurred in April 1975 and the constant remembering and recollecting the moment through the adoptees’ return and anniversary trip to Viet Nam in 2000 under the auspices of and organized by Holt International, the major adoption service who participated in Operation Babylift. Despite providing their own stories that are related through individual interviews, the adoptees are constantly grouped together as Babylift adoptees and interpellated as such. Their individual discourse of searching for answers is also tied to the realization of the difficulties and hardships of life in Viet Nam, the life they would have had if not for Operation

Babylift. Adoptee Saul Tran Cornwall describes this recognition of danger and rescue saying: “That’s what hit me, [the] poverty. We did think this could be us, on the streets selling things. [. . .] I appreciate that my first father had relinquished me and put me up for adoption.” In addition to this recurring realization of poverty and hardship in Viet Nam is the adoptees’ visit of the orphanages. Often, these visits are conducted with the aim of seeking further information regarding their background. Nevertheless, what comes to the forefront is the adoptees’ coming to terms that there are Vietnamese children and orphans who are malnourished, alone, and abandoned in the current-day Viet Nam, just as they were in 1975. The encounter between adoptee and orphan, moreover, conjures feelings of compassion and family, particularly where adoptees are carrying orphanage babies. A female Operation Babylift adoptee declares: “I’m just going to grab her up and take her home with me [to the camera] You’re going to come home in my bag, and you’re going to come home with me [to the infant].” This scene exemplifies the extent to which the discourse of salvation and rescue is embedded not only within the Operation Babylift narrative but moreover within the boarder practice of adoption. Moreover, it also takes on the image of the orphan child as object to be bagged and taken home in the same way the Operation Babylift children were precious cargo. As such, Operation Babylift is defined through the very Vietnamese adoptees as an operation of salvation and of a new life and a better future.

Nguyen Lee’s *Lost Children* documentary has the same discourse surrounding Operation Babylift as the compassionate and humanitarian act it claims to be. Like *Precious Cargo*, *Lost Children* reflect on how the twenty-fifth anniversary of Operation Babylift brings them together. Nevertheless, Nguyen Lee’s film goes further by documenting and including interviews that deal with the racism, discrimination, and hardships of life in the United States as the racial Other and as the political reminder of the lost Vietnam War. Yet, the discourse remains the same despite

the acknowledgement of the complicated nature of adoption and of acculturation and assimilation. The Babylift adoptees cannot articulate their difficulties without an attempt to reconcile and recognize the benefit and the compassion of the adoptive family. For example, adoptee Khanh Oehilke tries to articulate his decision to return to live and work in Viet Nam in a way that does not reject or deny the love of his American adoptive family; he says: “I wanted to stay [here in Viet Nam] maybe forever. It was difficult for me to explain it to them [his adoptive family] in a way that I didn’t want to make it seem like I was choosing between Vietnam and America, didn’t want them to make them feel like they didn’t do enough.” Apparent in this statement is the conscious awareness to acknowledge the American adoptive family and to not discount the charity and compassion of adoption. The adoption narrative, therefore, is staked on the discourse of the gift of freedom and the gift of family, excluding other discourses of familial tensions, difference, and hardship.

Precisely because the adoptions made possible and made through by Operation Babylift grants the Vietnamese orphans and children the gift of freedom and the gift of an American family, the framing of the event and of subsequent narratives are subsumed in the discourse of generosity and gratitude. Mimi Thi Nguyen defines the gift of freedom as tied to the figure of the refugee: “the refugee figure as a target and also an instrument for the gift of freedom, as an object marked for rescue and refuge, and as a subject emerging from these claims to care. [. . .] [it] is a stunning illustration of the labor that the gift of freedom performs on behalf of liberal empire” (23). As such, the gift of freedom perpetuates itself in the form of debt, Nguyen describes it as “*the gift that keeps on giving*, the debt it imposes (both *power over* and *power over time*) troubles the recipient far into the foreseeable future” (3). The two documentaries clearly depict the discourse of rescue and the imposition of gratitude on the Operation Babylift

adoptees. In a way, such a discourse interpellates the Vietnamese children as American citizens made possible through adoption by the American nation and by the American family. This familial inclusion becomes the way through which the Vietnamese children is naturalized as an American family member and citizen who is expected to be eternally grateful for the freedoms, the life and American dream bestowed upon these unfortunate Vietnamese children. Therefore, Operation Babylift adoptees also participate in and perpetuate the discourse of silencing. Where do they go from here, the children of the Babylift? From the reading of American documentaries, these adoptees now belong to America and America alone.

### **Where Do We Go from Here?: Towards Other Ways of Telling**

With the insistence on forgetting and silencing, often through the historical *mise-en-scene* and the mediation of empire, the French and American documentaries fail to accomplish their goal of bringing to narrative and to light these specific Vietnamese immigrant communities in a way that include their stories and narratives of immigration and settlement. In this way, the documentary films produce and reproduce the disavowal of imperial war and racial violence. What should be in focus in both documentaries and analysis are the stories and personal histories of the Vietnamese individuals who came to France and the United States as repatriates and adoptees. The children of both CAFI and Operation Babylift should belong to no one and should be the agents of narrating their own histories. These individual histories do not always speak in praise and gratitude of the reception by the French government and sociologists and of the reception by the American family and public. What is important, then, is to open up the possibility and to accommodate the varied, diverse, different, and differing narratives of displacement, diaspora, settlement, integration, assimilation, and life.

This is not to say that the documentaries completely silence the Vietnamese voices. The question of framing opens up a critique of the insistence of the master narratives despite the presentation and documentation of various Vietnamese voices. Rostan's *Le Petit Vietnam* and Lee's documentary *Operation Babylift: The Lost Children of Vietnam* begin to do this work by providing personal stories that complicated the dominant rhetoric of gratitude and that allow for brief critiques. In the documentaries, there are moments of direct speech from those of CAFI and from those of Operation Babylift where they offer differing and different narratives and moreover, where the discourse of disavowal can include remembrance and commemoration. Though the French narratives do not overtly offer such alternatives, the CAFI documentaries include CAFI subjects' telling of hardships, the trials of arriving in an unknown country, and the difficulties of growing up as the racial and cultural Other is itself an act of speaking out in a way that offers personal and individual memoirs of the experience of repatriation and settlement in France. The American documentaries on Operation Babylift is much more direct in giving commentary. Many adoptees, especially in Lee's *Lost Children*, share their experiences of discrimination, racism, and self-loathing. In a different way, *Precious Cargo* offers another point of view on the American operation; the film includes the Vietnamese critique and disapproval of American intervention with the babylifts, saying: "It is questionable. Had they stayed in Vietnam, they would have been better off alive. Think about your Vietnamese friends who remained." While these are brief moments in a longer narrative dominated by gratitude and appreciation, I want to insist these fleeting comments offer a momentary emergence of counter-narratives; they set in motion critique and offer different narratives and narrations by Vietnamese refugees, adoptees, and immigrants. In speaking of their own their individual and various

experiences, they confront the dominant, master narratives of quiet integration and voiced gratitude.

My reading of these four documentaries demonstrates how—despite the claim of offering a voice, memory, history, and agency to the Vietnamese French repatriates and Vietnamese American adoptees—they produce over and over the discourse that dominate and serve French and American neoliberal imperialism. But to conclude here is to dismiss alternative discourses and counter-narratives. Consequently, I turn to Vietnamese American sociologist YẾN Lê Espiritu’s call for critical refugee studies that is at the heart of my critique of these four documentaries. What Espiritu calls for a reimagining and analyzing critically the figure of the Vietnamese refugee; she says, “the narrative of the ‘good refugee,’ deployed by refugee studies scholars, mainstream US media, and Vietnamese Americans themselves, that has been key in enabling the United States to turn the Vietnam War into a ‘good war’” (*Body Counts* 22) and furthermore, “the production of the assimilated and grateful refugee—the ‘good refugee’—enables a potent narrative of American(s) rescuing and caring for Vietnam’s ‘runaways,’ which powerfully makes the case for the rightness of the U.S. war in Vietnam” (7). And this is exactly what we see in these documentaries: how the meditation of the repatriates’ and adoptees’ stories continually relegates their individual stories into the background while stories of integration and gratitude become the foreground to their experiences. Espiritu, therefore, proposes a new line of critical engagement; she describes critical refugee studies as: an “interdisciplinary field of *critical refugee study*, which conceptualizes ‘the refugee’ not as an object of investigation but rather as a *paradigm* ‘whose function [is] to establish and make intelligible a wider set of problems.’ [. . .] Critical refugee studies thus [posits] that it is the existence of the displaced refugee, rather than the rooted citizen, that provides the clue to a new politics and model of

international relations. Yet I also argue that [we] need to do more than critique; we need to be attentive to refugees as ‘intentionalized beings’ who possess and enact their *own* politics as they emerge out of the ruins of war and its aftermath” (11-12).

While Espiritu’s analysis focuses on the United States, I use her call for a critical refugee studies to include a comparative examination of displacement and diaspora as the result of and in the aftermath of empire and war. Espiritu’s reading goes hand in hand with my analysis of Operation Babylift, where the adoptees are the grateful refugee *par excellence* and are therefore caught in what Mimi Thi Nguyen advances as the bind of the gift of freedom and its debt. I also use Espiritu in order to consider the French documentaries, where a comparative analysis reveals similar means of mediation and framing in service of the master narrative of integration and assimilation in a different immigration/displacement context. As such, this comparative perspective lends itself to the various and differing ways of power and the contestation of such power.

Nevertheless, I return to the question of citizenship, where both repatriates and adoptees are technically neither refugees nor immigrants. Given their position as French and American citizens, repatriates and adoptees are situated between refugee/immigrant and citizen. What these figures of the repatriate and the adoptee as immigrants offer to Espiritu’s critical refuge(es) studies is their very position of liminality and in-betweenness. They participate in the mass displacement and the transnational movement from Indochina/Viet Nam to France/the United States and during major waves of Vietnamese immigration. And even more, they are privileged immigrants precisely because of their claim to citizenship status. The juridical moment of the state of exception also renders the context of their citizenship at the same time conventional and exceptional. Their citizenship, however, does not fix them with secure belonging as they are



outliers with regard to the integrated citizen of French republicanism and the well-assimilated or model minority of American multiculturalism. Consequently, I would position the repatriates and adoptees within the “new politics and model of international relations” that Espiritu proposes through critical refugee studies (12).

But then, if we are to move away from the good and grateful refugee and to examine these new politics, where do we go from here? The opposite direction would entail the analysis of the bad refugees and immigrants, subjects who question and complicate the easy and dominant narratives through moments of violence, uneasiness, and impossibility. While this would provide clear counter-narratives against hospitality and charity and against citizenship and easy assimilation, this may perhaps discount narratives that work within the configuration of the model minority or narratives that do not resort to overt hostility and violence. In *Race and Resistance*, Viet Thanh Nguyen criticizes Asian American studies for polarizing good and bad subjects: “In many of the works that I examine in this book, resistance and accommodation are actually limiting, polarizing options that do not sufficiently demonstrate the *flexible strategies* often chosen by authors and characters to navigate their political and ethical situations” (4, emphasis in the original). What Nguyen proposes then is closer scrutiny into the negotiations and the strategies, therefore producing a critical complex and critical understanding of Asian American lives, histories, and narratives.

Rather than always positioning the repatriates and adoptees as model minorities or grateful immigrants, what needs to be accounted for is their various expressions and narratives. Nguyen’s flexible strategies and Espiritu’s critical refugee studies provide the means to reveal alternative narratives in spite of the mediation and framing of dominant and master narratives of gratitude and debt and of integration and assimilation. This may be the direction to be taken: to

go back and re-examine the documentaries in light of the personal and individual narratives that the repatriates and adoptees give. Catherine Ceniza Choy's analysis of Deanne Borshay Liem's autobiographically-based adoption documentaries provides a model; in fact, Choy closes her historical-oriented monograph with a chapter on adoptees' documentaries. In doing so, she situates the documentary film as a medium that "illuminate that loss goes beyond the specific spatial and temporal experience of death, disappearance, or relocation of persons. It also signifies the loss of knowledge of this collective experience. The films are a poignant mediation on how the histories of Korean international and transnational adoption [. . .] are suppressed by the dominant narrative of U.S. humanitarianism and benevolent assimilation in Asia and America" (133). Choy positions the documentary of adoption as being centered on loss, where loss becomes the possible expression and agency for adoptees as well as the counter narrative produced against the happy and grateful adoptee. It is precisely because adoption itself is an act that carries the multiple losses of family, nation, and personhood. To address loss is moreover to allow Asian transnational and transracial adoptees come to their own agency and their own understanding of their individual situation that is interconnected with the larger context of war and history, displacement and im/migration, and identity and agency. Choy does this precisely by choosing Borshay Liem's autobiographical documentaries *First Personal Plural* and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*. Borshay Liem's films are personal explorations of her individual adoption story, where she addresses the fraught relationships and highlights the tensions of her racial difference in a white American family and her multiple identities and families brought on and about by the demand for transnational adoption.

With regard to counter-narratives, Choy differs from Trinh Minh-ha's insistence on producing truth in between regimes of truth; rather, Choy reads the documentary form as a

meditation on alternative forms of history, both in its remembrance and recounting. What is important for Choy is the recognition that history and the past are unrecoverable:

these filmmakers' attempts to recover history that the past cannot be completely recuperated through the traditional historical method of archival research because archival documents, photographs, and film footage privilege some perspectives and exclude others. In these films, the narrators' memories present viewers with a different lens to imagine and to examine the Asian American experience. (133)

The impossibility of recovery and recuperation is due in part to the limits of the historical methods and documentation; as such, Choy points towards the autobiographical documentary as one that offers alternative methods and a "different lens to imagine and to examine," precisely through Borshay Liem's depiction of how the historical fails to account for the plural: identities, mothers, families, and histories. It is not to say that these different methods would allow for full recovery and recuperation of history and identity; rather, the exploration of loss is more important than to produce privileged memories and histories.

Very much in line with Borshay Liem's autobiographical documentaries and Choy's analysis are two works on the Sainte-Livrade CAFI: Dominique Rolland's personal ethnography *Petits Viêt-Nams* [Little Viet Nams] (2010) and Clément Baloup's graphic novel *Quitter Saigon: Mémoires de Viet Kieu, Vol. 1* [Leaving Saigon: Viet Kieu Memoirs, Vol. 1] (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2013). While these works coincide with the documentary's ethnographic point of view because Rolland, a trained ethnographer herself, and Baloup document others' experiences, they produce works that does not rely on historical documentation or methods but rather offer mediations on multiple and plural experiences of those who lived and were still living at the CAFI in Sainte-Livrade. Though very similar in title as Philippe Rostan's film *Le Petit Vietnam*, Rolland renders *Petits*

*Viêt-Nams* plural and therefore (re)presents the plural and pluralistic stories of CAFI residents she meets during her short stay in Sainte-Livrade in 2000 during the start of the demolition of the CAFI. Departing greatly from the ethnographic work that is objective and detached, *Petits Viêt-Nams* is written in first person and uses this intimate narration to elaborate not only Rolland's personal feelings and history as herself a Eurasian but also produces the intimacy of her encounter with the elderly matriarchs and later second generations of Sainte-Livrade. She recounts others' personal stories as she documents the festivities and concerns of the present day. Furthermore, the text does not take the form of a traditional ethnographic study; instead, its form is multi-media: the written text, photographs interspersed (often without caption or a complete correlation to what is on the page), inserts of recipes (or a non-recipe for caramelized pork). In Rolland's work, the multiplicity of experience is not confined to a single means of expression; rather, the multiplicity and plurality of voices, stories, and forms speak to the excess that spills over when disavowal happens. In this way, Rolland's multi-media multi-narration circumvents the dominant discourse that the ethnographic documentary imposes.

Baloup's introduction to the repatriates of CAFI was through Dominique Rolland, after having met each other at the Salon du Livre, the largest French book fair and literary festival. Like Rolland, Baloup's representation of the Sainte-Livrade CAFI is through image and text, specifically through the medium of the graphic novel—or graphic memoirs, since Baloup depicts the personal narratives of various CAFI individuals. Within *Quitter Saigon*, Baloup documents his individual encounters with various Vietnamese French, including those of the CAFI, and also illustrates their journey narratives to France. Formally, Baloup distinguishes between his personal interaction with the Vietnamese French through the use of color to mark the present-day encounter, and the use of monochromatic blue hues to (re)present the Vietnamese French and

their memory of their journey from Viet Nam to France and to mark their past lived experiences. For Baloup, the formal divide between past and present allows for the reader to enter into an intimate experience of first-person narrative of the Vietnamese French's personal im/migration narrative. Baloup documents his own father's story as well as other men's accounts, ranging from coming to France for studies in the early 1960s to suffering in a reeducation camp before immigrating to France, each occupying his own section.

With regard to the Sainte-Livrade CAFI, Baloup's collective narrative on the CAFI differs from the others in so far as its being added on in the third reprint and in so far as it is the only collective narrative. Moreover, unlike the other narratives in *Quitter Saigon* that depict often their lives before leaving Viet Nam, the collective CAFI story focuses much more on their settling in France than their life in Indochina before or their process of immigration. As a collective narrative, members of the Sainte-Livrade CAFI relate their different experiences as repatriated Vietnamese: the hardships encountered upon arrival; the policing of the camps by former colonial administrators; and a road trip to the beach. Though it might seem that Baloup presents the CAFI Vietnamese as subjects of his illustration, he interacts with them in an attempt to understand his own background as the Eurasian son of a first-generation Vietnamese French, very much in the same way of Rolland's engagement with those of the CAFI. His father's story is the first one Baloup depicts, and Baloup uses it as an entry way into the plural and multiple narratives of leaving Saigon, of displacement and immigration. As the CAFI stories close Baloup's *Quitter Saigon*, they leave an impression of the many Vietnamese French narratives, from the singular men's stories that start off the graphic novel to the collective/collected plural stories of the Vietnamese CAFI.

With Rolland's *Petits Viêt-Nams* and Baloup's *Quitter Saigon*, documentation on the Vietnamese French of the CAFIs move away from the dominant narrative of silencing and forgetting in service of the French republican discourse. Both Rolland and Baloup offer not a recovery of Sainte-Livrade's history but rather, they align with Choy's call for an alternative historical method of memories and a different lens to imagine the Asian transnational immigrant experience. They rely on the spoken and shared stories and highlight the multiplicity and plurality of memory, experiences, and outlooks. In the preface to Baloup's second volume *Little Saigon*, Rolland situates her and Baloup's engagement with the CAFI as the memory work of the Vietnamese in France, saying: "Dès la lecture des premières pages [de *Quitter Saigon*], j'ai su que nous faisons la même chose, chacun à notre manière, moi avec ordinateur, stylos à plume et pages blanches, lui avec feutres et pinceaux. [. . .] Il faut y voir la preuve que la question des origines n'est justement pas une affaire d'une génération, mais plutôt de sensibilité partagée entre ceux dont l'histoire familiale s'ancre entre France et Vietnam" (*Little Saigon* 5).<sup>5</sup> Rolland emphasizes how her ethnographic project aligns with Baloup's graphic memoir project, how they draw from their personal and familial rapport with *métissage* and the im/migration to France their own family members in a way that provides the departure point for other Vietnamese French. Instead of merely documenting and recording, Rolland and Baloup begin with the personal and the intimate, thereby positioning the CAFI Vietnamese into voice and agency. In her preface to Baloup's *Little Saigon*, Rolland goes on to say how Baloup's lack of expert position as a sociologist or journalist allows for him to depict memory work; she says:

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<sup>5</sup> Even after having read just the first few pages of *Quitter Saigon*, I knew that Clément and I were working on the same thing, each in our own way, me with the computer, pen and blank pages, him with his pens and brushes. [. . .] One would see that the question of origins is not only the concern of a certain generation, but more like a shared sensibility between those whose family history is anchored between France and Vietnam. (my translation)

Pourtant, peut-être parce qu'il n'a ni curiosité déplacée, ni apitoiement, qu'il a juste le désir de témoigner et qu'il ne juge jamais, qu'il n'est pas un journaliste mais simplement quelqu'un qui écoute et qui restitue, les confidences vont naître au hasard des rencontres.

Clément Baloup, par son écoute discrète et sa restitution graphique sensible, choisit de se faire leur témoin, leur porte parole, et de mettre son talent au service de la mémoire, exercice si nécessaire en une époque où le sang sèche plus vite que l'encre et où l'histoire s'oublie vite.<sup>6</sup>

Here, Rolland puts alongside memory the notion of testimony, where Baloup dutifully and carefully records the stories offered to him. Nonetheless, his position of witness and spokesperson is through his illustrating his encounters with Vietnamese French and Americans and of their individual stories. It is a move away from documentation to representation, given Baloup's medium of the graphic memoir, of text and image conjured up from memory in service of memory. Already, Baloup's choice of genre and medium departs from the realism and the truth that it entails and heads towards the creative and imaginative representation—both representation in the art form of the graphic memoir and representation in Baloup's position of spokesperson.

And, where do we go from here? I would argue that this shift away from documentary and documentation is moving towards fiction and thus, fictional accounts of diaspora. To account for all the individual narratives of the Sainte-Livrade CAFI, let alone the wide

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<sup>6</sup> Yet, maybe because he neither has a needless curiosity nor pity, because he just has the desire to witness and because he never judges, because he is not a journalist but simply someone who listens and records, personal stories will come to surface from his encounters with others.

Clément Baloup, with his discrete attention and mindful graphic recording, chooses to become their witness, their spokesperson, and to put to use his talent in service of memory, a necessary exercise in this era where blood dries faster than ink and where history is quickly forgotten. (my translation)

experience of the Vietnamese diaspora, is impossible. But fictional texts, imagined and conjured up by Vietnamese diasporic writers, are open to and open up the many possibilities of the Vietnamese experience. Already with Baloup's illustrations that accompany documented text/narrative, his graphic memoirs are memory work with the realm of imagination and possibility. Discussing her motivation for *Sous tes doigts*, an animation short on three generations of women from the Sainte-Livrade CAFI, Marie-Christine Courtès speaks of her decision to move away from a documentary film and towards a fictional animated short film: "My documentary 'Le Camp Des Oubliés' (The Camp of the Forgotten) shed light on this little-known part of the French history, but I felt the need to dig, and I knew I needed fiction for that. I think that France is a postcolonial nation that doesn't want to face its past. Colonization is both a taboo and a political stake" ("Under your fingers: Interview"). Courtès speaks of the inability of documentary film—and by extension, ethnography—to provide deeper insight and to interrogate critically the disavowal of French colonialism and its racial violence. Consequently, she proposes and uses fiction to speak of the taboo of colonialism through a medium that has "infinite narrative and aesthetic possibilities, by its evocative power." In her animated short film, Courtès does not include dialogue in order to represent and engage with the very disavowal and silencing of the Vietnamese woman's experience of repatriation and of the CAFI; she explains: "In the documentary, I could not bring myself to ask the Vietnamese women in the camp about why they had been abandoned by their French 'husbands' after the Indochina war. I knew it would have been too painful a question for them. So I decided to write a story without any dialogue to respect their silence. I also wanted to draw attention to the importance of the body in this story." With her choice of fiction and the animation short, Courtès creates a space for alternative storytelling, voices, and narratives. In my work, I engage this space of



imagination as the site of a multitude of alternative narratives, ranging from the grateful adoptee to the violent gang member, from the settled to those left behind. Keeping in mind Yên Lê Espiritu's critical refugee studies and Viet Thanh Nguyen's flexible strategies, I look to moments of contestation and negotiation, of welcome and rejection, and to, most importantly, moments of impossibility in the following chapters on Vietnamese American adoption and Vietnamese diasporic sponsorship.

## CHAPTER 2

### Impossible Af/filiations: Adoption and Aporia in Aimee Phan's *We Should Never Meet*

10:17 The President, accompanied by members of the bus team No.1, boarded "Clipper 1742" transporting approximately 325 South Vietnamese orphans en route from Saigon.

10:19 The President carried an orphan to bus No.1.

10:27 The President carried a second orphan to bus No.2.

– President Gerald R. Ford's Daily Diary, April 5, 1975



**Figure 1.** President Ford disembarks with a child in his arms. April 5, 1975.  
Gerald Ford Presidential Library (A3860-28A)

The American still life that defines Operation Babylift is the photograph taken of President Gerald R. Ford as he carries an Operation Babylift baby off the plane and thus brings the Vietnamese orphan onto American soil (Figure 1). The president holds the child in his both of arms and seems look at the child with concern while, in contrast, the child seems bewildered and despondent. The infant is barely larger than the president's torso and is therefore the smallest figure in the photograph that is dominated by adults—the president, caregivers, airport

staff, and others. While the gaze of most of the bystanders seems to be directed to the airlift baby, the actual focus of the photograph is President Ford. The composition of the photo not only places him at center of the photo but moreover uses the covered stairway to further frame him as the focus of attention. As such, the photograph documents not the story of Operation Babylift children but rather the story of the American president, and by extension the United States, who protects such war orphans by offering them refuge and family. The Vietnamese orphan here becomes reduced to a trope through which the American savior and salvation are defined. This photographed moment redefines American loss of the Vietnam War as American generosity, pity, and charity. In other words, the American's defeat is reconfigured as a humanitarian victory through the iconic image of President Ford's welcoming Operation Babylift children. It is an image that serves to disavow the fact that Vietnamese orphans and Amerasian children are the product of American servicemen's sexual relations with Vietnamese women as well as the product of decades-long American military presence and involvement in Viet Nam. Here, the picture of President Ford taken by David Hume Kennerly at the San Francisco Airport on April 5, 1975, is iconic and allegorical. The President saves the Vietnamese war orphan through the magnanimous gestures of authorizing the airlift and of the act of carrying the child. Through the president as figurehead, the United States rescues and takes in (South) Viet Nam despite the military loss. Through such pictorial representation, the Operation Babylift orphan becomes the object within the politics of pity.

In the previous chapter, I draw on Ali Behdad's argument that America has a "forgetful representation of its immigrant heritage [that] is part of a broader form of historical amnesia about the formation of the United States as an imagined community" to propose how documentary films on Operation Babylift disavow the state of exception that is imperial war to

produce and reinforce the orphan and adoptee as the figure for rescue and salvation (5). Already through President Ford's Operation Babylift photograph, the Vietnam War is reclaimed by the United States. Operation Babylift is thereby used to redefine the United States from its military forces to its humanitarian services, from the American soldier to savior and adoptive parent, from American imperial war to the American family. I continue to engage with the persistent disavow of imperial war and racial violence by reading Operation Babylift through the lens of critical refugee studies. Moreover, I critique the focus on the American savior and instead and how that discourse views the Vietnamese orphan as mere tropes for American salvation. The iconic image of Operation Babylift is in fact a very brief and contrived moment. President Ford carries the first Operation Babylift to the bus, taking about eight minutes; he goes back and carries a second orphan. That President Ford does nothing more than transport the orphans to waiting buses speaks to the empty nature of American hospitality. Working through Aimee Phan's fictional depiction of Operation Babylift in *We Should Never Meet*, I examine the aftermath of Operation Babylift, what happens after President Ford hands back the orphan; in particular, I focus on the moments of resistance and breakdown that redefine adoption as no longer the epitome of American charity and hospitality. As a result, I reconfigure the orphan through critical refugee and critical adoption studies to engage with how Operation Babylift is an exceptional moment that shifts definitions of adoption and benevolence and engage with moments of excess, violence, and breakdown. I read Phan's *We Should Never Meet* to propose how the Vietnamese adoptee as sites where the United States seeks to suppress the history of imperial war through the incorporation of the orphan into the American family and nation and, in particular, the Vietnamese American community.

## **Redefining the Vietnamese Orphan**

In her analysis of the same image of President Ford with a Vietnamese infant, sociologist Y n L  Espiritu argues how Operation Babylift represents the facile shift from war to recovery and as a result, the vanishing of violence from the memory of war (40). Specifically, Espiritu goes into the historical context of the U.S. Air Force aircraft C-5 that was the aircraft for Operation Babylift; she brings attention to how the aircraft was used in military operations before and during the humanitarian babylifts, saying:

In the Babylift mission, the changeover from acts of violence to recovery occurred *without even a pause*. On April 4, 1975, initiating Operation Babylift, a U.S. Air Force aircraft C-5, ‘which was returning to the Philippines after *delivering war material,*’ immediately flew to Saigon to airlift Vietnamese orphans to Clark AFB. In other words, the C-5 was performing two seemingly opposing missions—warring and rescuing—back to back, and yet seemingly without contradictions. In the chaotic days of the rescue mission and even long after, no one noted the irony, or what should be the incongruity, of transporting Vietnamese displaced children in the very aircraft that delivered the war material that triggered their displacement in the first place. (41-42)

For Espiritu, she highlights how the aircraft served military purposes and then quickly pivots to humanitarian operations, delivering war materials and then Vietnamese orphans. Espiritu underscores how the Vietnam War moved from war to rescue “without a pause” by quickly moving from delivering war materials to airlifting Vietnamese orphans. Furthermore, she argues that the discourse surrounding the war shifts in favor of American participation and intervention precisely “without a pause.” In the place of the American loss with the Vietnam War, Operation

Babylift and other refugee campaigns--such as Operation Frequent Wind and Operation New Life—these humanitarian efforts come to redefine the Vietnam War as a “We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose” situation (83).

In service of her larger argument on critical refugee studies and critical juxtaposition, Espiritu places Operation Babylift alongside Operation Frequent Wind and American military bases in Guam and the Philippines “into a layered story of militarized refuge(es)—one that connects U.S. colonialism, military expansion, and transpacific displacement” (47). Espiritu’s use of what she calls critical juxtaposition allows for the critique of these facile and dominant understanding of war and of the refugee; she says: “the deliberate bringing together of seemingly different historical events in an effort to reveal what would otherwise remain invisible—in this case, the contours, contents, and limits of U.S. imperialism, wars, and genocide in the Asia-Pacific region and on the U.S. mainland” (47-48). As such, Espiritu focuses on the figure of the refugee, who is constantly pulled into the American imperialist discourse of rescue and salvation, but whom she reclaims through critical refugee studies in order to open the discourse surrounding American war and empire to includes violence, hostility, and aggression. Espiritu proposes critical refugee studies as the field and critical juxtaposition as the methodology “to expose the hidden violence behind the humanitarian term *refuge*, thus undercutting the rescue-and-liberation narrative that erases the U.S. role in inducing the refugee crisis in the first place” (48). At the heart of a critical engagement with U.S. empire and war, then, is the figure of the refuge and the refugee.

Here, I bring together Espiritu’s specific reading of Operation Babylift as occurring “without a pause” as well as her larger project of critical refugee studies in this chapter’s focus on the Operation Babylift Vietnamese American adoptee. I begin by taking up Espiritu’s

challenge to “expose the hidden violence behind the humanitarian term” and to critically pause on Operation Babylift, rather than following suit and passing over the event “without a pause.” To take pause is to scrutinize carefully Operation Babylift in order to reveal the processes of redefinition that transfers war to rescue, loss to liberation “without a pause.” What happens during Operation Babylift is the act of redefining, hastily and instantly, the American narrative about the Vietnam War, its American soldiers, and more importantly, the Vietnamese war orphans. With the impending end of the Vietnam War in April 1975, the American discourse surrounding the war was hotly contested because of radically opposing public opinion. The quickly approved Operation Babylift was the act of changing the label from acts of war to acts of humanitarian aid, from acts of violence to acts of rescue, from soldiers to saviors, and from the American empire to the adoptive family. War and violence quickly dissipates into the more easily acceptable discourse of charity and hospitality.

The figure of child as the war orphan, the child born of war, the transnational and transracial adoptee is importantly where race and rescue intersect. The Amerasian’s racial Otherness is precisely what brings about the discourse of pity and rescue. In her analysis of Korean and Japanese mixed-race children and international adoption, Catherine Ceniza Choy points to how “no one is particularly interested in the children as individuals” and thus highlights how the children are reduced to the object of various discourses of humanitarian interest and aid (26). This allows the United States to categorize Vietnamese children as objects of rescue (26). Furthermore, Choy reads how the media shapes children to fit the American rhetoric of pity and rescue: “[1950s and 1960s news media] popularized international adoption to the United States as the best hope for mixed-race children by publicizing the welcoming arrivals and life-altering circumstances of those who had already been adopted” (27). The photograph of President Ford

therefore exemplifies such publicity and media coverage of transnational adoption. The media's use of children and adoptees reveals the method and mode of how adoptees are transformed into the symbolic. Choy explains that the reduction of children born of war and born by American military servicemen from individuals to the symbolic produces at the same time reaffirms American moral responsibility; citing Norman Lobsenz, Choy says:

except for a few devoted persons, no one is particularly interested in the children as individuals. No one cares that they are in a legal and emotional limbo, imprisoned by red tape and averted eyes. [Lobsenz] characterized these children as "ghost children" created by "the sins of the fathers," poignantly highlighting American responsibility for these children. Lobsenz provided readers with a different, humanitarian approach [. . .]. Lobsenz then concluded that "for children whose status as war babies is branded on their features, adoption by Americans is perhaps the best solution. (26-27)

Lobsenz is critical the American government's and the public's reduction of children to the symbolic. However, Choy underscores how Lobsenz in fact uses "the ghost children" to push for the discourse of American moral responsibility in a way that justifies how "international adoption and humanitarian rescue were inextricably linked" (16). As such, the children come to stand in for and become the opportunity for the United States to make amends for both paternal violence—as these children were often products of rape—and American military violence.

The reduction of Amerasian children into the symbolic also concerns their status as refugees. I engage with figure of the adoptee in a way that speaks to how Espiritu critically engages with the figure of the refugee. Moreover, I argue that the adoptee is a specific and particular embodiment of the refugee that reveals the limits and the liminality of belonging and



citizenship. I also consider adoptees as enacting what Nhi Lieu's calls the refugee's "troubling, haunting presence." Similar to Espiritu's analysis of the refugee figure used as justification for and reconciliation of American involvement in the Vietnam War, Lieu highlights how the refugee is used to justify America's "ambivalent incorporation" of Vietnamese refugees:

Within the national imaginary, the Vietnamese refugee represents a troubling, haunting presence that threatens to reignite the violent history and contradiction of U.S. imperialism. [. . .]

The ambivalent incorporation of Vietnamese American subjects into the U.S. society took place in a way that fostered a double identity for refugees. They function as both model minority and non-model minority subjects. As model-minorities, they worked diligently to further the ideals of American pluralism and contribute to the American Dream. As non-model minorities and pathological objects created by refugee discourse, they helped to perpetuate the idea that they remain in need of American assistance—an extension of the same type of assistance they required in Vietnam. (xxi-xxii)

For Lieu, the figure of the refugee rubs against the desired image of refugees as needing American assistance through which the United States becomes the model for charity and humanitarian responsibility. Furthermore, the refugee as the model minority allows for the United States to reaffirm its generosity and the American Dream. Important to Lieu and to my work on the Vietnamese adoptee is how troubling the refugee figure is. For Lieu, refugees inhabit an ambivalent place precisely because they function in many and differing ways; the refugee, despite the demands of becoming the model minority and the well-assimilated immigrant, often can push towards the undesirable: the non-model minority, the pathological

objects, the bad subject—to take up Viet Thanh Nguyen’s term. As such, Lieu highlights underlying threat of the refugee of “[reigniting] the violent history and contradiction of U.S. imperialism.” In a similar approach, I position the Vietnamese orphan and adoptee in this space of the “troubling, haunting presence.” The Amerasian adoptee embodies the “violent history and contradiction of U.S. imperialism” that the United States seeks to suppress by the imposition of the discourse of charity, through the act of humanitarian aid, and by way of incorporating of the child as adoptee into the adoptive family and thus into the American nation.

### **Taking Pause: Aporias of Operation Babylift**

I take pause on the Vietnamese orphan turned adoptee to critically examine the transnational and transracial adoption that is brought about by Operation Babylift. To take pause, as Espiritu calls for, is to understand Operation Babylift within American military and imperial actions. It is also to be aware of the privileged yet ambivalent position of adoptees, of how they are located at the interstices of and the slippages between refugee, immigrant, and citizen. The adoptee thus is the figure of complex negotiations that occur in the public realm of citizenship and in the private realm of kinship. To also take pause is to recall the violence inherent in the humanitarian aid and particularly in Operation Babylift. Violence functions at the origins for Operation Babylift as well as its justification. Violence occurs as the sudden displacement of Vietnamese children and orphans. It also manifests through the culture shock of being handing over to an unknown American family. And importantly, violence is the mode of erasure that disavows the military contexts of Amerasians, of the babylift, and of ongoing discrimination. In pausing, I emphasize the inherent violence and hostility; to take pause is to

consider how the military and imperial violence of Operation Babylift often are rewritten into the saving narrative of Vietnamese orphans finding welcoming and happy American homes.

To take pause is to account for the hostility that goes hand in hand with hospitality. For Operation Babylift, two photographs illustrate this contradiction of rescue and violence. The first of America's charity and humanitarian efforts is the photo depicted and discussed at the very opening of the chapter: President Ford's disembarking with a Babylift child in his arms. The opposing picture is of the first Babylift flight that had crashed just minutes after taking off the runway in Saigon, and in particular, the picture of American servicemen surveying the wreckage.<sup>7</sup> The aircraft was transporting 305 people, 243 of which were Vietnamese orphans; the crash resulted in the death of 178 people. In the Bettman and Dang Van Phuoc images of the crash, the wreckage of the cargo plane is immense and becomes a landscape of ruins and rubble that dwarfs the American military officials who survey and climb onto the debris. I call attention to these specific images of the crash precisely because it shows American servicemen clearly marked by their uniform. The very presence of the American military officers at the site of the crash underscores the war and violence that is the Vietnam War and that is the context for Operation Babylift. The picture of the C-5A Galaxy military plane crash reveals the hastiness of a military cargo plane ill-equipped for the transportation of persons, let alone young and often sick children. To pause here is to expose how the crash occurred precisely because war and rescue was happening without a pause. The crash of the first unofficial babylift flight brings to light the violence that is otherwise elided under the discourse of rescue and through the more

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<sup>7</sup> Due to permissions and copyright issues, I am unable to reproduce the opposing image here. To view images of the Galaxy C5-A wreckage being surveyed by American military officials, please see "Cargo Plane Wreckage" by Bettmann from Getty Images (Editorial #: 515431728; <https://www.gettyimages.com/license/515431728>) and the "Vietnam War Operation Babylift Crash" photographs by Dang Van Phuoc from AP Images (ID: 160159884500, <http://www.apimages.com/metadata/Index/Watchf-AP-I-VNM-APHS471770-Vietnam-War-Operatio-/47eb500c7a1c4c6faa647bc3be32962f/11/0>; ID: 806071841750, <http://www.apimages.com/metadata/Index/Watchf-AP-I-VNM-APHS471765-Vietnam-War-Operatio-/7bf8da8ebcf4ac18d20a8136867ba5c/12/0>).

publicized photo of President Ford. I speak of these images here to take further pause and to draw attention to the elision and disavowal of such war and violence perpetuated by American military and neoliberal forces. With Operation Babylift, the discourse of war and violence, of American responsibility and failure, and the realities of adoption as discrimination and failure are swept under by the dominant narrative and discourse of rescue and charity. Yet, I seek to examine such instances of violence to consider the acts of hostility of Operation Babylift children and to demonstrate how the adoptee's antagonism arises from the very the impossibility of a charitable welcome from the United States and from the American family. I shift focus to the children born of war who often are reduced to objects to pity and whose lives are framed within the discourse of rescue to deliberate instead how Operation Babylift is an inherently hostile act of hospitality and to consider the welcome of the adoptee as a rejection.

