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CHAPTER 21

"The Deep Root Snapped": Reproductive Violence and Family Un/Making in Quan Barry's *She Weeps Each Time You're Born*

Mai-Linh K. Hong

Rabbit, the psychic Vietnamese protagonist of Quan Barry's *She Weeps Each Time You're Born* (2014), is besieged by myriad voices of the dead imploring her to "*listen*" (266, original emphasis). Not entirely unlike her fictional character, Barry juggles many possible narratives and subject positions when she enters the discursive space of "Vietnam." A biracial poet and fiction writer of African American and Vietnamese descent, Barry was born in Vietnam in 1973, adopted as a baby by an American family, and raised in the United States on Boston's North Shore; as an adult, she has returned to Vietnam several times as a visitor. If, as Barry suggests, her novel provides a fuller narrative of twentieth-century Vietnam for an American audience, re-presenting the postcolonial nation as more than "a metaphor for quagmire," *She Weeps* is still a literary work rooted in the long aftermath of the US-involved wars in Southeast Asia.[1] Underlying the text is a question that surfaces explicitly only once: "Please, is this about me?" an Amerasian adoptee character named Amy Quan (which is also Barry's name) implores her tour guide and interpreter in Vietnam when they visit Rabbit (255). The brief exchange is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, given the stereotype of the self-centered American abroad, but it is also poignant and pointed, for the (mostly) third-person narrator explains that now, decades after war's end, "the woman's kind were starting to come back. … [T]housands of adults who had been given up as children

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during the war were returning to the country where they'd been born" (254–255). The novel is set almost entirely in Vietnam and is, in a sense, Barry's literary return to her country of birth, framed at the start and end by the fictional Amy Quan's search for her origins, which the narrator describes as "long and arduous and weirdly joyful" (256).

Barry's Vietnam is a historical landscape filled with thwarted, improbable, and magical lineages and kinships spanning several generations. It is a nation whose reproductive capacities are made grotesque and fantastical by colonialism, war, forced migration, and the lasting toxicity of Agent Orange—conditions that have been among Vietnam's major, embattled realities for the past century. The novel is intricately researched, which shows in explanatory asides and a bibliography; but, beyond the carefully woven-in historical information, Vietnam in *She Weeps* is also a place of speculative possibilities. Frequently, grief and yearning for loved ones are answered—though not satisfactorily or without heavy cost to characters—by recourse to the magical and supernatural realms. Magical mothering acts, such as spirit-impelled adoption and sudden lactation, and psychic communications with the dead lead to the formation of non-biological kinships and communities throughout the novel. The novel's use of these particular magical realist tropes provides an imaginative counterpoint to real-life histories of violent family separation, erasure, and "organized forgetting" that surround the war in Vietnam, particularly its effects on Vietnamese women.[2]

Although the novel is not autobiographical, the author's inclusion of a semblance of herself draws attention to adoption as both a real-life, material condition out of which the novel arises and an important theme and recurring plot element within the novel. This essay builds on insights by scholars of critical adoption studies, an emergent field with close ties to Asian American studies, feminist theory, and critical race studies, to contextualize the novel's exploration of colonial and wartime family making and unmaking. In the first section, I offer *reproductive violence* as a rubric that links and situates the many forms of family *un*making that take place in the novel, and I place reproductive violence within current scholarly discourses about adoption. In the second section, I look to the adaptive and adoptive kinship formations that emerge in the wake of that violence and examine how such family making is represented. The novel's engagements with adoption, particularly through magical realism, may be understood as part of a search for "new configurations of survivability and possibility" in the face of widespread reproductive violence.[3]

Critical Adoption Studies and Reproductive Violence

The novel centers on the life of a woman, Rabbit, who is born in her mother's grave and can hear voices of the dead, and her adoptive mother, Qui, who is able to nurse Rabbit (and, at times, other motherless children) with

fantastically restorative breast milk. Qui is Rabbit's "adoptive" mother not in any formal or legalistic sense—as the term might be commonly understood in the United States—but in the sense that she, through her actions, assumes the lifelong role of providing for and protecting Rabbit after Rabbit's birth mother dies. The adoption of Rabbit occurs through supernatural intervention. Qui, a despondent teenage orphan living with her grandmother Huyen, is visited by the spirit of Little Mother, who has died of malaria while pregnant. Little Mother's apparition buys a jar of honey and then whispers in Qui's ear, "*be her mother*" (31, original emphasis). The next morning, Qui wakes up lactating, "the front of her shirt … damp as if she had pressed two wet hands to her chest," and she "moved with a newfound energy she hadn't shown in months" (32). Huyen understands the change in her granddaughter as a sign that they must pack their belongings and set out on a journey, which eventually leads to the newborn Rabbit's unearthing from Little Mother's grave. Three days old when she is discovered, Rabbit is already cursed with the ability to hear spirits of the dead who are still trapped on earth. It is 1975, the war is ending, and the psychic child must grow up learning how to "[i]n a country full of ghosts … distinguish between the voices of the bodied and the voices of the spectral" (44). This vexed positioning later earns the adult Rabbit some years of acclaim as Vietnam's unofficial state psychic, but it is also a lifelong challenge; she eventually ends up under house arrest after uncovering truths the government would rather keep buried.