Inherent in the discourse of rescue is the notion of hospitality. As the benevolent nation, American takes up these Vietnamese orphans, and the American family adopts them into their families and homes. The juxtaposition of war and humanitarian acts define Operation Babylift, yet the overwhelming understanding and remembering of the operation is inscribed within the discourse of pity and rescue. To this end, I bring Derrida and his work on hospitality alongside the field of critical refugee studies to consider how the adopted refugee child is a site of aporia, a site of the impossibility of hospitality as well as the gift of freedom. Through Derrida's hospitality, I consider the adoptee as guest through which hospitality is defined and interrogated. Rather than the overwhelming discourse of hospitality as salvation and rescue that is tied to Operation Babylift and its adoptees, Derrida's engagement with hospitality reveals the impossibility of pure and unconditional hospitality and moreover, the rapport of possible, conditional hospitality with its attendant hostility. In a number of works, such as *On Hospitality*

and “The Principle of Hospitality,” Derrida calls for the unconditional extension of welcome and of hospitality towards the Other; this, however, exists as an impossible ideal and consequently, an aporia. As such, Derrida posits that the only possible hospitality is conditional hospitality, that is, the welcome and the receiving of the Other premised upon certain expectations and conditions. In this case, American hospitality is conditioned not only by laws and politics, immigration and citizenship but also by the American family’s expectations of receiving the foreign child as adoptee into its home and into its family.

Precisely because hospitality is conditional, Derrida proposes the notion of *hostipitality*, the notion of how hospitality is tied to hostility. Defining *hostipitality*, Derrida draws on the contradiction of hospitality, saying: “the word for ‘hospitality’ is a Latin word (*Hospitalität*, a word of Latin origin, of a troubled and troubling origin, a word which carries its own contradiction incorporated into it, a Latin word which allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, ‘hostility,’ the undesirable guest [*hôte*] which it harbors as the self-contradiction in its own body)” (“*Hostipitality*” 3). Derrida turns to etymology to find the contradiction of hospitality that includes its opposite, hostility; as such, Derrida’s neologism of *hostipitality* highlights the violence that is inherent in the act of hospitality. For Derrida, the hostility seems to be located with the “undesirable guest” but also with the position of host, as the French *hôte* stand for both host and guest. The ambivalence between who is the hostile agent is precisely the ambivalence of *hostipitality*. The vagueness surrounding hospitality is the relationship of power. On one hand, the host exerts the power of extending or refusing welcome as well as the power to impose conditions on those who are bestowed hospitality. On the other hand, the guest exerts power in submitting to the host by establishing and reinforcing the very power of the host. Even more, the guest has power in his/her very undesirability in ways that upset the laws of the house.

Such contradiction and paradox highlights how hostility is very much paired with hospitality as well as how unconditional hospitality is impossible.

The hospitality extended to the Vietnamese refugee and in particular, the Vietnamese adoptee also participates in the discourse of the gift. For Derrida, both hospitality and the gift are aporias, as they are impossible to give without conditions or expectations. Like hospitality and the impossible unconditional welcome, the unconditional gift is premised on openhandedness and “no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt” (*Given Time* 12). However, the gift can only be genuine and therefore unconditional only if the one who gives is not recognized or known by the one who receives because such recognition would establish the giver as generous and the receiver as in the debt such generosity (23). While notions of the gift and hospitality are not parallel arguments, what I am interested in is how both the gift and hospitality work within impossibility and through aporias. For Mimi Thi Nguyen, she frames hospitality as the gift of freedom that the United States extends to Vietnamese refugees. She Nguyen takes up Derrida’s aporias of hospitality and the gift to formulate her concept of the gift of freedom to critique U.S.’s neoliberal empire and its power. In particular, Nguyen pays attention to the gift in the form of its debt, working through the realities and conditions of gift-giving. Reading Derrida, Nguyen highlights how “the gift is itself a surface on which power operates as a form of subjection” and that “to accept a gift is to be compromised by the one who gives [. . .], to enter into an economy of indebtedness that is concession or negation” (6). For Nguyen, the debt exemplifies the uneven power relations between the nation bestowing refuge and the refugee who is now indebted for such a gift of freedom:

This critical purchase of the gift as a *power over*, and its duration *over time*, underscores this book’s critique of liberalism’s benevolence, posited through both

abundance and altruism (put another way, things enough to bestow surplus on another). My concerns here draw upon the awesome power of the gift's subjection, first through the want or absence of those things of which the gift consists and second through the debt that holds the giftee fast, as these powers produce his or her desires, movements, futures. (These powers also engage multiple temporalities, both as an event perpetrated on an other and as the debt that commits an other to continuous subjection.) We can observe here that in the first mode through which the gift of freedom functions, the gift stages the circulation of persons and things (in the case of war, troops and armaments) to bind a relation of giver and recipient across the globe. In the second, duration and deferral take on deep resonance as concepts of time in which what is given here—that is, sovereignty, freedom, virtue—is always “to come” because the debt extends endlessly. (8-9)

Here, Nguyen considers the gift of freedom as the form of American neoliberal empire and how the giving of the gift holds power over the refugee and “holds the giftee fast” in ways that render the refugee always in debt. It is this persistence of indebtedness that imposes the gratitude and gratefulness upon the refugee. This overwhelming gift and its attendant debt allows, as Nguyen argues, for American liberalism to obscure violence and force against others and elsewhere through the giving of life and bestowing of freedom (4).

For the adoptee, the figure of the transracial and Amerasian adoptee takes the position of both model minority and the bad subject. If the model minority is positioned alongside the good guest, the grateful giftee, and the well-integrated adoptee, then the bad subject would then be the unwelcomed guest, the ungrateful and ever-indebted giftee, and the rejected adoptee. As such,

the adoptee is expected to become not only the model minority but the quintessential saved child at the same time the adoptee often faces the difficult reality of American racism and discrimination that belies the adoptee as the bad subject and to the extreme, the rejected adoptee. The adoptee, that I position as guest and Nguyen as giftee, can only then perhaps embody the bad subject in order to reveal the aporias that are rescue and adoption as hospitality and the gift of freedom.

### **Breakdowns, Theft, and Violence: *Hostipitality in We Should Never Meet***

For my reading of Operation Babylift and adoption, I take Mimi Thi Nguyen's the gift of freedom to define the very condition and conditioned state of being adoptees in the United States. I read the gift of freedom as American hospitality in terms of refuge and the American family that are extended to the Vietnamese adoptee and where the gift of freedom is premised on the expectation of gratitude as well as the obfuscation of debt and violence. Furthermore, I reconfigure the adoptee as the undesirable guest of conditional hospitality and as the ever-grateful giftee. As such, I argue that the undesirable guest is subject to the host's hostility, to the inhospitable and unwelcoming host, but I also place hostility in the hands of the guest, particularly when faced with such a host. I engage with Jodi Kim's discussion of the politics of compassion to move towards a politics of hostility. With violence as the form through which the rejected, undesirable guest acts out, I consider Viet Thanh Nguyen's push towards a complex understanding of the bad subject. The adoptee's hostility is the mode through which the adoptee re/acts in a complex way to the unwelcoming reception, the experience of American racism and class discrimination. Therefore, I read Aimee Phan's *We Should Never Meet* to argue how the very failure of adoption of Vietnamese children erupts into a critique of the American family as



well as the assimilated Vietnamese American community. The aporia of hospitality is manifested through the breakdown and the failure of kinship. The consequent search for affiliation and a recourse to violence become critical modes of engaging the aftereffects of the Vietnam War—the personal as well as the politico-historical loss of Viet Nam—in the very space of the United States.

To this end, I use Aimee Phan’s collection of short stories *We Should Never Meet* to take pause and to consider how creative fiction proposes critiques of the hostility and hospitality of Operation Babylift and the American adoptive family. While the documentaries on Operation Babylift considered in the previous chapter—*Precious Cargo* and *Operation Babylift: The Lost Children of Vietnam*—often fall back into the master, dominate narrative of rescue and salvation and of gratitude and debt, Phan’s fictional *We Should Never Meet* does include that discourse but as only one of many possibilities and differing negotiations. The collection is structured by linked narratives that recount the before and after of Operation Babylift. The odd chapters offer an account of the circumstances of Vietnamese transnational adoption and the babylift: an unnamed single Vietnamese woman giving birth to a child, who is the product of American military rape; the transfer of infants from the Vietnamese countryside to the orphanages of Saigon; Vietnamese caretakers and American humanitarian workers in Saigon; and the last-minute preparations for the airlift. The even chapters act as counterpoints to the odd chapters by providing stories in the aftermath. Each even chapter follows a single Vietnamese American youth, who appears in the other even narratives, and presents the supposed success and, more often, failures of Operation Babylift and of American adoption and foster care systems. In this chapter, I focus on two figures of failed adoption and failed foster care. In “We Should Never Meet,” Kim is an Operation Babylift orphan who was quickly rejected by her adoptive parents

and later fails to be placed in a more permanent foster family. In “Visitors,” Vinh is like Kim who goes from one foster family to another until he turns 18 and forms a different kind of family with his gang Brookhurst 354.

In *Ends of Empire*, Jodi Kim reads Phan’s collection as working against the politics of pity that comes to define Operation Babylift and the reception of Vietnamese refugees by the American public; highlighting how *We Should Never Meet* goes against the well-intentioned trajectory of transracial adoption, she writes:

Phan disrupts a politics of pity and gestures instead toward what we might call a politics of compassion. While a transnational politics of pity might have moved well-intentioned Americans to adopt Vietnamese orphans, the presumed teleology from orphan to adoptee to formation of a ‘new geography of kinship’ obscures the many instances in which Babylift children and the ‘unaccompanied minor’ children who came after them on boats were not ‘successfully’ adopted. Indeed, for these children, if a new geography of kinship is formed at all, it is with one another, often as abused foster children whom social services does not successfully place or protect. (219)

Employing Toby Alice Volkman’s term “new geographies of kinship,” Kim thinks through how transnational adoption assumes the trajectory of orphan to adoptee and holds the premise of the transformation of the orphan into family member who participates in a “new geography of kinship” rooted in the American adoptive family. She argues that this premise is flawed because it does not consider the possibility of unsuccessful adoptions and of failed placements, such as those depicted in Phan’s *We Should Never Meet*. The politics of pity that justified and expedited Operation Babylift is one made of good intentions that are not realized in the realities and

complexities of transnational adoption. As such, Kim points to the heterogeneity of Operation Babylift and looks to the failure of adoption and incorporation in the stories “We Should Never Meet” and “Visitors” (218). Jodi Kim positions the rejected Operation Babylift child Kim as “[disrupting] the facile assumption made by both the Americans and the Vietnamese at the time of the Babylift that life in the United States would necessarily have been better for such ‘orphans’” (220). Furthermore, the character of Kim is unable to establish “new geographies of kinship” because she herself rejects the possible affiliations with other foster teens, the gang, as well as with a Vietnamese American woman. Moreover, Jodi Kim reads Vinh as presenting the “gendered effects of being an unadopted, parentless Vietnamese youth in the United States” because he accepts and participates in the “new geography of kinship” afforded by his gang, one in which Kim does not belong and one that she ultimately rejects. These instances of alternative “geographies of kinship,” Jodi Kim argues, “thus resist a transnational politics of pity and inspire instead a politics of compassion and an ‘unsentimental critique’” (223). Importantly, Kim uses the stories in *We Should Never Meet* to highlight how “a newly reconfigured kinship might be foreclosed altogether and might not thus be a formation that results from or is guaranteed by transnational adoption” (203).

Taking a similar line with Jodi Kim, I pause to take a closer look at the two stories of failed adoptions and failed foster families, the two stories of Kim and Vinh. Precisely because these provide narratives that run counter to the happy ending afforded by Operation Babylift and transnational/transracial adoption, these two stories reveal the violence that undermine, underscore, and permeate Vietnamese American adoption, immigration, and citizenship. Where Jodi Kim reads Pham through the foreclosure of “new geographies of kinship,” I push further to situate this foreclosure as one that enacts the aporia of hospitality and the enduring debt of the

gift through which the welcome of the adoptee is rendered impossible because of the failure of adoption and of the foster care system. Furthermore, Kim's and Vinh's stories present the inability to form adoptive/foster families as well as the inability to form affiliations with the Vietnamese American community. Consequently, I push Jodi Kim's argument of a politics of compassion towards the politics of hostility, where Kim and Vinh stand to critique the aporias of hospitality, affiliation, and gift/debt and to posit a way to break through the expectations of the guest and the receiver/debtor.

Furthermore, I use Kim's and Vinh's narratives precisely because they are intertwined and hold key parallels in terms of the failure of incorporation into an American family, the gift given by a Vietnamese American, and the hostility that seeks to disrupt their positioning within the expectation of the guest and the debt of freedom. Kim's and Vinh's narratives are complicated by their on-again-off-again relationship and are analogous in the way that attempts to cope with American inhospitality through the forging and the breaking of familiar and familial bonds with the Vietnamese American community. At the heart of these two stories are attempts to produce a hospitality that extends beyond host and guest, beyond nation and citizen, and towards the familiar and the familial; however, hospitality and kinship as a form that has already failed Kim and Vinh can only produce hostile relations towards those Vietnamese Americans, who in some ways have found a place within American society. These two stories and its two protagonists, Kim and Vinh force us to take pause to reflect on Operation Babylift and what happens after, the aftermath of displacement and im/migration as well as the aftereffects of war

The act of hospitality that is central to "We Should Never Meet" and "Visitors" is that of adoption and of foster care. Kim arrives in the United States as one of the children of Operation Babylift; she is successfully placed into an American home for a few months only to be rejected

and sent back into the American foster care system. This initial failure of the promise of the American family and home repeats over and over, as Kim bounces from one foster family after another. The series of rejections also is a series of acts of hostility and violence towards Kim, where she is abused sexually, physically, and emotionally by various foster families. Vinh follows a similar trajectory as Kim, but he arrives in America as a Vietnamese refugee and as an unaccompanied minor. The oscillation between promises of hospitality, family, and home and realities of hostility, rejection, and displacement characterizes the complexities of Kim's and Vinh's stories. The failure of hospitality as embodied and emplaced in the American family and home results in Kim's and Vinh's seeking and constructing affiliations through shared foster home experiences and through the Vietnamese gang, Brookhurst 354, rather than relying on legal affiliations of adoptive and foster families. However, these affiliations cannot hold, as they are rooted in hostility and violence.

Hospitality in these two stories is also defined and embodied as the gift, both in terms of Derrida's *aporia* of gift-giving and Mimi Thi Nguyen's gift of freedom. The gift as a kind of contract and relationship of exchange comes to bear meaning and to open up the possibility of kinship and affiliation for Kim and Vinh with other Vietnamese Americans. The gift, moreover, is literally an object of jewelry for both Kim and Vinh. Developing a relationship with a Vietnamese shopkeeper, Kim receives a jade bracelet from the woman, which symbolizes Kim's dreams of a mother-figure and a more normal, if possible, alternative kinship formation than the "new geographies of kinship" afforded by the gang affiliation. For Vinh, the gift object is a necklace given by Bac Nguyen, an elderly but recently immigrated Vietnamese man. In the same way that Kim's gift of the jade bracelet is imbued with the desire for a normative family, Bac Nguyen's gift of his deceased wife's necklace to Vinh conveys Bac Nguyen's hope for Vinh

to establish his own household, with a wife and future children. The gift object in both stories stand in for the foreclosed “new geographies of kinship” that goes back to the idealized and promised family proposed by Operation Babylift, transnational adoption, and refugee immigration to the United States. Moreover, the gift—of freedom, of family, of Vietnamese America—incur a debt to be paid over time, which Kim and Vinh ultimately reject and react in hostility and violence.

Key to Kim and Vinh’s stories is the politics of hostility that breaks through Lieu’s double identity of refugee as model minority and non-model minority. Yet, I want to attend to Viet Thanh Nguyen’s critique of Asian American studies’ idealized use of the bad subject. In *Race and Resistance*, Nguyen examines Asian American scholars’ use of “a discourse of the bad subject, which both appropriates the dominant representation of Asian Americans as dangerous and subversive populations and idealizes Asian America as a site of opposition and resistance” (29). Nguyen speaks about how the bad subject is appropriated by Asian American studies to respond to and react against the model minority, a “particular ideological purpose in America’s self-representation as a land of opportunity” that “[disciplines] *nonmodel* minority” whose failure is due to their individual lack rather than due to their discriminated or oppressed position. As such, Nguyen critiques the simplified binary of model minority and bad subject (of good immigrant and bad refugee) as well as the reduction of Asian American texts as portraying either (positive) resistance or (negative) accommodation (7). Instead, Nguyen proposes and engages in analysis that highlights “flexible strategies exhibited by Asian American authors and literary characters [as] testimony to the ways Asian Americans in general pick and choose their tactics of struggle, survival, and possible assimilation.” Moreover, Nguyen uses this flexible strategy to produce “a more complex enactment of the discourse of the bad subject,” one that is both fluid

and inflexible (29). For *We Should Never Meet*, Kim and Vinh are the bad subjects—a high school dropout and a gang member. In both their stories, they resort to violence in ways that foreclose the possibility of affiliations with those of the Vietnamese American community—Kim calls on Vinh’s gang to break into the store of a Vietnamese American woman that Kim has become close to, and Vinh breaks into a recent Vietnamese immigrant’s home. While Nguyen pushes for a “more complex enactment of the discourse of the bad subject,” I wonder if Kim and Vinh do not employ flexible strategies but rather are reacting to the long history of rejection and violence they themselves encounter. In acting out, their violence attempts to work through the loss and the impossibility of family and therefore is not a violence that is easily legible as resistance or accommodation. I therefore interrogate Kim’s and Vinh’s use of violence as part of their complex negotiations of their position within the Vietnamese and American communities as well as their responding to the elided histories of violence in an attempt to mourn the loss of the Vietnam War—that stands in for the loss of family.

Kim’s and Vinh’s recourse to violence highlights how they re/negotiate their intended position as American citizen, Asian American model minority, and Vietnamese refugee within the American nation, the adoptive family, and the Vietnamese American community. The violent nature of their narratives questions assumptions about American hospitality as benevolent and the process of assimilation as straightforward. I therefore frame this discussion of immigration and violence within terms of hospitality in the discourse of kinship: the host is the American nation and the American family while the guest is the Vietnamese transnational adoptee and unaccompanied Vietnamese refugee minor. Nevertheless, Phan’s work introduces the Vietnamese American community into the dynamic of hospitality and kinship, thereby complicating the position of host—the American or the Vietnamese American as host. With the

breakdown of hospitality and kinship and with the recourse to hostility, the Vietnamese American, embodied by Kim and Vinh who cannot assimilate, cannot mourn the loss of Viet Nam and the impossibility of America.

### **“We Should Never Meet” and the Impossibility of Af/filiation**

In “We Should Never Meet,” Kim is an Amerasian/*Mỹ-lai* girl who as an Operation Babylift orphan. Placed into an American adoptive family, Kim unfortunately is returned after only a month and then placed into the foster care system. Within this social welfare system, Kim bounces from family to family, from house to house often because of her foster fathers’ repeated unsolicited sexual advances. Getting out of foster care at eighteen, Kim affiliates herself with Vinh and the Brookhurst 354 gang, boys who shared Kim’s fate of failed foster care in Orange County. Phan’s characterization of Kim reveals the repeated and ultimate failure of adoption, where America, despite its promises of Operation Babylift and its receiving Vietnamese boat people, fails to even place Kim in a foster family, let alone an adoptive family.

Nonetheless, Kim’s story opens not with the breakdown of family and hospitality but the act of a bad subject: the act of an attempted theft at a gift shop in Little Saigon. It is this act of violence that underscores the failure of the act of hospitality, Kim’s being returned and the failed foster homes. Opening the story *in medias res*, we see Kim in the aftermath of failed adoption, the failure of family and adoption. Having turned eighteen and legally an adult, Kim no longer has any familial ties constructed through foster care or by any legal means. Trying to replace a broken pager, Kim tries to steal a new one only to be caught by the Vietnamese shopkeeper. Importantly, Kim’s act of violence takes place in Little Saigon, where the largest population of Vietnamese refugees has settled and established themselves. The theft brings to light the lack of



rapport with the Vietnamese American community and poses hostility as the contrary mode of hospitality. Having entered into the Vietnamese woman's shop, Kim breaks the expected rapport of hospitality and capitalism, where one can enter into the free market but only in accordance to exchange and transactions. Here, Kim's theft breaks down this mode, and it is the transgressive act that positions Kim as the bad subject.

Nevertheless, the woman offers an alternative between hospitality and hostility through the act of the forgiveness for the theft. Unlike repeated rejections by and expulsions from foster homes, this time Kim is forgiven; consequently, being let go unpunished is wholly unexpected for her. Phan writes of the woman's unforeseen gesture in terms of compassion, compassion towards Kim, the Amerasian Other:

Leave, the woman said. There was a sternness in the woman's face, but also *compassion—something new*. Kim was used to insults and threats whenever she was caught stealing, especially when they recognized her as *my-lai* [Amerasian]. But this woman only nodded at her, maybe even felt sorry for her because of her mixed race, and turned her back, expecting Kim to simply walk out, unpunished. (31, emphasis added)

The passage configures the act of forgiveness and the sentiment of compassion as "something new" for Kim, as she often faced discrimination and rejection for her *Mỹ-lai* identity. In the shopkeeper's gesture, there is a recognition of the Other and the Other as an Amerasian, mixed-race girl. However, this recognition recalls the discourse of pity and rescue that non-productively embodies the adoptee. The woman's compassion is both an act of recognition of Kim as a Vietnamese kin as well as the reduction of Kim as an object of pity.

Significantly, the act of hostility produces an act of hospitality. After forgiving Kim of her attempted theft, the woman extends a welcome to Kim to her store, saying: “You can come in. [. . .] As long as you don’t try to steal anything again” (38). This extension of hospitality is conditional and contingent on Kim’s good behavior. When Kim returns to visit the woman in her store, the woman directs Kim saying, “Keep your hands out.” The conditioned welcome is specifically predicated on good behavior and thus, seeks to control Kim’s actions and body: “don’t steal anything” and “keep your hands out.” While this may not seem exactly welcoming, the woman’s reception of Kim speaks directly to Derrida’s conditional hospitality, that hospitality can only exist as a restrictive welcome. Furthermore, the shopkeeper’s hospitality is the lesser degree of American hospitality and citizenship, which are both predicated on laws and biopolitics governing model citizenship. In the same way American hospitality is conditioned on immigration laws and model minority behavior, the woman imposes the law against theft and good manners.

Despite being a conditional hospitality, the woman’s gesture is still one of welcome and also allows for a possible kinship between her and Kim. The shopkeeper’s initial recognition of Kim as a fellow Vietnamese person provides an opening for kinship and affiliation by way of a Vietnamese identity and by way of the Vietnamese language. Visiting the woman’s store, Kim asks her how she identified Kim as Vietnamese: “How did you know I was Vietnamese? Kim asked. Hardly anyone could tell unless they were looking for it. But his woman knew right away, spoke to her in the native language the very first time” (39). Kim’s curiosity stems from her always being identified as Other, with her Amerasian features as not Vietnamese enough but also not American enough. Responding to Kim, the shopkeeper extends a Vietnamese identity to

Kim and in doing so, affiliates Kim with herself and with the Vietnamese community. The woman says:

I can tell, the woman said. The way you walk and carry yourself. It's obvious.

But I was raised here, Kim said, and, before she could stop herself, I'm an orphan.

The woman shook her head. It doesn't matter. Whoever raised you, wherever, you're Vietnamese. (39-40)

Importantly, the woman ascribes a Vietnamese identity to Kim, rather than Kim identifying herself as Vietnamese because Kim is ambivalently positioned in between as mixed-race and orphan/failed adoptee. The woman's identification of Kim as Vietnamese then incorporates Kim into the Vietnamese and Vietnamese American community, dismissing Kim's Amerasian and orphan background. With the shopkeeper's welcome, both into her store and into the Vietnamese community, Kim is taken into and situated within the Vietnamese community; the initial act of hospitality provides Kim with a Vietnamese affiliation.

Kim's possibility of affiliation with the Vietnamese woman is further embodied and objectified by the gift of the bracelet. In the following visit, Kim receives a jade bracelet as a gift from the shopkeeper. The woman offers the bracelet as a gift, after seeing Kim eye it during each visit. While Kim hesitates, the shopkeeper insists and by way of an excuse, tells her to take it as an early birthday present. Developing from Kim's being identified as Vietnamese and becoming affiliated with the woman, the simple gesture of the gift becomes imbued with meaning full of kinship and affiliation. On one hand, this is because Kim comes to believe that the woman is being generous because it is Kim's birthday: "Kim stared at her, stunned. She

didn't remember telling the woman her birthday was coming up" (44). On the other hand, the jade bracelet itself symbolizes the kinship between mother and daughter and thus positions the woman as a mother-figure to Kim. This maternal relationship is embodied in the jade bracelet that is traditionally given by a mother to her daughter, as Kim explains: "you only give this [the jade bracelet] to family. Mothers to daughters, I know" (49). For Kim, she therefore reads the gift of the bracelet as a gift of family given by the shopkeeper. The maternal nature of the bracelet and the possible maternal relationship between the woman and Kim becomes overstated precisely because of Kim's maternal loss: as a Babylift orphan, Kim is completely without a mother and as a rejected adoptee, completely without a family. Without any knowledge of and without any possibility of having a relationship her mother, Kim then positions the woman as a substitute maternal figure, precisely because of the exchange, one who gives a gift of a Vietnamese identity and a gift of maternal jewelry.

The object of the jade bracelet and its function in the gift exchange brings up Derrida's reading of the gift as an aporia. The gift is an impossibility, very much aligned with the act of hospitality. Both the gift and hospitality in their unconditional and absolute forms are impossible as each are conditioned by the expectation of debt. The gift, therefore, like hospitality, cannot have any conditions, must be given without expectation of gratitude and without the indebtedness of charity. In "We Should Never Meet," the gift itself is a form of subjection, that positions Kim in rapport with the shopkeeper and that expects Kim to conduct herself with good behavior and gratitude. The conditions of hospitality that the shopkeeper stipulates—"As long as you don't try to steal anything again" and "keep your hands out" (38)—seem to continue through the gesture of the gift, that Kim as tied in a symbolic kinship must behave appropriately and accordingly. Therefore, within "We Should Never Meet," the conditions of being a good

daughter and a good citizen along with the debt of gratitude render genuine gift and hospitality impossible.

Significantly, Kim cannot and does not fulfill the debt required. Financially, Kim cannot repay the woman back for the jade bracelet, as Kim herself cannot support herself, a high school dropout working at Tasty Burger and has to crash with Vinh and the Brookhurst 354 boys.

While Kim is indebted to the shopkeeper for her hospitality and affiliation as well as for the gift of the jade bracelet, Kim does not seek to repay the debt but actually demands more. When her savings goes to having an abortion instead to towards a security deposit for a new apartment, Kim makes demands of the shopkeeper, thereby reposition Kim's debt to the woman onto the woman herself. Rather than being indebted to the woman, Kim believes that the shopkeeper, as a maternal substitute, is concerned for Kim's welfare to give Kim the much-needed deposit:

“The woman smiled in greeting, but when she saw Kim's face, her forehead creased with concern. Kim relaxed slightly at this, knowing this woman cared about her welfare, wouldn't turn her back on her” (49). This concern Kim reads as a sign of maternal kinship, between a surrogate mother and daughter and thus expects the woman to act accordingly. However, the shopkeeper refuses to lend the money, saying that it is inappropriate and that Kim is “practically a stranger.” The woman's refusal destroys Kim's expectations of kinship but also marks the breakdown of hospitality as well as of the gift.

Such breakdown is predicated on the woman's framing the act of hospitality and gift through compassion and pity. Rather than a symbol of mutual affiliation, the jade bracelet is nothing more than pity, that the woman gives the bracelet out of feeling badly for Kim: “I gave that to you because I felt sorry for you, the woman said slowly, like she was talking to someone she hadn't been getting to know for the last three weeks. You keep staring at it so pitifully.

That's all" (50). The woman's discourse of pity prevents the possibility of kinship and affiliation by rendering Kim merely the miserable, pathetic object. Furthermore, such charitable discourse disavows possible kinship and affiliation between them because the very breakdown produces estrangement. Responding to the woman's estranged behavior, Kim revises her vision of the shopkeeper from a maternal substitute to a stranger: "Kim stared at [the woman], conscious through every blink of her eyes the woman was changing into something else. Once familiar, the woman became a stranger again. Her features were not so similar to Kim's, her face, body language not so loving" (50). The familiarity that Kim once felt with the woman was based on mutual identity and affiliation as Vietnamese but not rendered strange and estranged. Now, Kim recognizes the difference and the divide between the Vietnamese woman and herself as an Amerasian, a returned Operation Babylift orphan: "She didn't want me then and now, even now" (50).

The conflation of Kim's multiple rejections "then and now, even now" underscores the misrecognition of family and community. It speaks to the failures of the American nation and the failures of the American and Vietnamese American communities that cannot and will not take in the Operation Babylift orphan. As an emancipated young adult, a high school dropout, and ex-girlfriend of a Vietnamese gang member, Kim furthermore is already understood as a bad subject. Kim defines her subjectivity as a bad subject by being caught in the middle of stealing the pager: "Thief, Kim said. She [the storekeeper] always thought that. I was nothing more to her" (51). Kim's self-identification is no longer on her cultural identity as Vietnamese but rather solely as the bad subject, the *nonmodel* minority, the criminal element. Importantly, this is the position of the hostile other and the inhospitable guest.

Significantly, violence is reserved for Vinh and his Brookhurst 354 gang. Like Kim, Vinh and these boys were placed in the foster system and did not have the experience of a stable family life. However, where Kim resides in hostile feelings, these gang members follow through on their hostility to commit home invasions. Although Kim's narrative does not actually describe the violence inflicted upon the Vietnamese woman, it does imply that they do follow through with breaking into the shop, given the extent of Kim's rage. In the closing moments of the short story, Kim reveals the boys' motivation for their hostile acts, saying:

These weren't bad boys. Kim had known most of them since they were kids.

Though they all had problems, most were friendly, funny, loyal. The only reason they could do the things they did was because they felt they had to. For years, they'd been denied so much from their new country and government-issued families. They robbed these houses and stores to break even, to survive. They believed they had no other choice. (52)

Despite how Kim makes sense of the gang's acts through notions of obligation and survival, what is significant is how they go through with robberies is to "break even" and thus to get even against those who have denied them so much and for so long. The boys' hostility is directed not only at the United States and its failure to properly welcome them by placing them into adoptive and foster homes but more importantly towards those Vietnamese who settled down and have a place in America. In this, Phan explains that the Brookhurst 354 gang's violence is a response to the violence that they themselves experience having been "denied so much from their new country and government-issued families." Rather than reproducing the binary opposition of good refugee and bad subject or of the model minority and non-model minority, Kim's and the gang's hostility and violence are reactions to the impossibility of the good refugee. The gang

attacks the Vietnamese woman, and in a subsequent narrative, they carry out home invasions not against Vietnamese American families, not American families. By their violence against the Vietnamese American community, the gang reveals how the failure of kinship with Vietnamese American families is already impossible because of the community's marginalization of these youth, reproducing the already present American hostility against youths and refugees whom America has supposedly rescued.

In face of estrangement and as the undesirable guest, Kim reacts with inhospitality and hostility and reacts violently. When Vinh, her gangster ex-boyfriend asks why Kim is upset, Kim calls the woman "Bitch, that goddamned bitch" (50) and calls on Vinh to rob the store, getting back at the shopkeeper and her maternal betrayal. Despite her rage, Kim lashes out by inciting Vinh and the Brookhurst 354 gang to attack the Vietnamese woman. Kim's hostility itself is limited to the affective realm. It is an emotional connection that Kim attempts to construct with the Vietnamese woman. It is the feeling of betrayal that turns upside down the fiction of a maternal bond and a mutual Vietnamese identity and into the reality of estrangement and strangers. The foreclosure of any mother—her Vietnamese birth mother, American adoptive or foster mother, and a fellow Vietnamese American woman—provides Kim sympathy for the boys who are in a similar position. Both Kim and the boys therefore uses violence as a way to process their loss and to enact the pain of such loss on others: "It crept through her so slowly and thoroughly, from deep in her stomach up her neck to the strands of her hair, the realization of what she'd just done. Vinh never really told Kim what they did with the merchants and families they robbed. She was certain they weren't left untouched. The boys weren't out for money. They wanted to give back their pain" (53). While the violent acts themselves belong to the gang, Kim importantly points out the function of violence for both herself and for the boys: "they



wanted to give back their pain.” Kim’s calling upon Vinh and the boys’ attacking the store, the hostility only expresses their own pain of being alienated and othered from the Vietnamese American and American communities and their pain of losing family from war and displacement.

The title of the story “We Should Never Meet” therefore speaks to the impossibility of hospitality and kinship through Kim’s meeting the Vietnamese shopkeeper. The title is formulated with the auxiliary verb “should” as well as the negative “never” and thus comes as a proposal where Kim and the woman should never meet and should have never met. Without such a meeting, there is no hospitality and no gift as well as no hostility and no violence. While the story’s title attempts to argue that it would be better if they should not meet, the narrative between Kim and the shopkeeper thus argues for possibilities within such meetings, such conflict. Moreover, the title of both the story and the collection as *We Should Never Meet* proposes that these encounters and conflicts, the building and the breaking down affiliations need to be addressed so that there remains the possibility of working through the loss, the mourning of the impossibility of family and nation.

### **The Place of “Visitors”: Permanently Bad, Outsiders, and Criminals**

The fourth story in *We Should Never Meet* “The Visitors” carries through the sense of hostility towards the American host and towards the Vietnamese American community. Moreover, the story intensifies the guest’s acts of hostility and violence against the supposedly welcoming host. Like Kim, Vinh draws a distinction between him, the boys of the Vietnamese gang Brookhurst 354, Kim—those unwanted and outcasts—and the assimilated, well-settled and well-established Vietnamese American families. Vinh first arrives in the United States as an

unaccompanied minor, who eventually bounces from one foster home to another until he joins Brookhurst 354. While Vinh does not fit the narrative of Amerasian orphans and Operation Babylift because he is a Vietnamese refugee unaccompanied minor, Vinh is an important foil for Kim. Vinh's status as an unaccompanied minor offers a foil to Kim's status as a babylift child; both immigrated without families and offer a different narrative of immigration and settlement that is often made possible through family. Furthermore, the boys of the Brookhurst 354 somehow find themselves either without families or disassociating from their own families in order to form the gang as an alternative form of kinship, affiliation, and family. This motley crew of unwanted Vietnamese youth contrasts with the Vietnamese American community that is formed by whole and secure families, often with their suburban homes, luxury cars, and material goods. Where those Vietnamese American families have integrated into American society, Vinh and his 354 boys remain visitors to American and Vietnamese American society, positioning themselves as outcasts and thieves in American and Vietnamese American society.

Significantly, Vinh's narrative reenacts Kim's failed relationship with the shopkeeper but only to push the breakdown further. In "Visitors," Vinh meets an elderly Vietnamese man named Bac Nguyen who is lost in Little Saigon, having only arrived in the United States a month earlier. Vinh helps Bac Nguyen carry his groceries home to his daughter's house, where they have an intense conversation about the Vietnam War and about loss and mourning. During the conversation, Bac Nguyen finds out that Vinh is in love and offers him one of his wife's necklaces. This gesture recalls and echoes the Vietnamese shopkeeper's gift of the jade bracelet to Kim. This is both a gesture of hospitality but also one that is rewritten into a gesture of violence when Vinh steals the necklace during his gang's home invasion. The hostility against Bac Nguyen and the act of theft speaks to the breakdown of both hospitality and of the gift.

Here, debt is no longer contingent and inherent in the act of gift-giving because Vinh breaks the cycle, stealing what would have been the gift and consequently what would have constituted more debt. Theft does not entail any obligation because it relies on the forceful taking of what may have been gifted. Consequently, with the focus on Vinh and the violent act of home invasions, I argue that “Visitors” (re)presents the bad subject can become the figure for resistance and critique. As Vinh is a gang member, the use of Vinh as both a visitor and a bad subject introduces and engages with Lisa Marie Cacho’s reading of how social death permanently criminalizes gang members.

The title “Visitors” defines the role and the position of Vinh as well as the Brookhurst 354 gang as not fitting into the mold of citizens as model minorities or the mold of the Vietnamese American community as grateful refugee. As a visitor, the Vietnamese refugee and the Vietnamese immigrant are always visitors, the eternal guest of American hospitality and always subject and in debt to the United States as host. Immigrated to the United States as an unaccompanied minor and then placed into the foster care system without a successful placement, Vinh therefore embodies the notion of visitor precisely because he is not tied down to family and not (well) integrated into society and into the nation. Consequently, Vinh is out of place precisely because he inhabits the margins of society as the bad subject and criminal element.

Moreover, the story not only positions Vinh as the guest but also positions Bac Nguyen as another guest and also, as the object of Vinh’s violence. A recent immigrant, Bac Nguyen was sponsored by his daughter and has only been in the United States for a month. As a result, Bac Nguyen is positioned as a visitor, one who does not know the lay of the land as well as the way of American life in Southern California. When we are first introduced to Bac Nguyen, he

discusses this realization of being so out of place in the United States: “Bac Nguyen realized the absurdity of dressing so formally for a simple trip to the supermarket. He understood the instant he stepped through the automatic doors and saw both employees and customers alike in T-shirts and tennis shoes. They must have believed him such a foolish old man, an obvious new refugee” (90). Bac Nguyen not only reflects upon but moreover comes to understand how much he is different from and ignorant of the Vietnamese American lifestyle. His formal attire sets him apart from the rest of the Vietnamese American community, a two-piece suit against the t-shirts and tennis shoes. This discrepancy furthermore marks Bac Nguyen as a new arrival, the newly-settled refugee, while the Vietnamese American community as those who are now assimilated, more Americanized, and marked as citizens—although racialized and still problematic—rather than visitors.