Rabbit is not the only character cared for by a non-biological mother. Not only does Qui take on the role of Rabbit's mother by immediately nursing her, but Huyen newly understands herself to be obligated to "serve" Qui, the orphaned granddaughter she previously abused, redefining their adoptive relationship from that time on (32). Near the novel's end, Rabbit continues the cycle of maternal substitution by discovering and nursing a pair of conjoined, newborn twins whose mother has died birthing them. Thus, adoption in a general, non-bureaucratic sense—as a method of non-genetic kinship formation arising from necessity—is central to the text. The adoptive bond is corporealized and made visible by the repeating trope of magical breastfeeding, which creates a biological, if not genetic, kinship between (adoptive) mother and child. Interestingly, the text itself is a product of a quite different, historically specific form of adoption, that is, the wartime, transnational, transracial adoption of its Vietnam-born author that gives rise to her decision as an adult to learn and write about Vietnam. The distance between the two types of adoption is significant, as the latter may be steeped in ethical dilemmas, elaborated below, while the former, more present in this novel, largely escapes (or appears to escape) those particular dilemmas by being domestic and intraracial. A burgeoning scholarly literature on adoption has broadened the ways we can understand adoption and as such offers a fruitful critical vocabulary for reading this text and untangling the forms of family un/making involved.

Scholars of "critical adoption studies" have developed intersectional, justice-oriented approaches to adoption that reveal the power relations structuring today's global adoption industry and practices. These scholars call attention to the coercive and violent conditions that precede and sustain adoption, which is understood to be "a market, a reproductive technology, and a method of family disintegration and creation," shaped in each of these functions by global structural inequalities.[4] Kimberly McKee's and others' crucial reminder that adoption is about family *disintegration* as much as creation—that it forecloses one set of kinships while it establishes another—inspires my use of the double-sided term "family un/making." Family un/making insists on a contextual understanding of "the decisions made and actions taken by people who create and sustain a family," to borrow from Catherine Ceniza Choy's delineation of "global family making," that is, family making that "consciously" crosses borders of race and nation.[5] Adoption *as an analytic*, which I am deploying here, does not only refer to the formal creation of a bionormative, "as-if" kinship bond between two individuals where none existed before.[6] It also indexes the often unjust conditions that make adoption possible by constraining birth mothers' ability to parent (or to choose not to); impacting their health and life expectancy; and leading birth mothers to relinquish children they wish to keep. To be clear, my approach to Barry's text does not ascribe to its author the critical stance of these scholars toward adoption (or assume any particular agenda or viewpoint in Barry's work), but I do place her text among the global production and circulation of narratives about adoption that shape public understandings of family and kinship.

Critical adoption studies sometimes refer to women's "reproductive destiny," an expression that highlights the many shades of volition and constraint under which women make decisions (or have decisions made for them) concerning their reproductive lives. McKee defines reproductive destiny as women's "ability to assert agency and control over their reproductive autonomy," and asks, crucially, "Whose Reproductive Destinies Matter?".[7] McKee calls upon reproductive justice as an ethical framework, rooted in theory and activism by women of color, that makes visible the ways adoption may differently enable or thwart particular women's reproductive destinies, reflecting those women's subject positions with respect to colonialism, capitalism, structural racism, and geopolitical precarity. Transnational and transracial adoptions tend to privilege the reproductive destinies of white, middle-class women in the Global North to the detriment of birth parents and children who are poorer, browner, and more vulnerable to political catastrophes such as war, famine, and entrenched poverty.[8] Dorothy Roberts describes adoption as "a political institution reflecting social inequities, including race, class, and gender hierarchies, and serving powerful ideologies and interests."[9] That is not to say that transnational and/or transracial adoption is ethically wrong or harmful per se, but it is to understand prevalent adoption practices

and institutions as being, as Laura Briggs writes, "always layered with pain, coercion, and lack of access to necessary resources, with relatives (usually single mothers) who are vulnerable"—even in cases where adoption is "the best outcome in a bad situation."[10]

Building on such insights, I focus here on specific manifestations and effects of reproductive violence in Barry's novel. By *reproductive violence* I mean the interwoven conditions of power, coercion, and bodily and mental harm that disrupt women's reproductive destinies at all stages of reproduction, including conception, gestation, birth, childrearing, and family making. Critical adoption studies often discuss the "violence" of adoption in a broader sense that may encompass many types of harm, individual and collective, mental and physical. As Kit Myers articulates it, "Those at the forefront of activism, practice, and research understand that love and adoptive family-making are always already wedded to varying forms of structural, symbolic, and traumatic forms of violence."[11] McKee explains that the "violence" that adoption "enacts on women's reproductive autonomy," particularly women of color and in the Global South, "stems from power differentials that exist between adoptive parent and birth parent, receiving country and sending country (in cases of international adoption), as well as the conditions that reduce adoption to reductive narratives of gratitude and humanitarian child-saving."[12] My use of the term reproductive violence aims to home in further on how, concretely, structural forces act upon women's bodies and autonomy to foreclose or compromise particular women's reproductive destinies. Reproductive violence is distinct from and broader than sexual violence, for although rape, sexual abuse, and sexual assault are forms of reproductive violence, this rubric encompasses many different violations of women's autonomy and health relating to their reproductive and family lives.

Expressive literature like *She Weeps* has the capacity to dramatize and narrativize such forms of violence, making visible their possible effects on individuals and families—and by extension, on communities, the nation, and the diaspora—over many generations. Barry's novel catalogs the universe of reproductive violence affecting Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic women from French colonialism to the present, including virtually all characters in this female-centric novel. The text is relentless in this regard: It includes scenes of wartime rape, forced abortion, involuntary family separations (through forced labor, premature death, forced migration, incarceration, etc.), late-term miscarriage (and the mother's subsequent suicide, resulting partly from cultural pressures), maternal death from childbirth, destitute orphans, and babies and fetuses shockingly deformed by Agent Orange. The rubric of reproductive violence allows us to understand such seemingly disparate occurrences as part of the web of coercive conditions that compromise Vietnamese women's reproductive autonomy, with deep impacts on their lives and identities and those of their children, including those raised abroad by adoptive parents. The novel portrays a bleak, grief-filled universe

for biological parents and offspring who wish to remain together: basically, none do. Their inability to do so is structural and historical, not the result of random, individual tragedies resulting from misfortune. Naming reproductive violence as such allows us to identify manifestations of it as consequences of structural inequality, and to make clear that colonialism and war affect women in particular ways that tend to be minimized or altogether missing in official histories.

Among the numerous women's life stories woven into *She Weeps* are those of several forebears of Rabbit, mostly female, each of whom conveys to Rabbit a different but related legacy of colonial and military violence. Tu, her father and sole male relative, is an anchoring but transitory presence; he is there for her unearthing but then largely missing until much later. In the years between, she is cared for by Qui first and foremost, and also Huyen and Tu's mother, Bà. The five of them form a makeshift family unit brought together by the discovery of the newborn Rabbit. Shortly after Rabbit is born, Tu returns from battle and encounters Qui and Huyen on the road (after their visitation by Little Mother); he brings them to his mother's house, where he learns of his wife's death. That night, the group is alerted to Rabbit's existence by noises heard first by Qui, and once Rabbit is pulled from the grave, Qui steps into the void left by Little Mother. The newly assembled family departs in search of safety, joining millions of displaced Vietnamese "fleeing without knowing exactly where, people pushing south as if the just the word *south* could save them" (64).

In the chaos that surrounds the war's end, the women are largely unaligned with any side of the conflict. Observing the two Vietnamese flags, Qui "wasn't sure which was prettier. The north's solid red with the one yellow star or the southern flag of the Republic of Vietnam, three red stripes running horizontally in a field of yellow" (63). For Qui, the flags are aesthetic objects divorced from any specific political possibilities. Only Tu, a Viet-Cong soldier, is marked as taking sides, and even he is more compelled to fight than committed to it. He is soon sent to battle the Khmer Rouge, leaving Bà and Huyen to care for Rabbit and for Qui, who is barely more than a child herself. Huyen wonders briefly whether they can forego further migration and instead resettle there, near the sea: "she would take Qui out to the ocean, teach her to wade into the surf at low tide, throw a net. They were mountain people, but they could learn" (64). In a starkly divided world, the women live lives of adaptation and care, focused on each other's survival, not on ideology. Yet in the novel their struggles are clearly, constantly, sometimes even pedantically historicized, demonstrating that although their day-to-day lives may be experienced as non-political, their fates are inescapably shaped by political violence.

Among the central female characters, the elderly Bà is the most clearly rendered link to Vietnam's prewar, colonial past. She first appears early in the novel, having recently buried her daughter-in-law and survived military

incursions on her town; it is during their migration, while Bà is dying, that the story of Bà's youth is conveyed to the reader through flashbacks. The flashbacks are triggered by Rabbit embracing her grandmother, "Bà's life spooling into her granddaughter in the span of a human kiss" (67). A distinctive, twelve-page sequence narrated in second person suggests that Rabbit momentarily experiences everything Bà recalls. (The passage is the longest of a handful in the novel in which the narration shifts to second person as if speaking directly to Rabbit.) Rabbit's inheritance from her paternal grandmother includes the psychological legacies of colonial violence, as Bà's memories become Rabbit's. As a young teenager, Bà and her mother leave home to work on a French colonial rubber plantation, tricked by a recruiter with promises of good pay. The work is brutal and exploitative with abuses of all kinds including sexual abuse of female laborers. Bà's mother is advised by other women to accept a child's half-pay for Bà's labor, even though she performs an adult's work, to make the daughter less of a target for rape. Such gendered violence is thus a condition of colonial extraction, as Bà's labor is coercively devalued in exchange for possible protection from rape. Bà is eventually selected as a housemaid while her mother remains in the field; henceforth, mother and daughter rarely see each other. Life as a plantation house servant is luxurious by comparison with field work and somewhat elevates Bà's status in the colonial hierarchy, but the socialization Bà undergoes further distances her from her mother. After months of separation, "you barely recognize her, the lines in her dark brown face as if gouged with an awl. The first time you call your mother *Maman*, she looks stricken, as if you've just hit her" (76). Bà and her mother came to the plantation to escape dire poverty, only to encounter worse—slavery-like working conditions, involuntary separation, and the destruction of their bond with each other. The separation and Bà's involuntary acculturation in French are both experienced as violence to the mother–daughter pair, with the figurative gouging of an awl and strike to the face.