Out of place in the community of Little Saigon, Bac Nguyen importantly feels out of place in his own daughter’s home. Despite being sponsored by his daughter and being welcomed by her and her family, Bac Nguyen retains the feeling of being a visitor. As a perpetual guest, Bac Nguyen is always uneasy in his daughter’s quintessentially American home. The house is described as “pristinely composed—like a museum. [Bac Nguyen] felt a detached coldness in his daughter’s house. Perhaps it was in the States, and everything in it was essentially American. He didn’t know. He hoped he would get over the feeling in time and come to see this unfamiliar place as his home” (95-96). The house is so American that it is rendered unfamiliar, closed off, and detached. This feeling extends to Bac Nguyen’s uneasiness in the house, that he is completely out of place as a guest of the home rather than a settled family member. With such a museum-like house, Bac Nguyen cannot feel and perhaps never will feel settled in his daughter’s home and by extension, in the United States.

Bac Nguyen's meditation on his feeling out of place in his own daughter's home speaks to Vinh's position as outsider, visitor, and guest. When Vinh helps Bac Nguyen home, Vinh is invited to have tea in Bac Nguyen's daughter's house. Similar to Bac Nguyen, Vinh feels out of place within the same Vietnamese American house. Although a true visitor and guest in the house, Vinh has the same uneasy sentiment as Bac Nguyen does inside the "essentially American house": "the boy was shifting on his heel, looking around the house awkwardly" (95). Importantly, the Vietnamese American house throws Vinh off despite spending the majority of his life in the United States and despite his breaking and entering many different American homes. This uneasiness within the house becomes the point of departure for Vinh to express his feeling that he is a perpetual visitor despite his being an American citizen:

Do you miss Vietnam? [Vinh asks]

Of course, Bac Nguyen said. It's my home.

That's how I feel. Even though I don't remember much of it, I still feel like it's my home, and this place, while nice, isn't. *It's like I'm visiting, and I've overstayed my welcome.* (97, emphasis added)

Clearly stating his being a visitor, Vinh drives the point that he is the eternal visitor, one who has importantly overstayed his welcome. Being in the position of a visitor requires the distinction between home and the elsewhere, which he makes between Viet Nam and the United States. Having left Viet Nam at an early age, Vinh still considers Viet Nam as the site of his identity that is bound along the notion of home. For Vinh, Viet Nam as home can be the nostalgic remembrance and the idealization of a life and of a family better than his lack of family in America. The lack of home in the space of America comes from his experience of bouncing from foster home to another in Orange County. He never experiences family and home in the

United States. As a result of the constant displacement and rejection, Vinh finds himself in the position of the perpetual outsider, the visitor who overstays his welcome, and ultimately, the inhospitable and hostile guest.

On the level of their being visitors, Vinh and Bac Nguyen commiserate. Though he is unnamed until the conclusion of their encounter, Vinh connects with Bac Nguyen because of their shared feelings of being out of place. Helping Bac Nguyen, Vinh claims that he only recently arrived in the United States, a lie that allows Vinh to be more sympathetic. However, this lie in fact articulates Vinh's sentiment of always being out of place and of being the visitor who overstays his welcome. It moreover positions Viet Nam as home and the United States as an unwelcoming site. Vinh speaks of the loss of his parents by commenting that "they've taken so much from us" (94). Without an antecedent for the pronoun "they," Bac Nguyen assumes that Vinh is speaking about the Communists, who had killed Bac Nguyen's wife and son. However, Vinh's statement "they've taken so much from us" does not refer to the Vietnamese Communists but instead refers to the Americans: "You misunderstand, Bac, the boy said. I wasn't meaning the Communists. [. . .] I was talking about the Americans" (94). This clarification and the shift of the meaning from Viet Nam to the United States therefore place the loss and the violence in the hands of the American government and military, who had "taken so much from us."

Furthermore, Vinh pulls into the discussion of the loss of the war the American attempt to deal with the loss of the Vietnam War specifically in terms of hospitality. He says, "I should know that opinions differ when it comes to the Americans. [. . .] Not for me. They destroyed our country, then they left. To ease their guilty conscience, they took some of us in. It's really that simple" (96). Here, hospitality is the act of taking the Vietnamese into the United States; however, he argues that the hospitable act is not necessarily hospitable and reasons that such

actions comes about because of American guilt for the loss and violence in Viet Nam. Already, hospitality is undermined by hostility, the guilt and the reason for taking in Vinh and others. Even more, taking in to account Vinh's earlier statement that "they've taken so much from us," the act of hospitality is already imbued with acts of hostility. Vinh's language of "take" calls into question the distinction between hospitality and hostility. On one hand, to take the Vietnamese in is an act of hospitality, of taking the other into the space of the self. On the other hand, to take is antagonistic; it is the act of taking away, an act of imposing loss on the other. "Visitors" therefore exposes hospitality's structure where hostility already precedes and is the underlining factor for the United States' taking in Vietnamese orphans through Operation Babylift and Vietnamese refugees in the postwar period.

The encounter between Vinh and Bac Nguyen in addition to Bac Nguyen's act of hospitality open a conversation on loss. Vinh locates loss in the space and place of the United States, specifically the failure of the American family and home. In contrast, Bac Nguyen locates loss in the space and past of Viet Nam and through the death of his son Anh. Bac Nguyen loses his son during the Vietnam War, when Anh is shot down by a Communist sniper in Vung Tau (94). The loss itself is tragic; however, the loss is even more important because Bac Nguyen projects Anh onto Vinh. Bac Nguyen's misreading thus transports his originary loss in the space of Viet Nam to that of the United States. Early in their encounter, he feels a kinship with Vinh precisely because Vinh brings to mind the deceased Anh: "Bac Nguyen was momentarily distracted by their [Bac Nguyen and Vinh's] shadows on the concrete, their heads nearly touching, the two of them working together. He remembered Anh, and, with the only thought of his youngest son, Bac Nguyen's eyes immediately swelled" (92). The vision of the two shadows brings together Bac Nguyen with the specter of his son, but the specter as formed

by the physical body rendered a shade by Vinh. The image of the shadow calls forth the specter of Anh, and in doing so, the loss of Anh is conjured up in the present. Furthermore, in Bac Nguyen's eyes, Vinh takes on different qualities and expressions of the deceased Anh. Speaking about the nature of Vinh's relationship with Kim, Bac Nguyen reads Vinh's confidence and determination as Anh's. Bac Nguyen draws it out in a simile, saying: "The jut of his [Vinh's] chin, thin lips nearly white pressed together. Like his son Anh when he told Bac Nguyen he was enlisting in the South Vietnamese army. Full of confidence, denial of any fear" (99). Here, Vinh's confident mannerisms are linked back to Anh through the qualities and with the simile. Bac Nguyen therefore pulls Vinh into a relationship of filiation by way of projecting his deceased son onto Vinh.

Importantly, Bac Nguyen goes further to connect his personal loss with Vinh through the figure of his deceased wife. Speaking about the importance of family over the draw of politics and idealism, Bac Nguyen calls Vinh to focus on Vinh's girlfriend:

We spend so much energy and time on larger issues, religion, country, political parties, that we ignore the smaller ones, like family and our homes, which are ultimately more important. I will always regret every political meeting I went to when my wife begged me to stay home with her. I will always regret every minute I chose not to spend with her because I will never have it back. Do you have a girlfriend? [. . .] You should concentrate your energies on her. Forget about these politics. (97-98)

Bac Nguyen remembers the loss of his wife not through her actual death at the hands of the Communists—in the manner that he links Anh's death as intimately tied to the Communists—but rather through lost time, through his absence. As a consequence, Bac Nguyen urges Vinh to



leave politics aside and instead focus on his girlfriend, who represents the ideal of family and home. Importantly, this move from Anh to his wife reiterates Bac Nguyen's feeling of kinship towards Vinh. Bac Nguyen "proselytize[s]" Vinh to remember wife and family as a father would to a son. Furthermore, Bac Nguyen sees himself in the figure of Vinh and attempts to rectify his own past actions and regrets.

Specifically, Bac Nguyen reads himself and his wife into the relationship between Vinh and his girlfriend through the act of giving a gift. Seeing how Vinh may neglect his girlfriend the way that Bac Nguyen did in Viet Nam, Bac Nguyen brings out his wife's jewelry, the only physical reminder of her: "long glittering rows of necklaces, bracelets, and earrings. See this? This is all I have of my wife" (99). After seeing that Vinh is determined to marry his girlfriend, Bac Nguyen makes a gift of one of his wife's necklace, reasoning that: "For one [necklace] to be shown off again, worn proudly on a young woman's neck as a symbol of this boy's love for her, that seemed appropriate" (99). Like the jade bracelet given by the shopkeeper in Kim's narrative, Bac Nguyen's gift is also a piece of jewelry and one that is imbued with the meaning of love, wife, and family. The act of giving reflects the intimate relationship in which Bac Nguyen views Vinh as his son, the act becoming a father's bequeathing something precious and meaningful to his son. Moreover, the gift is the act that introduces them to each other intimately. Only at the end of their meeting do Bac Nguyen and Vinh learn each other's names, thereby establishing a filial rapport between them. At the same time, the gift of jewelry and the exchange of names place Vinh in a position of debt towards Bac Nguyen, both for his filiation and his giving jewelry. Here, specifically, the gift refers to the debt of filiation and the promise of kinship, where Bac Nguyen only gives Vinh the necklace so that Vinh himself can build a family—win Kim's affections with the necklace and start a family with her. In this way, Bac

Nguyen attempts to recuperate his patrilineal line through Vinh, placing an obligation on Vinh through the form of the gift of the necklace. The gift—and consequent debt—closes the first half story and later is juxtaposed against the violence and hostility to come.

In the second half of “Visitors,” Vinh’s true motive behind meeting Bac Nguyen is revealed: he is scouting the gang’s next target for a home invasion. The act of kindness on the part of Vinh is now reread through the frame of hostility. He only helps the old man home to scope out the next house for the gang to break into. When prompted by his gang brothers, Vinh directs the Brookhurst 354 crew to Bac Nguyen’s house. Nonetheless, Vinh does it with some hesitation because the exchange of the gift and of affiliation between the two men. Vinh attempts to suppress these emotions of kinship and to dismiss them through an antagonistic rereading of Bac Nguyen’s welcome: “Senile old man. Why couldn’t he just shut up? Why did he have to talk so long, wasting Vinh’s time? And why did he stay to listen?” (102). Here, even before the break-in, Vinh already resents Bac Nguyen’s hospitality and begins to reframe Bac Nguyen’s recognition of Vinh as a threat.

In the actual home invasion, Vinh breaks in with other members of Brookhurst 354, and importantly, what is supposed to be a routine burglary ends up in violence. It begins as usual but soon falls apart when the inhabitants wake up and start a commotion. What would have been a silent theft becomes a violent home invasion: the boys beat up the son-in-law, subdue the daughter, and lock the children in a closet. These protests and struggle upstairs contrasts significantly with Vinh’s noiseless theft of Bac Nguyen’s fortune, money, and jewelry hidden under the bed in the downstairs bedroom. Regardless of the two differing thefts of noise and violence upstairs and silence and theft downstairs, the home invasion is one that is impersonal, where the boys take whatever of value they can find in the Vietnamese American house.

In the end, however, Vinh becomes extremely hostile and acts out even more violently than those of the gang because he is recognized by Bac Nguyen. After taking Bac Nguyen's money and savings, Vinh pauses and decides to take the box of jewelry that Bac Nguyen had shown him earlier. Vinh is about to leave the room, but Bac Nguyen wakes up and attempts to take back the jewelry box, to take back what remains of his wife. Vinh reacts with violence, swinging the box at Bac Nguyen and hitting him in the face. Only then, Bac Nguyen realizes who the thief is and calls out: "Vinh? Vinh, child, is that you? The voice was soft and frail, but in the cold night air, soared furiously through Vinh's ears, down his throat, nearly strangling his heart" (110). The calling out of Vinh's name stuns not only Vinh but his gang brothers, who "[stare] at Vinh in horror, disbelief, betrayal." Here, recognition and naming become rejection and betrayal rather than mutual acknowledgement and affiliation. On one hand, Bac Nguyen recognizes Vinh as thief and violent gang member, which thereby breaks down any previous filial affections. On the other hand, Vinh's being named in the criminal act betrays Vinh to the Brookhurst 354, revealing how Vinh had put Bac Nguyen's affection and gift of filiation over the gang's affiliation. The double betrayal in the speaking of Vinh's name results in Vinh's violent rejection of Bac Nguyen and rejection of any filial rapport with him. Vinh smacks the old man across the face, stomping on him when he is down, and declares: "You don't know my name. Kick. You don't know anything about me" (111). The violent outbreak signals the failure of recognition between Bac Nguyen and Vinh as a seemingly father son relationship but also between Vinh and his gang family.

Vinh's violence against Bac Nguyen is in stark contrast against their initial encounter, precisely because of Bac Nguyen's naming Vinh out loud. In the initial encounter, Vinh remains nameless until the very end of their meeting. Through this position of not being named or

identified, Vinh becomes the living specter of Anh for Bac Nguyen. Bac Nguyen imposes Anh onto Vinh, through his shadow and his demeanor. Even more, Bac Nguyen speaks to him on familiar and familial terms, especially when he gives his wife's necklace to Vinh. It is the imposition and manifestation of Bac Nguyen's loss on the person of Vinh and on the site of the United States. Yet, Vinh's taking the jewelry box during the home invasion breaks these imagined familiar and familial bonds; the failure of such bonds reiterates the loss as being placed on American soil. That Bac Nguyen calls Vinh by name results in Vinh's violent reaction and brutal rejection of any familiarity between them: "You don't know my name. Kick. You don't know anything about me" (111). The repetition of "you don't know" highlights the vicious breakdown of any possible knowledge, any possible relationship. Bac Nguyen, therefore, misreads their encounter, and the misrecognition of kinship illustrates the failure and the inability to create such bonds between the diasporic and Vietnamese American community.

Vinh's outbreak of violence against Bac Nguyen is not so much because of the material desire and economic gain from the robbery; more importantly, it is because of Vinh's personal desire for kinship and family, which is positioned through the figure of Kim. While Vinh openly and vehemently beats up Bac Nguyen and thereby rejects any affiliation proposed by Bac Nguyen and the Vietnamese American community, he desires instead to establish his own kinship through Kim, someone who is also like Vinh in being out of place in both the Vietnamese and American community. This marks the failure of the nation as well as that of the diasporic Vietnamese community to incorporate them precisely because of their marginalization as abandoned, unaccompanied refugee children and because of their criminalization as gang members and violent thieves of the Brookhurst 354 gang.

The marginalization of Vinh and these boys as well as Vinh's violent refusal of Bac Nguyen is tied to their criminalization as gang members. Examining *Little Saigon*, Nhi Lieu points to how Vietnamese refugee youth sought each other out precisely of their being rejected by both American and Vietnamese American communities: "Experiencing difficulty adjusting to American society, youth members of subsequent waves of Vietnamese refugees formed gangs that threatened their wealthier, more assimilated compatriots" (36). In a similar manner, Lisa Marie Cacho also brings up Southeast Asian gangs which are formed by refugee youth, stating that: "U.S. refugee policy with Southeast Asia [. . .] has long invested in disrupting familial ties. Both the 1980 Refugee Act and the 1987 Amerasian Homecoming Act enabled and facilitated the immigration of unaccompanied minors and families with absent fathers; these unaccompanied children were the ones imagined to be responsible for gang violence" (87). In both Lieu's and Cacho's observations, the unaccompanied refugee youth becomes part of a gang precisely because of rejection, by the breakdown of family and by American society.

The rejection of gang members is read by Cacho as a form of social death, where "permanently criminalized people are the groups to whom I refer as *ineligible for personhood*" (6, emphasis in the original). For Cacho, she insists that the permanent criminalization of gang members is required for the foundation of law, one that is "dependent on the *permanence* of certain groups' criminalization." Gang members constitute one of these permanently criminalized groups, and Cacho speaks of how criminalization marginalizes gang members to the point of being rendered ineligible and impossible for re/integration:

gang members, whether immigrants or U.S. citizens, cannot be recuperated into U.S. norms or according to 'American' values. They do not appear to make rational or normative choices. In fact, their choices do not make sense to most

law-abiding U.S. citizens and residents because gang crime has already been interpreted as senseless and unprovoked. Gang members are too unsympathetic, too irredeemable, and too unreadable. They are rendered illegible as victims and irrational as victimizers. (62-63)

Gang members therefore cannot be recuperated as they stand in opposition to American values and as they are rendered always misunderstood and misrecognized as well as ineligible and illegible. Furthermore, for Vietnamese and Southeast Asian gang members, they not only are positioned within the space of social death but also further marginalized because of their cultural difference: “With their cultural difference being represented as an obstacle to rational action, Southeast Asian gain agency only through assimilation, Americanization, and the unconditional acceptance of the U.S. ‘rule of law’” (88). Yet, assimilation, Americanization, and acceptance are impossible when Vietnamese gang members are deemed not recoverable, not rational, and not legible.

Using social death to read Vinh and the Brookhurst 354, I argue that “Visitors” speaks to the foreclosure of both familial and social integration, that these boys and gang members cannot be and can never be incorporated or integrated in either/both Vietnamese and American family and nation. As a consequence, their only form of kinship is through affiliation, specifically gang affiliation; they construct this form of alternative kinship precisely because they cannot be integrated into a Vietnamese American or an American family, as they are passed from one foster family to another and without a successful placement or permanent residence. Significantly, the form of alternative kinship becomes the very, even through alternative kinship formation because the very form of alternative kinship is one that criminalizes them.

Vinh himself and the gang's violent home invasion speak to the permanent criminalization and foreclosure of integration because the rejection of filiation occurs through violence and crime. The scene where Vinh beats up Bac Nguyen is not out of frustration or of being rejected by society; rather, Vinh acts out violently because Bac Nguyen's misrecognition, which lies not with Vinh's identity but with Vinh's position as a criminal. Bac Nguyen repeatedly calls out to Vinh but in an uncertain tone as marked by the question marks and asks him about his motivations: "What are you doing, child? [. . .] Vinh? Vinh, child, is that you? [. . .] Vinh? Why are you doing this? What would your parents say?" (110-111). Bac Nguyen's line of questioning reveals the uncertainty of his identification of and with Vinh and also highlights the breakdown of recognition and filiation previously built by their earlier conversation. Vinh's reply of "You don't know my name. Kick. You don't know anything about me" represents the complete breakdown of any mutual comprehension and recognition (111). Here, Bac Nguyen not only renders Vinh illegible, but moreover, Vinh renders himself illegible. Vinh's denial of Bac Nguyen's knowledge and refusal to be understood is both an act of resistance and an act of social death; Vinh is consequently "*ineligible for personhood*" (Cacho 6).

"The Visitors" therefore works through the breakdown of both family and nation, of the American and Vietnamese American community, and of filiation and gang affiliation. With the recourse to violence, the gang members are not only objects that refuse comprehension and legibility but also subjects who choose to be incomprehensible and illegible. Instead of the flexible strategies for resistance and accommodation proposed by Viet Thanh Nguyen, they are reacting violently to their ongoing experience of rejection in these illegible ways. While Cacho argues that the social death of gang members renders them "*ineligible for personhood*," perhaps

Vinh and the boys of Brookhurst 354 are enacting such illegibility precisely to critique the costs of eligibility, citizenship, and personhood. When Cacho states that eligibility for personhood is assimilation, Americanization, and unconditional acceptance, Vinh's violent refusal of Bac Nguyen can be read as an attempt to propose a different means for eligibility and legibility that does not belie racial, cultural, and refugee difference (88).

Importantly, Vinh and the Brookhurst 354 bring to light the criminalization of social death at the same time they complicate and repudiate the ways in which they would become eligible for personhood. In the ways they are ineligible for personhood speaks to the difficulties as well as the breakdown of the promise of hospitality in the form of family and refuge in the United States. The home invasion, the violent treatment of well-integrated Vietnamese Americans depicts the *hostipitality* of the guest, the visitor. And it is through the bad subject as thief and gang member that Vinh can pose critiques and be critical of the American dream rooted in charitable hospitality and law-abiding citizen.

### **The Many Social Deaths of the Rejected Adoptee, Gang Member, and the Vietnamese American Community**

In *Social Death*, Cacho points to the dangers of how “we point toward representations of contemporary gang members as evidence for the ways in which entire communities of color are criminalized and stereotyped, we may miss how the gang member, like the ‘illegal alien,’ is both an effect and an object of criminalization, not the ‘truth’ behind moments of misrecognition” (64). In this way, the gang members and their associates—here, Vinh and the Brookhurst 354 alongside Kim—stand in as examples of the bad subjects and the non-model minority precisely because they are refused and rejected from the American family and the American home and by



extension from American society and nation. Cacho warns of how gang members are used to criminalize and stereotype the community as a whole. While I do not want to reproduce this use of the gang member to stereotype the community, I want to take this up as an opportunity to move from this close reading of the failed adoptee and failed foster children and towards the Vietnamese refugee and Vietnamese American community.

In my reading of Aimee Phan's *We Should Never Meet*, I argue that Kim and Vinh proposes a politics of hostility precisely as a reaction to the ongoing violence of their reception and the failure of the United States' promise of rescue and salvation. Kim and Vinh are already doomed from the start. By taking these children as Operation Babylift babies or as unaccompanied minors and placing them in failed American adoptive families and failed foster families, the United States has already doomed their chances of forming ties with Vietnamese American families. This is the social death proposed by Orlando Patterson, whose definition is tied to how slaves experience social death because of their natal alienation: "I prefer the term 'natal alienation,' because it goes directly to the heart of what is critical in the slave's forced alienation, the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations" (7). While a different case, adoption is predicated on a similar kind of natal alienation. Jodi Kim takes up Patterson's social death to argue "that a particularly elided yet significant condition of possibility for transracial adoption is the conjoined 'social' death of the adoptee and the birth mother. The very production of the adoptee as a legal orphan, which severs the adoptee from any kinship ties and makes her an exceptional state subject, renders her the barest of social identities and strips her of her social personhood" (169). The adoptee as orphan and the unaccompanied minor as gang member are taken away from family and community ties in a way that alienates them, and the failure of adoption and foster care provides further alienation. Because of this social death,

the United States, by taking Operation Babylift babies and unaccompanied refugee minor and placing them into failed American adoptive and foster families, has already ruined their chances of forming ties with Vietnamese American families. This natal alienation is not only with their birth parents who are lost and unknown but extends to the Vietnamese American community.

The Vietnamese American community also cannot take in Kim and Vinh and others because, as refugees and immigrants, the Vietnamese Americans also experience the impossibility of recuperating family as well as the impossibility of American hospitality. Although not to the same degree, Vietnamese refugees are the figures on which the United States stages a recuperative “rescue-and-liberation narrative that erases the U.S. role in inducing the refugee crisis in the first place” (Espiritu 47). As such, the Vietnamese American community’s experiences of marginalization reveal the United States as a hostile host. The refugee experience also enacts a social death and results in natal alienation, where the “loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations” is specific to the Vietnamese American maternal and paternal figures in *We Should Never Meet* (Patterson 7). In Kim’s story, the Vietnamese American shopkeeper cannot have children because of her being older and because she foreclosed the possibility. Speaking with Kim, the Vietnamese woman reveals that she does not want to have children because she would not be a good mother:

What about children? [Kim asked]

[. . .] I don’t think so, she said. I never thought I would make a good mother.

[. . .] Me neither, Kim said.

Oh don’t say that, the woman said. You’re young. You don’t know yet.

When did you know?

The woman shrugged. I’m not sure. I think I always did. (Phan 43)

The shopkeeper therefore forecloses any possibility of family, believing herself to be a bad mother as well as rejecting Kim's desires for a maternal figure. In the end, the Vietnamese American woman is perhaps a bad mother, rejecting Kim as a possible daughter by affiliation. For Bac Nguyen, his alienation in the United States as a recent immigrant and as a visitor in his own daughter's home is one that is also compounded by the loss of his son. Bac Nguyen's arrival to the United States is already tainted by the American violence against his family. Because of the loss of his son Anh, Bac Nguyen seeks to reclaim a patrilineal line through Vinh by gifting him a necklace for his future, though impossible, bride. However, this recuperation of kinship is impossible, as Bac Nguyen has a foreboding feeling when Vinh first leaves: "As the boy walked away, a fuzziness settled into Bac Nguyen's head. The last time he remembered his sensation was when Anh left for the army. Bac Nguyen couldn't admit to himself, as he shook his son's hand for the last time, that he knew Anh was going to die. He certainly hoped that wasn't the same fate for this boy Vinh. Perhaps it was only loss, simple as that" (100). Bac Nguyen reads Anh onto Vinh and therefore claims Vinh as a kind of son; yet, it is a relationship that Bac Nguyen already feels a sense of loss. Bac Nguyen's claim of Vinh serves to increase Vinh's own alienation, and Vinh's final rejection of and beating up Bac Nguyen clearly spells out the impossibility of any affiliation or recuperation of kinship.

As a consequence, the failure of kinship in terms of adoption and foster care also results in the failure of affiliation with the Vietnamese American community. In both stories, Kim and Vinh are tempted by a possible relationship with Vietnamese American maternal and paternal figures; yet, Kim and Vinh violently reject them in ways that refuses this alternative kinship. In *We Should Never Meet*, Kim and Vinh act out violently and brutally at the extremes of being unable to be incorporated into a family as well as unable to be incorporated into American

society. In this way, they reveal the limits of American rescue and hospitality for both Operation Babylift orphans and Vietnamese refugees.

## CHAPTER 3

### A Dis(-)ease in the Family: Adoption, Difference, Affiliation by Affliction in Bharati Mukherjee's "Fathering" and Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth*

All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is  
unhappy in its own way.

– Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

All families were an invention. Some families were  
machines. Some were gardens, full of topiaries or  
overgrown with milkweeds. Others were Trojan horses or  
other inspired works of art.

– Monique Truong, *Bitter in the Mouth*

#### **Of All Families, Of the Adoptee**

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the family remains an impossibility, as it reflects the aporias of hospitality and of the gift; moreover, both Kim and Vinh of *We Should Never Meet* are repeatedly rejected from various families—the adoptive family, foster families, and the Vietnamese American community—precisely because of their positions rooted in social death and in hostility and gang violence. For this chapter, I reconsider the possibility of family and kinship formation by transracial and transnational adoptees as negotiations within the breakdown of the adoptive family. Such possibility is constructed through affective terms of happiness and its opposite unhappiness, as the famous opening line of *Anna Karenina* states: “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Beginning as such, Tolstoy’s masterpiece therefore documents the breakdown of familial ties and of marital ties of the titular protagonist and, in doing so, positions the uniqueness of the family who is “unhappy in its own way.” Importantly, Tolstoy finds unhappiness productive insofar as it makes families different, distinct, and unique from the same and expected happy families. There is something to

be said about unhappy families, and Tolstoy sees the opening line through with the story of the unhappy marriage and the unhappy family of Anna Karenina.

Almost echoing the English translation of *Anna Karenina*, the last chapter of Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth* begins with a statement regarding all families in terms of invention instead of affect: "All families were an invention" (265). Moreover, Truong positions invention as the universal condition of family and kinship and provides various objects of invention: machines, gardens, or works of art. With the revelation of the novel's first-person narrator Linda Hammerick's "true identity" as Linh-Dao Nguyen and therefore as a Vietnamese adoptee at the end of the first half of the novel, *Bitter in the Mouth* positions family not only in terms of invention but also in terms of the Trojan horse, a symbol of deception—"Others were Trojan horses." Truong therefore aligns the family, specifically the Hammericks, with one of Tolstoy's unique but unhappy families. Perhaps more significant is Truong's positioning the family as invention and thus constructed by other means than blood relations and biological birth and by affiliation. All families, whether happy or unhappy, now include those formed from biological and blood-relations alongside those formed through adoption and affiliation.

The notion of invention has long been tied to adoption as an alternative mode of family formation. Adoption scholar Toby Alice Volkman argues that the circulation of transracial children in transnational spaces produces "creative forms and new geographies of kinship" (19). More recently, Kim Park Nelson calls transnational adoption as the "new method of family building: transnational adoption on demand and without end" in her analysis of U.S. war reportage that promotes the "new globalized adoption industry" (1). The idea that transnational and transracial adoption allows for a new family formation speaks to Truong's notion that "all families were an invention" (265).

Precisely because of the inventive nature of adoption, I examine works that do not represent normative transnational and transracial adoption: Bharati Mukherjee's "Fathering" from the collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) and Monique Truong's novel *Bitter in the Mouth* (2010). Adoption in "Fathering" is one that is premised on biological adoption, where American Vietnam veteran Jason adopts his mixed-race daughter Eng, whose mother he abandoned Viet Nam when his tour was over. While a transnational adoption, Eng's adoption occurs precisely because of her biological ties to Jason. *Bitter in the Mouth* centers on the transracial adoption of Linh-Dao Nguyen, but it is not a transnational adoption. Despite Linh-Dao's Vietnamese background, she is adopted in the United States under the exigent circumstances of her parents' death in a fire rather than being saved from war-torn circumstances. As two exceptional representations of transnational and transracial adoption, they nevertheless enact similar trajectories with non-biological and transnational adoption of displacement and also address similar issues of loss and alterity. With the two exemplary cases of transnational and transracial adoption of Eng and Linh-Dao/Linda, they perform Volkman's "creative forms and new geographies of kinship."

Speaking of "creative forms," I turn back to Truong's invention of families. By way of "all families," Truong highlights how families are constructed, put together, and fashioned: We added to our selves—we built our machines, tended to our gardens, created our objets d'art." (265). Moreover, Truong provides examples of successful and unsuccessful invented families, reminiscent of Tolstoy's distinction between happy and unhappy families: "Some families were machines. Some were gardens, full of topiaries or overgrown with milkweeds. Others were Trojan horses or other inspired works of art. Sinister or a thing a beauty we often couldn't tell because we were too close." On one hand, the invented families can be beautifully manicured

“gardens, full of topiaries,” “inspired works of art,” and “a thing of beauty.” On the other hand, they can be gardens “overgrown with milkweeds,” “Trojan horses,” and “sinister.” While Tolstoy privileges unhappy families for their uniqueness, Truong does not seem to prefer one over the other. Nevertheless, she works through and distinguishes between successful families and unsuccessful ones when she includes the invention of families who are uncaring, threatening, and sinister.

These failed and unsuccessful families are located within the affective realm of unhappiness as well as uneasiness. Uneasiness is especially the condition for adoption because it is the act of welcoming the Other into one’s family and home; the construction of kinship is through affiliation rather than blood ties. Even more, transnational adoption heightens this uneasiness, as the adoptive hospitality is constructed towards the adoptee who is the racial Other. In particular, transracial adoption speaks to the example of the Trojan horse. The Trojan horse is a symbol of deception and of a covert threat. Presented as a gift horse to Troy, the Trojan horse is brought into the city and results in its destruction because it concealed Greek soldiers who invaded the city. For the transracial adoptee, the figure of the Trojan horse highlights the adoptive family’s expectation of an easy welcome at the same time they are confronted with the uneasiness and discomfort of the adoptee’s racial difference and alterity. The transracial adoptee is therefore positioned as always a guest because the adoptee is the racial Other. As such, transracial adoption is unhappy and unsuccessful because the adoptee’s racial difference cannot easily be manicured into topiaries without the adoptive family disavowing that very Otherness. I am not suggesting that the transracial adoptee is always a threat that will destroy the family; rather it is the idea that adoption is often an idealized form of hospitality and welcome that disregards issues and breakdown arising from difference and specifically racial difference. The



Trojan horse, I argue, reveals how racial difference threatens the invention of the family by the means of transracial adoption and how the affective realm of uneasiness brings to light the adoptive family's disavowal of the adoptee's difference against the adoptee's own negotiations with her alterity. Reading transracial adoption in Mukherjee's "Fathering" and Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth*, I focus on this distinct invention of the family that is premised on alterity and difference, and the two adoption narratives dramatizes the uneasiness and anxieties of this hospitality towards the Other.

As a consequence, I bring together Tolstoy's affective emphasis on the family and Truong's inventive formation of the family to read the transracial and transnational Vietnamese adoptee through the doubled valence of disease—the physical disease and the affective disease—that comes to represent the adoptee's embodied difference within the American family and American society. This reading builds upon the previous chapter's discussion of the breakdown of adoption through *hostipitality*, how hostility is always intertwined with and intrinsic to hospitality. Reading Bharati Mukherjee's short story "Fathering" and Monique Truong's novel *Bitter in the Mouth*, I use the notion of dis(-) ease as a way to discuss *hostipitality* within the American family and within the supposedly successful adoption of the Vietnamese girl: Eng by her American biological father and Linda/Linh-Dao by a Southern American family, respectively. These two adoption stories reveal how mutual hostility is the state of hospitality for host and guest precisely because of the embodied difference of the transnational adoptee. In both narratives, the Vietnamese transracial female adoptee embodies and is positioned within the space of difference not only in terms of racial difference but moreover in terms of illness or a neurological condition. The transracial adoptee encounters non-belonging and the discomfort of her own alterity. Consequently, I use the earlier, more

obscure meaning of *dis-ease* as “an absence of ease; uneasiness, discomfort; inconvenience, annoyance; disquiet, disturbance; trouble” and mark it as *dis-ease* as well as include the commonly-used *disease* as sickness and illness (“disease, n.,” *OED*). The double valence of *dis(-)ease* reflects the affective realm of kinship (all happy families and each unhappy family) as well as the inventive realm where transracial bodies are rendered Other and different in the construction of the American adoptive family and nation. With *disease*, the affective and unseen condition of *dis-ease* becomes embodied and manifested in the physical, where the female body is physically ill or suffers from a neurological condition and where the female body is the site for the guest’s otherness and undesirability.

With the notion of *dis(-)ease* and the valences of physical illness and uneasiness, I touch upon theories of affect and trauma that bring together bodies and bodily experiences to think through adoptees and their own bodies and bodily experiences as the racial Other. The often-fraught relationship between adoptee and adoptive parents and family is one that is “unhappy in its own way” and reveals how the affective can articulate distinctive experiences of difference and trauma. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth defines affect through the notion of encounter and in-betweenness in relation to the body:

Affect is in many ways synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter*. [. . .]

Affect is born in *in-between-ness* and resides as accumulative *beside-ness*. Affect can be understood then as a gradient of bodily capacity—supple incrementalism of ever-modulating force-relations—that rises and falls not only along various rhythms and modalities of encounter but also through the troughs and sieves of sensation and sensibility, an incrementalism that coincides with belonging to compartments of matter of virtually anything and every sort. [. . .] Affect marks a

body's *belonging* to a world of encounters or; a world's belonging to a body of encounters but also, in *non-belonging*, through all those far sadder (de)compositions of mutual in-compossibilities. Always there are ambiguous or 'mixed' encounters that impinge and extrude for worse and for better, but (most usually) in-between. (2)

Defining affect through the notion of encounter, Gregg and Seigworth draw attention to how affect relates to the body and how affect often arises from its non-/belonging. As such, my use of the double valence of dis(-)ease speaks to and works through Gregg and Seigworth's affect as forces of encounter and non-belonging, especially where dis-ease arises from the discomfort from the adoptee's alterity. Even more, dis(-)ease is centered on unhappy affect, as most adoptive families are "unhappy in their own ways." Critic Sianne Ngai focuses on the ugly feelings of affect, ones that are "marked by an ambivalence that will enable them to resist, on the one hand, their reduction to mere expressions of class *ressentiment*, and on the other, their counter-valorization as therapeutic 'solutions' to the problems they highlight and condense" (3). In particular, Ngai defines irritation as a "'superficial' affect—a conspicuously weak or inadequate form of anger, as well as an affect that bears an unusually close relationship to the body's surfaces or skin (35). With irritation, Ngai highlights how ugly feelings bring together affective emotion and embodied responses. Meera Atkinson and Michael Richardson draw upon these two conceptualizations of affect through their framework of traumatic affect, which is "understood as the mode, substance and dynamics of relation through which trauma is experienced, transmitted, conveyed, and represented. Traumatic affect crosses boundaries, between personal and political, text and body" (12). Atkinson and Richardson's traumatic affect brings trauma into how affect is experienced corporeally and relationally. For this chapter, my

use of dis(-)ease to read the exceptional adoption stories of “Fathering” and *Bitter in the Mouth* draws on these affective frameworks where the adoptee’s perpetual state of alterity gives rise to ugly feelings and to a state of uneasiness that marks their racial bodies as *not-belonging* in a world that privileges kinship and to traumatic affect produced by the very conditions of adoption.

The two narratives, “Fathering” and *Bitter in the Mouth*, brings together affect and the body in their exploration of embodied trauma and loss and in their critique of the spectral effects of American empire and the American family. Published as part of Bharati Mukherjee’s collection *The Middleman and Other Stories*, “Fathering” documents the adoption of Amerasian Eng by her biological father and Vietnam veteran Jason. The discourse of dis(-)ease comes out of Eng’s feverish state that comes to mark both the physical illness of a fever and her traumatic memory of violence and loss rooted in her deceased grandmother; furthermore, “Fathering” posits the dis(-)ease in medical terms with the tension between alternative/Eastern medicine and pharmaceutical/Western medicine. The opposing ways of treatment stand in for the different demands of hostility and assimilation and highlight Eng as the racial Other. For Truong’s novel *Bitter in the Mouth*, the difference is marked not so much in terms of embodied difference, when Linda’s identity as Linh the Vietnamese adoptee is kept secret and hidden, but much more in terms of the sense of uneasiness brought about by Linda’s lexical-gustatory synesthesia. With the later revelation of her Vietnamese heritage and past, Linda comes to stand in for the racial Other in the South and with her neurological condition as also representative of her racial difference and such experiences of dis-ease in Boiling Springs, North Carolina. Consequently, these two stories deal with the adoption of a Vietnamese child by an American family and furthermore, speaks to the very position of alterity and difference that the guest occupies in American hospitality.