As Bà grows up on the plantation, she finds even her chosen kinships—her own would-be family making—curtailed by violence stemming from the same source as that which separated her from her mother. She meets and falls in love with an older, male field laborer who turns out to be a local resistance leader sought by French authorities after a failed revolt. Their love defies colonial order (made present, again, by the interjection of French language), as well as logic and understanding: "Nobody. *Personne*. Not a single soul will ever understand the unworldly rapport between you and this man" (74). While their deep attachment persists, they are parted by his imprisonment and never reunite. (Much later in life, after the man becomes a healer, he meets and attempts to treat the very ill Little Mother, whom he recognizes as Bà's daughter-in-law.) Bà is arrested, interrogated, and tortured in the sweep following the revolt, a fictionalized version of the August Revolution of 1945, because of her association; she bears the scar of a cigarette burn on her chest

until her death. Colonialism interferes with both Bà's and her mother's reproductive lives, wellbeing, and relationships, and in the end destroys both women's abilities to make and sustain the families they wish for. The plantation scenes succinctly illustrate the many ways colonialism violates the reproductive destinies of Bà and her mother. Like other women, they inhabit gendered vulnerabilities under colonial rule—constantly at risk of sexual violence, with their kinship formations disrupted by demands for cheap labor and subservience. The historically and politically constituted traumas of Bà's life carry stark implications for Bà as a rooted subject: Even in her final years, she is seen burying her daughter-in-law, separated from her son, forced into hiding, and fleeing the aftermath of a disastrous postcolonial war.

Qui, who belongs to the postcolonial generation that grew up during the Vietnam War, experiences horrific reproductive violence prior to her anointment as Rabbit's mother. The reader infers early on that Qui has been traumatized but learns the details only gradually through flashbacks: In her early teenage years, Qui was raped and impregnated by a soldier and then tricked by her grandmother into a gruesome home abortion involving the insertion of a cypress cone. It is suggested that the abortion took place "months" before her visitation by Little Mother's ghost (32). Huyen believed ending the pregnancy "was the only course of action. Wartime was no place for a child to have a baby"; Qui had no choice in the matter (140). The abortion is graphically recounted midway through the novel in a flashback interspersed with narration of an ill-fated attempt to escape Vietnam by sea that takes place several years after. Qui, Rabbit (then a young child), and Huyen are huddled in the hold of a small fishing boat with scores of other refugees during a storm:

> They felt themselves being lifted. Huyen threw more dirt over the bloody spot growing between her granddaughter's legs. Somehow they all knew if they could just make it to the other side of the wave. The blood so thick it gleamed black. It wasn't like anything Huyen had ever seen. Qui whimpered. Rabbit latched on to her body looking for the peace of the world. Huyen assumed it had been flushed out in the first blood, but now it was just coming. She could tell by the way Qui lay panting. Riding the wave all the way to the top, Rabbit sucking on her chest. Then the deep root snapped. A body lay floating in a river. A family was swept overboard out into the open sea. … A tiny golden fish glittered in the blood. Huyen scooped it up in a bowl and swept it into the fire. (141–142)

The longer passage from which these lines are drawn alternates between the abortion and the boat journey. The two, commingled occurrences are scenes of profound family destruction that specifically crystallize kinships broken—"the deep root snapped"—by war. In one instance, the "tiny" fetus is "swept … into the fire," foreclosing Qui's ability to become a (genetic) mother in that time and place. Huyen believes she is doing what is best

for her granddaughter, since "[w]artime was no place" for that particular reproductive destiny, but her actions compound the girl's trauma. In the other instance, an entire, nameless family of refugees seeking safety together is obliterated in a brief sentence, "swept overboard out into the open sea." Because Barry merges the scenes, from the reader's perspective the refugee boat, in short order, transports and disposes of varied human remnants of the cyclical, family-destroying operations of colonialism and war.

The repeated transitive verb "to sweep" encapsulates the predominant relationship between these characters and the inescapable, top-down forces of history that carry them in the novel. In another mid-novel scene, a man being interrogated in a reeducation camp chooses silence rather than to divulge names, "[a] river sweeping him onward toward wherever it would bear him," with that "wherever" capturing both his and the refugees' vulnerability (128). Indeed, in the boat scene, it is not specified *which* family goes overboard in the storm; several do, having climbed up on deck rather than risk drowning in the hold. Their deaths, like countless other Boat People casualties, are anonymous and unrecorded. The refugees are uprooted and untethered from their homes, families, and communities, without a political identity they can claim. On one hand, they appear to be, as in Hannah Arendt's classic definition of refugees, "nothing but human beings."[13] On the other hand, it is not bare survival that drives many of the refugees, but their spouses and children: One woman throws herself overboard in grief, believing her young son has fallen from the boat and drowned; later, he is discovered in the hold, ill but alive, now motherless. Another woman, recently widowed, also becomes suicidal (though she is killed another way before she can take her own life). One family cannot bear to leave its ancestors buried in Vietnam, so unearths their remains to bring along: bones clanging in a canvas bag, "[t]he entire Dinh family tree uprooted and being carried across the sea" (155). Like numerous characters over the course of the novel, the refugees fear the loss of family above all else.

The refugee boat is thus depicted as a liminal space in which families are unmade and made, where kinships are affirmed, redefined, strained, and destroyed, often all at once. Even the boat's provenance is overdetermined: A doctor, desperate for his family to escape Vietnam, acquires the boat by murdering its previous owner. Although he hides the fact, Rabbit hears the terrified spirit trapped onboard—"Please … Take whatever you want"—and discerns the vessel's history (139). After the storm, in a karmic twist, the doctor is shot dead during a pirate attack. Soon after, the boat hits a sea mine and is destroyed; most remaining passengers die in the explosion or drown. The victims include Huyen, the doctor's grief-stricken family, and Rabbit's childhood friend, Son, a little boy whose forlorn ghost henceforth haunts Rabbit. The epically doomed boat and its passengers are representative of post-Vietnam-War refugee experiences in that they meet not just one, but *nearly all* of the most disastrous fates to befall the Boat People in real life. Among

the wreckage at sea, the novel reaches a cruelly ironic turning point: After floating for days, Qui and Rabbit are picked up by a (North) Vietnamese navy ship and returned to shore, where they must begin life again, their family now reduced to two.

For the next two decades in Vietnam, with "tens of hundreds of thousands of millions" of ghosts clamoring to speak to Rabbit, the women have only each other to turn to among the living (44). Even the living are repositories for the stories of the dead. In everyday interactions, Rabbit is accosted by visions of loss experienced by those with whom she comes in contact. Patting the shoulder of her van driver, Rabbit suddenly sees his wife's death in childbirth, "a woman in horrible pain, a body stuck inside another body, the pelvis starting to crack, Viet with both hands up in the darkness all the way past the wrist" (226). Such trigger-like flash imagery sets the traumatic rhythm of her life as well as the novel, as each person she encounters spills their particular grief. But even as the novel paints this universe of near-constant family unmaking, it also engages in various forms of adaptive (including adoptive) family making. New, non-biogenetic kinships emerge, often improbably and sometimes fantastically, in the crucibles of war and forced migration. The next section of the essay considers how such speculative family making may function as a partly critical, partly sentimental response to reproductive violence, in particular to traumatic family separation.

Adaptive (and Adoptive) Family Making in War's Aftermath

When Barry departed Vietnam via adoption at the age of six months, it was not of her own volition, and in this she has something in common with the millions of refugees who fled Southeast Asia in the late 1970s through the 1980s. Barry has previously written about various separations from Vietnam—of refugees and adoptees—as well as about people who remained. Indeed, *She Weeps*, her first novel after four books of poetry, is a seeming roll call of such individuals, all with different experiences and perspectives, all stakeholders in the construction of a non-American-centric, modern Vietnamese history; in this respect, it echoes some of her prior work addressing Vietnam.

In a nine-part poem published in 2000, "Child of the Enemy," the speaker is a black Amerasian adoptee marked at birth by "the dark meat of my face. A love child, child of perfidy, allegiance / split like a door."[14] The enjambed lines may be read to signify either conflicted national allegiance or the actual child "split like a door," a metaphor for one's identity turned violently back on itself; such violence is already hinted in the speaker's face of "dark meat." The poem opens with a childhood nightmare about "the ones that got away, far away / under the wreck of water" as well as their "kin left rotting on the shore" (25). "[R]otting kin" may recall drowned Boat People who washed

ashore, but it refers also to those who never left, who continued to live with persecution, poverty, and worse in Vietnam. It also refers to the speaker's own kin: An "obituary" for her "biological mother" appears as a later section of the poem (29). Importantly, the rotting ones are not individuals but "kin." Their presence in the poem is defined by their relationship to those who "left" them. These lines center the survivor's guilt and the grief of ones now "far away," their families unmade by forced migration, their consciences "split" as much as their identities and allegiances. All of this, too, is reproductive violence, and it is deeply connected to still more reproductive violence described in the poem: A later section reveals that the speaker's mother was raped in a rice paddy, "the night bleeding like a wound / the soldier digging into her with the dead / weight of his lust," and that the speaker may be a product of this violation (28).

As a "child of the enemy" herself—*which* enemy depends on your perspective—Barry could reasonably be considered both victim and beneficiary of American violence abroad: America's imperial militarism likely occasioned her birth *and* her separation from her birth family, yet she is also cognizant of moving through the world with the rights and privileges of an American. She describes in an interview, for instance, encountering a disfigured man in Vietnam, probably "a victim of napalm," and thinking, "I did that. I can't run and hide and say that I don't have some kind of responsibility in that."[15] But, as with other Amerasians who resettled in the United States through adoption or otherwise, Barry's "responsibility" is vexed, multidimensional, and crossed with her own and others' abjection.

A telling moment arose in public discourse surrounding the Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1988 (AHA), a law that permitted mixed-race Vietnamese children of American servicemen to immigrate to the United States accompanied by certain close relatives. Vietnamese Amerasians born during the war numbered over 100,000 by some estimates; around 30,000 became beneficiaries of the AHA along with 80,000 claimed relatives, before the Act was defunded in 1993 due to accusations of widespread fraud.[16] The AHA initially enjoyed some popular support owing partly to American media representations of the children as "poor, desperate, and despised" in their homeland because they were racially marked as offspring of (North) Vietnam's former enemy.[17] However, once the AHA migrations were underway, some officials and observers expressed concern that secondary beneficiaries were gaming the policy by feigning kinship with Amerasians.[18] While it may have been the case that many asserting kinship were not *genetically* related to the primary beneficiaries, the idea that "[f]raud swamped the program"—that is, that an overwhelming number of AHA beneficiaries intentionally misled the US government to reap undeserved benefits—is revealing.[19] Such framing reflects a confrontation between real-life, adaptive arrangements of care and kinship among postwar Vietnamese on one hand and, on the other, America's "investment in a certain kind of affective,