Significantly, the breakdown of the adoptive family in “Fathering” and *Bitter in the Mouth* differs from the breakdown of American hospitality in *We Should Never Meet* because it comes not only from tensions and violence of racial difference but moreover from the negotiations and attempts to find ways to voice and work through such violence from discrimination, from loss and displacement, from ongoing trauma. The embodied and affective nature of difference allows for the discourse of the body and the medical to form alternative ways of voice and resistance precisely through its affective power, that disease can produce disease or that disease as the double of dis-ease tied to being the racial Other. Therefore, I close with an alternative form of kinship that is neither tied to Tolstoy’s model of affective family nor Truong’s invented kinship; rather, I propose the model of affiliation by affliction; the dis(-)ease as affliction can itself be the basis for a different and distinct form of family. This move away from kinship and the familial towards affiliation as partners for Jason and Eng and as synesthetes for Linda takes into account difference and alterity as well as allows for the interrogation and critique of American hospitality and multiculturalism in a supposedly post-racial world.

### **Self-Medication: The Work of Medicine and the Negotiation of Trauma in Bharati**

#### **Mukherjee’s “Fathering”**

In this first section, I turn to Bharati Mukherjee’s short story “Fathering,” published in the short story collection *The Middleman and Other Stories*. I purposely include South Asian American writer Bharati Mukherjee among Vietnamese diasporic women writers—Aimee Phan, Monique Truong, Angie Chau, and Linda Lê—because of her literary preoccupation with the Vietnam War. She often includes Vietnam War vets and more importantly, the Vietnamese refugee and adoptee characters throughout her oeuvre. In an earlier collection *Darkness* (1985),

“Saints” is about the friendship between Tran, a Vietnamese refugee, and Shawn, a follower of Indian mystic Ramakrishna Paramahansa. In *The Middleman and Other Stories*, Mukherjee includes two Vietnam veterans, Jason of “Fathering” and Jeb Marshall of “Loose Ends.”

“Fathering” importantly has the two sides of the Vietnam War: Jason, a Vietnam War vet and Eng, Jason’s Amerasian daughter. Eng is the first iteration of Mukherjee’s recurring figure of the Vietnamese adoptee the later iteration Du Thien appears in *Jasmine* (1989) who is adopted by Jasmine/Jane and Bud Ripplemayer in Iowa and later reunites with his Vietnamese sister in California.

Bharati Mukherjee has received critical acclaim and attention, and most critical works address her large body of writing by way of surveys on the major themes of immigration and negotiations of identity. While critical surveys of Mukherjee’s work are necessary given her large literary corpus, I propose a close, textual engagement and therefore focus on the short story “Fathering.” Most brief analyses of “Fathering” consider Mukherjee’s (de)construction of the family through Jason, Sharon, and Eng. Andrea Daska proposes that Mukherjee “challenges familiar concepts of family life in two ways: [. . .] she shows traditional American families to be exposed to social changes that threaten to collapse its expectations of rootedness and stability [and reconstitutes] new American families’ of hybrid origins in her writing [. . .]. The family thus comes to symbolize most acutely the cultural exchange between old and new Americans, and consequently the need for re-housing under changed circumstances” (114-115).

Examining American masculinity in Mukherjee’s immigrant narratives, Jennifer Drake positions the family in terms of Foucauldian genealogy and “the failure of fathering,” where “fathering understood through narratives of ownership, or kinship, kinship signifying something besides a few genes and a lot of violence in common” (77). Also speaking of family in biological terms,

Sherry Morton-Mello argues that Mukherjee “duplicates the sense of arbitrary benefit of such a bond that goes beyond shared DNA and dissonant cultures” (285). In my own in-depth engagement with “Fathering,” I draw from these analyses’ discussions of the family and notions of reconstituting the American family, American families’ hybrid origins, re-housment, and kinship.

However, I propose that Eng’s acceptance into Jason’s life and Jason and Sharon’s family is in fact an act of adoption despite Eng’s being biologically Jason’s child and despite how the adoption can be construed as the reunion between father and daughter. The disruption of the American family as formed by Jason and Sharon with the entrance of Eng is the disruption of the Other as guest into the hosts’ home as American family and nation. The framework of adoption reconsiders how the American family is formed by recalling the transnational military engagements that produces Amerasians and transracial adoption and by working through the breakdown of the family as a site for “new geographies of kinship.” Furthermore, I employ the double valence of the word dis(-)ease to allow for the representation of alterity and hostility and for Eng’s negotiations of her physical illness and psychic trauma.

Narrated in first person by American Vietnam War vet Jason, “Fathering” recounts his experience of adopting his own daughter into his American home. Eng is born from Jason’s sexual encounters with a Vietnamese bar girl during his military tour and is brought to the United States only because Jason’s partner Sharon had insisted on his looking for his child as a way for him to come to terms with his time in Viet Nam. Taking place over a single day, the short story explores how Jason negotiates the demands of his American common-law wife Sharon and his Amerasian daughter Eng. On one hand, Sharon complains about how Eng disrupted their

American life and how Eng manipulates Jason. On the other hand, Eng rejects Sharon and attempts to get Jason to care for her especially because she is ill. And Jason is caught in the middle: “I want to comfort Sharon, but my daughter with the wild, grieving pygmy face won’t let go of my hand” (121). The discourse surrounding the tension between Sharon and Eng is a medical and medicinal one, where both female characters suffer from psychological stress and trauma and where both seek out different treatments. To deal with the family situation, Sharon seeks out Dr. Stearns and ultimately gets sedated. Throughout the story, Eng suffers from a fever that makes manifest her psychological trauma stemming from psychic loss, which she attempts to heal herself by coining. In the end, Jason chooses Eng and flees with her from the doctor’s office, saving her from the enemy: “I jerk her away from our enemies. My Saigon kid and me: we’re a team” (122).

In “Fathering,” Eng embodies alterity and therefore is positioned as alien by way of transnational adoption and by way of Eng’s mixed-race body. Transnational adoption is the welcoming of the Other as guest; here, it is specifically the welcome of the Amerasian and Vietnamese Other into the American home and family. Eng, significantly, is not merely a complete stranger to Jason, as most transracial adoptees are to their American adoptive parents; rather, Eng is Amerasian, mixed-race, *lai*,<sup>8</sup> and thus the product of Jason’s sexual relations with a Vietnamese bar girl and by extension, the product of American military presence and intervention in Viet Nam. Moreover, Jason remembers this encounter specifically through the lens of the Vietnam War: “her mama [was] the honeyest-skinned bar girl with the tiniest feet in Saigon. I was an errand boy with the Combined Military Intelligence” (114-5). Unlike most narratives of adoption, such as Operation Babylift or Kim’s story in *We Should Never Meet*, where the adoptee is not related to the adoptive family, Eng’s adoption is one that is blood-

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<sup>8</sup> *Lai* is the Vietnamese term for mixed race; it is equivalent to the French *métis/se*.



related: Jason is her biological father, and Eng his biological daughter. Nevertheless, the blood kinship entails estrangement precisely because Jason leaves Viet Nam with no real knowledge of her, along with all his memories of his service in Viet Nam. Importantly, Eng's adoptive parents each have a singular identity and a singular nationality: Jason as a Vietnam Vet and both Jason and Sharon as Americans. In contrast, Eng is both Vietnamese and American at the same time she is neither wholly Vietnamese or American. In this way, Eng occupies an ambivalent space and furthermore, crosses over, traverses borders, and violates the singular identity of either Vietnam/ese and America/n. As such, I read Eng as an ambivalent figure that questions and complicates self and other, adoptive parent and adopted child, father and daughter. Her mixed-race status renders her not only Vietnamese but also American at the same time she is neither wholly Vietnamese or American; she is Vietnamese (-) American, Amerasian, *lai*.

Eng's liminal and ambivalent position renders apparent and comes to embody the doubled dis(-)ease of transnational adoption. Jennifer Drake highlights this absolute alterity, saying: "The child, Eng, is very sick and very unassimilated, unassimilable, crazy with post-traumatic stress syndrome and the violent stories she holds on to that are her genealogy, her narratives of coherence" (77-78). My reading draws from Drake's position but goes further to analyze the violence, the post-traumatic stress of war, displacement, and adoption in terms of Eng's body, her embodied experience of trauma, and the dis(-)ease of such. In "Fathering," Eng suffers physically from a fever and thus brings up the discourse of disease as physical ailment. At the same time, "Fathering" ties the physical illness with the psychic trauma of war and of transnational adoption through Eng's feverishness as well as through the discourse of medicine and self-medication. Dis(-)ease with regard to "Fathering" and to Eng herself is therefore both

physical and psychic, where the corporeal often points to the emotional and where the uneasiness often comes out of the bodily pain.

“Fathering” begins with Eng’s being sick with a fever, pointing to the biological and physical disease, which is employed to position her as Other and as guest to the adoptive though biological family. Importantly, when she first appears, Eng stands on the threshold of Jason and Sharon’s bedroom. The opposition between hosts and guest, adoptive parents and adoptee is heightened by their positions: Jason and Sharon are lying together in bed while Eng stands just inside the bedroom. Eng’s presence is also marked by her being ill. As Eng calls out to Jason to get his attention, he immediately diagnoses her and describes her unseemly state: “I know a sick little girl when I see one. [. . .] Eng’s got a high fever. Brownish stains stiffen the nap of her terry robe. Sour smells fill the bedroom. [. . .] The robe and hair are smelling something fierce. She doesn’t show any desire to cuddle. She must be sick. She must have thrown up all night” (114-115). Not only does Jason diagnosis Eng as being sick, but he also describes her in a way that situates her as the Other and outside the realm of the normal, health, good smelling person. What is important is how he is aware of how Eng’s sickly odors are filling the room. Her physical illness is coupled with the sense of uneasiness prompted by her “sour smells” filling their bedroom. Jason therefore highlights how the odors of Eng’s disease can effect uneasiness; that is, Eng’s physical ailments provokes an affective response from Jason and Sharon. For Jason, her condition evokes pity and the paternal desire to take care of his daughter, which reflects the larger history of American pity and salvation. However, Sharon reads Eng’s fever as a threat to Sharon’s relationship to Jason, therefore rendering Eng as the hostile guest, the inhospitable Other. On the threshold, Eng therefore an insider at the same time she is an outsider, defining the ambivalent position of adoptee: “Eng stands just inside our bedroom door,

her fidgety fist on the doorknob.” Eng “just inside” exemplifies her status as adoptee and as Jason’s biological mixed-race daughter. Eng “stands just inside” illustrates how she is considered as a part of the family as Jason’s biological daughter and as she is legally adopted; yet, Eng is not easily incorporated into the adoptive family and American nation, standing barely inside the room and therefore always a guest, the perpetual foreigner. Sharon, moreover, ascribes this outsider position to Eng moreover as an external threat, saying: ““For God’s sake leave us alone”” (114). Sharon’s hostile reception defines Eng’s being “just inside” as always just outside. She translates Eng and her fever as the threat of the Other, specifically towards her relationship to Jason because embodies the other woman, the Vietnamese bar girl with whom Jason has sexual relations and produced Eng. In this way, Eng’s disease is already tied to disease, the fever highlighting the uneasiness of Eng’s presence within Jason and Sharon’s household.

Not only specifically tied to Sharon’s uneasiness, Eng’s illness is moreover tied to and opens up the physical trauma as well as the psychic trauma of the Vietnam War and its attendant violence. While Eng herself has a fever, she enters into a feverish state. Here, I draw attention to how both the noun *fever* and its adjective form *feverish* work similarly to dis(-)ease by having the double valence of illness and affect. The noun *fever* denotes having an elevated body temperature caused by disease and “a state of intense nervous excitement, agitation, heat” (“fever, n.1,” *OED*). The adjective *feverish* denotes the state of having an elevated temperature and “excited, fitful, restless” (“feverish, adj.,” *OED*). Having a fever and in a feverish state, Eng relives the trauma of losing her grandmother:

Back upstairs I catch Eng in the middle of a dream or delirium. “They got Grandma!” she screams. She goes very rigid in the bed. [. . .]

“She bring me food,” Eng’s screaming. “She bring me food from the forest.  
They shoot Grandma! Bastards!”

I [Jason] don’t dare touch her. I don’t know how.

“You shoot my grandmother?” She whacks the air with her bony arms. (118)

It seems that Eng’s fever allows for her psychic trauma of witnessing her grandmother’s death at the hands of American soldiers to manifest, to emerge from denial or repression. Moreover, Eng identifies with her grandmother’s death, undergoing the trauma and reliving it in an embodied form where she screams out and lies “very rigid.” This affects Jason, as Eng’s feverish state produces a state of dis-ease where Jason cannot even approach his own daughter to comfort or soothe her in her illness: “I don’t dare touch her. I don’t know how.” For Eng, she voices the psychic violence in a way that highlights the corporeal violence towards her grandmother; this scene therefore positions trauma in both its physical and psychic natures and in doing so, speaks to the dual significance of dis(-)ease.

Significantly, Eng brings Jason into the narrative of her and her grandmother’s traumas; in doing so, she brings the violence that had taken place in Viet Nam into the space of the United States. In her fever/ish, Eng accesses and relives the trauma of losing her grandmother to American soldiers, going so far as to implicate her father in the act of the violence and as perpetrator of imperial war. This allegation of Jason’s participation recalls and highlights his responsibility for his military service in Viet Nam and his own denial. Eng’s direct address to Jason in her delirium—““You shoot my grandmother?”” (118)—places accountability on Jason for his military actions as well as his relations with a Vietnamese woman that produced Eng. She also calls for American accountability in the Vietnam War. Before Eng’s arrival, Jason does have not clear memories of his military service in Viet Nam and attempts to suppress it: “I was

an errand boy with the Combined Military Intelligence. I did the whole war on Dexedrine. Vietnam didn't happen, and I'd put it behind me in marriage and fatherhood and teaching high school. Ten years later came the screw-ups with the marriage, the job, women, and the works. Until Eng popped up in my life, I really believe it didn't happen" (114-115). Jason's memories of Viet Nam and the Vietnam War is blurred by his own drug use and moreover, by his own denial of such experiences in the pursuit of the all-American life. Through Eng's dis(-)ease, Jason is affected by Eng's feverish condition even if he cannot touch her ill body; the feverish affect manifests how the sense of dis(-)ease can be transferred and is therefore implicated in the imperial violence.

When Eng enters Jason's life as his biological and adoptive daughter—being recovered and brought to the United States, Eng, with her very physical presence along with her psychic trauma, is what finally conjures up Viet Nam as a lived reality for Jason. Drake reads "Fathering" as "the Vietnam War comes home to America" but refracts Eng's alterity upon Jason (76). Drake summarizes the story, saying: "In 'Fathering,' Jason decides to search for his Vietnamese daughter Eng. He hopes, believes, that materializing his experience in Vietnam by bringing Eng 'home' will heal him, make him stop living like it didn't happen, make him remember the Jason that Vietnam (America) murdered, transformed" (77). As the embodiment of the Vietnam War, Eng comes home to America and "undoes stories of the American family" precisely because she also comes home to Jason, her biological father (76). Jason, nevertheless, does not critically reflect on his past. Often, he reads onto Eng various recollections he has of his tour in Viet Nam without considering his own role. While the intrusion is not merely her physical presence, it is Eng's articulation of the American imperial violence in the Vietnam War within the space of the veteran's home, within his American family, and within the present of the

United States. Eng sees Jason as a representative of the American soldier and often addresses him as “soldier” rather than her father. She emphasizes his military role and, as a result, minimizes the paternal figure that would seem to reconcile such trauma through kinship and hospitality in the form of adoption. In doing so, Eng supplements his forgetting with the memory and reality of such trauma, war, and violence. Her body and in particular, her ill-stricken body becomes the (site of) traumatic experience for Jason.

On one hand, Eng embodies trauma for Jason as well as for herself; on the other hand, she also defines psychic trauma in terms of the physical, defining the dis(-)ease of war and violence in the form of scars. Scars represent the initial and lingering violence and trauma of American imperial war and its corporeal effects on the Vietnamese body. Eng speaks of her mother’s scar and explicitly connects this physical injury to the violence of war; she directly interrogates Jason, saying: ““You got any scars you haven’t show me yet? My mom had a big scar on one leg. Shrapnel. Boom boom. I got scars. See? I got lots of bruises”” (116-117). For Eng, scars mark the violence of war especially because her mother’s scar is from a bombing, an explicit injury from the Vietnam War. While her own scars are not from such military violence, they seem to be inherited from her mother because her diction ties her mother’s shrapnel wound to her own bruises. These welts further mark Eng’s mixed-race *lai* body as embodying the sexual violence towards Vietnamese women and their sexual encounters with American servicemen. The bruising is all over Eng’s arms; Jason describes them, saying: “Now I see the bruises, the small welts all along the insides of her arms. Some have been weeks old, they’re that yellow” (118). Significantly, Jason only sees the bruises after her feverish state where she relives her grandmother’s death. The appearance and therefore knowledge of such bruises are intimately tied to Eng’s psychic trauma. Despite the temporary bruising, they are in fact long-

term scars and therefore the externalization of such emotional pain. Unlike her mother's shrapnel scar, Eng's bruises are not directly caused by the war and by American military actions. Yet, they make manifest the prolonged consequences of the Vietnam War and the violence still present in its aftermath on the later and younger generation.

The numerous bruises represent Eng's ongoing attempts to cope with, handle, and even heal the psychic trauma. Dis-ease and disease are intimately tied and embodied in her body, especially when Eng attempts to heal herself through her version of coining. Eng's bruises—and Eng herself—bring into discussion how trauma is expressed through dis(-)ease and how trauma becomes embodied; trauma becomes manifest through the uneasiness afforded by illness and through the competing modes of medicine and treatment. The origins of Eng's bruises is only revealed to Jason—and to the reader—at the end of the short story: “She pulls her mitts off with her teeth, chucks the blanket, the robe, the pajamas to the floor; then, naked, hysterical, she presses the quarter I gave her deep into the soft flesh of her arm. She presses and presses that coin, turning it in nasty half circles until blood starts to pool under the skin” (122). This act of pressing coins on her skin is Eng's attempt to coin herself, a medicinal practice that she had observed with her now-deceased grandmother. As such, the bruises are the result of her attempts to heal her psychic trauma. Eng inflicts these bruises upon her own body in response to the traumatic experiences in Viet Nam and in retaliation to the United States and its violence, one that is represented by Western medicine and modern drugs and by the character of Sharon. In a sense, Eng bruises and scars herself to heal from the scarring of the psychic trauma. Ill and bruised, Eng is haunted by the Vietnam War in a very physical way; her body is the very space of trauma.

Eng's attempts to self-heal and to mark herself with coins in the "old way" and as the "money cure" are her interpretation of the traditional Vietnamese *cao gió* and more generally, Eastern medicine's practice of coining (122). The Vietnamese term *cao gió* literally means to scratch or to scrape the wind/air; coining or coin rubbing comes out of the belief that one's illness is caused by catching a bad wind and therefore needs to scratch the bad wind out: "It is believed that too much 'wind' in the blood is the cause of many illnesses, and coining will bring the blood to the surface by which a 'bad wind' can be released" (Zamani). When framed in terms of blood and winds and in terms of a harmony between body and natural forces, coining proposes an alternative medical discourse that departs from Western diagnosis and pharmaceutical medication. The practice of coining is used to alleviate minor illness and aches and pains; often it serves as a treatment in place of similar pain medications. A coin is rubbed predominately along the back, chest, and neck, leaving red marks and lines. Because these markings are very prominent and in appearance reminiscent of serious bruising, they are often misconstrued as signs of physical abuse. The California Childcare Health Program fact sheet highlights this misunderstanding of coining as a form of child abuse, saying: "Coining is one of these healing practices that may cause injuries or physical harm and your child care provider may mistake it as abuse and assume the child is in danger" (Zamani). The misreading of the coining's markings as ill-treatment, especially child abuse, positions coining and other alternative and complementary Eastern practices—by extension its practitioners and patients—as alien and illegible.

In terms of her self-treatment through coining, Eng is misunderstood and furthermore seems to be untreatable. Sharon is completely at a loss as to how to deal with Eng and furtively calls Dr. Kearns to inform him of Eng's bruises, as Jason overhears:



Downstairs I hear Sharon on the phone. She isn't talking flu viruses. She's talking social workers and shrinks. My girl isn't crazy; she's picked up a bug in school as might anyone else.

"The child's arms are covered in bruises," Sharon is saying. "Nothing major. They look like . . . well, they're sort of tiny circles and welts." There's nothing for a while. Then she says, "Christ! Jason can't do enough for her. That's not what I'm saying! What's happening to this country? You think we're perverts? What I'm saying is the girl's doing it to herself." (117)

Sharon's dialogue, even in its one-sided presentation, reveals how Eng's reason for and actions of coining herself remain incomprehensible to both Sharon and Dr. Kearns. She cannot fully articulate Eng's condition and can only approximate it by describing the bruises on Eng's arms. Dr. Kearns' unknown responses reflect the instinctive claim of abuse for any unknown bruising and the ignorance of any possibility for such bruising other than mistreatment illustrated by her defensive reactions. Sharon's rebuttal against the immediate assumption that Eng's bruises are the result of parental abuse stresses the incomprehensibility of alternative medicine and healing practices as well as the uneasiness of the situation, for Sharon as well as for Eng, who remains alien, foreign, and illegible. In fact, *JAMA's* article on coining and Vietnamese attitudes towards healthcare points to how the misreading of coining as abuse can alienate the Vietnamese immigrant and Vietnamese American populations: "The failure to include such practices as coin rubbing (cạo gió) [sic.] in the differential diagnosis of child abuse may lead to false accusation and continued alienation of ethnic groups from American medical care" (Yeatman and Dang 2748). This alienation is not only in terms of ignorance and misunderstanding but moreover in terms of the conflict between Western biomedical and Eastern/alternative/complementary

medicinal practices. When she rebuts Dr. Kearns' unfounded accusation of Jason's abuse with the fact that Eng is not lacking in anything and that "Jason can't do enough for her," Sharon recalls the notion of hospitality as a welcome that is contingent on gratitude and recognition of such charity (Mukherjee 117). Yet, Sharon herself cannot come to understand Eng's bruises and furthermore cannot come to terms with Eng's presence in her family and home. Sharon's incomprehension and Dr. Kearns' quick diagnosis of abuse both contribute to the alienation of Eng and to the dis-ease that arises from such illegible disease.

For Jason, he associates coining not to child abuse but to a kind of tribal, primitive practice that renders coining and Vietnamese medicinal practices perhaps even more illegible and inaccessible. In expressing his desire to care for Eng, Jason describes his encounter with coining saying: "If I could, I'd suck the virus right out of her. In the jungle, VC mamas used to do that. Some nights we'd steal right up to a hootch—just a few of us intense sons of bitches on some special mission—and the women would be at their mumbo jumbo. They'd be sticking coins and amulets into napalm burns" (116). An American soldier, Jason does not approach what he sees during the mission with cultural awareness and openness to alternative practices, especially when he comes across not Vietnamese women but "VC mamas." The description Jason provides reinforces a chauvinistic, reductive, and imperial understanding of the Vietnamese women as natives with bizarre and incomprehensible practices. Jason's use of "mumbo jumbo" expresses the inability to recognize and understand alternative practices and furthermore, renders such practices as nothing other than mere superstitions. It is significant that Jason and the "intense sons of bitches" are soldiers who intrude upon the practices and rituals of Vietnamese women. Belittling alternative and different ways to treat, heal, and cure injuries in the form of coining and amulets, Jason points to the American and Western military

interventions that in fact produce the napalm burns that afflict these Vietnamese women yet does nothing to provide medical support and accountability for such violence on civilian bodies. Like Sharon who refuses that Eng's bruises are the result of physical abuse, Jason refuses to acknowledge the physical abuse and hurt that the American imperial war inflicts upon Vietnamese bodies, through napalm, bombings, sexual violence, among others. This serves to maintain the illegibility of both coining and the violence on Vietnamese bodies, the denial of the dis(-)ease of war and attempts to heal through other ways than Western biomedicine.

It is with Sharon's call to Dr. Kearns that Eng's fever and dis(-)ease becomes even more framed within the discourse of medicine and the medicinal, specifically in the opposition of Eastern or complementary alternative treatments with Western pharmaceutical medicine. Jason, Sharon, and Dr. Kearns—the (presumed/assumed-White) Americans—attempt to treat and cure Eng's fever as well as Eng herself through drugs and pills. "Fathering" is in fact a story that highlights the various ways to heal Eng of her fever and by extension, her trauma.

Jason comes to represent the use of drugs as the prominent treatment in Western biomedicine. Not feeling well, Eng reaches out to Jason, and Jason ascertains that she is ill, saying: "I know a sick girl when I see one. [. . .] Eng's got a high fever" (114). Jason diagnoses Eng with an elevated temperature and therefore prescribes aspirin for his daughter. Significantly, Jason immediately thinks of aspirin to treat Eng just as he relied on Dexedrine to make it through his military tour in Viet Nam. Jason, moreover, subscribes to the notion that pills are also needed in the everyday civilian life, when he observes Sharon's psychological breakdown and recommends that "you need uppers to get through peace times, too" (116). Jason's reliance on drugs for himself and for others defines Western medicine as dependence on pharmaceutical drugs for both physical and psychological ailments.

Although reductive to characterize Western biomedicine as merely pharmaceutical drugs, “Fathering” insists on this definition, particularly through the character of Dr. Kearns and how he attempts to diagnose and treat dis(-)ease through drugs and sedation. Especially regarding Eng, Dr. Kearns becomes the central figure of Western medical treatment. Sharon seeks out Dr. Kearns help with Eng’s bruises, and Dr. Kearns himself later examines Eng and immediately wants to treat her with drugs. Dr. Kearns is a symbol of Western biomedicine, as indicated throughout the story by his medical title of doctor; furthermore, he himself heavily relies on drugs to treat both Sharon and Eng. Treating Eng, Dr. Kearns has her lay on the examination table but does not examine her at all; instead, he quickly goes to fetch some pills:

Then [Dr. Kearns] makes a sign to [Jason] to lay Eng on the examining table.

“We don’t look so bad,” he says to my daughter. Then he excuses himself and goes into a glass-walled cubicle. [. . .]

Dr. Kearns comes out of the cubicle balancing a sample bottle of pills or caplets on a flattened palm. [. . .] “Miraculous stuff, this,” he laughs. “But first we’ll stick our tongue out and say *ahh*. Come on, open wide.” (120-121)

Dr. Kearns does not examine Eng at all and yet immediately goes to drugs as the mode of treatment, pointing to an over-reliance on pharmaceutical drugs. Moreover, he cites the miraculous nature of drugs and thus reads pharmaceutical as an all-purpose remedy, one that can produce immediate effects and therefore cure to the fullest extent.

This notion of drugs as “miraculous stuff” also applies to the treatment of psychological issues and psychic trauma, particularly when Dr. Kearns sedates Sharon because of her increasing anxieties and her dis-ease towards Eng. Not physically ill like Eng, Sharon seeks out medical treatment from Dr. Kearns because of her affective state: she can no longer deal with the

uneasiness and threat she feels from Eng. Feeling antagonized by Eng's presence and reading her as a threat who is manipulating Jason, Sharon gets so worked up that Dr. Kearns sedates her in his office. Her treatment is psychological rather than physical, as Dr. Kearns describes: "Nothing to panic about. Nothing physical. [Sharon] came in for a consultation.' [. . .] 'She's a little exercised about a situation. I gave her a sedative'" (119). There is no physical ailment and no physical cause, as Dr. Kearns explicitly states, for Sharon's breakdown because her psychic trauma derives from having welcomed Eng into her family. Nonetheless, Sharon is treated by sedation and the use of drugs, which become the method of avoidance and denial rather than of healing and working through the trauma of Eng's adoption and her alterity. Sedation as a pharmaceutical treatment recalls Jason's preference for drugs to disregard and to gloss over whatever trauma he experiences in Viet Nam. With Dr. Kearns, drugs work for both physical illnesses, such as Eng's fever, and also for psychological anxieties, such as Sharon's breakdown.

However, such reliance on sedation and pharmaceutical drugs as treatment methods are not successful precisely because they can only treat symptoms of anxiety and dis-ease and do so without treating or fully addressing the psychic trauma itself. Even Sharon seems to acknowledge that addressing psychological trauma requires treatment beyond pharmaceuticals; she says that "aspirin isn't going to cure Eng" (117). On one hand, Sharon seems to acknowledge that Eng suffers from psychic trauma in addition to her fever. On the other hand, Sharon perhaps points to the impossibility of fully being cured of such psychological and emotional trauma. Specifically for Eng, her trauma comes from what she had witnessed and lived through in Viet Nam and through the act of adoption as a form of violent displacement. Eng's fever—her disease, her being physically ill and with a high temperature—seems to be the medium through which her psychic trauma—her dis-ease and traumatic experience of war and

displacement—can be manifest and articulated. Recalling the scene where Eng relives her grandmother’s death, this exemplifies how dis(-)ease comes together, with its affective and psychic uneasiness alongside its physical and feverish illness. For Eng, her psychic trauma comes out and is manifested through her physical ailment, and her body becomes the space for its possible treatment. Unlike Dr. Kearns’ use of sedation to treat—to avoid and to repress, rather—anxiety and psychological issues, Eng does not deny her trauma and seeks to treat it through coining. The bruises and welts are the result of Eng’s attempt to coin her own body. While coining is mostly used for the treatment of physical ailments, such as colds and fevers, Eng employs it to care for her psychic trauma.

The climax of “Fathering” is Eng’s explicit rejection of Dr. Kearns and Western medicine as sedation through her re-experiencing psychic trauma. With Dr. Kearns’ attempting to give her a shot of sedative, Eng violently refuses him and calls out to her grandmother, who stands in for an alternative treatment as well as trauma itself:

Eng opens her mouth real wide, then brings her teeth together, hard, on Dr. Kearns’s hand. She leaps erect on the examining table, tearing the disposable paper sheet with her toes. Her tiny, funny toes are doing a frantic dance. “Don’t let him touch me, Grandma!”

[. . .]

“Don’t let him touch me, Grandma!” Eng’s screaming now. She’s hopping on the table and screaming. “Kill him, Grandma! Get me out of here, Grandma!”

“Baby, it’s all right.” [Jason says.]

But she looks through me and the country doctor as though we aren’t here, as though we aren’t pulling at her to make her lie down.

“Lie back like a good girl,” Dr. Kearns commands.

But Eng is listening to other voices. She pulls her mitts off with her teeth, chucks the blanket, the robe, the pajamas to the floor; then, naked, hysterical, she presses the quarter I gave her deep into the soft flesh of her arm. She presses and presses that coin, turning it in nasty half circles until blood starts to pool under the skill. (121-122)

Eng is clear and adamant in her refusal of Western sedation and in her rejection of Dr. Kearns. Reminiscent of the previous feverish scene, she is in a state of delirium, in which she is again reliving her trauma. With her explicitly calling out to her grandmother for protection, Eng connects to her grandmother as a way to work through the trauma, especially if we consider her grandmother as the one who showed Eng the practice of coining. Eng’s violent act of biting down on Dr. Kearns hands is a clear and physical protest against the very hand that holds the syringe; this embodied act of refusal is moreover a protest against the denial of trauma.

Eng also explicitly expresses how she views coining as the better practice for healing over Western biomedicine in her shouts against Dr. Kearns, who comes at her with a syringe and with the intention of sedating her: ““Get the hell out, you bastard!’ Eng yells. ‘*Vamos!* Bang bang!’ She’s pointing her arm like a semiautomatic, taking out Sharon, then the doctor. My Rambo. ‘Old way is good way. Money cure is good cure. When they shoot my grandma, you think pills do her any good? You Yankees, please go home!’ She looks straight at me. ‘Scram, Yankee bastard!’” (122). Here, Eng names coining as the “old way” and the “money cure,” and in doing so, Eng opposes coining and voices her preference for and belief in the coining over Western medicine, the new way and the drug cure. Her vehemence directed against Dr. Kearns is specifically in terms of medicine while her antagonism against Jason is in terms of his being

an American and therefore a “Yankee bastard.” Consequently, Eng’s opposition to Western medicine actually speaks to the broader conflict of American intervention. Dr. Kearns is interfering in a family affair, where the adopted family is under crisis. And representative of American servicemen in Viet Nam, Jason importantly is Rambo, the figure of the stalwart American military savior. Eng can reject Dr. Kearns’ and Jason’s advances in both medical and military terms, “pointing her arm like a semiautomatic.” As such, Jason’s description of Eng as his Rambo pulls her into the realm of war and conflict, significantly in a way that opposes American military intervention as well as American/Western medical practices of sedation and pharmaceuticals. Eng’s rejection of Western medicine and her practice of coining are in fact an attempt to address, confront, and work through the trauma of the Vietnam War, of her displacement, and of her dis(-)ease within adoption.

Importantly, Eng’s attempts to coin herself do not heal Eng of her trauma or of her fever. Eng cannot fully perform coining on herself, as coining usually is applied on a body by another person. However, without her grandmother and in the United States without anyone to coin her, Eng does it on herself in the only way that she can: she pushes the coin into her skin, producing bruises. This then has no real medicinal effect other than welts. While Eng relies on Eastern alternative medicine, it too cannot heal her of her traumas. Jason seems to understand the impossibility of a cure for such psychic and psychological issues, saying: “Something incurable is happening to my women” (122). Jason importantly positions not only Eng as incurable but also Sharon, thus acknowledging the difficulty of easily overcoming trauma rooted in war and in the breakdown of the adoptive family as well as the gendered violence of trauma and war. The failure of coining is nevertheless productive because of Eng’s attempts to work through psychic trauma. For such irrevocable trauma from war, abandonment, displacement, and the rupture of



the American adoptive family, there cannot be an instantaneous cure or easy healing, and Eng depicts the work and the effect of such working on psychic trauma through the bruises inflicted on her own body.

Ultimately, “Fathering” does not culminate in anyone’s being cured of their physical ailments or of their psychic traumas; it also does not culminate in the restoration of a happy (adoptive) family. Nonetheless, Jason ends “Fathering” with a seemingly happy ending: “Then, as in fairy tales, I know what has to be done. ‘Coming, pardner!’ I whisper. ‘I got no end of coins.’ I jiggle the change in my pocket. I jerk her away from our enemies. My Saigon kid and me: we’re a team. In five minutes we’ll be safely away in the cold chariot of our van” (122). Calling for the fairy tale’s happy ending, Jason sees his rescue of Eng from the hands of Dr. Kearns and “away from our enemies” as a heroic act. Jason swoops down to intervene, scoops the helpless Eng, and makes the getaway. This happy end, Drake proposes, is rooted in a story of violence that is the only coherent story that they can access: “Jason takes the leap into the violence of fairy tales and their shared history, because he has no access to other scripts that allow for difference-that-can’t-be-grasped, and, simultaneously, intimacy as strong as family [ . . . ]. This is where the story ends for Jason and Eng: mutual dislocation, in between-selves and countries, but not assimilated, clinging to the one coherent story they share” (78-79). To end with the “one coherent story” Eng and Jason share is to highlight the violence that enables and produces Jason and Eng as a transnational family as well as the violence of the Vietnam War, one with enemies and Rambo, as the context in which Eng is formed and reacts to in the aftermath. Like Drake, I read Jason’s siding with his daughter, determinedly an act of a father’s love, as problematic because it reproduces American military intervention through money and soldiers, continuing American imperial war in neoliberal times. Jason seems to bribe Eng with

coins and with the promise of Eng's being able to heal herself through his "no end of coins." However, Jason never fully comprehends Eng's trauma and her recourse to coining along with the actual practice of coining itself. In this way, Eng still cannot heal herself properly. For Drake, the story's ending recalls a fairy tale's happy ending, therefore underlining the potential and the violence of another dream, the American Dream; she says: "Despite [the American Dream's] actual failures, this is its transformative power, and Mukherjee's work engages this most generous aspect. In her stories, hope's transformative violence—a gritty lap toward 'freedom'—dialogues with the false hope offered by an American Dream premised on white supremacy and disseminated by global capitalism's exploitations" (61-62). Drake's generous reading of the American Dream does not ignore its problematic "false hope," as she highlights racism and neoliberal exploitation.

What is most significant in this flawed happy ending is Jason's new vision of Eng and him as "pardners" and as a team. In calling to Eng with coins, Jason recalls the practice of coining and therefore seems to be open towards an alternative, some means other than Dr. Kearns' pills and sedation as a possibility of treating trauma. Moreover, Jason's appeal to Eng is in a small part his recognition and acknowledgement of the dis(-)ease embodied in Eng, the physical and psychic trauma of the Vietnam War. The end of "Fathering" is the moment of not full reconciliation but perhaps a coming together or the moving closer together of Jason and Eng and of their own traumas of the Vietnam War. In this way, they suggest a different construction of filiation that is an affiliation by affliction because of how their biological and adoptive relationship brings together their own personal traumas of the Vietnam War in its aftermath. The failure of healing yet points to the endurance of trauma and how perhaps healing and cures may not be necessarily the best approach, as Eng declares: "I want to be a ghost. I don't want to get

better” (121). The failure of “Fathering” in terms of Eng’s adoption, Jason’s fathering, Sharon’s inability to cope, Eng’s reliving trauma, all these failures may signal the potential for dis(-)ease, that the uneasiness of difference and the scars of violence may be in of themselves possibilities for imagining otherwise and for relating otherwise through affiliation by affliction.

**Bitterness and Taste, Disdain and Difference: Synesthesia and Racial Difference as Dis-ease in Monique Truong’s *Bitter in the Mouth***

In Monique Truong’s novel *Bitter in the Mouth*, the narrative of dis(-)ease shifts from the outwardly hostile and violent relationship between the American family and the Vietnamese adoptee in Mukherjee’s “Fathering” to a more subtle examination of racial difference and otherness rooted in the adoptee condition. Truong’s second novel is a reflective, coming-of-age story of Linda Hammerick, who narrates her story in first-person. On the surface, the novel is a memoir and *bildungsroman* from the point of view of Linda’s looking back onto her childhood in the American South of Boiling Springs, North Carolina, during the 1970s-80s. Linda reflects on the everyday moments of her childhood, on her trauma of being raped by a family friend and on her various relationships with her beloved great uncle Harper, her best friend Kelly, and her adoptive mother DeAnne. Nevertheless, from the beginning, Linda’s story is marked as different precisely because she has a neurological condition: lexical-gustatory synesthesia, where the speaking and hearing of words produce and stimulate various tastes. For Linda, each word she speaks or hears bears a specific taste, a certain flavor, and she describes these moments as “incomings.” For example, when Linda hears her name spoken, she tastes it as mint; the novel marks these incomings as “Lindamint.” As such, Linda’s distinct experience is grounded in both

the word and its synesthetic incoming and importantly, rooted within an internal experience of difference.