'natural' family," which bolstered the United States' efforts to portray itself "as a benevolent and responsible actor in the world."[20] In addition to the fact that Vietnamese cultural understandings of family relationships did not always align with American ones,[21] many Vietnamese had lost biological relatives and lived with non-biological kin out of necessity. They often formed deep and lasting loyalties to individuals with whom they had survived war and other traumas, and whom they would not subsequently abandon. It is unknown how many such adaptive/adoptive families, born of loss and displacement, may have been considered "fraudulent" by the US government, which offered no way to account for improvised Vietnamese family making in the wake of war.

What is clear is that post-Vietnam-War American cultural politics virtually required that US political leaders represent America's engagements with Vietnam—including the AHA—as demonstrations of moral righteousness. This meant the dominant narrative about the AHA's passage and, ultimately, shutdown was: America charitably offered new beginnings to the unfortunate Amerasians, who had been forsaken by their Vietnamese countrymen, and the Vietnamese treacherously took advantage of that generosity. These narratives relied on long-standing stereotypes of Asian (or "Oriental") people as deceitful and inscrutable, a "yellow peril" whose machinations endanger Americans. But they were also historically specific, as dominant representations of the AHA fell in line with what Yến Lê Espiritu has called the "we-win-even-when-we-lose syndrome," that is, the cultural twists and turns by which America has gradually transformed its narratives of loss and failure in the Vietnam War into narratives of moral or ideological triumph—sometimes to such an extent that America emerged as a hapless victim rather than as a foreign aggressor.[22] By 1999, a *USA Today* survey of 500 American teenagers found that "only one-third said they learned anything about the war in school, and half said the United States had won."[23] This was the state of popular knowledge about Vietnam despite (or because of) the fact that American culture had self-reflexively obsessed about the Vietnam War for a quarter-century, generating thousands of books, movies, memoirs, and journalistic think-pieces that were, in the end, mostly about America.[24]

Barry's poem "Child of the Enemy" and the cultural politics of the AHA help situate Barry's literary imaginings of wartime and postwar family un/making in Vietnam and in the diaspora. Barry's poem and novel both take up the perspective of an Amerasian adoptee—culturally and by citizenship an American, but one with vexed roots in Vietnam. Having grown up among mostly white-American-centric representations of Vietnam rendered from masculine perspectives, Barry approaches her novel as a project of epistemological remediation as well as an artistic project. *She Weeps* is decidedly *not* history, but it engages in a kind of historical revisionism that tackles Americans' narrow view of Vietnam, which focalizes only the 1960s–1970s. The fictional Amy Quan's tour guide explains when they reach the house where Rabbit resides, "I just want to show her [Amy Quan] everything there is to see in

Vietnam. … This is the country where she was born"—a country she has not really "see[n]" until her adulthood (253). And just as the tour guide provides Amy Quan with a tenuous, filtered view into the country of her birth, choosing sights and interpreting for her, so Amy Quan, the author's stand-in, guides the reader as a not-quite-native informant. Interviewed about the book, Barry notes that "there really isn't that much talk about the American war there. … I was trying to show that Vietnam, you know, is so much larger than just what our preconceptions of it are."[25] However, although one of Barry's narrative strategies is to decenter the "American war," it is hard to say the novel exits the shadow of the war: With Amy Quan's search for origins framing the novel at its start and end, *She Weeps* is still clearly produced through the diasporic consciousness of one who seeks, in part, a fuller accounting of her own, complex, and violently obscured origin.

Even if such an accounting may be sought, that does not mean it can or will be "found." Early in the novel, the narrator advises, "This is not a story of what's missing. Some things just have yet to be found" (6). The search without a clear conclusion may actually be an epistemological model that suits the novel's thematic focus on adoption and origins. As Kimberly Leighton observes, it is often assumed within a neoliberal framework that adoptees want to know their "real" origins—that is, facts and whereabouts of their birth, perhaps even coming face to face with long-lost genetic relatives—and that the search for origins will lead to "the self's reunion with its truth, a truth the denial of which has limited the freedom thought to be possible through authentic self-knowledge."[26] Leighton argues, drawing on Foucault, that a different, more ethically sound paradigm of search may be in order: one that does not automatically privilege genetic origins, but rather may unveil "new modes of being, and with an attitude of curiosity.[27] A preferable mode of search would aim "to know the self through *genealogical*—rather than *genetic*—narratives of identity" and would generate "a continuous and open-ended *process of identity-making*."[28] It is precisely such an "open-ended process of identity-making," along with kinships that are "*genealogical*—rather than *genetic*," that distinguish Barry's speculative family making from adoption literature grounded more in probable realism than magical realism.

The genealogical understands kinship to be created, enacted, imagined, and experienced, rather than predetermined by shared DNA. Kinship may arise out of, for example, mutual reliance and mutual care, without any basis in genetic similarity. This is crucial because, as scholars of adoption have often asserted, whatever power imbalances unjustly pervade the present adoption industry, non-biogenetic kinship formation still can open positive and liberatory new avenues for social organization. As Margaret Homans describes in an introduction to a recent journal special issue on critical adoption studies, "[a]doption can adhere rigidly to nuclear family norms, regulating sexuality and contributing to the realization of racist projects, but it can also enable nonnormative family forms and it can queer the family. … Adoptees and adoptive families can be the same as everyone else; and they can be cyborgs,

hybrids, uncanny assemblages."[29] Part of the work of critical adoption studies is to "imagin[e] different ways toward justice and dignity for everyone in nonnormative families—where social life does not require social death."[30] This means, among other things, that to identify adoption's pitfalls should not necessitate forsaking the felt attachments that it produces, for adoption not only provides family where family is missing, but also allows us to reimagine family in potentially more just and dignified ways for all.

Such reimaginings are fundamentally speculative. As such they fit comfortably within the universe of speculative fiction, a "super-genre" that includes magical realism: Speculative texts "interrogate[] an empirical reality we presume we know through the strategies of discontinuity, change and difference," with the effect of enabling writers and readers "to identify historical patterns, amplify contemporary social and political problems and envision futures in which alternate approaches to justice may be imagined."[31] Reproductive violence not only endangers women and children—though that would certainly be enough to make it a crucially important topic—but may constrain an entire people's sense of futurity, that is, their sense of *having* a future in which to thrive and reproduce physically and culturally. Responding to such a precarious futurity, Barry's magical realism seems to ask: What kinds of family making are possible in the midst of geopolitical calamity, in the midst of death, forced migration, and unwanted family separation? What forms of community and rootedness may evolve from the ashes of war? For women of color in particular, given a world whose social and political structures are inimical to our flourishing, and whose histories we barely survive, we must ask the urgent and profound question posed by Nikki Thelathia Young, a scholar of ethics and black queer families: "how can we BE together?".[32] Adoption may after all be a precondition for more ethical ways of BEing together, now and in the future. If that is the case, how might we reimagine adoption in more just and transparent ways? How might such a reimagined adoption enable new forms of survival, futurity, continuity, and kinship?

Barry's novel is not about any particular possible configuration of "the future"; rather, it works to reimagine the conditions of futurity itself. Such conditions include past and present forms of reproductive life that evolve in the shadows of violence and injustice. In this sense, it makes sense that the adaptive/adoptive kinships of Barry's novel are importantly tied to other, speculative forms of social being and belonging. Rabbit's ability to hear and occasionally see spirits, linking the realms of the living and dead, is a fairly common magical realist trope, but what makes *She Weeps* less conventional is its configuration of the time-tested communication-with-the-dead trope not as an individual gift/curse, but as a collective condition. Qui and Rabbit function as a dyadic pair; they are inseparable from the moment of Rabbit's unearthing, and they possess interlocking supernatural abilities. Months after her rape and abortion, Qui acquires from Little Mother's ghost the ability to produce plentiful breast milk with extraordinary healing qualities. Corporeal

but symbolic, Qui's milk is repeatedly described as a "ray of light" or "silvery light," adding to its mystical quality (51, 212). When the two are adrift at sea after the disastrous attempt to escape Vietnam, Qui's breast milk keeps Rabbit alive. Qui nurses Rabbit well into Rabbit's adulthood. The grown-up Rabbit becomes a celebrity psychic acclaimed (and later rejected) by the Vietnamese government. She is frequently depleted and traumatized by unsettled spirits who everywhere beg her to listen, and by grieving people who visit her in hopes of hearing from departed relatives. After the most difficult days of sharing others' trauma, "Qui would close the doors of the house and pull the weary Rabbit to her chest, the official bearer of the dead limp like a rag doll" (212). The milk's restorative powers enable Rabbit to continue the work of hearing the dead and bringing closure to the living. Rabbit's psychic ability manifests as a shared condition requiring particular kinds of feminine care and labor to sustain it—requiring, that is, *family* in the figure of Qui.

None of that is to say that the version of "family" that Rabbit and Qui enact for each other is especially liberatory. It is, in fact, a fairly conservative, bionormative kinship model that fetishizes the maternal body. Qui is a mostly opaque character who rarely speaks; indeed, on the day of Little Mother's visitation, when Qui relays to Huyen the instruction from Little Mother, "[i] t was the last thing Qui ever said" (32). The moment Qui assumes motherhood is simultaneously the moment of her silencing, and as Rabbit's wet nurse she is literally consumed by the unsung labor of caregiving. She appears not quite human at times—with her muteness and "savage beauty … bones chiseled like a deer's" (29), and she locates and cares for Rabbit seemingly by instinct rather than reason. On the night of Rabbit's unearthing, having led Tu and the others to Little Mother's grave, she stands silently "holding her hands in front of her chest as if cradling something" until Tu digs up the coffin and opens the body bag containing his dead wife and miraculously living child (43). It seems Qui's fate is mostly to silently perform the role left vacant by Little Mother, executing the gestures of motherhood for Rabbit and even becoming Tu's lover later in the novel. The roving narrator, who enters some characters' thoughts more than others, gives few clues into Qui's interior life and never dwells there.