With the revelation that Linda Hammerick is in fact the Vietnamese adoptee Linh-Dao Nguyen, Linda as Linh-Dao and her internal(ized) difference become refracted and manifested as physical racial appearance and ethnic difference, which is expounded by her White adoptive family and the predominately White American South community. Because the novel does not disclose Linda's Vietnamese identity and her adoptee status until the very end of the first part of the novel, Linda's otherness, I argue, is strategically displaced and transposed to her unseen, intangible neurological condition. The difference of synesthesia, nevertheless, is connected to the racial and adoptee difference. Linda's condition often renders her interaction with others difficult because hearing certain words that conjure up bitter, foul incomings make her feel ill. These distasteful encounters are later heightened when Linda's difference is physically presented as the Vietnamese adoptee within a Southern and White community. Consequently, Linda's adoptee status and her synesthetic condition come together through dis(-)ease. The uneasiness of Linda's racial difference and Linda's uncomfortable incomings highlight the difficult position of the transracial Vietnamese adoptee. *Bitter in the Mouth* therefore approaches dis(-)ease and adoption in a different way from Mukherjee's "Fathering" manner of highlighting racial difference alongside medical difference. Furthermore, the shift from a color-blind narration via Linda's synesthetic experience to one that is colored by Linda's Vietnamese background and adoptee/outsider status, I argue, allows for a critical approach to adoption that is not solely based on race. As a result, adoption becomes the form of reading and understanding Linda's complex negotiations of belonging and difference, of self and otherness within the family and without in the American society. These negotiations moreover are conducted not only through race but also

through modes of kinship, history, and the physical experiences of the body that arise from her experiences of dis(-)ease.

The first difference Linda presents is of her internal as well as internalized difference through her framing her synesthesia as a secret. As she does not know the name of her condition as synesthesia let alone know that there are others who have variations of the neurological condition, Linda considers her experience of words as tastes as something that is singular and abnormal. Therefore, she keeps it as a secret: “My first memory was a taste. For most of my life I have carried this fact with me not as a mystery, which it still is, but as a secret” (15). The notion of secret goes hand in hand with Linda’s defining her gustatory experiences of words as incomings; both of Linda’s choice of “secret” and “incoming” highlight the interiority of Linda’s experiences as well as how she understands herself to be different from her family and from others, precisely because they cannot understand or experience these incomings as Linda does. Michele Janette raises this notion of synesthesia as Linda’s “secret sense,” saying: “Truong thus characterizes synesthesia as not a disease or disability but as a nondominant mode of experiencing the world, one kept secret not because it impairs but because it is likely to be misunderstood” (158). While I use the notion of dis(-)ease to characterize Linda’s experience, I do agree with Janette that synesthesia is not a disease or disability; my use of disease is to bring to light the physical experience of difference and uneasiness that synesthesia as well as Linda’s adoptee and Vietnamese status provides. For Linda, the synesthetic experience of the world seems to be on a personal and individual level, rather than a systemic difference, such as race, cultural or ethnic difference. As the reader has yet to learn of Linda’s Vietnamese identity and therefore, her racial and ethnic difference, Linda seems only to have a secret and remains very

much part of her albeit-fraught family and part of her all-American community of Boiling Springs, North Carolina. This secrecy of her synesthetic condition goes hand in hand with her adoptee status to be revealed later and speaks to how Linda works through and comes to terms with her life-long experiences of dis(-)ease.

Despite synesthesia being a personal, interior condition, I draw attention to the degree to which Linda is marked as different because of her very distinct circumstances with synesthesia. As synesthesia is a neurological language-processing condition, she experiences language through taste; each word spoken or heard bears a specific and unique flavor, evoking a range of different foods and flavors. This condition leads to interesting often fraught interactions on Linda's part. Her first memory is of a bitter taste in the mouth and therefore an unpleasant experience at the very moment of trauma and loss; I will read this moment more closely further on. Her synesthesia often results in mixed experiences, such as when she actually enjoys the DeAnne's reprimands because of their evoking pleasant incomings in contrast to the taste of the failed casseroles: "*Stop being selfish! Why are you selfish? Selfish children don't go to Heaven! No dessert for the selfish!* [ . . . ] The word "selfish" brought with it the taste of end-of-the-summer corn on the cob. Not the kernels but the juice at the honeycombed core after everything has been gnawed away" (34). Here, DeAnne's attempt to scold her daughter results in a tasty and delectable experience for Linda. Janette reads Linda's synesthesia as a palimpsest, saying: "Synesthesia is literally palimpsestic condition, layering conventional discrete senses into a composite sensory experience, in this case, simultaneously hearing and tasting. Beyond the sensorial literal, Linda's synesthesia also creates an experimental palimpsest that folds present and past. The sound of a word spoken in the present tense carries the taste of something Linda has previously eaten" (157). Because of this palimpsestic experience, Linda processes specific

incidents through a layering of senses, rather than the straightforward experience of language comprehension. Moreover, the palimpsest can also configure trauma for the adoptee in the layering one dimension of trauma as coming from the past that is rooted in loss and another as coming from her being adopted in the present. As such, Linda's engagement with language is through the incongruity and contradiction of signifier, signified, and incoming/taste, as Linda explains: "Many of the words that I heard or had to say aloud brought with them a taste—unique, consistent, and most often unrelated to the meaning of the word that had sent the taste rolling in my mouth" (Truong 21). It is the incongruity of a word's meaning and the taste of its incoming that produces the state of dis-ease, where Linda's uneasiness arises from the contradiction of and the incongruent experience of language as the signified becomes entangled with two different registers of signifiers—the signifier as word itself and the signifier as the synesthetic incomings. Linda is often uneasy because her experience of language is not only supplemented by but moreover disrupted by the incoming tastes, thereby provoking Linda to behave in ways not appropriate to the words being said, the conversations being had.

As such, Linda's condition often overwhelms her and renders her unable to properly respond and thus outwardly positions her as different through her behavior towards her incomings rather than through her physical difference. She brings up how her experience of incomings at school disrupts her concentration and therefore affects how others perceive her as a failure when she in fact is a capable student. Often Linda cannot focus precisely because her incomings interrupt her concentration and often keep her from effectively participating. She describes one incident, saying: "When my teacher asked, 'Linda, where did the English first settle in North Carolina?' the question would come to me as 'Linda *mint*, where did the English *maraschino cherry* first *Pepto-Bismol* settle *mustard* in North *cheddar cheese*

*Carolinacannedpeas?* My response, when I could finally say it, I experienced as ‘Roanoke Islandbacon’” (21). The experience is so overwhelming for Linda because the incomings occur almost with every word and because the clashing flavors are keenly felt. Therefore, the incomings render her almost physically unable to reply so much so that she hesitates before she could actually respond to the question. To this end, Linda’s interior condition becomes externalized in two ways: her synesthesia becomes literal flavors that she physically tastes and therefore reacts to, and her reactions are then read as her inability to focus. The latter is recognized and experienced by others; her teachers take note of Linda’s condition but misunderstand it and thus read it in a negative light: “On my report cards, my teachers conveyed this undetected fact to my parents as ‘your daughter’s unwillingness to pay attention in class.’” Her teachers can only observe her hesitation as unwillingness to engage in class precisely because her condition is neurological and therefore internal. Linda explains further, saying: “Throughout grade school and middle school, I had been a C student. Standardized test scores, however, showed that my reading comprehension skills were well above average. My math scores were also consistently high. The problem was my inability to concentrate in class” (20-21). Her class grades were average, reflecting her teachers’ interpretation of her overwhelming incomings, while her test scores were much higher because she does not have to deal with incomings from spoken words. The synesthesia furthermore marks Linda as less intelligent and inattentive, and this discrepancy of her intelligence makes apparent and renders physical the disease of her difference. Through this example of school and education, her neurological condition and internal experience of difference becomes manifest to mark her as different and Other.

This incongruity to synesthesia’s incomings foreshadows and later points directly the incongruity of Linda’s physical appearance and her attempts to suppress her difference as the



Vietnamese adoptee Other. At this early part of the novel, Linda's racial and ethnic identity has not been revealed and therefore is being contained in the way that Linda attempts to control her "incomings." Because the overwhelming nature of her incomings and because they disrupt her daily life at home and especially at school, Linda attempts to suppress her synesthesia: "I knew that I would never become an A student unless I could stop, or at least minimize, what I called the 'incomings'" (21). With the help of her best friend Kelly, Linda experiments with various strong-tasting products in the attempt to reduce the intense incomings. This speaks to her attempts to render her outward perception to coincide with her actual intelligence; her neurological condition, while internal and not physically expressed, affects others' perception of Linda. While she attempts to reduce the synesthetic experience to transform herself into an A student, she is in fact attempting to reduce the dis-ease—the uneasiness that she personally feels as well as the concern her parents and teachers have towards her—and assimilate into the good student—and with knowledge of her adoptee status, into the good daughter and the grateful adoptee. Linda attempts to suppress the incomings with equally strong and intense flavors; she tries strong-tasting gum and candy, such as Big Reds or Tic Tacs, but to no avail (21). As a final recourse, Linda turns to tobacco, which successfully overpowers the incomings. Significantly, Linda associates tobacco with a variety of tastes that renders it capable of numbing her incomings: "The taste of tobacco—a mouthful of earth, damp and just plowed; dried leaves and apple peels; the kick of turpentine; and the surprise ending of honey—was overpowering every one of the incomings" (22). While successful, Linda's first trials with chewing tobacco affect her physically; she vomits then is "sick to my stomach and light-headed" (21). She later decides on cigarettes as a more manageable way to stifle her synesthesia. Nevertheless, these attempts bring to the light the physical suffering as well as the emotional burden as ways of trying to mask

Linda's difference as a synesthete, thereby echoing such effort in an adoptee's attempt to fit into her adoptive family and to assimilate into American society. Here, Linda locates it in the expectation of being an A student. Suppression of her synesthetic experience is thus Linda's act of assimilation, of fitting in, of concealing her difference and alterity.

Linda, nonetheless, subverts her attempts to fit in with the revelation of her Vietnamese and adoptee identity. This revelation of her "true" identity occurs at her college graduation from Yale. As she goes up to receive her diploma, she hears her name called out: "Linh-Dao Nguyen Hammerick *DrPepper*, summa cum laude, *Literatureroastbeef*" (158). The moment of the reveal occurs at her graduation, significantly marking how Linda overcomes the difficulties of her incomings and how she is able to improve herself from the high school C student to an Ivy League graduate with the highest honors. Even more is the actual revelation of Linda's full name and also her identity as Vietnamese American: Linh-Dao Nguyen and Hammerick. Significantly, Linda's identity in terms of her name is predominately Vietnamese while her American adoptee status is marked only by the second last name Hammerick. Linda as her own name that dominates the narrative is not present; rather, it is absent from her official and full name. This speaks to the pressures for an immigrant and adoptee to assimilate so much that one's given name is elided and passed over in favor of an American version, here Linda over Linh-Dao. The disclosure of Linda's name also importantly divides the narrative in two: formally, in terms of the first half "Confession / ... August 3, 1998" and the second "Revelation / August 4, 1998 ..." but also thematically, in terms of incomings as difference then race and adoptee difference.

Knowledge of Linda's Vietnamese name and origins therefore reorients the first half of the novel that represents the dis(-)ease arising from her synesthesia; she addresses her racial difference explicitly in the rest of the novel and thus raises issues with transracial adoption within the United States. Following the revelation of her Vietnamese background and therefore of her adoptee status, Linda discusses openly her experiences as the racial Other and as the Vietnamese adoptee in all-American South of Boiling Springs, North Carolina. Her physical difference is experienced by others as a willed blindness; she explains that the white community participated in a colorblindness, one that works alongside a weak multiculturalism that Kim Park Nelson defines as acknowledging race only to ignore and deny racial difference:

They vowed to make themselves color-blind on my behalf. That didn't happen. What did happen was that I became a blind spot in their otherwise 20-20 field of vision. They heard my voice—it helped that I came to them already speaking English with a southern accent [. . .]—but they learned never to see me. It was an act of selective blindness that was meant to protect me from them, or perhaps it was the other way around. (Truong 170-171)

That Linda is experienced as a blind spot in the Boiling Springs White community's 20-20 vision highlights how Linda is not only rendered different but moreover ambivalently positioned as an Asian Other in the White and Black divide of the American South and as a Vietnamese adoptee in America. While Linda's synesthesia gives rise to internal feelings of uneasiness among classmates and her family who are not synesthetes, Linda expresses here the sense of dis-ease that is felt both internally and externally. For Linda, the dis(-)ease comes out of the combined difference and uneasiness from synesthesia, her racial difference, and her transracial adoptee status defines as the exceptional Other.

Many critics read *Bitter in the Mouth* as a novel of the American South; they claim that Truong provides a particular representation and critique of the U.S. and its racial politics. In *Possessing the Past*, Lisa Hinrichsen reads the novel as part of the “post-plantation multicultural imagination” that participates in how “the region’s traditional biracialism is dissolving” and provides “the South as a site from which to critique national fantasies of exceptionalism and innocence and to test out the possibility of multiracial and multiethnic coalitions” (159). Hinrichsen further argues that Linda’s synesthesia and racial difference confront the white American South, saying: “In the small community of Boiling Springs, which stands in for the South as a whole, the uniformity of taste, race, and historical narrative are challenged and dismantled by Linda’s particular mode of sensing and feeling the world” (196-197). Justin Mellette draws a correspondence between the American South and South Viet Nam (the Republic of Viet Nam), contending that “Truong asks readers to consider a more modern idea of a South that is not limited to the borders (and binaries) of the former Confederate states” (124). Moreover, Mellette reads Linda’s full name as “forcing us to consider how Linda’s racial identity functions in a novel already replete with explorations of marginalized social groups in the South.” His assertion of a modern notion of a South therefore highlights Linda’s difference within her synesthesia and her Vietnamese origins/name. While Hinrichsen and Mellette consider the critique of the South, Denise Cruz considers the South within a framework of the regional “as a literary tradition, geographic imaginary, and critical practice” and thus proposes that “Truong’s regionalist literary strategies—which center first on taste instead of sight, and second, on an overlay of queer, global, and rural imaginaries—resist the dominant structures of racial visibility and heteronormative affiliations that have determined the terms of national belonging in the US and in Asian America” (718). Cruz attends to the “regionalism through

taste” that informs Linda’s synesthesia to “initially [read] like a Southern shopping list,” and “it is with this connection that Truong’s word-taste pairings call attention to the failed dynamic of the visual and national as the normative method for describing and writing about race” (722, 723). Focusing on a productive notion of ugliness and failure, Monica Carol Miller reads Linda’s racial and physical difference as part of an “ubiquity of ugly female characters in this [Southern] fiction calls into question what southern scholar W.J. Cash termed ‘gyneolatry,’ the worship of the beautiful white woman upon which so much of retrogressive southern ideology has been based” (qtd. 86; 1). Miller thus argues that Linda is perceived not only as different but more importantly as invisible: “Linda’s physical difference does not have a place in the upwardly aspiring world of her family’s white society and therefore she becomes invisible” (116). These critiques attend to the dis-ease that arises from the Asian American body within the American South and therefore provide needed interventions into racial critiques that go beyond the white and black binary of the South and larger U.S. debates on race and inclusion. Nevertheless, they often push aside the importance of adoption with Linda’s placement in an American white family and into the Boiling Springs community. Adoption and Linda’s adoptee status would provide, I contend, a further insight into her negotiations of race and difference in the American South.

While indeed seen as racially different, Linda importantly is both a Vietnamese girl in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, and a Vietnamese adoptee in the Hammerick family. Linda’s status as a transracial adoptee further engenders her alterity and difference. Especially when she seems to be the only Asian Other in Boiling Springs, she does not have a Vietnamese or Asian American community in the South to support her. Because of her adoptive upbringing within a White Southern family, Linda is in the precarious position: she appears as Asian but is culturally White. With the dis-ease of the situation, Linda reveals the contradictory nature of American

multiculturalism that proclaims the hospitable acceptance of race at the same time it perpetuates hostility and discrimination.

In *Invisible Asians*, adoption scholar Kim Park Nelson explores the multiple contexts of Korean American adoption “as a social phenomenon that reflects the evolution of American race relations; [. . .] as a bellwether of increasing economic and cultural globalization; and as a foundation of a worldwide community of people deeply touched by personal experiences of adoption” (11). In particular, Park Nelson uses oral histories from adult Minnesotan Korean adoptees to “[highlight] ways this population is failed by popular forms of multiculturalism that celebrate diversity [and how they] worked through the complicated process of identity formation in an environment of weak liberal multiculturalism, and identities that emerged incorporated critiques of multiculturalist ideologies, critiques that celebrated adoptees’ difference but did not protect them from overt anti-Asian racism or the effects of racial isolation in a state that remains overwhelmingly white” (13-14). Park Nelson critiques multiculturalism because of its failure to address racial discrimination despite its celebration of diversity:

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, with the growing popularity of a particular form of multiculturalism that “celebrated difference” without directly addressing racial injustice, transnational adoption came to be celebrated as a form of family building that exemplified the colorblind and inclusionary values of social liberalism. The experiences of Minnesota Korean adoptees reveal that this form of multiculturalism failed to protect them from racism and racial isolation. (92)

Part of the discourse of humanitarian charity during the Cold War, transnational adoption of Korean orphans and children therefore became the epitome of this “particular form of multiculturalism that ‘celebrated difference’” that Park Nelson refers to as “weak

multiculturalism”: “The weak multiculturalism that became popular in the 1980s attempted to celebrate difference without acknowledging or attempting to reconcile racist American national histories and policy” (100). With her study’s population of adult Minnesotan adoptees, Park Nelson comments on how notions of multiculturalism minimize adoptees’ experiences of racism to effect a colorblindness that disregards such acts of discrimination:

Because popular multiculturalism and its celebration of difference in the 1970s and 1980s had no remedy for racist discrimination, it became a double bind for these adoptees. These adoptees understood that the families and communities around them had trained themselves either not to see racism, or to believe that racism was a minor problem, confined to a few overtly bigoted individuals, that could be solved with the positive attitude of inclusive multiculturalism. Even through almost every adoptee who participated in this project spoke about racist incidents they had faced, many believed that to make a claim of racist discrimination would be to break the social etiquette of colorblindness, and risk arousing resentment in their White social networks. (120)

Park Nelson’s inclusion of adoptees’ oral histories drive home the ambivalence of the adoptee position and the failure of weak multiculturalism.

With *Bitter in the Mouth*, Linda participates in and works through Park Nelson’s discussion of weak multiculturalism, racism, and colorblindness in particular through the notion of the “blind spot.” Accounting for Linda’s adoptee status, racism through Boiling Springs’ “blind spot” reflects Park Nelson’s assertion that adoption played into weak multiculturalism’s denial and elision of racial tensions that mark the adoptee’s life. Knowing of her position within the blind spot and how “they learned never to see me,” Linda is aware of the simultaneously

hypervisibility and invisibility of her racial difference (Truong 171). Colorblindness characterizes Boiling Springs' White racism towards her Asian Otherness, and Linda's reflection on the children's racist comments highlights how such discrimination slips into the seeming acceptance of difference: "they would turn around and silently mouth 'Chink' or 'Jap' or 'Gook' at me, so that our teacher couldn't hear. [. . .] I understood, without really understanding, that 'Chink' and 'Jap' and 'Gook' were intimately connected to how the children saw my body. [. . .] You [the children], their darling little parrots, have become the mouthpieces for all that these men and women couldn't say aloud to me" (171, 172). Linda understands how the children's racism has been taught by their parents and therefore reveals how the colorblindness of Boiling Springs is nothing more than ongoing bigotry and racism.

Ascribing Whiteness to transracial adoptees become the means through which American families can constitute wholeness in the disregard for the adoptee's alterity and difference. From adoptees' oral histories, Park Nelson draws the conclusion that adoptive families often rely on colorblindness in order to avoid discussion and the conflict of racial difference: "For Korean adoptees, the ambiguity of Asian American racialization is compounded by racial ambiguity within adoptive families that use colorblindness to smooth over racial differences and conform to a normative construct of family that includes blood ties and physical resemblance between parents and children" (132). The notion of a family resists the construction of family through adoption, that is, through the unconditional hospitality extended to the Other—an Other who is not blood-related, who is the racial Other by transnational and transracial adoption. The demands of family constructed on blood lineage and family likeness result in the denial of difference and of any resulting dis-ease.



For Linda, it is the women in her adoptive family who refuse to acknowledge Linda as Linh-Dao and to acknowledge the conditions of transracial adoption—the loss of her birth parents and the act of hospitality underlying adoption. For Linda’s adoptive mother and maternal grandmother, they acknowledge Linda only insofar as they acknowledge her existence. Her own adoptive mother DeAnne refuses to know anything about Linda and goes so far as to forbid her husband Thomas from calling Linda by her Vietnamese name Linh-Dao. It is DeAnne who renames Linh-Dao as Linda in an attempt to silence Linh-Dao’s past as well as Thomas’ previous close relationship with Linh-Dao’s mother Mai-Dao. Linda’s adoptive maternal grandmother Iris Burch Whatley treats her in the same way; Iris does accept Linda at all precisely because Linda is not her blood progeny:

As a grandmother, she had the duty to protect me from harm, to teach me right from wrong (or rather the acceptable from the unacceptable), and to endure, on her part, the questioning stares of her neighbors and friends without ever once opening up her mouth. Because if she did, she would have to admit that her family wasn’t like theirs. [. . .] she would see of me what she wanted, and she would ignore the rest. For Iris, “the rest” included most things about me, especially who I was before I became a Hammerick.

She never forgave DeAnne and Thomas for not giving her a grandchild in the usual way. (166)

As grandmother, Iris points to her disappointment that her grandchild Linda is not her flesh and blood. While there is underlying racism against Linda for her Vietnamese background, Iris ignores Linda especially because of “who [she] was before [she] became a Hammerick,” that is, Iris holds the fact that Linda is not a biological descendent and thus Linda’s adoptee status

against her. For both DeAnne and Iris, what is in their blind spots is Linda's adoptee identity more than her racial difference. Kim Park Nelson brings up the racial etiquette of politeness by Whites, saying "I suggest that there is a specific racial etiquette to transnational adoption, wherein the White Community tend to politely overlook the racial difference between the White majority and the adoptees themselves" (145). This politeness comes across in *Bitter in the Mouth* through the civil reception of Linda into the Hammericks family. As the Vietnamese adoptee Other, Linda disrupts the lineage of the aspiring Southern White family at the same time she critiques the White Boiling Springs community's blind spots and racism.

Even more, Linda's being in the blind spot of the Boiling Springs community results in Linda's internalizing these feelings of denial of presence and of existence. Even with the African American community in Boiling Springs, Linda does not see them as allies but rather as a threat towards Linda's own self-denial of Otherness. Linda describes her sense of uneasiness around the Black community, saying: "These [African American] women actually saw me, and what they wondered about me—why one of my own hadn't taken me in—made their hearts tender. [. . .] I learned early not to meet their eyes, dark and deep as a river. If I saw them, I would have to see myself. I didn't want a mirror. I wanted a blank slate" (170). Linda recognizes the issue of transracial adoption when she reads in the Black women's eyes "why one of her own hadn't taken [her] in" but deflects their compassion to not remember her own position as transracial adoptee. As such, Linda suppresses her position as a person of color to not see herself at all; Linda thus resides within the blind spot herself.

Where color blindness implicates a refusal to see race and racial difference and conflict, the blind spot is the very disavowal of presence, of existence. This speaks to the denial of alterity that occurs with the adoptee identity; Park Nelson considers the transnational Korean

adoptees' negotiation of race and identity formation as multifaceted and as working between hypervisibility and total invisibility. Park Nelson points to the importance of the various negotiations and positions that Korean adoptees take up in terms of identity and identification. Often Korean adoptees see themselves more as White than as Korean or Asian; Park Nelson discusses this aspect of assimilation and identity saying: "Korean adoptees' assimilation into the family is followed by assimilation into racial and cultural identities of Whiteness. [. . .] Because of acculturation to Whiteness through rearing, many Korean adoptees find easy access to White privileges and life options, because of both a general support for White identities and a lack of support for non-White ones" (131). This preference for Whiteness is then therefore exacerbated in the South, where race is divided into White and Black with little allowance for Linda's Vietnamese identity. This preference for Whiteness is then therefore exacerbated in the South, where race is divided into White and Black with little allowance for Linda's Vietnamese identity, as critic Miller states: "an ethnic identity outside of the white/black racial identity leads to invisibility in the white, heteronormative, southern society exemplified by Boiling Springs" (115). Linda's adoptee identity further complicates how her Vietnamese "ethnic identity is outside of white/black racial identity" and how she prefers invisibility.

Linda does not want to confront her own Otherness as well as her adoptee status. Speaking of not seeing the African American women, Linda says, "If I saw them, I would have to see myself. I didn't want a mirror. I wanted a blank slate" (170). To acknowledge the Black women's position as women of color, Linda would then have to acknowledge that she is one of them as a woman of color and therefore different from her adoptive family the Hammericks, different from her (White) best friend Kelly, and different from the families of Boiling Springs. Linda's invisibility and self-denial are towards being an Asian American in the South and a

transracial adoptee in the Hammerick family. As such, Linda seems to see herself as White, culturally White because of her upbringing and seems to pass as White by the formal elision of her Vietnamese name and identity in the first half of the novel. She deflects her alterity but does attempt to work through the dis(-)ease of difference by way of her synesthesia and by way of her working through her childhood in Boiling Springs. Her attempts to manage her synesthetic incomings as well as her rape by Kelly's teenage cousin is narrated in the past tense and through a mature voice looking back on her adolescent years. Nevertheless, *Bitter in the Mouth* highlights Linda's identity in flux and in conflict, as the novel is divided into two and breaks up Linda's identity into a Southern synesthete and a Vietnamese adoptee. The novel speaks to Park Nelson's claim of invisibility and hypervisibility of the transracial adoptee: the invisibility comes through the internal and internalized difference of synesthesia while the hypervisibility comes through the experience of the transracial adoptee whose physical and outward appearance always position her as a racial Other.

Significantly, the kind of incongruity of racial difference and its perception also occurs with Linda herself as she attempts to reconcile her own self-image with her adopted status within a White all-American family. As assimilation and sameness is expected of Linda from her adoptive family and community despite of her physical racial appearance, Linda denies such difference by making the semantic and emotional distinction between appearance and being:

Since leaving Boiling Springs, I was often asked by complete strangers what it was like to grow up being Asian in the South. You mean what was it like to grow up *looking* Asian in the South, I would say back to them with the southern accent that had revealed to them the particulars of my biography. [. . .] For me, pointing out the difference between "being" and "looking" was the beginning, the middle,

and the end of my answer. I would rarely offer them more. (169, emphasis in the original)

Linda importantly distinguishes between being and appearance precisely because she is outside the context of her hometown. Outside of the blind spot of Boiling Springs, Linda's physical difference is now connected to her racial difference and therefore to the experience of being an Asian Other in the American South. In breaking down and rephrasing "what it was like to grow up being Asian in the South" to "what it was like to grow up *looking* Asian in the South," Linda points to how being and looking are separate modes; this is particularly true for her who, throughout the first half of the narrative, occupies difference in being a synesthete and only in the second half of the novel allows herself narratively to be seen as racially different through the revelation of her Vietnamese ethnic identity. Moreover, the shift from alterity as an ontology to racial difference as physical features that can be seen contrasts against the way in which the residents of Boiling Springs position Linda in the blind spot.

Nevertheless, this illustrates how Linda herself takes upon and comes to work through her alterity as both an Asian woman in the South and as a Vietnamese adoptee in a White family. Linda not merely denies her racial identity but moreover alienates her body from her identity as Linh and as a Vietnamese woman: "from the age of seven to eighteen, there was nothing Asian about me except my body, which I had willed away and few in Boiling Springs seemed to see anyway" (169-170). Linda delineates a clear separation between her racial and racialized body and her Southern personality and identity—perhaps both aligned with Whiteness—and moreover, moves away from her body almost to the point of disembodiment. She does away with her body when she seeks to classify herself as the A student in high school, saying: "To be the Smartest Girl in my high school was to be disembodied, which was what I thought I wanted

all along. I was the Brain. Everyone else around me became their bodies” (173). In contrast to other students whose based their identities and high school status through their bodies and physical appearance—for example, her best friend Kelly loses weight to fit into the hip and in-crowd—, Linda does away with her own body, using the metonym of the brain as intelligence and smarts. The use of synecdoche as the substitution of the Brain as the part for the body as the whole is the method of disembodiment and the means through which Linda alienates her body and therefore racial alterity. Linda’s disembodied self-conception goes in line with the white community’s blind spot that does away her own Asian body. In doing so, Linda wills away her Asian difference as well as her physical presence found in her body in the very same way that the white American community willed away her racial difference. This is a self-erasure and the discourse of blindness is tied to the purposeful attempt to fit in and to assimilate into her all-White family and community. The blindness experienced and willed by both Linda and Boiling Springs speaks to both the physical and conceptual understanding of dis(-)ease. Blindness is itself a physical condition, but as the narrative positions blindness as a refusal to see difference and alterity, the conceptual notion of blindness points to dis-ease and the constant state of uneasiness experience by those townspeople as well as by Linda to refuse to see and therefore comprehend and address identity, race, difference embodied in the Vietnamese adoptee.

In addition to Linda’s racial identity and difference, what are notably also in the blind spot are the entanglements of her physical embodied reality, neoliberal empire, and her own narration of her origins and adoption. Linda’s physical appearance and therefore body is rendered absent and disembodied precisely because her body comes to stand in for other Asian bodies. These blind spots refer therefore to the willed denial and forgetting as well as the elision that dominates the discourses of gratitude and humanitarian service rooted in America’s

welcome of Vietnamese refugees and especially adoptees. Linda's reflective critiques of Boiling Springs in fact call attention to the community's willful blindness as acts of denying and repressing American responsibility for the Cold War military campaigns in Asia and Southeast Asia. As the blind spot in her community, she in fact also comments on their vision as being crystal clear and blind at the same time; she states that she is the "the blind spot in [Boiling Springs'] otherwise 20-20 vision," therefore rendering Boiling Springs' vision as "selective blindness" (170, emphasis added). In doing so, Linda draws attention to the inherent contradiction of sight and blindness, that "selective blindness" is actually the dis-ease and condition of Boiling Springs, and by extension of the United States. This uneasiness within the community is an extension of such dis-ease found within the adoptive family and through the adoptee's alterity; such "selective blindness" reveals the refusal of the construct of Tolstoy's unhappy family and Truong's inventive family that is predicated on transracial adoption as the hospitable welcome towards the racial Other.

Selective vision therefore calls attention to the act of choosing what is visible and therefore accepted and what is ignored or disavowed. In Linda's case, she reads how her body of Asian difference calls to mind the Cold War American military engagements in Asia:

They knew that if they saw my face they would fixate on my eyes, which some would claim were almond-shaped and others would describe as mere slits. If they saw my hair, they would marvel at how straight and shiny it was or that it was limp and the color of tar. [. . .] If they saw my unformed breasts, the twigs that were my arms and legs, the hands and feet small enough to fit inside their mouths, how many of the men would remember the young female bodies they bought by the half hour while wearing their country's uniform in the Philippines, Thailand,

South Korea, or South Vietnam? Complicit, because they would rather not know the answer to that question, the mothers and sisters and wives of these men looked right through me as well. Instead of invisibility, Boiling Springs made an open secret of me. I was the town's pariah, but no one was allowed to tell me so. (171)

The blazon—the listing of Linda's physical attributes—reduces her body into parts and specifically into Asian stereotypical descriptors, such as the almond-shaped eyes, tiny feet, but Linda turns this reductive essentialism into a metonym for American military and sexual relations in Asia. Through her Southeast Asian body and her body of difference, she embodies the elided military history and sexual experience of American soldiers stationed in Cold War Asia and moreover, bring together the historical/military with the intimate and with sexuality. Boiling Spring's blind spot is both Linda herself and furthermore what Linda's Asian body calls to mind—elided histories.

Linda herself, nevertheless, is not exempt from this forgetting. In a similar way to how she becomes disembodied in high school to distance herself from her racial difference, she also distances herself from an identity that is based on or derived from Viet Nam and Vietnamese history. Reading about the Vietnam War in a history book, she describes that she feels disconnected to as well as distances herself from this history:

I learned that the [Vietnam] war was still in progress in 1968, the year of my birth, and that it ended for the Vietnamese in 1975, the year of my second birth at the blue and gray ranch house [the Hammericks']. I filed these facts away. They were connected to me, but I wasn't connected to them. This pattern would repeat itself as I learned more about Vietnam. [. . .] At the time, I had no body, which meant that I was impervious and had no use for such information. (216)



For Linda, there is a disconnect between Linda and facts about Viet Nam and Vietnamese history. In a way, because Linda is born and raised in the United States, she has no direct ties to Viet Nam, especially when Linda does not associate 1975 with the end of the Vietnam War but rather with her “second birth.” The disconnect is on one hand Linda’s move away from assuming that one’s identity lies in one’s cultural and ethnic history and on the other hand, Linda’s own personal experience that is located not in Viet Nam but in the American South. Nevertheless, Linda provides the discourse of not having a body and thus being disembodied, which may be extended to her as being without history, both in terms of Vietnamese history and of her own personal history. Linda’s disconnect with the history of Vietnam alongside her having “no body” point to the ambivalent position of the transracial adoptee as well as to Linda’s self-denial of difference, historically and embodied.

The embodied and disembodied discourse surrounding Linda’s alterity draw on the double valence of disease as the physical ailment and the uneasy feeling. That Linda’s own disease is a neurological condition and a language processing disorder speaks to how difference is the physical manifestation of difference at the same time it is an internal experience of difference.

*Bitter on the Mouth* itself has a narrative blind spot for both Linda and the reader. On the level of Linda’s narrative, its blind spot is the narrative of her biological Vietnamese family’s immigration and the trauma that leads to Linh-Dao’s adoption by the Hammericks. She only comes to learn of the circumstances of her placement in the Hammerick family and in all-American Boiling Springs, North Carolina, from DeAnne and only in the final chapter of the novel. What DeAnne recounts is how Thomas Hammerick met and fell in love with Linda’s

mother Mai-Dao in 1955. However, they never pursued the relationship and maintained distant contact through letters. Mai-Dao returned to Viet Nam then later immigrates to the United States in 1975 to join her husband Khanh, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In Mai-Dao's furtive letters, Thomas learned of the marital tensions between her and Khanh as well as her personal experience of the fall of Saigon in April 1975 and its aftermath. One night, Thomas is called to Chapel Hill because the police found Linh-Dao outside of the burning trailer home in which her parents have perished. Thomas decided to bring Linh-Dao home, and DeAnne after hearing the whole story agreed to adopt her. This serves as the pivotal revelation to Linda's identity and background that complements the earlier revelation of Linda's name as Linh-Dao Nguyen.

Nevertheless, while DeAnne discloses these circumstances to Linda, what remains unclear and not fully addressed are the actual circumstances that prompts Linda's adoption: the fire, the loss that prompts and allows for adoption to take place. Whether the fire was accidental or arson is never addressed because the only witness is Linh-Dao, who does not remember. While there are some indications that Khanh's jealousy and Mai-Dao's unhappiness with life in Chapel Hill may have been at the root of the fire, the narrative does not provide clear insight and only states that Linh was found with her passport, even when Thomas's first letter may imply there was some action taken on Mai-Dao's part. Janette reads Linda's loss in terms of racialized violence as well as gendered violence, saying:

Like the origin of Linda's synesthesia, the cause of the fire is never given. But its occurrence on the day following the first Fourth of July after the so-called Fall of Saigon (1975) suggests a racialized violence: jingoistic American patriotism provoking violence against a 'gook,' a racialized national enemy. Truong's novel

thus echoes the nonfictional violence experienced by Vietnamese immigrants to the United States [. . .] Alternatively, the fire can be linked to domestic gendered violence (itself connected to racialized international conflict), since in the days and months of anxiety after the Fall of Saigon, Linh-Dao's father, Khanh, becomes 'irritable and somewhat irrational.' (169)

Janette highlights the intimacy of inter/national violence and domestic violence. Khanh's unease at the end of the Vietnam War is tied with his distrust of his wife, and these feelings are exacerbated because he experiences all of this in the space of the United States and in the position of stateless migrant. Regardless, what is known is the trauma and loss of Linh-Dao's parents in a fire that leaves her an orphan within the United States.

For Linda as an adoptee, the significance of the trauma lies not in the cause itself but rather how she situates it in the space of loss and not knowing, either by forgetting, repression, or denial. As the only witness of the accident, Linda possesses no memory of her childhood and most importantly of the trauma and the loss:

DWH [DeAnne Whatley Hammerick] had skipped past the story of Khanh and Mai-Dao's death because she had no idea what really took place. I [Linda] was the one who was there, the only one who had survived. But to bear witness I had to remember. What took place in the trailer home in the days and hours and minutes before the fire on the night of July 5, 1975, was lost to me. Whoever carried me out, his or her face was blank to me. Whoever stayed inside, by force or by choice, became stranger to me. The years of my life with them the life before *this* life, has been erased or, rather, my memories of them had been erased by my benevolent brain. (279)

Here, the novel pivots from Linda as the first-person narrator to DWH/DeAnne as the one who possesses knowledge and access to Linda's adoption story. And despite Linda's retaining her narrative position in retelling how DWH informs her of her past, Linda is now positioned as the object of the trauma and of the adoption story. This is marked by the emphasis and repetition of the objective pronoun "me." Furthermore, Linda uses a discourse of erasure to describe the trauma and its traumatic effects of forgetting and repression. She has no recollection of her Vietnamese parents and categorizes her life into two: the life before, unknown and lost to her, and "*this* life," the life that she knows. This division into two lives recalls how Linda earlier addresses 1968 as her first birth and 1975 her second birth—one that is not then associated at all with the end of the Vietnam War in April 1975 (213). Linda describes this erasure and forgetting as benevolent, as trauma becomes repressed or suppressed to allow for the subject to move on.

Moreover, Linda's ignorance of "the life before *this* life" underscores her adoptee status. As transnational Asian adoptees often are placed into adoptive families at a very young age, many of them have little to no memory of their birth parents and of their biological family life. Analyzing embodiment and hybridity, Cathy Schlund-Vials and Cynthia Wu read *Bitter in the Mouth*'s narrative organization in light of the transnational adoptee experience, where the novel's organization mimics the experiences of transnational adoptees and their learning of their origins: "[*Bitter in the Mouth*] is for the most part achronological insofar as it progresses backward in time and the reader only learns of Linda's familial past toward the end. This backward progression corresponds to the deductive experiences of transnational adoptees whose present-day existence – as Linda's narrative emblemizes – shaped by an obscure past they can often only return to with great effort" (205). This reflective, backward narration by Linda therefore is the work of (adoptee) memory that she undergoes to evaluate her experiences as a

Vietnamese adoptee in the United States and to learn and process the loss of her Vietnamese birth parents upon which adoption is contingent. Nonetheless, this work of (adoptee) memory is never fully resolved, as Linda remains ignorant of the cause for her parents' death.

The erasure allows not only Linda to cope with the sudden and tragic loss of her parents and her Vietnamese cultural identity but moreover is the precise state of loss and forgetting upon which adoption is conceived and constructed. Where the actual circumstances that allow for Linda's adoption remains in the blind spot along with her Asian body, the act of adoption itself is very present and clearly articulated. What DeAnne dwells on is how Thomas goes off in the middle of the night and returns with Linda: "Thomas claimed me [Linda]. [. . .] Thomas told DeAnne that it had be instinctual. [. . .] He meant the desire to bring me home. A child needed a father and a mother, he said to DeAnne" (280). Here, the moment of rescue becomes the defining moment of adoption as the means for family formation; Thomas's instinct relies on the normative and affective conception of a child in need of a father and a mother. For DeAnne, the adoption meant the reinforcement of the family through silence and forgetting. Agreeing to adopt Linda, DeAnne positions her decision to silence Thomas from speaking about his relationship to Mai-Dao in particular and to then enforce forgetting Linda's biological parents so that DeAnne can assume the maternal role: "DeAnne had agreed to my adoption. DeAnne told Thomas that her second precondition was that they would never speak about my birth parents again. *Otherwise how could I love you, Linda?*" (278). Silence and affection is tied together so that the multiplicity and plurality of parents—biological and adoptive, Vietnamese and American, the Nguyens and the Hammericks—can be rendered singular and therefore (hetero)normative: one father, one mother, and one child. The focus on the act of adoption rather

than the trauma and the loss therefore shifts the focus of loss and attempts of working through loss to a focus on rescue and the American family.

The act of narrating and reflecting allows for Linda to locate her experience of trauma with her experience of synesthesia. As a neurological condition, synesthesia is characterized by psychologist Julia Simner as “a multi-variant condition in which everyday activities (e.g., reading, listening to music) give rise to extraordinary experiences (e.g, colors, tastes)” (2149). The condition of synesthesia manifests in three manners: developmental synesthesia (often during early childhood), acquired synesthesia (a rare condition from a brain injury or sensory deafferentation), and pharmacological synesthesia (from a hallucinogenic drug experience) (Grossenbacher and Lovelace 37). For Linda, her experience of synesthesia occurs at an early age and would be a form of developmental synesthesia, yet Linda’s first synesthetic experience is at the very moment of her trauma and loss: “My first memory was a taste.” “When I was seven, I heard a word that made me taste an unidentifiable bitter, and I never forgot flames cutting through the seams of the trailer home, and sound of footsteps on gravel, then darkness” (Truong 15, 116). For Linda, only the bitterness remains as a memory, yet, as it is tied to loss, it remains inaccessible and unidentified. The bitter taste as the incomprehensible loss of her parents can only be experienced and not fully understood. Such trauma and loss thus are then embodied Linda’s synesthetic experience. Hinrichsen argues for such a synesthetic embodiment of trauma, saying:

*Bitter in the Mouth* suggests that taste becomes its own form of historical documentation, functioning as a mnemonic device rooted in the body. [. . .] Synesthesia becomes a form of cognitive cryptography for the trauma she was not able to assimilate as a young child, here manifested as a ‘bitterness in the mouth’

for which she cannot find language. It is a form of cognitive hybridity that performs cross-cultural and cross-sensorial work against fantasies of sameness, enacting what Sneja Gunew provocatively calls the “mouthwork” of memory processing. [. . .] The narrative that emerges from the “mouthwork of memory” can only approximate the way trauma is registered in the body. (195-196)

Hinrichsen points to “mouthwork” as the memory work in which Linda engages in the form of both her synesthetic experience and her continual search for the bitter taste in the mouth. For Linda, the fact that there is the residual of the trauma in the form of an unknown bitterness highlight the physical and emotional form of trauma and how it lingers through the Hammericks’ silence on the very condition of Linda’s adoption. *Bitter in the Mouth* therefore represents synesthesia as not merely biologically or neurologically formed but more importantly informed by loss that is inherent in adoption.

Even more, Linda uses synesthesia as the way through which she can perform the “mouthwork of memory” and thus process her multiple and layered traumas in the very act of narration. *Bitter in the Mouth* is her confession and revelation of her life experiences that are marked by synesthesia and by trauma: her loss of her parents in a mysterious fire, her adoption into the Hammerick family, the uneasiness of being the sole Vietnamese adoptee in Boiling Springs, the death of her adoptive father Thomas, her rape by a family friend, the loss of Kelly’s friendship, the breakdown of her engagement due to infertility, and the sudden death of her beloved great-uncle Harper. For Janette, synesthesia is a form of the palimpsest, one that allows for the layering of secrets and traumas in a way that is productive insofar as Linda is able to speak about these experiences, to process through what Gunew calls “mouthwork.”

Importantly, Linda processes these traumatic losses through her synesthesia as well as through the act of narration. Linda's own first-person narration is marked by moments of storytelling and language with and by others. Linda's close friendship to Kelly is epistolary, with their letters numbered and cited throughout *Bitter in the Mouth*. Linda's memories of her adoptive father Thomas are of the stories that he tells her when she first arrives in Boiling Springs. Linda often cites her great uncle Harper's stories, songs, and albums; and like Kelly's letters, Harper often sends Linda postcards from his travels. Lastly, DeAnne ends *Bitter in the Mouth* with the narration of Linda's adoption. The preponderance of language as stories and narration tied to moments of loss and trauma highlight what Sneja Gunew argues for in terms of the synesthetic experience of language for diasporic and migrant subjects, she says: "It may be well that the synaesthetic process by which we attach the attributes of unexpected senses to an object, is a way of undoing the naturalized meanings and functions associated with both food and language" (99). Gunew's concept of "mouthwork" therefore involves the examination of how "displacement and the unexpected migration of the senses within the body shape [the concept of home]" (94). Linda's experiences of synesthesia allow her to process trauma otherwise; in particular, the loss of her parents is located in the fire but more importantly in the lingering, mysterious bitterness. The displacement and corporeality of the senses then is located in Linda's body but moreover in her narration.

In *Bitter in the Mouth*, Truong locates Linda's narration as synesthesia, the act of language as well as the medium for physical experience, and I argue, as the state of dis(-)ease that allows Linda to work through the uneasiness of her adoptee status in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, and to work through the dis(-)ease of her synesthesia in light of the loss and trauma surrounding the conditions for her adoption and for her racial difference. What Linda highlights



above all in the last pages of *Bitter in the Mouth* is the notion of the story, not as a medium for truth and revelation but rather as a need for origins and understanding—one that is very much part of the adoptee’s search for origins and birth parents. Linda closes her narration, saying: “Of course, I had wondered how DeAnne Whately Hammerick could have remembered in such plaintive details all the contents of all those long-ago letters [between Thomas and Mai-Dao]. I had thought, in between our sips of bourbon, that she could be making this all up. I decided that it didn’t matter. At least it was a story, I thought. We all needed a story of where we came from and how we got here. Otherwise, how could we ever put down our tender roots and stay” (282). Linda’s reasoning that “we all needed a story of where we came from and how we got here” is the premise for *Bitter in the Mouth* and her own narration of her life story. Nonetheless, it is not a coherent or fully-credible story, as Linda’s origins remains illegible and mediated. Such an ending roots Linda in her position and (lack of) understanding as a transracial adoptee and in the position of synesthete that makes sense of the world through the palimpsestic, layered, and unconventional.

### **The Invention of Affiliation by Affliction**

To close with the beginning as Linda does in *Bitter in the Mouth*, I turn back to the opening quotation of the chapter and present it in full:

We created them with our bodies or with our will. We had children because they could be had. Biological or adopted, they were helpless and had little say in how they would fit into the larger body. All children learned to adapt and thrive, or they died. Their first lessons of survival were learned within the home. Some children never grew up. Some hid within their own skin. Some shone like the

sun or glowed cool like the moon. We added to our selves—we built our machines, tended to our gardens, created our objets d’art—because we desired, above all things, to outlive our bodies. We knew that when we died, our families—if no one else—would remember our faces and repeat our names. In that way, we lived on. But we failed to acknowledge our selfish desires. We spouted grandiose assessments of what we had done. *We gave you life*, we said to our children. *We saved your life*, we said to the children of other people whom we took into our homes. Both statements were true. Both statements were the beginning of the story and not the story itself. (265-266, emphasis in the original)

Here, pulling away from Tolstoy’s universal statement of un/happy families and the assumption of family as blood relations, Truong’s *Bitter in the Mouth* invents family and kinship through other ways of construction, specifically adoption, and pushes the nuclear family towards the geopolitical and transnational because the figure of the adoptee is in fact the figure that brings together the transnational and transracial through her very alterity.

Significantly, “Fathering” and *Bitter in the Mouth* close with the notion of invented relations that are not specifically defined as family or kinship. In the conclusion of my analysis of “Fathering,” I point to Jason’s choice of “pardners” and a team as an attempt to (re)define his relationship to Eng, one that moves away from the paternal relations of father-daughter and beyond alternative relations of adoptive father-adoptee. A relationship as “pardners” and as a team shift away from the debt- and gratitude-related discourse in which a transnational adoptee is often positioned. As such, Jason’s discourse reorients his hopeful connection with Eng away from the adoptive parent-adoptee relationship as well as the blood relations between father and daughter. Furthermore, Jason chooses Eng over Sharon because of their common yet distinct

traumas from the Vietnam War. As a civilian, Sharon cannot understand Jason's experience in war and combat. And although Eng is a civilian, Eng experiences the violence of war and its aftermath. They relate to each other not as father and daughter but as soldier, Rambo, and "partners." The language of combat as well as the psychic trauma construct Jason and Eng's affiliation by affliction.

In *Bitter in the Mouth*, Linda completely disregards possible familial and kinship relations; rather, she comes to find her personal identity as a synesthete and affiliates herself with other synesthetes. Linda comes across a PBS program about synesthetes and learns that her experience of incomings are experiences of synesthesia, and it is a revelation for her: "I saw myself, or rather my doppelgänger. [. . .] 'Can you describe for me the tastes that you experienced as you said those words?' 'Certainly. Mashed peas, dried apples, wine gum, weak tea, butter unsalted, Walkers crisps. . . .' Mr. Roland replied. [. . .] What I was experiencing at that moment wasn't an out-of-body experience. It was an in-another-body-experience. [. . .] It was a mirroring. It was a fact. It was a cord pulled taut between us. Most of all, it was no longer a secret" (217). Linda's introduction to the world of synesthesia via the PBS program allows her to literally name her personal experience and her affliction as synesthesia and to reveal her secret. She attempts to seek out the synesthetes featured on PBS but fails; nevertheless, she "[looks] to the transcript [of the PBS program] for an alternative family tree" (228). This attempt to establish "an alternative family tree" speaks to how Jason renames his relationship to Eng as a team but goes beyond this to form a larger, distinct affiliation; for Linda, she sees synesthetes as a kind of family. It is not family as shared blood but family as sharing the same affliction, the same experience of synesthesia. Thus, she reflects the wider experiences of adoptees who come to identify as adoptee and with other adoptees. In the specific case of

Korean adoptees, they often come to specifically identify as Korean adopted, as Park Nelson explains:

Experiences of an awakening Korean adoptee identity were highly significant for many of the Minnesota adoptees who participated in my research, most of whom defined and described their identity as “Korean adopted” (abbreviated as AK or sometimes KAD), as distinct from other identities based on culture, nation, or race, such as Korean American, Asian American, or American. While they knew these other identity formations were available (in addition to White, which many say they previously considered themselves), they had chosen to define themselves as Korean adoptees. (104)

Linda identifies herself as a synesthete and seeks out others like herself, highlighting the invention of affiliation by affliction. She defines her family as those sharing in her experience of the world that is rooted in her neurological condition, her disease: synesthetes. Here, synesthete stands in for adoptee, as Linda’s personal, intimate experience of being a transracial adoptee translates into her personal, intimate experience of being a synesthete.

*Bitter in the Mouth* closes with: “At least it was a story, I thought. We all need a story of where we came from and how we got here. Otherwise, how could we ever put down our tender roots and stay” (282). The invention of the family through transracial and transnational adoption therefore is the invention of the “story of where we came from and how we got here” and the invention of a new form of kinship: affiliation by affliction. These invented stories then allow for adoptees, Eng and Linda, to work through their loss tied to filiation and kinship as well as formulate possible affiliation that moves beyond blood-relations and the adoptee-adoptive family paradigm, one that is rooted in their particular and distinct experience of affliction and trauma.

As works of fiction and literature, Mukherjee's "Fathering" and Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth* are such stories to allow adoptees to seek out, work through, come to terms with possible identities that do not rely on filial positions of daughter and adoptive daughter. The reinvention of the (adoptive) family as affiliation by affliction thus accommodates adoptees, both themselves and their experiences of loss and difference.

## CHAPTER 4

### Letters, Mourning, Impossible Reunions:

#### Aporias and Refugee Temporality in Vietnamese Diasporic Narratives of Sponsorship

Everything was the same but nothing was as it was.

– Angie Chau, “Taps,” *Quiet as They Come*

A disjointed or disadjusted now, “out of joint,” a disjointed now that always risks maintaining nothing together in the assured conjunction of some context whose border would still be determinable.

– Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

For the most part, this dissertation focuses on the figure of the Vietnamese adoptee and their negotiations of their transnational and transracial experience in the United States. In this fourth chapter, I investigate a different form of transnational family building through the figure of sponsored Vietnamese family member. As the one left behind in Viet Nam, the sponsored family member is the object of sponsorship and recuperation. Like adoption, sponsorship is concerned with the construction of the family; sponsorship recalls the framing of adoption as a form of immigration based on family building. Nevertheless, while adoption is premised on the humanitarian act of rescuing a child and placing him/her into an adoptive family that is typically multiculturally inclusive, sponsorship is premised upon family reunification and the act of making the family whole. Rather than an additive process of family building that is adoption, sponsorship is the reconstitution of the family.

The chapter’s shift towards sponsorship allows me to develop further the frameworks and parameters of Yén Lê Espiritu’s critical refugee studies and push further earlier discussions on the figure of the adoptee. I argued that the adoptee shifts the definition of the refugee to include those who are participate in a privileged for of migration and those who are more easily granted and viewed as citizens. Consequently, I also contend that the sponsored allows for an expanded

discussion of critical refugee studies because the figures of the adoptee and the sponsored reside in the liminal space of citizen/immigrant and family/stranger and therefore complicate ideas of belonging and exclusion. The adoptee and sponsored are exceptional figures who are configured at once refugee and citizen as the discursive object of imperial war and militarism and the object of rescue and hospitality. They reposition the Vietnam War in the space of the family, where the violence of war is enacted in the relationships and interactions between family members and where such trauma is (re)produced in the intimate elsewhere in the Vietnam War's aftermath. Being and becoming for the adoptee and sponsored thus are entangled with hospitality and kinship, temporalities of past and present, and the spaces of Viet Nam and the United States/France.

Current United States and European Union immigration policies privilege kinship in their definitions of sponsorship. According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), sponsorship is the financial commitment and responsibility towards one who seeks permanent residence in the United States. The sponsor can be an American citizen, a permanent resident, or an American employer willing to assume this fiscal responsibility. Immigration through sponsorship is predominately family-based; a *CBS* article states that “[sponsorship] is the most common legal form of immigration to the United States. According to the Department of Homeland Security, 238,087 immigrants were categorized as a ‘family-sponsored preference’ in 2016, and 566,706 came as ‘immediate relatives of U.S. citizens’ (spouses, children, or parents)” (Guild). While the rhetoric of financial assistance dominates this general definition, it is the rhetoric of kinship that defines the specific relationship between sponsor and sponsored. In the USCIS A1 informative sheet “A1—I am a U.S. Citizen . . . How do I help my relative become a U.S. permanent resident?”, it specifies that a U.S. citizen can petition for

his/her spouse and his/her children with “different immigration classifications for children depending on their age and whether they are married” as well as parents and siblings, provided the U.S. citizen is twenty-one years old or older (1). The USCIS therefore defines family in terms of the nuclear or immediate family that consists of father, mother, and children in an effort to preserve the family unit and to limit immigration: “the law gives special consideration to immediate relatives of U.S. citizens, which includes the U.S. citizen’s spouse, unmarried children under the age of 21 years of age, and parents” (2). The narrow definition of kinship acknowledges the nuclear family and only extends beyond the spouse and children to include a citizen’s parents; children who are twenty-one years and older or who are married are given less consideration, as they can be considered (fiscally) independent of their family and if married, as they can be considered as the head of their own immediate families. The USCIS definition of family therefore is one of a close, immediate kinship and of financial dependence, where the U.S. citizen guarantees fiscal support of these family members, and the use of “sponsorship” emphasizes the responsibility of the U.S. citizen to be responsible for those sponsored in both administrative and financial terms.

The European Union’s policy on sponsorship is similar but framed through the notion of family reunification. On its website, the European Commission – Migration and Home Affairs defines family reunification “is an entry channel enabling those who already reside legally in a Member State (referred to as sponsors) to be joined by their family members. Family reunification helps to create socio-cultural stability, facilitating the integration of third-country nationals residing in EU Member States, thus promoting economic and social cohesion – a fundamental EU objective.” While the USCIS information sheet stresses kinship through financial responsibility and support, the EU Migration and Home Affairs instead emphasizes the



socio-cultural stability and cohesion of family reunification. Precisely because the EU focuses on the socio-cultural stability afforded by family, the EU titles its policy the “Council Directive on the Right to Family Reunification Directive” to focus on the family and sparingly uses the term sponsor. Despite its different focus on family, the EU has a similar policy as the USCIS where the reunification of family is limited to the nuclear family: “family reunification should apply in any case to members of the nuclear family, that is to say, one’s spouse and one’s minor children” (“Council Directive” L 251/12). The EU’s reliance on the construction of the family as the nuclear, immediate family and how the notion of the family constructed as whole promotes “economic and social cohesion” (“Family Reunification”).

While official policies on sponsorship and family reunification encourage family reunion, sponsorship as depicted in fictional narratives reveal the impossibility of making the family whole. This chapter therefore reads such impossibility through Linda Lê’s novel *Les trois Parques* (1997) translated to English by Mark Polizetti as *The Three Fates* (2010) and Angie Chau’s short story collection *Quiet as They Come* (2010). Lê’s novel centers on how two sisters and a female cousin, who are the titular three fates, plan to bring sisters’ father King Lear from Viet Nam to visit them in France. In her collection, Chau includes the story of Kim and Duc, who have been separated because Duc was a reeducation camp detainee and thus was prevented from leaving Viet Nam with Kim and their children for the United States; later however, Duc is able to rejoin Kim through sponsorship. Both narratives’ goals of family reunification through sponsorship ultimately fail because King Lear dies before he is able to visit the three in France and because despite his sponsorship, Duc cannot deal with being reunited with Kim and disappears from his family’s lives. Both narratives therefore highlight the impossibility of familial reunion because of the unrealistic assumption that reuniting with family makes easy the

process of immigration when in actuality, the sponsored continually experiences the ongoing and lingering aftereffects of war and displacement and from separation and abandonment. The sponsored as a recent immigrant into a family that has already settled down and have become well-adjusted to French and American life interrupts this life in the aftermath. He brings with him the ongoing violence of war in the aftermath; as being left behind in Viet Nam, he experiences the violence of the Socialist regime, particularly Duc who spends years in a reeducation camp, and such realities that his family do not and cannot comprehend. The sponsored therefore is figured as one who disrupts time; he both enacts and embodies temporal disjuncture.

While the current immigration policies discussed above may not necessarily apply to these narratives, they define kinship and family as the small, nuclear and immediate family and reunification in terms of familial and social cohesion. Moreover, the policies assume that the sponsors have to a certain extent assimilated and are well incorporated into American and European society. In this way, sponsorship highlights the demands of racist incorporation upon the refugee/immigrant to become the productive French and American citizen. It is a trajectory of assimilation that is insisted upon and put upon the refugee/immigrant. With the figure of the sponsor, the sponsor disrupts this linear trajectory from good refugee to assimilated citizen by revealing the vulnerabilities of the sponsors. This disruption moreover speaks to the spectrality of the sponsored to define two disjointed temporalities: first, the material conditions that first made the sponsor/ed refugees and second, the demands of racist incorporation and assimilation. I propose a reading of Derrida's concept of aporia to consider sponsorship as an impossible form alongside that of hauntology that is manifested through the specter and a "time out of joint." In theorizing a critical refugee aporia, I use Eric Tang's notion "refugee temporality" to argue how

the sponsorship breakdown the trajectory of refugee to citizen in the disruption of time and how the sponsor embodies the histories and experiences of imperial war that renders impossible family reunion.

### **Sponsorship's Aporias, Disjointed Time, and Refugee Temporalities**

In *Les trois Parques* and *Quiet as They Come*, the failure of sponsorship reiterates the failure of transnational and transracial adoption as a way to construct the adoptive family. I use Derrida's aporia to work through the impossible moment of reunion and the breakdown within moment of the reconstitution of the family and moreover, consider how sponsorship complicates hospitality because of the sponsored's identity as already family and therefore a guest who is not a stranger. In previous chapters, I discussed adoption as an aporia of hospitality as well as an impossible gift of freedom as articulated by Mimi Thi Nguyen. As one of the main aporia that Derrida addresses, hospitality expects the unconditional welcome of the guest-Other by the host; however, this hospitality is rendered impossible when the host makes demands of the Other, such as asking the guest for his/her name. Conditional hospitality therefore exists while unconditional hospitality touches on the space of the aporia. In my reading of the Vietnamese adoptee, I use the notion of aporia to examine the conditions for adoption that constructs adoption as a more intimate form of hospitality since adoption is the welcome of the transnational and transracial Other into one's home and family. Adoption as a form of kinship formation therefore configures the impossibility of hospitality as unconditional. Sponsorship presents a similar conflict. While sponsorship is the act of hospitality, the guest within this particular relationship of hospitality as sponsorship is in fact family and kin at the same time he is estranged and therefore a stranger to his own family. It is precisely because of the spatial and temporal distance that the estranged

sponsored family member occupies the position of the intimate Other. The impossibility of sponsorship as a model for family reunification highlights the inherent hostility of hospitality, what Derrida terms *hostipitality*. Because sponsorship enacts the impossibility of hospitality through *hostipitality*, I therefore configure sponsorship as an aporia of hospitality.

With sponsorship as a form of aporia, I engage with Derrida's theorizing of the aporia in his work *Aporias*. From the Greek *aporos*, aporia literally means "without passage" and thus the impossible ("aporia," *English Oxford*).<sup>9</sup> Other definitions describe aporia as a puzzle, an internal contradiction, a doubt, and uncertainty. In all denotations, aporia suggests an impasse, where thought, theory, or argument is at a crossroads. Derrida specifically ties aporia to the notion of the nonpassage:

It had to be a matter of the nonpassage, or rather from the experience of the nonpassage and is fascinating in this nonpassage, paralyzing us in this separation in a way that is not necessarily negative: before a door, a threshold, a border, a line, or simply the edge or the approach of the other as such. It should be a matter of what, in sum, appears to block our way or to separate us in the very place where *it would no longer be possible to constitute a problem*, a project, or a projection, that is, at the point where the very project of the problematic task becomes impossible and where we are exposed, absolutely without protection, without problem, and without prosthesis, without possible substitution, singularly exposed in our absolute and absolutely naked uniqueness, that is to say, disarmed, delivered to the other, incapable even of sheltering ourselves behind what could still protect the interiority of the secret. (*Aporias* 12, emphasis in the original)

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<sup>9</sup> The etymology from the *English Oxford Living Dictionary* states that aporia is "mid 16th century: via late Latin from Greek, from *aporos* 'impassable,' from *a-* 'without' + *poros* 'passage.'"

Derrida moves the aporia beyond the impossibility or the nonpassage towards the possible-impossibility. This locates the encounter with the Other and therefore bears in mind the encounters enacted through hospitality and sponsorship. He further positions aporia as an impossibility at the same time as a possible-impossibility, saying: “I was then trying to move not against or out of the impasse, but in another way, according to another thinking of the aporia, one perhaps more enduring (13). In a sense, the aporia is a productive impasse, where other ways of thinking, being, and encountering the other are possible

I use Derrida’s definition of aporia as a nonpassage with sponsorship because the nonpassage is especially relevant and thinks through to how sponsorship is the passage of immigration at the same time it is the collapse of family reunification. For the sponsored, there is a form of displacement, physical movement from one place to another. In the works discussed, it is the imagined possibility of the father’s voyage from Viet Nam to visit his daughters in France and the actual immigration of Duc from Viet Nam to rejoin his family in the Bay Area in California. Sponsorship is therefore a privileged form of passage and of im/migration that is premised upon the reunion and reconstitution of the family; it makes whole the family precisely because the sponsored is kin. At the same time, sponsorship is a nonpassage precisely because the sponsored is related to and supposedly not a stranger to his/her family, thereby producing the assumption that sponsorship is an easy, straightforward process of family reunion. The immigration narrative of the sponsored is similar to other Vietnamese refugees and immigrant experiences at the same time it is different because the very act of rejoining the family allows for a possibility of a better welcome in the new homeland.

The nonpassage of the aporia and the non/passage of the sponsored can also be understood in terms of time and temporality. Derrida positions the aporia at the limit of the

future as well as the enduring future, that the aporia is always what is to come and what is not yet. The aporia goes beyond the present and thus emphasizes a temporality apart from the present: “This formulation of the paradox and of the impossible therefore calls upon a figure that resembles a structure of temporality, an instantaneous disassociation from the present, a *différance* in being-with-itself of the present” (17). The aporia’s temporal disassociation from the time of the present reiterates how aporia is defined as the nonpassage; moreover, the experience of aporia as the nonpassage endures to think “in another way, *according to another thinking*” (13, emphasis in the original).

The aporetic nonpassage of the sponsored family member is structured in terms of temporality. Because of their different relationship to time, I consider how the sponsored is disassociated from time and therefore haunts time and comes to represent an impossible but enduring future. The fact that the sponsored is a family member left behind positions the sponsored within an often-idealized past imagined by those who have immigrated and settled elsewhere. The sponsored King Lear and Duc reside in a different temporality of the present than that of the three fates in France and Kim and the children in the United States precisely because the sponsored is disassociated from those who have already immigrated. Significantly, the separation between those left behind and those who are settled brings out feelings of guilt as well as longing, which highlight the conflict of responsibility and debt towards the sponsored. The act of sponsorship is the attempt to reconcile these disjointed temporalities with the sponsored’s arrival into his family’s present. Furthermore, sponsorship supposedly merges the different temporalities and reconciles the sponsors’ feelings of debt.

Nonetheless, the sponsored’s (potential) arrival in the adoptive homeland underscores the temporal disjuncture. I therefore employ Derrida’s hauntology in order to configure the time of

sponsorship and its temporal disjunctures a “time out of joint.” While the aporia seems to present itself as enduring and orients itself towards the future and futurity, Derrida speaks of specter in terms of the past and its interruption into the present in *Specters of Marx*. Derrida hinges his discussion of the specter and time on the notion that “time is out of joint.” Opening with Hamlet’s line as the work’s epigraph and devoting the first chapter “Injunctions of Marx,” Derrida defines the temporality of the ghost and the specter as a time out of joint, saying: “‘The time is out of joint’: time is *disarticulated*, dislocated, dislodged, time is run down, on the run and run down [*traqué et détraqué*], *deranged*, both out of order and mad. Time is off its hinges, time is off course, beside itself, disadjusted” (20). As a consequence, the specter’s temporality is interruption and eruption into the present or into time itself. Even more, Derrida explains that haunting occurs even before the moment of haunting so that haunting always already enacts a “time out of joint.” Derrida uses this spectral temporality and haunting and applies it towards a critique of Marx and the moment of fetishization; Derrida argues that that moment does not exist because the object is already haunted before its transformation into the commodity:

But if the commodity-form is *not, presently*, use-value, and even if it is not *actually present*, it affects *in advance* the use-value of the wooden table. If affects and bereaves it in advance, like the ghost it will become, but this is precisely where haunting begins. And its time, and the untimeliness of its present, of its being “out of joint.” To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. [ . . . ] Everything begins before it begins. Marx wants to know and make known *where, at what precise moment, at what instant* the ghost comes on stage, and this is a manner of exorcism, a way of keeping it at bay: before this limit, it was not there,

it was powerless. We are suggesting on the contrary that, before the *coup de théâtre* of this instant, before the “as soon as it comes on stage as a commodity, it changes into a sensuous supersensible thing,” the ghost had made its apparition, without appearing in person, of course and by definition, but having already hollowed out in use-value. (201-202)

There is no initial haunting since there will always be a haunting that precedes it. In the same manner, the specter who haunts, then, is also preceded by another specter, that one by yet another. Consequently, Derrida upturns and interruptions the notion of a linear, teleological time in favor of the “time out of joint,” where there is neither an originary haunting nor an originary specter, where there is a perpetual cycle of haunting and specters in this “out of joint” time.

Here, I argue that the sponsored as a kind of specter as defined by Derrida and therefore is positioned within his hauntology as simultaneously being and nonbeing. Because the sponsored is left behind in the space of his family’s homeland of Viet Nam, he often is figured as occupying the temporality of the past. The sponsoring family often views him as not living in their current present and situates him within their past. The distance and separation between the sponsored and the family produces a temporal disjuncture.

With sponsorship as the im/possible reunion, sponsorship threatens the space of the present that is occupied the Vietnamese French and Vietnamese American family in their adoptive homeland. I therefore bring together Derrida’s use of aporia along with the temporalities of the enduring futurity and the already haunt past to think through sponsorship. The act of sponsorship is one that is divided between two poles: the family who immigrated and settled elsewhere and the family member who is left behind and remains in Viet Nam; the family who has assimilated and the family member who is a stranger. The arrival of the family left



behind promises bring resolution to the family's resettlement in the France and the United States because the reconstitution of the family as whole would absolve the sponsor's feelings of guilt for leaving those behind. Nonetheless, the very arrival of the sponsored family member produces temporal disjunctures, where the sponsored as often relegated to the past of imperial war. The disjointed time of the sponsored materializes the conditions that produce the refugee in the first place as well as the underlying material conditions of racist assimilation and incorporation.

To use Derrida's aporetic enduring future and the specter's "time out of joint" within a critique of imperial war and racist incorporation, I employ Eric Tang's concept of "refugee temporality," which he proposes in his in-depth analysis of the life of Cambodian refugee Ra in *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto*. Tang proposes "refugee temporality" in order to consider the refugee's knowledge of the "persistence of past forms of power under seemingly new conditions. In this way, it also names how Ra knew and gave expression to unending liberal warfare" (49). In recounting Ra's history of constant displacement from one apartment to another, Tang examines how the Cambodian refugee is produced within a "cycle of uprooting, displacement, and captivity that defines the refugee experience persists long after resettlement" (5). The linear trajectory from refugee to citizen is therefore is disrupted by how Cambodian refugees remain refugees despite obtaining citizenship within the space of the hyperghetto. Tang argues that "refugee temporality challenges those who insist on the transfigurative power of crossing the border. It calls into account dominant representation of Southeast Asian settlement in the United States as caesura: whereas the refugee was once granted the ascension to life—both literal and biopolitical. Refugee temporality challenges us to keep time with Ra in a different way" (50). In keeping refugee time, Tang takes

pause, as it is “one long interval—as a present that was never a transition but a long pause,” where the unsettled refugee never transitions to settled citizen (51).

Employing Derrida’s *aporia*’s enduring future and “time out of joint” alongside Tang’s refugee temporality, I read the figure of the sponsored precisely to interrupt this seemingly progressive trajectory of the refugee to citizen, of the displaced to the settled. The potential for and the very appearance of the sponsored in the family’s present reveal the material conditions of immigration and settlement, one that is often premised on disavowing the past. I employ Tang’s refugee temporality as a “long pause” to recall the earlier discussion of Yén Lê Espiritu and how war occurs without a pause; here, I position sponsorship as a critical pause to consider how refugees are in a continuous state of captivity and how imperial war persists. Sponsorship as a form of refugee temporality allows for a critical pause to consider the ongoing, lasting nature of such violence. In my analysis of sponsorship, I situate the sponsored as embodying this refugee temporality because of how the sponsored interrupts the progressive time of the present rooted in assimilation and integration, in settling down in France and the United States. Where the narratives of sponsorship reveal the impossibility of family reunion, I consider the sponsored as participating in how “refugee temporality is the refugee’s knowledge that state-mediated resettlement is a false proposition; it is the disavowal of resolution, an unclosed refugee sojourn” (Tang 159). Furthermore, Tang insists that “refugee temporality is not another way of stating that the refugee is haunted by the past—through trauma or survivor guilt. Instead, it is the distinct way in which refugees know the power of their past captivities remains in their present—in the supposed land of salvation the promised them safety and freedom,” and I agree with Tang (173). Yet, I argue that the figure of the sponsored family member complicates this by revealing the material conditions of the sponsor, who has to distance themselves from the past in order to

settle down and thus (re)producing the narrative of “the transfigurative power of crossing the border,” and furthermore by critically pausing to understand the persistence of imperial war and violence (50). This is where I find Derrida’s specter and haunting as a “time out of joint” productive; to take pause is to keep time differently in the way that haunting is already haunting. How the sponsored as specter haunts allows us to consider the material conditions of imperial war and racist incorporation as already always occurring in its persistence. Together, refugee temporality and disjointed time, I propose, reveal the impossible demands of racist assimilation and incorporation, and moreover, bring to light the ongoing violence and material conditions of imperial war figured through sponsorship. Therefore, I attend to Derrida’s final request in *Specters of Marx* of learning from the ghost and how to talk to it in dialogue with Tang’s challenge of “[keeping] time with Ra in a different way” by attending to how sponsorship is impossible (Derrida 221; Tang 51).

The im/possibility of familial reunions defines the aporia, I contend, as both the time and space of neither here or there, of the in-between and the gap for these sponsored family members. While they are often ascribed to the temporality and positionality of the past as those who remain in Viet Nam and as those who were left behind, the sponsored arrives in the present only to interrupt, thereby reducing the distance of time and space between the sponsored and their assimilated family and between their trauma and loss from war, displacement, and immigration. On one hand, the possibility of reunion is tied to its very impossibility, specifically articulated through Lê’s *Les trois Parques* and the death of the father. On the other hand, Chau’s *Quiet as They Come* represents how the impossibility of reunion is inherent in its very possibility through Duc’s arrival in the United States and his consequent disappearance. I seek to engage with the aporias rising out of sponsorship to comment on how the assimilation or integration of

Vietnamese refugees often forgets the violence of war and conflict and in doing so displaces such violence onto the sponsored and onto post-war Viet Nam. As such, the sponsored are suspended in a refugee temporality which ultimately forecloses reunion. The elided voices and narratives of those left behind insist on critiques of what is viewed as past histories of colonial and neo-liberal empire and consequently, constantly pull the aftermath back into the site of war, loss, and trauma.

### **The Sponsored as the Specter, the Living-dead Father in *Les trois Parques***

I begin with *Les trois Parques*, a novel that Linda Lê describes as operating on the register of myth with an account of three Vietnamese French women. Nameless, they are identified by metonymic descriptions: Potbelly, the eldest sister who is pregnant and who owns a “spanking new house” (10); Long Legs, the younger sister who works as a telephone interviewer; and Southpaw, their female cousin who has as a stump for her left arm. Potbelly and Long Leg’s father is known as King Lear, and he often invokes the Shakespearian tragedy of being left behind in Viet Nam and neglected by his daughters. The novel recounts on the various reflections, memories, hauntings that take place throughout a lazy Sunday at Potbelly’s home. These recollections move between the three’s individual lives in France and King Lear’s in Viet Nam, between their presence and his absence, between their present boredom and lingering anxieties. The novel’s driving force, if any at all, is the discussion surrounding the father’s visit to France, the cursory planning and concerns about his arrival and stay. Ultimately, the novel closes with news of the father’s death.

This chapter examines the process of sponsorship as an aporetic reconstitution of the family that is mediated through the discourse of hospitality. In *Les trois Parques*, sponsorship is

configured as the three female relatives' hopes of welcoming the father left behind in Viet Nam into the daughter's household in France. While *Les trois Parques* does not recount sponsorship exactly, I consider the novel's potential as a sponsorship narrative because of the women's intentions of having King Lear visit their home in France. Moreover, the father's ultimate death epitomizes the very impossibility of reunion and the reconstitution of the family. As such, I read *Les trois Parques* as dramatizing the rhetoric of aporia and nonpassage and the hauntology of the specter within the breakdown of family and through the father's untimely death.

In her œuvre, Linda Lê is often preoccupied with loss, death, and the impossibility of mourning. Specifically, *Les trois Parques* is the first work in a trilogy tied to Lê's personal loss of her father in Viet Nam and her not being able to return to Viet Nam to see him before his death: *Les trois Parques* (1997), *Voix: une Crise* (1998), and *Lettre morte* (1999). In an interview, Lê explicitly speaks about this personal trauma: “[*Lettre morte*] C’est un livre charnière. Il clôt ce que je considère comme une trilogie consacrée à la mort du père et à la folie qui en résulte pour la narratrice. *Les trois Parques* exploraient ce thème à distance, en recourant à de nombreuses références culturelles et littéraires. *Voix*, au contraire, est un matériau brut, fragmenté, très éclaté, immédiat. Celui-ci est un monologue” (“Linda Lê” Interview).<sup>10</sup> While Lê provides and acknowledges the autobiographical context for her writing, she does not consider her work as autobiography or *autofiction*. Rather, her writing is a process that attempts to work through her grief and breakdown in a gesture towards the universal and symbolic, Lê says: “J’ai tenté, avec ces trois regards, une entreprise qu’au départ je croyais impossible: atteindre une dimension presque universelle, ne pas rester dans l’autobiographie, faire de la mort

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<sup>10</sup> “[*Lettre morte*] This is a pivotal book. It closes what I consider a trilogy dedicated to the death of my father and the madness that is the result for the narrator. *Les trois Parques* explored this theme at a distance in using many cultural and literary references. On the other hand, *Voix* is the raw material, fragmented, broken, and unhesitating. This one [*Lettre morte*] is a monologue.” (my translation)

du père une mort symbolique. C'est pour cela que *Les trois Parques* appartiennent au registre du mythe, *Voix* à celui du rêve et *Lettre morte* à la fantasmagorie. Pour que le deuil ne soit plus un deuil particulier.”<sup>11</sup> In *Les trois Parques* specifically, Lê contextualizes the act of writing as being “Written in a state of extreme isolation [. . .] And to he who is absent, whose murmur overcame ‘the dreadful voice that men often call silence’” (171). This paratextual concluding note to *Les trois Parques* acknowledges how Lê’s father haunts her through her own loss and grief, where the figure of the lost and absent father voices through silence. This context for Lê’s writing and for *Les trois Parques* dominates its critical literature. While I acknowledge the importance of this autobiographical context, I go beyond the autobiographical nature of the novel to consider the portrayal of grief through the figure of the father as the spectral sponsored family member.