Yet Qui seems to derive something like joy or fulfillment from the sheer physicality of mothering, which offers reprieve from the trauma that haunts her psyche. The first time she nurses Rabbit, "[t]he young girl's face went rapt, the feeling as if a ray of light were being drawn out of her body. For the moment the memory of the thing her grandmother had done to her was forgotten" (51). It is possible, though not clear, that the timing of Rabbit's birth coincides with when Qui's biological child would have been born had her pregnancy continued, so that both Qui and Rabbit substitute in each other's lives for what each has tragically lost. They are, in other words, each other's adaptive as well as adoptive kin, their bond produced through trauma

and necessity. It may be beside the point whether Qui has any "agency" as Rabbit's mother; perhaps that is not the most productive ethical question to ask. The novel offers, first, a paradigm of family making that is rigorously embedded in historical circumstances even while it escapes the constraints of historical verisimilitude. In that embedding/escape lies the possibility of critique, wherein reproductive violence may be identified as the complex of structural forces that harmed Qui. Secondly, the Qui/Rabbit dyad and the trope of communications with the dead together offer an imagined response to trauma that is socially reconstructive—that is, it creates and recuperates genealogical, if not always genetic, kinships—even if it is individually costly (as the labor of post-violence reconstruction often is, particularly for women).

Thus, it is significant that the fictional Amy Quan's search for origins finally brings her to Rabbit's doorstep. By the end of the novel, Amy Quan's "long and arduous and weirdly joyful" journey intersects with Rabbit's decades-long sojourn with her nation's ghosts, such that the two characters shed light on each other's central dilemmas and even provide each other with qualified resolution (256). The scene of their meeting is contained within one of numerous, brief, italicized interludes, and it is written in second person, addressed to Rabbit from the collective dead. Isolated, exhausted, and under house arrest, Rabbit has for some time avoided listening to the voices of the dead. Amy Quan's plea to her tour guide—"Please, is this about me?"—coincides with an awakening in Rabbit, as if to suggest that yes, after all, it is about her. Amy Quan's unusual physical appearance—"dark in a way you have never seen before," indicating her African American identity—and her long voyage revive Rabbit's interest in communication: "This unlikely combination of circumstances opens your ears again for the first time in what will be for you a new age. Everything is interconnected. … Transplantation. The green stalk putting down roots" (256). The metaphor of a "deep root snapp[ing]" in earlier scenes is here romantically refigured as transplantation and interconnectedness, a hopeful generation of new roots, relationships, and community. For Amy Quan, the encounter with the psychic confirms her long-standing sense of not being alone: "Wherever you go in the world, even if you find yourself in a strange land among strangers who love you, know that someone will always be listening who loved you first" (256). The sense of rootedness both women have lost and sought in different ways strengthens again in each other's presence. Given that Amy Quan is transparently a stand-in for Barry, this sentimental turn casts the novel as a whole in a more hopeful light, as if the narrative wishes to find a kind of redemption in the cementing of improbable relationships. It is helpful here to return to Leighton's productive troubling of the adoptee's search for origins as a paradigm of self-knowledge: Rather than discerning the historical whys and wherefores of her birth, Amy Quan finds a more holistic sense of belonging that arises from the act of "listening." Rabbit's involuntary gift for hearing voices, after all, is also a metaphor for literary production, the channeling of stories that insist on being told, that take on a life of their own in the telling.

Notes

1. Nguyen, "Interview with Quan Barry."
2. Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 7.
3. Peggy Phelan in Homans et al., "Critical Adoption Studies," 9.
4. McKee, "Critical Adoption Studies," 75.
5. Choy, "Global Families," 9.
6. Barbara Yngvesson in Homans et al., "Critical Adoption Studies," 42–43.
7. McKee, "Critical Adoption Studies," 75, 80.
8. McKee, "Critical Adoption Studies," 75–76.
9. Roberts, "Adoption Myths," 50.
10. Briggs, *Somebody's Children*, 4.
11. Kit Myers in Homans et al., "Critical Adoption Studies," 19.
12. McKee, "Critical Adoption Studies," 75, 87.
13. Arendt, "We Refugees," 118.
14. Barry, "Child," 26. Barry does not publicly discuss details of her family history, and one should avoid inferring biographical details not offered as such. But I am interested in her texts' recurring interest in certain life situations, which include those of adoptees, refugees, Vietnamese rape victims, and those congenitally affected by American napalm use.
15. Simon, "An Expansive View."
16. Yarborough, *Surviving Twice*, x–xi.
17. Varzally, *Children of Reunion*, 7.
18. Varzally, *Children of Reunion*, 7; Yarborough, *Surviving Twice*, xi.
19. Yarborough, *Surviving Twice*, xi.
20. Varzally, *Children of Reunion*, 7.
21. In Vietnam, nearly everyone of the same generation is *anh*, *chi*, and *em*, the same terms of address used for siblings.
22. Espiritu, "We Win," 330.
23. Yarborough, *Surviving Twice*, 223.
24. Yarborough, *Surviving Twice*, 223.
25. Simon, "An Expansive View."
26. Homans et al., "Critical Adoption Studies," 37.
27. Homans et al., "Critical Adoption Studies," 37.
28. Homans et al., "Critical Adoption Studies," 38; original emphasis.
29. Homans et al., "Critical Adoption Studies," 1–2.
30. Kit Myers quoted in Homans et al., "Critical Adoption Studies," 19.
31. Jones, *Medicine and Ethics*, 5.
32. Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 4.

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