In the critical work on *Les trois Parques*, there is inclination to read the novel in relation to the rest of Lê’s œuvre through the lens of immigration precisely because of Lê’s Vietnamese immigrant background. For one, Maryse Fauvel explicitly ties Lê’s work to the notion of hospitality: “Ses personnages [de Linda Lê], la plupart immigrés d’un pays asiatique et vivant en France, prennent le rôle à la fois d’invités et d’hôtes, d’immigrés et de maîtres donc, des hôtes accueillis et d’hôtes accueillants, car ils acquièrent une identité qui déborde des définitions traditionnelles de ce qu’est être immigrés en France” (330).<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Fauvel positions this hospitality in relation to haunting where Lê’s characters are haunted by a Vietnamese past tied to the larger French history of colonization in the region: “parce qu’ils sont hantés par leur passé,

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<sup>11</sup> I have tried with these three perspectives to undertake a project that I know already is impossible: to approach a dimension towards the universal, to not remain within autobiography, to deal with the symbolic death of the father. This is why *Les trois Parques* belongs to the register of the myth, *Voix* to that of a dream, and *Lettre morte* to that of the phantasmagoric in order to have mourning is no longer a personal mourning. (my translation)

<sup>12</sup> These characters [of Linda Lê], many of whom are Asian immigrants who live in France, assume the roles of guest and host simultaneously, of immigrants and masters, of welcoming hosts and welcomed guests, because they acquire an identity that overcomes traditional definitions that they are immigrants in France. (my translation)

hanté par leur village natal au Vietnam, leur famille disséminée par la guerre, la fin de la colonie française, l'immigration en France et ils sont persécutés par le sentiment de la culpabilité d'être partis, d'avoir abandonné le père, la maison, le village et leur culture" (331).<sup>13</sup> Along similar lines, Lise-Hélène Smith considers immigration through postcoloniality in her reading of the fragmented life of the postcolonial subjects of Lê's work. Using a different approach, Gillian Ni Cheallaigh considers the compulsive themes of female madness and female suicide through Lê's act of composing and de-composing mutilation in her trilogies. Furthermore, scholarship more focused on *Les trois Parques* tends to catalogue the overwhelming number of metaphors and intertextual references within the novel. Tess Do's work tracks the food metaphors in an exploration of postcolonial culinary legacies. Thu Thuy Bui works through the trilogy's obsessive images and symbols of rage framed against the Self, the Other, and God while Sabine Loucif examines the construction of the self through the intertextuality of mythology, religious, and literary texts.

More productive readings of Linda Lê and *Les trois Parques* engage with the work of mourning and loss. Julia Pröll reads Lê's construction of a female melancholia that is closely linked to Freud's melancholia through the motif of pregnancy and the deformed fetus; she suggests that Lê's creative preoccupation with still-born or bodily-incorporated fetuses provides a post-Freudian understanding of melancholic incorporation of the lost object, which for Lê is Viet Nam. Like Pröll, Alexandra Kurmann uses Freud and focuses on female characters, specifically with the girls' grandmother Lady Jackal as a phallic mother, to reorient the dominant analysis focused on the patriarch King Lear. She positions Lady Jackal as the phallic (grand)mother who is "the only character able to retain her subalternity in a Western context, and

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<sup>13</sup> [The characters are haunted] because they are haunting by their past, haunted by their homeland of Viet Nam, their family scatted by war, the end of the French colony, immigration to France, they feel guilty and culpable for having left, having abandoned their father, their home, their village, and their culture. (my translation)

[. . .] she acquires an unrivalled power over all other figures in the novel” and who does so through her spectral haunting, one whose “capacity [. . .] to cause tangible havoc in the lives of the living is perhaps the greatest indicator of her superior potency as a spectral figure in Lê’s paternal trilogy” (73).

Most significant for my work on *Les trois Parques* as a narrative of impossible sponsorship is Leslie Barnes’ engagement in her work *Vietnam and the Colonial Condition for French Literature*. Barnes considers haunting through as a formal narrative device and moreover as tied to sacrifice: “Narrative haunting in the trilogy is the staged afterlife of the originary sacrifice, which manifests itself in the form of ghosts and grotesque images [. . .]. I read these novels at the intersection of trauma theory and deconstruction and beyond both through Catherine Malabou’s concept of ‘plasticity’” (167). Barnes “read trauma in Lê’s novels as a *formal practice*” where “the crisis of representation becomes a question of filiation, one inspired as much by her own sacrifice of origins as by her affinity for other literary outsiders [. . .]. And she explores this question through figures of haunting and other grotesque imagery attendant to trauma. Lê makes the failure of each work the condition of possibility for the next, keeping the would open in order that it might fester” (170, 171). Reading *Les trois Parques*, Barnes points to the intertextuality and the density of prose as Lê’s working through content and form to produce a “structural fatality” through “the emphasis on physical and emotional abnormality” (186, 186).

I employ these analyses that address the impossible work of mourning, where Lê engages in and pushes beyond Freudian melancholia, to incorporate Derrida’s spectrality and hauntology. Because the novel centers on the discussion about the father’s visit, I read *Les trois Parques* as an aporetic sponsorship narrative, that is a narrative of sponsorship’s very impossibility. While sponsorship is used within the frame of immigration—of permanently immigrating to France and



settling down in France, the father's trip is a potential sponsorship/immigration with relation to the particular responsibility and the debt imposed upon the sponsor. I consider the status of the father's visit as conforming to the demands required by the E.U. to sponsor a family member in terms of accommodations and financial resources. Potbelly's anxieties underscore the legal obligations of the sponsor towards a guilt—survivor's guilt, the daughters' guilt of abandoning their father—which positions the father as not only a figure of sponsorship but importantly relegates him to the past. This (re)produces the logic of a transformative border crossing, where the refugee submits to the demands of assimilation and therefore disavows the persistence of imperial violence through racist incorporation. King Lear therefore figures as a spectral figure who haunts through his lost letters and through his narrative presence in his very physical absence in a way that articulates the disjointed time of sponsorship and the potential for refugee temporality.

In *Les trois Parques*, sponsorship is implied through the relationship between the eldest Potbelly and her obligations and consequent anxieties towards her father King Lear. Throughout the novel, Potbelly is preoccupied with the details of her father's voyage from Viet Nam and his stay in France: "My cousins, seized by impatience since early August, were bent on summoning King Lear as soon as possible. The best thing, the older one said, would be to take advantage of a long absence by the master of the household [. . .] and my cousins would play cicerones for King Lear, who could stay in the spanking new house, in the future child's nursery, freshly wallpapered" (4). For Potbelly, the timing of her husband's absence is essential to her father's trip so that it actually lessens the burden on her household. Potbelly's anxieties also stem of her desire to provide for her father:

But nothing in the world could have dissuaded her from her charitable enterprise, and budget be damned. For the ancestor's coming, my cousin wanted to bite the bullet and make several more extravagant purchases, enough to bring the spanking new house up to code as a residence of status [. . .]. As for Old Lear, once his travel expenses were met, on his arrival they would still have to attend to his accoutrement, dress him from head to foot, as tropical garb threatened to stand out like a sore thumb in the streets around here. And once he was grounded and trussed like a king, they would still need to find him distractions, titillate all his senses, and give him an eyeful before he shut his eyes for good. All that swank to ensure King Lear would have a grand old time. (15)

Potbelly's fiscal worries are pragmatically tied to providing her father with everything he might require during his stay at the same time they are excessive in nature. It speaks to a king's welcome, serving to show off how well Potbelly and the others have settled into France and to show off what they have achieved. In particular, Potbelly's anxieties are related to her responsibility of taking care of King Lear upon his arrival and of delivering everything required for a hospitable welcome.

Potbelly's anxieties tied to providing for King Lear and his visit speaks to sponsorship's financial obligations. Sponsorship as a form of immigration relies on putting the obligation on the sponsor to provide for the sponsored by ensuring proper accommodations and financial resources so that the costs of immigration and integration are not put upon the government. The E.U. directorate on family reunification stipulates this, saying: the sponsor is being required to have both "accommodation regarded as normal for a comparable family in the same region and which meets general health and safety standards [. . . and] stable and regular resources which are

sufficient to maintain himself/herself and the members of his/her family, without recourse to the social assistance program of the Member State concerned” (“Council Directive” L 251/16).

Potbelly’s plans for welcoming King Lear into her home highlight both these stipulations: that she can provide accommodations and be financially responsible for King Lear during his stay. The two requirements for sponsorship presumes that the sponsor is already well-adjusted and settled into life in France, that they have occupations with steady incomes with enough or even additional resources to provide suitable accommodations and sustenance for not only for themselves but also for the sponsored. Specifically with Potbelly, she has a “spanking new house” and has settled down in France and settled down with her new family with some expendable income to pay for the costs of King Lear’s travel and visit. Her house and financial income reflect the material conditions that arise from the demands for her to assimilate, transforming from refugee to productive, self-reliant citizen; it therefore (re)produces the resettlement as the “ascension to life” (Tang 50).

Moreover, the excessive nature of Potbelly’s worries and her grand plans for her father’s visit underscore the overwhelming guilt that Potbelly and her sister Long Legs have towards leaving their father behind in Viet Nam. Just before the end of the Vietnam War, King Lear’s mother-in-Law Lady Jackal takes Potbelly and Long Legs into her custody, believing that she could provide for them better elsewhere than King Lear in Viet Nam. This act is described as a kidnapping and the forceful removal of King Lear’s daughters: “the image of the two orphanlets had suddenly danced before [Lady Jackal’s] eyes. She had to rescue them, had to save my little cousins. She had to wrest them away from King Lear, stuff them in the huge sedan [. . .]. Lady Jackal appeared at the blue house and made off with my two cousins, who left, eyes shining with excitement, for an outing to the seashore and never returned” (18). As a kidnapping, the two

daughters were forcibly separated from their father; yet, their remaining in France and later successfully assimilating—as evidenced by the new house and their loss of the Vietnamese language—represents the burden of guilt for their leaving King Lear behind. In particular, the first lines describe the women’s guilt, saying: “They had abandoned King Lear to his small blue house. They had neglected him for twenty years, and now they were conspiring like a pair of Cordelias to bestow one last joy on the old monarch. He hadn’t asked for it” (3). The overt intertextual references to Shakespeare’s *King Lear* with the father only known as King Lear underscores the conflict between father and daughters and the guilt arising from their abandoning their father. They therefore seek to rectify their abandonment and neglect of their father by planning King Lear’s visit and by “bestowing one last joy.” Barnes reads this passage’s repetitive diction as “the tension between the desire to call the abandoned father forth and his destiny to remain ‘forgotten’” (186). The “last joy” in paying for the father’s trip is not only an attempt at family reunification after a violent separation but moreover, an attempt to rectify the sisters’ filial guilt.

In *Les trois Parques*, guilt is tied to the father: the three’s guilt surrounding leaving King Lear behind as well as their guilt of successfully integrating into French life, though at a cost. Among the three, Potbelly arguably experiences the deepest guilt because she is the most successfully settled. She is married, owns a “spanking new house,” and is currently pregnant. Long Legs has an apartment that she shares with Theo, her waning love interest, and has a job though a dissatisfying one as a telephone survey interview. Southpaw seems to be rather independent as well. The brief glimpses into their personal lives underscore how the women have adjusted and integrated into French life. As such, they can finance King Lear’s visit and would fulfill the requirements for sponsoring King Lear. However, their assimilation, I argue, is

an effective assimilation as a result of loss. The three women give up their Vietnamese identity, culture, and practices because to be successfully integrated to is to be transformed and in a way, to disavow the refugee past. The fact that the three do not possess proper names, let alone any indication that they are Vietnamese in appearance or identity, seems to render them without markers of their being Vietnamese and of their previous refugee/immigrant status. As such, their ties to Viet Nam are only made known only through their relationship with King Lear who is clearly identified as Vietnamese and as living Viet Nam. The three's relationship to King Lear and to a larger extent, to Viet Nam is tenuous, slippery, and superficial. It seems that only Potbelly retains some proficiency in Vietnamese to read the letters from King Lear and some ability to cook Vietnamese dishes with the help of Lady Jackal's notebooks of recipes. The loss of the Vietnamese language and the attendant distance from Vietnamese culture paired with their leaving King Lear behind underline the relationship of guilt and debt towards the father as well as bring to light the material conditions of racist incorporation, one that demands such disavowal and loss.

Because of the three's expectation that having King Lear visit absolve them of their guilt and obligations, their potential hospitality enacted towards King Lear in fact is a conditional hospitality. The welcoming of the father into their French household would justify their departure from and life in France, especially for Potbelly. They seek his approval, and this illustrated in their discussion surrounding the ceremony with which they would welcome and receive him. However, their selfish motivations actually undo the very principle of hospitality as the unconditional welcome of the Other. Even more, the very conditions for the father's possible visit is the expectation that he expresses gratitude and appreciation for Potbelly and the others' efforts:

Question from the telemarketer to owner of spanking new house: *Under what conditions would you welcome, for a finite length of time, an elderly person into your home? Only if that person were directly related to you. Only if you neglected that person for a great many years. Only if that person were to express his gratitude in advance.* There's the rub. There was no discernible trace of thankfulness in King Lear's replies to my older cousin's invitation. As proof, she tried to produce the last letter received, which she had pressed in one of her cookbooks and now couldn't find. Damn that letter. Tucked away somewhere.

[ . . . ] The letter remained missing. (5, emphasis in the original)

In this passage, the telemarketing questions posed intervene to reveal the explicit conditions for the father's visit and thus the conditional nature of hospitality. The repetition of "only if" underscores the specific conditions of an impossible hospitality, the conditions being the expectation of gratitude. Potbelly's invitation to King Lear moreover is the gift of hospitality, and such a gift demands gratitude as the prerequisite for her financing her father's trip to France and stay in her new house; in particular, she complains of her father's lack of gratitude and appreciation, that "there was no discernable trace of thankfulness in King Lear's replies." This conditional hospitality, moreover, serves to impose the demands of racist incorporation upon King Lear. In the way that the three have had to express their own gratitude to their country of settlement through assimilating into French life, Potbelly expects King Lear to do the same.

King Lear's missing letter symbolizes the impossibility of sponsorship as a form of hospitality. The letter is only mentioned when Potbelly wants to use it as evidence of the father's ingratitude towards their offer of a reunion in France. Placed within this context, the letters between Potbelly and King Lear can represent the potential for reunion because they are in

correspondence but can also underscore the very distance between them. The fact that the letter is missing highlights their disassociation from Viet Nam and their neglect of King Lear. On one hand, the letter is inaccessible to Long Legs and Southpaw because it is written in Vietnamese; only Potbelly can read it, and even then, she is reluctant to translate it for the others: “No point in looking for the letter, then, because it would have to be translated, and my cousin was sick of playing interpreter (for the depilatoried long legs, which would have avoided the sun like the plague had they remained in the tropics, and for Southpaw, who had severed the umbilical cord and now pull a horrified grimace at the sound of that barbaric yawp” (6). Because it is written in Vietnamese, the letter is rendered unimportant especially by Long Legs and Southpaw, who cannot read Vietnamese. The very fact that the letter is itself missing evacuates the letter of its meaning, as the father’s words are rendered unimportant and meaningless. Yet, the letter itself is mentioned as missing throughout the novel. Each mention of the letter is tied to its being lost. Potbelly searches each of her Vietnamese cookbooks, where she usually keeps the father’s letter; however, this particular letter relating the father’s lackluster reaction to the offer of a visit is not there. Only towards the end does Potbelly realize where the letter may be: in the closet or in a pile of clothes. This realization, nonetheless, does not prompt her to search for it, and the letter therefore remains missing. The letter written in Vietnamese is always missing. Its function is to the distance across temporal and geographical distance, underscoring the aporetic impossibility due to empire and its racist incorporation, where the three have “severed umbilical cord” to meet the demands of resettlement in France and assimilation into French life.

The missing letter as representative of the father is a metonym for King Lear himself; they are physically absent in the lives of the three fates yet continue to haunt them. The missing letter operates on the level of interruption and refers to a near past that is not accessible in the

present precisely because the letter is always lost, and Potbelly never actually finds it. Not only is the letter King Lear's words and message to his daughters, it stands in for King Lear and his presence however tenuous in the three's life in France. The letter as always missing and therefore marked as lost parallels how King Lear is missing from their lives and neglected in Viet Nam. The letter as lost, moreover, foreshadows how King Lear dies at the end of *Les trois Parques* and thus ultimately lost to them. Missing from their lives, the father acts as a spectral presence, and his haunting takes on even more significance when he dies. Because of his haunting the narrative in his absence, through the missing letter, and in the end by his death, King Lear expresses Derrida's understanding of the specter as being and non-being at the same time; in his hauntology, Derrida positions the specter within this absent presence and present absence: "Namely, a body! In the flesh (*Leib*)! For there is no ghost, there is never any becoming-specter of the spirit without at least an appearance of the flesh, in a space of invisible visibility, like the dis-appearing of an apparition. For there to be a ghost, there must be a return to the body, but to a body more abstract than never" (*Specters* 157). The specter is not merely a ghostly presence; rather, the specter has an appearance of a body at the same time a more abstracted body. This appearance of the body and the abstracted body allows for the specter to be present yet absent, being and nonbeing at the same time. In the case of King Lear, I read that, like the missing letter, his body is always displaced, positioned at a distance and outside of France and ultimately situated in death and loss. Nevertheless, the father's presence is physically rendered in the space of France and into their present through the figure of the letter, an abstracted body; as always missing, the letter is therefore even more abstracted and ultimately beyond abstraction because both the letter and the father are lost forever.



Throughout the novel, the narrative of King Lear interrupts the major narrative of three's Sunday reflections and musings. These moments provide insight into King Lear's life in Viet Nam, how he tries to cope with the absence of his daughters by reading and rereading their letters and cherishing the photos that they send. Narratively, the interruptions of the father's life throughout the novel consequently participate in a spectral haunting that occurs at a "time out of joint" and works towards a refugee temporality. In addition, the formal structure of the novel allows for a temporality of the present that is constantly interrupted by the past. The novel focuses on the three women yet allows for the past to interrupt the narrative with stories of their past in Viet Nam before their immigration to France and of King Lear. As such, the interjection of the past through their personal history as well as the past as represented by King Lear. Even more, the temporality of the past is tied to King Lear. Even if he resides in a parallel present in Viet Nam, King Lear is always situated in a distant present in which he prepares for his journey to France and waits with anticipation while the three's narrative actually occurs within the duration of a day, a lazy Sunday. Even more, the news of his death at the very end of the novel resituates him into the distant past. The time difference between King Lear's death and the telegram announcing his death suggests that King Lear had already died before the Sunday of the novel and that he was already dead when the narrative conjures him up to describe his life in Viet Nam. His death occurs near dawn—"King Lear had left at daybreak on his bike that stayed in place" (165)—while the news of his death happens at dusk in France, with the sisters and their cousin's sitting in a slowly darkening room—"And the telephone continued to ring the bells that sent shivers up and down the three silhouettes seated beneath the lamp" (164). A time difference of six hours suggests that the three fates learned of their patriarch's death a day after his passing and thus render King Lear's portrayal a spectral and haunting one.

King Lear therefore represents the past and, in his death, haunts the present through the narrative interruptions through the narrative's jumping to his life in Viet Nam. This is evidenced by the repeating and insistent ringing of the phone at the end of the novel. The phone begins to ring and continues to ring in the last pages of the novel. The rings echo throughout the darkened house because none of the three wants to pick up the phone, believing it to be from one of Long Leg's rejected suitors. It is only with the return of Potbelly's husband that that the call is answered. He picks up the phone and receives a telegram delivered over the phone that bears news of King Lear's death. The message of his death is ultimately lost because the intended recipients, the three fates, do not actually pick up the phone to receive the message. The news of death seems to be only heard by an intermediary, the Swiss husband, and the narrative of the sisters and their cousin abruptly ends without their actually learning of his death and without their reaction to the tragic news: "the mediator, who, disconcerted by the shrinelike stillness and stumbling in the dark, rushed toward the phone to silence those slaughterhouse screams, which yielded to a metallic voice reciting a telegram from Saigon. [section break with a visual cue of a carriage return]" (165). The immediate section following the news of King Lear's death actually speaks of his death. The reoccurring motif of the phone's repeated ringing underlines how King Lear haunts the three's present lives in France and the narrative. His haunting therefore constructs sponsorship—in the form of King Lear's visit—as unrealized and thus impossible. Moreover, King Lear's death is never received by the three; the narrative pushes King Lear's death into the space of the irrecoverable past and draws attention to how the three fates always position King Lear in the distant past by never actually finding the missing letter. They therefore (re)produce the demands of racist incorporation and construct the father as being of the past in order for their movement towards a present in order so that they then stand in contrast in the

present. Only in eliding their past embodied by King Lear are they able to shed their status as refugees and become citizens. Never finding out about this death, the three women do not have to confront and do not have to take pause in order to consider the material conditions of their resettlement. Enacting a “time out of joint,” the novel allows for the present to be haunted by the distant present and the past by the constant narrative interruptions and finally with the death of King Lear. Ultimately, King Lear and Viet Nam bookend the novel within a spectral time: “He was tired, broken. He awaited the end, sitting in his small blue house like King Lear in his hovel, stripped clean and abandoned by his daughters” and “King Lear left at daybreak on his bike that stayed in place” (3, 165). The spectral is the impossible form of sponsorship that is manifested through haunting and a “time out of joint.” Perhaps the use of King Lear to bookend the novel forces the pause that Tang proposes in his refugee temporality, one that keeps time differently and attends to the refugee as the one left behind, always stuck in a state of unsettlement.

### **Becoming Spectral, Haunting, and Refugee Temporality in *Quiet as They Come***

In *Les trois Parques*, sponsorship is rendered an impossibility precisely because of King Lear’s death. Furthermore, any potential reunion is complicated further by the distance created by the three’s assimilation into French life and their distancing themselves from the father and Viet Nam in ways that submit and (re)produce the logic of racist incorporation and assimilation. I use my reading of Linda Lê’s *Les trois Parques* to define sponsorship as an aporia and the spectral relationship between the sponsor and the sponsored. Haunting by the sponsored arises from the discrepancy between past and present as embodied by the sponsored and the sponsoring family. Haunting, moreover, is expressed as negotiations of guilt and loss within the material

conditions that render these diasporic figures vulnerable. Turning to the Vietnamese American work *Quiet as They Come*, I examine sponsorship in its fulfillment and its consequent failure by way of Duc and Kim's reunion in order to work through how sponsorship constructs the sponsored as a specter that operates within a refugee temporality.

Born in Viet Nam in 1974 and immigrated to the United States at the age of four, Angie Chau made her debut with the short story collection *Quiet as They Come*. With recurring characters and interwoven storylines, *Quiet as They Come* reads more like an intergenerational account of the Vietnamese American immigration experience. It provides multiple and differing perspectives from members of an extended family as they settle into down in California's Bay Area. This extended family consists three families: Lam and Trang and their three sons; Huong and Viet and their two children; and Kim and her children, Sophia and Marcel. This large family provides Chau an opportunity to (re)present the various stories of settling into American society, assimilating, cultural alienation, and loss in the Vietnamese American experience. In his review of *Quiet as They Come*, Christopher Schaberg compares the debut collection to Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* because "each book involves a collection of recurring characters, many of whom are traumatized by a war whose temporal and spatial proximity is often ambiguous" (442). Furthermore, Schaberg argues that "through the shifting perspectives of multiple family members, Chau narrates the obverse side of the war: the distant ripple effects and far-reaching consequences of a war that punctuated the age of modern globalization." Like Schaberg, I read Chau as responding to the far-reaching effects of the Vietnam War. In particular, I focus on how *Quiet as They Come* addresses everyday life in the aftermath of war, including issues of discrimination, difference, and loss inherent in settling down elsewhere. With the arrival of Duc by way of sponsorship, he brings to light the material conditions that

attempts of disavowal of imperial war and violence within the space of settlement; though im/possible, Duc's sponsorship forces the pause of refugee temporality, the "one long interval—as a present that was never a transition but a long pause" that does not easily resolve with assimilation and settlement (Tang 51). Sponsorship therefore is characterized by temporal ruptures and aporetic impossibility that is "the distinct way in which refugees know the power of their past captivities remains in their present—in the supposed land of salvation the promised them safety and freedom (Tang 173).

Reading *Quiet as They Come*, I frame the collection through sponsorship. The three families headed by Lam, Huong, and Kim are all sponsored by their younger brother Tri. Having been sent to the United States to be educated in the American system and having remained in the United States after the war, Tri is able to sponsor his siblings:

As the baby boy of the family, Tri was sent to America to get a Western education so that he could return with an American degree and be a sure bet for Vietnamese Parliament. [Kim's] Her parents would have never guessed when they sent him away that the American War would end with a Communist victory, that they would never see their youngest son again. However, it was Tri's U.S. residency that allowed him to sponsor them from the refugee camp. Otherwise, they would have ended up in Australia, or Germany, or France, since America was on the top of everyone's list. (42)

Already in America at the end of the Vietnam War, Tri serves as an anchor for his siblings and their families to be placed in the United States and to settle together in the Bay Area. This also points out how advantageous it is to have a family member be a U.S. permanent resident or citizen to gain entry due to the overwhelming numbers of Vietnamese refugees seeking the

United States as the country of settlement during the immediate post-war period. Furthermore, Tri's U.S. residency serves to legitimate the families' arrival since he can act as a guide to American life and an aide towards their transformation from unsettled refugee to assimilated citizen. Moreover, Tri's sponsorship of his siblings allows for them to reunite—the older siblings with the youngest Tri—and for their own families to remain united—having their spouses, with the exception of Kim, and their minor-age children being allowed to immigrate together. Already, *Quiet as They Come* already points to how sponsorship functions to reunite the family.

In particular, this section examines the sponsorship narrative of Duc and the resulting reunion between Duc and Kim. Unlike Lam's and Huong's families who immigrate to the United States intact, Kim arrives in the United States with their two children, Marcel and Sophia, but without her husband and their father Duc. Duc is left behind in Viet Nam because he detained in a Vietnamese reeducation camp having been a soldier for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Only after ten years is Duc reunited with Kim in the story "Taps." Focusing on Duc, I contend that he embodies the specter that arises from the aporia of sponsorship more clearly than King Lear. Duc actually arrives in the United States only to quickly disappear after the failed reunion with Kim. This situates Duc as a figure who contests the forgetting of the ongoing violence of imperial war in the space of resettlement. As the only figure who is explicitly tied to the Vietnam War through his status as a former ARVN soldier and as a reeducation camp detainee, Duc is tied to the past of the Vietnam War and tied to the space and imaginary of Viet Nam, which is juxtaposed against the American present lived by Kim and their children. Kim, Sophia, and Marcel recall Linda Lê's three fates because of their linear progression towards assimilation into their settled present as well as their disavowal of the

persistence of empire through the demands of racist incorporation. Significantly, Duc and Kim are reunited in the short story “Taps.” Duc arrives in the United States after being sponsored by Kim. Their moment of reunion and the culmination of sponsorship is the moment where war and its aftermath collide, where past and present produce haunting, and where impossibility and aporia entail a critical pause. Duc’s and Kim’s inability to connect with each other and the resulting violence renders it impossible for Duc to stay, and he disappears from his family and also from rest of the short story collection. Because sponsorship as reunion is, I argue, an impossibility and an aporia, Duc’s physical presence in the United States and his reuniting with his wife Kim makes apparent the spectral and the aporetic at the same time works towards a configuration of refugee temporality.

Throughout *Quiet as They Come* and up until his appearance in “Taps,” Duc is portrayed as tied to the past and situated within the space of Viet Nam. He is left behind and imprisoned in a reeducation camp and consequently, already made spectral. The opening lines position Duc as one of the many family secrets: “The smallest room goes to my aunt Kim because it’s only her and Sophia and Marcel who don’t have a dad. [. . .] There are lots of hidden closets and corners and secrets inside [the house we all live]. Like how we’re not allowed to bring up Uncle Duc because he’s in jail in Vietnam” (13). Elle, Huong’s daughter who narrates the opening story “Hunger,” speaks of Uncle Duc as being lost and as a secret. Elle’s saying that Sophia and Marcel do not have a father denies the existence of Duc. In particular, the denial renders Duc as nonexistent in the space of the United States precisely because he remains behind and secreted in Viet Nam and also because he represents the persistence of military violence as an imprisoned ARVN soldier. In this denial, Duc is both absent and present at the same time. Significantly, Duc as a secret and as a denied existence is situated in the space of the house in America, where

Kim and the others are subject to the demands of racist incorporation rooted in disavowal. The house is the American house in which the three families first settle and is also tied to the notion of secrets: “In this house there were always secrets and alliances. There were the things everyone was supposed to know. [. . .] And then there were the things one knew but pretended not to know [. . .]. This was what it meant to live with your extended family, and entire nuclear family to a room, in a three-bedroom house” (35). The house defines the new space of the United States as well as the adopted country of the families. Tied to secrets, the house therefore defines and dominates the geographical and temporal imaginary of the present within the space of the United States. It therefore situates Duc as tied to and remaining in Viet Nam and thus to the past and representative of such a past. Moreover, the denial of Duc’s existence—that Sophia and Marcel do not have a father—further renders Duc as the spectral embodiment of war, Viet Nam, and the past and as a present absence that can only be articulated as a secret or mentioned in whispers.

Duc is defined as a secret within the larger, extended family, but in the intimate setting of Kim’s family, Duc is more openly spoken about and conjured through the letters that he writes to Kim. Only in their bedroom does Kim bring up Duc and speak about him to Marcel and Sophia by reading and rereading his letters. These letters materialize Duc. For Kim, the love letters embody Duc’s presence in his absence: “She reached into the bedside drawer and pulled out the familiar grainy envelope, marked *par avion*. She received Duc’s letters with pure relief. These thin sheets and tight scrawls were the only proof that her husband was still alive” (36). The materiality of Duc’s detailed letters makes manifest his presence despite his long absence. The very physical object of the love letters affirms and confirms his life at a remove in Viet Nam. For Kim, she finds comfort in the letters, and they provide her a material connection with her



absent husband: “She covered her face with the letter, trying to gather Duc’s scent” (36). Here, the letters facilitate the romantic nostalgia that she uses to construct Duc across temporal and geographical distance. These letters consequently stand in for the absent Duc and thus reflect the spectral nature of the absent presence.

While Duc is actually living and lives within the same present moment as Kim, he is always configured in terms of the past, and the content of the love letters recall their past in an idealized and romanticized fashion. The letters often touch upon present-day concerns, but Kim disregards this and only ascribes importance to the nostalgic memories the letters provide. For Kim, she reads and rereads his letters to forget the present and live within in the past: “Kim and Duc had written letters throughout the years. She thought it odd now that she hadn’t asked more questions, harder questions. But truth was she welcomed the love letters. When the transparent sheets arrived from Vietnam, she got to trade in the exhaustion of life as a single mother in a foreign country for the easy past. Duc wrote about how he had once pursued her. He wrote about their mating games and rituals: Friday night movies, Saturday night durian shakes, Sunday morning coffee” (112-113). The letters provide Kim with a connection to Duc in his absence. Moreover, this connection that the letters provide allow her to escape her present full of anxieties and worries of having to settle in a foreign land by reliving the romance, companionship, and idealized relationship with Duc. In doing so, she constructs Duc as this romanticized past to deny the present and her present worries. Any reference to their future and potential reunion is also framed through this nostalgic longing: “From prison he would write, ‘You are my heart.’ ‘I’m staying alive for you and the kids alone.’ ‘When we are together again we will. . .’ and they were always glorious dreams” (113). Kim uses the love letters to conjure up her romantic, nostalgic past and therefore conjures Duc as the past and spectral.

Furthermore, Duc's arrival in the United States does not remove his association with the past. Rather, he is conjured as even more spectral. The first mention of Duc after his arrival in the United States in fact does not reveal his presence. He is made known through the sounds he makes behind the closed door of the bathroom. In the opening scene of "Taps," Kim is outside of the bathroom with Duc inside. She listens to the sounds that he makes while brushing his teeth and washing his face. Not made known through his physical presence but only through the noises he makes, Duc is abstracted, closed off, inaccessible. This opening scene therefore sets up the reunion as already a failure because Kim is left out and does not seem to be able to reach Duc. Even when she is reunited with Duc, Kim still situates him within the past in the same way that the love letters relegated him to a nostalgic past of romance and longing. Unlike the physical materiality of the love letters, the sounds are elusive and allow Kim to position him in the past but here, a past of war and violence: "she heard the tap-tap-taping furious against the faucet. She pictured his trigger finger and wondered if it sometimes it itched for the rattle of a machine gun. Wondered what he had suffered at the hands of his captors. Wanted to ask him if he had never killed a man" (111). The shift from a romantic past that is tied to their relationship as husband and wife to a past tied to war and displacement positions the narrative as occurring the very aftermath. This serves to underscore how their migration from Viet Nam to the United States is the result of the fall of Saigon and the result of the long history of imperial war from the First Indochina War to the American War/Vietnam War. Duc, therefore, is not only a figure of the past but moreover, the specter of the Vietnam War in the aftermath in America.

Significantly, Duc's arrival in the United States gives the specter a physical body. In my earlier discussion of King Lear as being embodied as a spectral figure by the metonym of the missing letter, I use how Derrida ascribes a body to the specter as one that is being, nonbeing,

both and neither at the same time. Before Duc's arrival, his love letters allow for a material presence to Duc's absence. With his physically being reunited with Kim, Duc, I contend, further demonstrates how Derrida's specter has a body that is an even more abstracted one. In his hauntology, Derrida allows for the possibility of materiality and corporeality for the specter, saying: "For there is no ghost, there is never any becoming-specter of the spirit without at least an appearance of flesh, in a space of invisible visibility, like the dis-appearing of an apparition. For there to be ghost, there must be a return to the body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever" (*Specters* 157). This allows of an understanding of the specter that resides in between and alongside being and nonbeing. For Duc, it is not the specter gaining "at least an appearance of flesh"; rather, it is Duc's becoming-specter that has a body, which is rendered and considered different. According to Kim, Duc is the same but not the same. She describes his different yet familiar appearance, saying: "At the airport, she saw that he was darker from the sun. He was skinner from the lack of food. But mostly, he looked the same, walking tall through the terminal gate, tall and handsome" (112). The differences in Duc's physical appearance are differences in degree, highlighted by repetition of comparative adjectives. His changed features are not drastic and thus allow him to look different and the same at the same time. The very physical description renders Duc as neither same nor different yet both at the same time. Moreover, Duc as specter embodies the "return to the body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever" (Derrida, *Specters* 157).

Duc's spectrality as more abstract than ever contributes to how Kim is unable to reconnect with him and her inability to comprehend him and his experiences, experiences that haunt not only him but also Kim. Living alone with Duc for the first days of their reunion, she already struggles to understand him: "After a decade of waiting, telling herself Duc was the love

of her life, thinking if not for herself but for the kids, praying that once he got here everything would be better, after ten long years, her husband had finally arrived, and Kim was living with a stranger. [. . .] she expected it to change a man. But she didn't expect what she got" (112). Because she positions him within the nostalgic and romanticized past as "the love of her life," Kim does not anticipate the estrangement that arises from their decade-long separation as well as from Duc's personal experience and trauma of being tortured and imprisoned for years in a reeducation camp. Kim experiences the reunion as "everything was the same but nothing was as it was" (124). She allows for some change on his part but cannot comprehend and cannot deal with the extent to which Duc has changed so much so that he is no longer the "love of her life." Furthermore, Kim places the burden on Duc to improve their lives and thus places impossible expectations on sponsorship as reunion and family reunification. That his arrival in the United States would suddenly make life better for Kim and the children highlights the promise of a happy ending of a family reunion. Nonetheless, the separation and estrangement between Duc and Kim reveal the aporetic nature of sponsorship. Recognizing Duc's change, Kim confronts Duc to ask him about his life in Viet Nam to try to connect with him. But he reacts badly and with sudden violence; he pushes her away and then holes up in their bedroom. Exasperated with his estranged and violent behavior, Kim seeks the help of immigration services' counseling hotline, who reminds her that: "it was common. Duc was shell shocked, post traumatic stress disorder they called it. [. . .] Until then, said the voice on the other end of the line, 'Be patient. Ten years is sure to change a man'" (119). The confirmation of Duc's change and his estrangement highlights how he is becoming abstracted, how he is becoming incomprehensible despite his physical body's remaining readable and present. Kim cannot easily incorporate him into her settled present precisely because Duc refuses the "transfigurative power of crossing the

border” in his act of migration through sponsorship (Tang 50). Through his being estranged from Kim, Duc is constructed as a specter who is both present and absent at the same time.

Conjured up in the present through sponsorship and immigration, Duc carries with him this more abstracted body as traces and reminders of war that enter the space and temporality of the aftermath. Here, I contend that “Taps” defines the present as the aftermath of war and Duc as the reemergence of war that disrupts the American present, which seeks to disavow the traces and persistence of imperial war. As a former ARVN soldier, a reeducation camp detainee, and now sponsored family member, Duc directly embodies Tang’s refugee temporality. Duc illustrates the “distinct way in which refugees know the power of their past captivities remains in their present—in the supposed land of salvation the promised them safety and freedom” (Tang 173). This comes out of Duc’s critique of Kim’s own transformation through assimilation and integration into American life: “He said, ‘You don’t keep the house the way you used to.’ [. . .] Under his breath he said, ‘You’ve turned American’” (Chau 114). He points to the excess he characterizes as being American—that Kim uses too much water in the sink and thus makes the floors wet—and thus differentiates between past and present, between her housework in Viet Nam and in the United States. This differs from Duc as always being characterized soldier in the Vietnam War and even in his arrival in the United States: “He stood stiff, composed, a soldier’s soldier, the officer that he’d once been” (113). Duc’s appearance in the United States therefore emphasizes the appearance of the Vietnam War in the space of the aftermath and in the temporality of the postwar, one of temporal disjunctures that reveal the material conditions of racist incorporation.

Even more, Duc as specter and his spectral body are specifically constructed through war, military violence and constructed as embodying a refugee temporality that brings to attention to

the continuing captivity from imperial war to postwar imprisonment to resettlement. Already characterized as “shell shocked” and suffering from “post traumatic stress disorder,” Duc suffers from the consequences of war and bears its emotional and bodily scars. Physically, he bears the scars of the violence inflicted on him: “The scars like mountain ranges, crumbling down his back. His hand reached for them. He traced the contours down the length of his spine” (122). He is marked by the Vietnam War as well as its violent aftermath by serving in the ARVN and by being imprisoned in the reeducation camps. His scars render embodied the emotional and psychological trauma of such war and violence. Moreover, the scars illustrate the ongoing and lasting effects of imperial violence even as Duc is sponsored and reunited with Kim in America. Even more concretely, he arrives in the U.S. “carrying all his possessions that one military green duffle bag” (112). That all of Duc’s belongings that he brings to the United States is contained in a military duffle bag symbolizes the emotional, traumatic burden of imperial war that he carries into the present. Furthermore, the contents of this duffle bag reveal the traces and artifacts of war and of his participation in such violence:

There was six of them. They looked like dried apricots shriveled and sliced thin. They were an earthen color perhaps gone bad from having been kept too long. [ . . . ] They were different sizes some bigger than others, distinct in shape, with a perfect smoothness on the curved side, and an abrupt jaggedness on the other. Although they had a brittle appearance, when [Kim] picked one up she found it had a rubbery texture. Kim held it up to the lamp. Under the brightness of the bulb there were tiny microscopic hairs on the outer ridge like peach fuzz. After a moment, Kim realized it was a human ear.

She recoiled and dropped it. She'd heard of this sort of thing before. People gossiped about Vietnam vets who'd gone crazy, returning with decapitated fingers, severed toes, a necklace of ears. Now before her, six of them were scattered on her bedspread. (122-123)

At first, the severed ears are not recognizable and are compared to dried fruit. Kim's realization of what they are immediately brings forth the war and the violence consequences in the American present. She drops them and directly connects the ears to the trauma and violence experienced by Vietnam vets. This recalls Duc's own military position as a soldier and ARVN officer to also position him with these "Vietnam vets who'd gone crazy." The image of the severed ears illustrates how war and its violent aftermath are enacted by and suffered by combatants, survivors, and victims. Where war is mentioned in passing elsewhere in *Quiet as They Come*, here, war not only is conjured by the specter of Duc but moreover with the concrete objects of the severed ears; they are tangible souvenirs of war within the space of resettlement. What is never explained is how Duc comes to possess the ears, whether he was the one cutting them off or the one who inherited or came across them. Regardless, he brings the ears into Kim's home and into the aftermath in America. Perhaps then, the human ears serve as a metonym for the remainders of war and trauma that are never and could never be fully explained away. Such persistence of imperial violence makes Kim pause and therefore attend to the lasting effects of the Vietnam War in the aftermath of assimilation and reunion. The ears serve to embody "the distinct way in which refugees know the power of their past captivities remains in their present—in the supposed land of salvation the promised them safety and freedom" (Tang 173). Both the specter of Duc and the remnants of ears serve to render present the Vietnam War and attendant violence. The temporal disjuncture that the ears bring about allows the absence of

resolution—“it is the disavowal of resolution, an unclosed refugee sojourn” (Tang 159)—and proposes instead a spectral vision of the Vietnam War

The presence of scars and human ears points to the conditions of Duc’s immigration to the United States as the sponsored family member and his immigration under specific humanitarian conditions. Unlike the impossibility of sponsorship that is predicated on the very death of King Lear’s in Lê’s *Les trois Parques*, sponsorship is a possibility that Chau allows for with the reunion of Duc and Kim. Nevertheless, sponsorship’s aporia arises from this very moment of spousal and familial reunification. In “Taps,” Duc finally appears, and this conjuring of Duc into Kim’s American present occurs through the legal-political processes of sponsorship. In particular, Duc’s imprisonment in the reeducation camp allows him to be considered for immigration to the United States through the humanitarian resettlement process under the Orderly Departure Program’s HO category for former re-education center detainees. The HO category stipulates that applicants must have been detained for at least one or three years dependent on how close their association was to U.S. government agencies or organizations (“Joint U.S.-Vietnamese Announcement”). An ARVN soldier and reeducation camp detainee, Duc falls under the HO category where “Vietnamese applicants who spent three or more years in a re-education center as a result of their close association with U.S. agencies or organizations to implement United States Government programs and/or policies prior to April 30, 1975” (“Joint”). The figure of Duc and his arrival in the U.S. bring together the two aims of the Orderly Departure Program (ODP): immigration for family reunion and humanitarian reasons. On one hand, Duc’s arrival reconstitutes their family: the husband is reunited with his wife, and the father with his children. On the other hand, Duc’s immigration is permitted precisely because of the number of years he was imprisoned in the reeducation camp. Moreover, that Duc



was an ARVN soldier and reeducation camp detainee draws attention to the role that the United States had in the Vietnam War and later serves as the conditions for his immigration. In a way, the United States' ODP is an attempt to address the consequences and ongoing after effects of the military conflict that was in part created and aided by Western intervention. Duc's being reunited with Kim and his children would seem to signal a happy ending and absolve the United States. However, the conjuring of Duc only results in impossibility and haunting precisely because of secrets and how "everything was the same but nothing was as it was" (Chau 124). In this way, Duc's story of sponsorship goes hand in hand with the failure of adoption because the breakdown of adoption and sponsorship are due to how they are first subjected to and are subjects of an imperial war that produced them as refugees and then as privileged refugees—transracial adoptees and sponsored family members—how they are subject to assimilation and incorporation that demands the disavowal of those very conditions of imperial war and racial violence.

The discovery of the human ears ends the short story and more importantly, signals Duc's disappearance from the narrative and from his family's life. Duc's very appearance and presence in the United States through sponsorship and immigration is thus rendered nonexistent and absent. In the end, he becomes the specter and even more spectral. When Marcel and Sophia return home from summer camp, they do not see or meet their father. Instead of telling them that Duc did arrive but is now no longer there, Kim tells them that their father was on the verge of boarding the plane for the United States when Vietnamese officials denied him passage: "But in the end he never made it. Aunt Kim told us [the children], 'There was some bureaucratic mistake. They say he can't come to America. Ever'" (129). To explain away Duc's disappearance, Kim constructs a narrative where he is forever repressed and suppressed in the

space of Viet Nam, that he can only exist far away from the present in the United States. Her denial of Duc's arrival in the United States now configures him even more a specter to the point of disavowing presence. In this act, Kim denies Duc in order to move on, thereby giving into the conditions of racist incorporation. Duc assumes the specter being both present and absent, neither nor and both at the same time when he is the secret that is not discuss yet always known.

Duc's sponsorship therefore acts as the mode of conjuration, of conjuring the specter. In his discussion of the word "conjuration," Derrida points to its having a surplus value in its many meanings in English and German. Specifically, I evoke two definitions that Derrida provides: (1.b.) "the magical incantation destined to *evoke*, to bring forth with the voice, to *convoke* a charm or spirit. Conjuration says in sum the appeal that causes to come forth *with the voice* and thus it makes come, by definition, what is *not there* at the present moment of appeal" and (2.) "'conjurement' (*Beschwörung*), namely, the magical exorcism that, on the contrary, tends to expulse the evil spirit which would have been called up or convoked" (*Specters* 50, 58). Not only is the spectral body "more abstract than ever," it participates in both its conjuring and exorcism. The spectral body is convoked and invoked precisely at the moment that it is "*not there*" but also convoked in order to be expelled and exorcised. The doubled-nature of the word "conjuration" therefore illustrates the ambivalence surrounding the specter as well as that surrounding sponsorship as an act of family reunion—the feelings of familiarity and estrangement, the friction of the past and present, and the wavering between presence and absence. As both the apparition and the expulsion, conjuration reveals how sponsorship is impossible, as it conjures up a certain vision of the past only to be unable to deal with it. In the case of Duc, it is the burden and baggage of the Vietnam War, its attendant trauma, and the lasting effects well into the aftermath. Furthermore, it locates the specter within refugee

temporality because conjuration and exorcism does not allow for resolution. The inability to come to a resolution defines Tang's refugee temporality as: "the disavowal of resolution, an unclosed refugee sojourn" (159). The very title of the short story "Taps" signals Duc's disappearance and loss. As the bugle call played at military funerals, "Taps" draws attention to how Duc's appearance the United States as a sponsored family member is tied to loss and the story of sponsorship as one inherently about loss. Nevertheless, Duc is alive in his disappearance; "Taps" therefore configures Duc as the specter within a "time out of joint" and within refugee temporality.

In spite of his disappearance, Duc continues to haunt Kim, Marcel, and Sophia; in this way, Duc as specter lives on. In the story "In the Season of Milk Fruit," Sophia speaks of her and Marcel's return from summer camp only to find a house with traces of her father's presence everywhere in spite of his absence: "There was evidence of him everywhere in our apartment. I found a man's shaving brush in the medicine cabinet and a sterling silver Zippo lighter beside the windowsill" (174). The objects and material traces that Duc leaves behind give body to his very absence in the aftermath of an impossible reunion. Furthermore, Sophia clearly defines Duc as a ghost with its material haunting, saying: "It was as if we lived with a ghost. Everyone knew he had been there but we had to pretend he didn't. How else to explain the missing handles on her favorite teacups? [. . .] I held the damaged teacup to the sun. 'What happened?' [. . .] When I went to the bathroom, I saw a crack on the toilet seat between my legs. I led her in and pointed. 'Who did that?'" (174). Defined as a ghost, Duc's very absence manifests through materiality. On one hand, he leaves behind some material possessions; on the other hand, he haunts through the objects broken in his violence. He is therefore conjured as one who interrupts the present through a force and violence and one who moreover breaks through the quotidian of the

aftermath in America. As such, Duc assumes the being of specter through its being both present and absent, neither nor and both at the same time when he is the secret that is not discussed yet always known. I read Duc's spectral position as participating in "what Saidya Hartman and Stephen Best describe as the pause between the 'no longer and the not yet'" (Tang 159). Duc is no longer present but not yet absent, rendered material in the traces of violence and loss that Sophia discovers. He haunts in ways that underscore this ambivalent hauntology.

In her definition of Duc as a ghost, Sophia also points to the disavowal of the ghost. Sophia describes how her mother denies Duc's presence by ascribing the material objects Duc left behind as not belonging to him: "When I presented my finds to Ma [Kim], she said, 'You should be in theater. You have quite the imagination. That's your uncle's'" (174). Kim willfully repudiates Duc and his haunting by placing him in the realm of the imagination at the same time she rationalizes the objects away as belonging to Sophia's uncle. Consequently, Kim and the family position Duc as both ghost and secret—"It was as if we lived with a ghost. Everyone knew he had been there but we had to pretend he didn't." This recalls the first mention of Duc as one of the family secrets and also clarifies how Duc as specter and the spectral haunt Sophia and Kim and their present.

### **Living with a Ghost**

I conclude this comparative examination of sponsorship as an impossible and aporetic form of family reunion and reading of the sponsored as a spectral figure who haunts to offer ways to speak and to pause in order to consider the past and trauma in the present and the aftermath of refugee settlement. To close, I reconsider Sophia's notion of "It was as if we lived with a ghost. Everyone knew he had been there but we had to pretend he hadn't" (174). This

idea of living with a burdened past, the violence of trauma, and the feelings of guilt and loss extends to the Vietnam War, the violence and trauma that extends into the aftermath, this is the afterlife of the specter. Living with a ghost but having to pretend is the afterlife of the specter and the state of mourning. In “In the Season of Milk Fruit,” Sophia thinks about her father Duc to imagine an (im)possible relationship by conjuring him through the old photographs hidden away. She dreams of him, attends to his traces, and allows him to continue to haunt her. Pregnant and speaking to her unborn child, Sophia says: “I was conceived in warfare, raised in a refugee camp, and came up in an urban combat zone. I am a soldier. I am a survivor. Ba [Father] isn’t dead. He is only wounded. You and be baby boy, together will be a we, the search party reunited to find him” (176). How Sophia defines Duc as not dead and being wounded allows for spectrality through which Duc is present yet absent and through which she recognizes his trauma and haunting. Moreover, her identifying her father as a soldier and as a survivor allows her to relate more intimately because she considers herself also a soldier and survivor. In doing so, Sophia reveals what Tang calls the “persistence of past forms of power under seemingly new conditions” (49). The conditions that produced Duc as a soldier engaged in imperial war are the ones that also produce his impossible sponsorship and migration and Sophia’s conditions of racist incorporation that demands her to disavowal this violent past.

Sophia’s determination to be “a search party reunited to find [her father]” comes out her always wondering “What about my father in this life? Where is my Ba now?” (176, 168). Sophia attends to the “unending liberal warfare” that is her own life having been “conceived in warfare, raised in a refugee camp, and came up in an urban combat zone” (Tang 49; Chau 176). Her search for her father therefore is one that figures him as not dead but wounded, alive but not present. Derrida closes *Specters of Marx* with the address to the ghost: “He should learn to live

by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech [. . .] *Thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio*” (221, emphasis in the original). Sophia’s vision of her father as wounded allows for her the possibility to seek him out, to find him, and to talk with him; furthermore, the figurative parallelism of Sophia and her father as both soldier and survivor is how Sophia “[learns] to let them speak or how to give them back speech.” In this way, Sophia does not seek “to exorcise not in order to chase away the ghosts, but this time to grant them the right, if it means making them come back alive, as *revenants* who would no longer be *revenants*, but as other *arrivants* to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome” (220). This vision also provides her with a different understanding of time, where Duc is marked as a possibility and a potential within her loss of her father. She encounters her father through old photographs, uncovering the snapshots that Kim hides away. Examining these pictures, Sophia describes Duc as having “eyes [that] look like he’s going to eat you up if you look at him for too long. I can’t help but stare and stare” (166). The encounter between Sophia and Duc marks a “time out of joint,” where Duc is frozen in his officer’s uniform and where Sophia pauses time to stare. The gaze between the spectral Duc and Sophia produces a space of encounter within a different space and temporality. As ghost yet not dead, Duc haunts Sophia, and she configures him in the time of the stare to pause, as Tang proposes, in order to “keep time [. . .] in a different way” (50).

## CONCLUSION

### Redefining the Terms of Immigration

The Adoptee reminds you to look for yourselves. The Adoptee symbolizes a knowledge of divergence—but does not restrict you to those histories you’ve been made to inherit.

– Matthew Salesses, “The Adoptee”

In current discussions surrounding the immigration debate in the United States, a supposed new form of immigration has surfaced: chain migration. For the Trump administration, chain migration conjures up hordes of immigrants who are criminals and terrorists. In actuality, chain migration is an uncommon alternative term for sponsorship and now reconfigured as a term that carries with it a sense of threat and menace. Trump claims to end chain migration repeatedly as part of his immigration policy, which includes building a wall between the United States and Mexico.

Appearing in a series of tweets on the social media platform Twitter, chain migration has become one of Trump’s flashy words employed to condemn current immigration policies. The first tweet appeared on September 15, 2017, stating simply: “CHAIN MIGRATION cannot be allowed to be part of any legislation on Immigration!” This was soon followed by another in response to the terrorist attack in New York City, posted November 1, 2017: “CHAIN MIGRATION must end now! Some people come in, and they bring their whole family with them, who can be truly evil. NOT ACCEPTABLE!” Here, in particular, chain migration is used to convey Trump’s assumption that immigrants are responsible for the New York terrorist attack. Chain migration yet again made the news after Trump named it as the fourth pillar in immigration reforms in his 2018 State of the Union address: “The fourth and final pillar protects the nuclear family by ending chain migration. Under the current broken system, a single

immigrant can bring in virtually unlimited numbers of distant relatives. Under our plan, we focus on the immediate family by limiting sponsorships to spouses and minor children. This vital reform is necessary, not just for our economy, but for our security, and our future.” In calling to “protect the nuclear family by ending chain migration,” Trump makes an underlying supposition that chain migration is different from sponsorship as defined by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, which is premised on the reunification of the nuclear family. To further emphasize his concerns over chain migration from the State of the Union address, Trump posted the next day a tweet saying: “....we need to keep America safe, including moving away from a random chain migration and lottery system, to one that is merit-based [with a link to Executive Order 13780, dhs.gov]” (3:20PM 16 Jan 2018). And most recently, Trump tweeted: “We need a 21st century MERIT-BASED immigration system. Chain migration and the visa lottery are outdated programs that hurt our economic and national security” (8:05AM 6 Feb 2018). This included a link to and an image from the White House article “National Security Threats—Chain Migration and the Visa Lottery System” that sets out to define chain migration as the threat of endless, random immigrants (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Definition of Chain Migration.  
White House, “National Security Threats—Chain Migration and the Visa Lottery System”  
and @realDonaldTrump Tweet



Trump employs the term chain migration to reconceptualize immigration as endless waves of immigrants, waves so large in number that they would overwhelm the United States. What Trump is afraid of then is that there is no end to immigration once one immigrant is admitted to the United States. Even while Trump argues for a family-based immigration policy, he restricts it to the nuclear family because he conceives of chain migration as allowing for the entry of any and all family members. “Because most immigrants are selected on the basis of their family connections—rather than real selection criteria, like the skills they bring to our economy or their likelihood of assimilation into our society—our current family-based immigration system does not meet the needs of the modern United States economy and is incompatible with preserving our national security,” cites the White House and thus seemingly justifies Trump’s outbursts on chain migration (“National Security Threats”). Trump’s aggressive use of the term chain migration and his rhetoric surrounding it therefore allow him to construct immigrants and refugees as threats and dangers to America, thereby reconfiguring immigration policy as issues of national security.

Significant is how chain migration is only recently deployed in this incendiary and provocative manner. According to Linda Qiu, chain migration has been “weaponized” since before the Trump administration because it had been a neutral term that was infrequently used to illustrate a particular process of immigration:

“Chain migration” was originally a neutral, if not dry, phrase used by academics to describe the immigration process. [. . .]

In scholarship, the term appears to have emerged in the 1960s before tapering off in recent years, and even being eclipsed by the more recently established “family reunification.” [. . .]

Why the sudden uptick?

The White House and allies have deployed the phrase to label existing policy they find undesirable. In taking points and white papers, they have stated a preference for a merit-based system while labeling the current sponsorship process as “chain migration.” (“‘Chain Migration’ Has Become a Weaponized Phrase”)

While Qiu positions the trajectory of the term chain migration starting from neutral to weaponized, this ignores how terms of im/migration are never completely unbiased. The rhetoric and policies of American immigration are in fact often discriminatory and exclusionary especially with regard to Asian immigration—specifically, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Immigration Act of 1924 also known as the Asian Exclusion Act. Other discussions of chain migration and critiques of Trump’s proposed immigration policies refer to how Trump’s shift in terminology from using the official and current terms sponsorship and family reunification to chain migration serves to frame immigration as a threat where masses of unknown and likely violent immigrants would be allowed to enter the United States without stringent processes and regulations in place. According to Shika Dalima, the Trump administration’s turn towards the term chain migration “is meant to conjure images of a process in which one immigrant comes into the country and then pulls in hordes of relatives, who in turn pull in hordes more, until entire tribes and villages are emptied into the United States. The White House even released an infographic to that effect” (“The Pernicious Myth of ‘Chain Migration’”). And with the increasing risk of fake news and with the instant circulation of social media, Trump’s and his administration’s deployment of the term chain migration seeks to redefine immigration in negative, nonproductive, and even violent terms all the while without

consideration for actual policies and legislation already in place for sponsorship and family reunification.

That Trump wants to institute a new plan that “protects the nuclear family by ending chain migration” thereby limiting sponsorship to only immediate family positions the nuclear family underscores how kinship is tied to citizenship and to immigration as a form of national hospitality (“State of the Union”). By highlighting and privileging the nuclear family, Trump, I contend, constructs America as not being open and welcoming to those who are not already within the family, within the nation. While Trump’s proposed revisions are actually already in place with the current USCIS policies on sponsorship, his rhetoric of limiting immigration that “protects the nuclear family,” I argue, has as its basis racist assumptions about family as specifically the White American family. Western and European constructions of kinship are formulated on the nuclear family; while Asian families more broadly define kinship as being more widely inclusive of extended family and relatives. Trump’s insistence on the nuclear family therefore places boundaries on kinship and nation. However, as I discussed in Chapter 4, the immigration policy that allows Tri to sponsor his elder brother and sisters along with their families is the very one critiqued by Trump. The extended family represented in *Quiet as They Come* is actually the nuclear family at two levels: the family of Lam, Huong, Kim, and Tri; each sibling’s own spouse and children. Moreover, the four families are neither deviant, evil, nor threatening. That each family falls apart has nothing to do with the seemingly inherent faults of the extended family; rather, they are “unhappy in their own way,” as Tolstoy says. The breakdown of each family, with Kim’s in particular, is not because of their being the supposed threat to America but precisely because of the demands of racist incorporation and of the persistence of imperial war that attempts to recuperate the military loss of the Vietnam War on

these bodies and families of Vietnamese refugees in particular and non-Western immigrants in general. The racial hostility in hospitality is expressed through the family, and the family is how America constructs and limits welcome belonging.

Current discussions of immigration and the use of new terms to address and speak about immigration consequently reveal the racism, discrimination, and xenophobia of the American and French systems. While French President Emmanuel Macron has not been as vocal as President Trump, Macron has begun to issue stricter immigration policies in response to the migrant crisis that Europe has been facing starting in 2015. Facing large numbers of migrants entering Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea or by way of Southeast Europe, France revised its politics to delineate asylum from economic migration: “[The French] government is in the midst of preparing a new policy, focused on distinguishing between those who seek to establish themselves in France for economic reasons — the overwhelming majority, especially among those from Africa — and those fleeing persecution. He wants to send those in the first category home, and indeed such returns were up 16 percent last year” (Nossiterjan). Despite this being less inflammatory than Trump’s tweets, Macron’s proposed immigration reform seeks a very specific definition and consequent policy of immigration that only allow for asylum seekers and restrict other terms of immigration. In other words, the reform implements exclusion for the large part of immigrants into France and for African migrants in particular. In both Trump’s and Macron’s redefinitions or specifying particular terms, they reveal how immigration is tied to racism and how difference is integral in the redefinition of the terms of immigration.

In this dissertation, I attempt to redefine the terms of immigration through the specific cases of adoption and sponsorship. My work seeks to critique the racist and exclusionary practices voiced by Trump and Macron by undermining how adoption and sponsorship are

constructed as key examples of American and French humanitarian aid and welcome. Moreover, adoption and sponsorship are too often employed to position the United States and France as benevolent countries who receive those in need with open arms. In fact, I attend to the breakdown of the adoptive family and the failure of sponsorship as moments that articulate the impossibility of such welcome, reunion, and belonging that the United States and France seem to promise. As a consequence, my work seeks to undermine how hospitality and kinship are constructed as rescue and welcome to recognize how racism and discrimination endure through the demands of assimilation and how they are functions of neoliberal empire.

I close this dissertation on adoption and sponsorship by using two examples that engage with terms of immigration in ways that challenge Trump's vision of chain migration. Instead of Trump's redefinition as promoting policies rooted in xenophobia and discrimination, Viet Thanh Nguyen's and the *Open in Emergency: A Special Issue on Asian American Mental Health's* redefinition of the terms refugee and adoptee propose more nuanced and complex understandings of immigration. Through their personal and creative work, Nguyen and *Asian American Tarot* critique the current proliferation and circulation of xenophobic and exclusionary terms promoted by Trump and his administration. Specifically, I look to how Viet Thanh Nguyen reappropriates the term and the figure of the refugee in order to redefine it through his personal and fictional writing. Then I will examine to the mixed media, collaborative work of the *Asian American Literary Review's* special issue *Open in Emergency* and in particular, its Asian American tarot card deck works to undermine fixed meanings through fortune-telling to engage with the unknown possibilities of the refugee and the adoptee. Their work of redefining what the (Vietnamese) refugee is and what the (Asian American) adoptee allows for an interrogation of immigration and citizenship in ways that disrupt the dominant—read White—discourse of

immigration. Furthermore, their work serves to resist and to commonly held notions of the adoptee and the sponsored, the family and the nation, belonging and citizenship. As such, Viet Thanh Nguyen and the *Open in Emergency* tarot deck provide alternative insight into the future of Asian American and Vietnamese American studies and emerging Asian American voices and Vietnamese American voices.

Published in February 2017, Viet Thanh Nguyen's short story collection *The Refugees* appeared directly in the aftermath of the November 2016 election and the January 2017 inauguration of President Donald Trump and during a time when immigration was making headlines and inhospitality became part of anti-immigration rhetoric. As if in direct response to Trump's initial presidential actions that called for the building of a new U.S.-Mexico border wall and Executive Order 13769 "The Muslim Ban," Nguyen presents *The Refugees* as a collection of diverse and differing stories that reflected the experiences of Vietnamese refugee and of Vietnamese Americans. In their reviews, literary critics highlight the timeliness of *The Refugees*. Megan Mayhew Bergman's review in the *Washington Post* is titled "Viet Thanh Nguyen's 'The Refugees' couldn't have come at a better time." NPR's Michael Schaub praises the collection saying that "it's a beautiful collection that deftly illustrates the experiences of the kinds of people our country has, until recently, welcomed with open arms." Lucy Scholes' *Independent* review calls it an antidote: "With President Trump's recent attempt to ban refugees from entering America, the quiet but impressively moving tales dissecting the Vietnamese experience in California in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Refugees* are a powerful antidote to all the fearmongering and lies out there." In opposition to Trump's exclusionary and inhospitable rhetoric, Nguyen's collection therefore proposes a more humanistic perspective on American immigration. Even more, *The Refugees* provides the plurality, diversity, and differences of the Vietnamese

American refugee experience that resists how Trump constructs the immigrant and refugee within a singular narrative of violence and terror.

In his own experience, Viet Thanh Nguyen reclaims the identity and subject position of the refugee in order to reappropriate the term, redefine it, and moreover, interrogate the hospitality and the welcome tied to the refugee. In his *Financial Times* piece, Nguyen proclaims: “I am a refugee, an American, and a human being, which is important to proclaim, as there are many who think these identities cannot be reconciled.” What he stresses here is how multiple and differing identities can come together and complicates how often refugees are viewed as different from Americans and therefore not American and how the identity of the refugee should be easily casted aside when one obtains legal citizenship. Nguyen reiterates similar sentiments in his introduction to the edited collection *The Displaced* that was excerpted in advance in *Entertainment Weekly*, when he says: “I was once a refugee, although no one would mistake me for being a refugee now. Because of this, I insist on being called a refugee.” In his insistence on being called a refugee, Nguyen underscores how what it means to be an American often denies one’s own immigration and refugee story. In doing so, Nguyen echoes Ali Behdad’s *A Forgetful Nation* in which he argues that America enacts its own historical amnesia regarding immigration. From this position of the refugee, Nguyen forces the reading public to confront the refugee in ways different from and resisting against Trump’s racist and reductive portrayals of the refugee.

Instead of the nameless horde of immigrants and refugees threatening America, Nguyen personalizes and makes particular the refugee by writing about his own refugee experience. Nguyen does so through intimate details that document his family’s story as well as his own. A particularly poignant scene is when Nguyen is separated from his family. This is a story he

repeatedly mentions in interviews and press articles, and he provides a more detailed account in his introduction to the collection *The Displaced*:

To leave the refugee camp in Pennsylvania, the Vietnamese refugees needed American sponsors. One sponsor took my parents, another took my brother, a third took me.

For most of my life, I tried not to remember this moment except to note it in a factual way, as something that happened to us but left no damage, but that is not true. As a writer and a father of a son who is four years old, the same age I was when I became a refugee, I have to remember, or sometimes imagine, not just what happened, but what was felt. I have to imagine what it was like for a father and a mother to have their children taken away from them. I have to imagine what it was that I experienced, although I do remember being taken by my sponsor to visit my parents and howling at being taken back.

I remember being reunited with my parents after a few months. (EW)

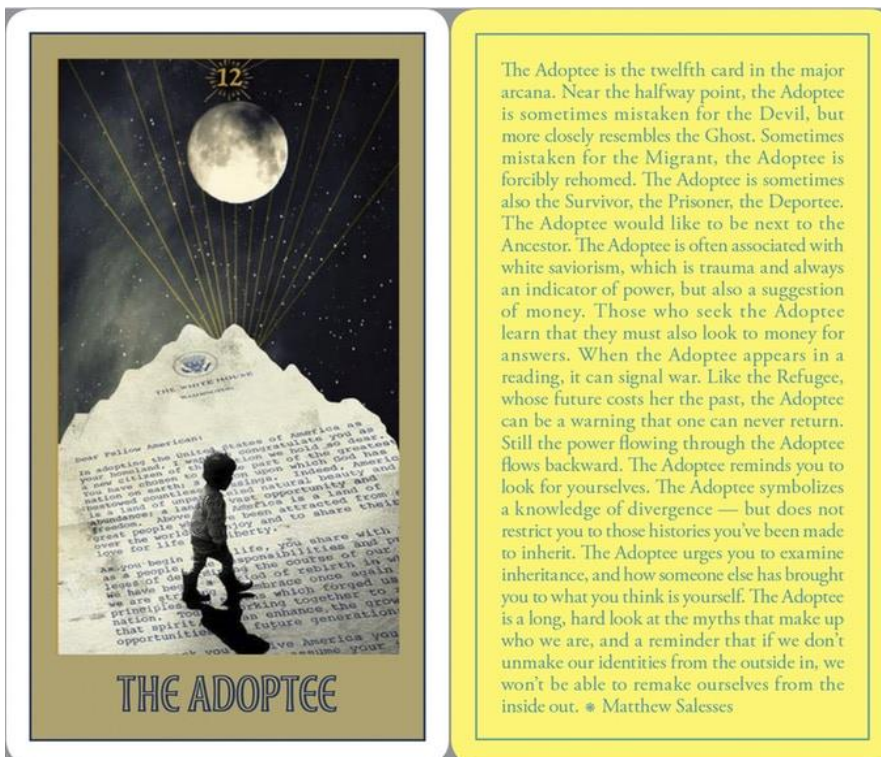
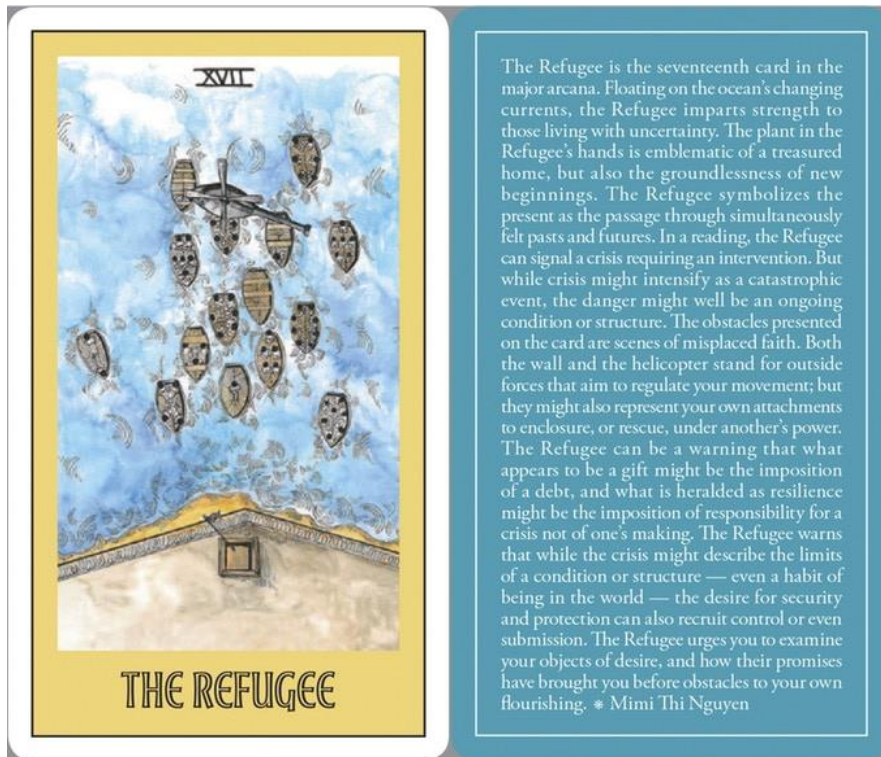
This traumatic separation is brought about by sponsorship, here specifically, an act that is almost an adoption where the conditions of hospitality are premised on the separation from and therefore temporary loss of family. That Nguyen's loss of Viet Nam not enough and that, to add onto this, the of his own family however short-lived calls attention to how adoption, sponsorship, and hospitality are conditioned on loss. Furthermore, this separation underscores the damage that is done to the refugee in the attempt to provide a welcome to the refugee, the immigrant, and the Other. The othering of the refugee is one that denies the refugee humanity; Nguyen explains: "The other exists in contradiction, or perhaps in paradox, being either invisible or hypervisible, but rarely just visible. Most of the time we do not see the other or see right through them,



whoever the other may be to us [. . .]. When we do see the other, the other is not truly human to us, by very definition of being an other, but is instead a stereotype, a joke, or a horror. In the case of the Vietnamese refugees in America, we embodied the specter of the Asian come to either serve or to threaten” (*EW*). In numerous interviews and in his non-fiction work, Nguyen insists upon telling and retelling his personal experience and his family’s as refugees as a way to insist upon his being a refugee and being a human being. In this way, Nguyen infuses the refugee with memories and sentiments and thus with a humanity that is often denied when the refugee is classified as the Other or when Trump’s rhetoric insists upon the refugee as threat.

Nguyen’s engagement with the term and the figure of the refugee by (re)claiming his refugee identity and the refugee’s humanity speaks is central to the *AALR*’s special issue *Open in Emergency* that seeks to address and provide resources for the traumas of hospitality and immigration and in particular for Asian American mental health. In how Nguyen seeks to imagine the refugee in different and multiple ways, *Open in Emergency* proposes a similar yet unconventional way of conceptualizing the refugee through tarot cards and fortune-telling. Attempting to tackle mental health within the Asian American community as well as the lack of Asian American-nuanced mental health practices, guest editor Mimi Khúc defines the project as approaching mental health from the Asian American perspective where the study and research on mental health often ignores Asian Americans as well as people of color in general: “Rather than trying to recalibrate our existing mental health resources to better engage race and Asian American experience, we decided to start on the opposite end, with what wellness, unwellness, and care actually look like in Asian American life” (*AALR* website). Khúc’s project then attempts to work through and envision how an Asian American practice of mental health would be conducted. In this way, the project already redefines approaches to mental health by opening

up to different and alternative practices. Drawing from “the spirit of fortune-telling so prevalent in our communities,” the special issue includes an Asian American Tarot deck, “[featuring] original art and text that work to reveal the hidden contours of our Asian American emotional, psychic, and spiritual lives, as well as the systems of violence that bear down upon them. Replacing the 22 archetypes of the traditional major arcana (e.g., the Empress, the Hierophant, the Wheel of Fortune, etc.) are figures drawn directly from Asian American life--the Migrant, the Foreigner, the Shopkeeper, the Adoptee, the Model Minority, the Desecrated Temple” (“Asian American Tarot: A Mental Health Project”). The redefinition of what it means to treat mental health by proposing fortune-telling and the tarot deck allows for the revision of the tarot deck itself to reflect the Asian American life and experience and moreover includes fortune-telling within mental health practices. As an alternative form of addressing mental health, fortune-telling allows for many and endless ways of defining, engaging, and articulating. To include Asian American figures is to allow for open-ended, flexible, and changing definitions, and in particular the Refugee and the Adoptee (Figures 3 and 4). The understanding of past, present, and future of the refugee, the adoptee, and the Asian American becomes fluid and shifting through the act of fortune-telling using this Asian American tarot deck.



**Figure 3, above.** “The Refugee” Asian American tarot card; Image by Simi Kang; Text by Mimi Thi Nguyen  
**Figure 4, below.** “The Adoptee” Asian American tarot card; Image by Monica Ong; Text by Matthew Salesses  
 Published in *Open in Emergency: A Special Issue on Asian American Mental Health*;  
 Guest edited by Mimi Khúc (AALR volume 7 issue 2, Fall/Winter 2016).

Both sides of the tarot card, the image and text, are open to interpretation. They are open-ended yet specifically defines the different, various, and varying ways that the refugee and adoptee experience Asian American life and the “systems of violence.” The vague yet delineated descriptions allow for the complex and complicated ways that the refugee and adoptee are constructed, deployed, reappropriated, and rendered otherwise. The act of fortune-telling therefore allows for the individual to read their past experiences, present circumstances, and future hopes onto the cards, thereby recognizing themselves through these key Asian American figures. In this way, I contend that the tarot cards function with the system of fortune-telling that propose alternative ways to find meaning. Moreover, I argue that the specific tarot cards articulate the figures of the refugee and the adoptee within how I configure the adoptee and the sponsored as aporetic figures within kinship structures of hospitality. Where I position the adoptee and the sponsored within the ambivalence and ambiguity of hospitality, kinship, and mourning, the tarot cards affirm and insist upon the productiveness of ambiguity and of not fixing categories. My own work illustrates how the hospitable welcome can also operate as hostile discrimination; how healing can invite scars and illness; how the promise of family means loss and is constructed through separation and reunion.

In closing with Viet Thanh Nguyen and the *Open in Emergency* Asian American tarot deck, I situate my work alongside their projects that strives to redefine through the different articulations and engagements with the refugee, the adoptee, and the sponsored. What they have shown is the power of articulating and representing the Vietnamese American refugee and the Asian American immigrant experiences. It is through fictional and non-fictional work and through the tarot cards and fortune-telling that refugees and adoptees can begin to face, process, and voice the trauma inherent in being the guest and immigrant in ways that complicate and

critique hospitality, assimilation, and belonging. Similar the Adoptee tarot card, I hope that my study of Vietnamese adoptees and sponsored family members produces a “knowledge of divergence” and therefore serves to provoke careful and considered studies of refugees and immigrants.

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