

The Politics of Care: Historical Retrieval in Vietnamese American Cultural Production

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A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2021

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English

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**Abstract**

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My dissertation examines care in post-war Vietnamese American cultural production. I argue that care is a significant method of historical retrieval that resists dominant understandings of time, gender, and political action. Vietnamese refugees have often been portrayed as a problem to be solved or objects to prop up liberal narratives. Dominant American history operates on linear time, pushing narratives of progress onto refugees and the post-war generation to draw attention away from imperial violence in the building of the U.S. empire. Drawing upon Asian American studies, women of color feminism, and feminist refugee epistemologies, I argue that post-war Vietnamese American cultural production resists liberal time's desire for closure by calling attention to the ongoing violence on refugee and immigrant communities. To think about how the post-war generation responds to that history of war—being from that history, but not defined by it—I consider how cultural producers preserve history to take care of the communities that existed before us, and the ones that will come after. Taking multiple forms, care links individual trauma to a larger community and gives us a path to retrieve history. In the simplest terms, care allows Vietnamese American communities to form caring communities and envision caring futures.

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## Acknowledgements

This project would not be here without the relationships, both within and outside of the university, that have sustained and nourished me. Though I cannot fully encapsulate my gratitude in just a few pages, I will try to use this space as a starting point.

I am so incredibly thankful for the generosity of my dissertation committee. I took Habiba Ibrahim's Black Feminist Theory course in my first year of graduate school, and I return often to the readings she selected for our seminar and the notes I scribbled down as she guided our thinking. Habiba's class was the first time I felt seen in graduate school, and I'm so grateful for the space she has made for me over the years. Habiba pushed me to think more deeply and encouraged me to find my own answers. Habiba taught me that the intellectual and personal are not separate, and that the merging of those worlds can allow us to reach new, important conclusions. She is a superb scholar, teacher, and mentor. I cherish all of the conversations that we've had over the past five years, about everything from temporality to hate-watching.

Stephanie Clare believed in this project from the beginning; I first wrote my second chapter in her class, and I'm so thankful she encouraged me to stick with it. Stephanie's feedback energized me; she was direct and motivating and always provided me with a way to move forward with my research. I'm thankful for the ways Stephanie encouraged writing as an important method of thinking through ideas. LeiLani Nishime took a chance on me when I asked her to join my project, and I'm so lucky for her mentorship. LeiLani has the incredible skill of taking my jumbled thoughts and forming arguments with them, and with such generosity that I begin to believe in my project, too. I am always in awe of how LeiLani manages to balance so many things at once, and she does it all so brilliantly! Linh Thủy Nguyễn never

wavered in reminding me that this is my project, and that this journey should be done first and foremost for myself. Linh always asks the hard questions that need to be asked. She showed me that this process should and could be joyful and exciting. Linh has taught me the importance of sharing power when you have it. UW is truly a better place with Linh. Finally, Rick Bonus has taught me so much as a teacher, mentor, and editor. I don't know how to put into words how thankful I am for Rick's guidance. Rick sets high standards for himself and others around him, and in so many ways, he has helped me set and reach my goals. Leading by example, Rick taught me the importance of community in academia when he graciously welcomed me to UW.

In all the different academic institutions I've floated in and out of, I never felt like I belonged, until I found people at UW who made me feel like I did. The American Ethnic Studies department welcomed me in my very first quarter, when I felt lost and homesick. I am thankful to have met and worked with scholars who gave me a home in this sometimes cold institution, especially the generosity and kindness of Jang Wook Huh, Moon-ho Jung, Carolyn Pinedo-Turnovsky, LaShawnda Pittman, Vince Schleitwiler, and Connie So. Thank you, Connie, for inviting me to my first OCA event during Lunar New Year 2017, when I spent my first Têt away from my family. My graduate journey would not be possible without GO-MAP's financial and emotional support. GO-MAP validated me as an anxious first-generation college student. The Samuel E. Kelly Ethnic Cultural Center gave me a space to dance, feel safe, and find laughter and friends, and I think often of how the ECC made room for our Women of Color Dissertation Writing Group, where we shared writing, time, and food. Special shoutout to these amazing WoC(tors): Natalie Gasca, Amarise Little, Dalya Perez, and Aditi Rajendran. The administrative staff in the English department, Ali Dahmer and Mary Malevitsis, have been so kind and reassuring, making daunting processes feel approachable and manageable. Our weekly English

writing group kept me on track and provided so much camaraderie throughout countless drafts: thank you, Laura De Vos, Matthew Hitchman, Matthew Howard, and Elba Moise. Finally, to erin Khuê Ninh and Shireen Roshanravan: my final chapter exists because of your commitment to Asian American feminism. A very special thank you to erin, who has given us so many gifts.

As someone who has always struggled with making new friends, I never imagined I would leave graduate school with so many meaningful friendships. With Mara Minion, Tyler Wagner, and Yan Wang, I have shared so many meals, cups of tea, and mahjong games. My friends at home visited me in rainy and sometimes snowy Seattle, bringing with them the warmth that I missed so much in California: a very deep thanks to Anton Dam, Vinh Dinh, Deanna Hong, and Rosalind Tu. Finally, I could write a whole dissertation on how I owe so much to Rachel Yim Schlotfeldt, who nourished me with our conversations, read countless drafts, and shared so many walks with me in the past years. What would I do without her? I am so lucky to know Rachel.

My support at home has been unwavering. My dad visited my classes, saved any piece of work that had my name on it, and eagerly shared my graduate journey with Ông (who I miss all the time) and Bà (whose energy and strength I can only hope to emulate). My mom is the original storyteller in my life, and she graciously and selflessly dedicated her time to help me complete this project. This dissertation was created through her stories, and I come back to her every time I lose my way. My brother Trung and my sister-in-law Michelle have laughed with me, fed me, and encouraged me throughout. I am here because of them.

This project simply would not be possible without Bryan, who plays all the roles in my life: my best friend, partner, first reader, cheerleader. Bryan's endless support has given me what I didn't know I needed. He has steadily been by my side to encourage and nurture me in all these

different stages of our life. And our greatest collaboration yet has given us more joy than I could ever imagine. Luca, you are my sweetest gift. Somehow, you've known how to care for me since the very beginning, and I promise I will always give you all the care I have to give.

*For my mom, because every story begins with her.*

## **Introduction** | The Politics of Care: Historical Retrieval in Vietnamese American Cultural Production

I grew up listening to my mom's stories told in our kitchen over the dining table. Only a teenager when she left Saigon, my mom recalled her experiences fleeing Vietnam with her mother and sisters. Her vibrant stories revealed a spectrum of feelings, from terror to joy to boredom, and as a child, I clung on to every word. As she painted our family's history, so did other mothers in our community. With my cousins and friends, many of them second-generation Southeast Asian Americans, we would exchange stories that had been passed down to us by the women in our lives, and we shared photos that our parents and grandparents had preserved. Circulating across generations through our homes and communities, these refugee memories and ephemera taught us our family histories and what it means to be part of the post-war diaspora.<sup>1</sup>

When I entered college and listened to stories told about our families rather than by them, I heard different ones. I saw photos like my mom's, but now they were framed only through suffering. I found narratives that treated refugees as objects, repeated images of white American masculinity and military forces, and portrayed a creditor-debtor relationship that required Vietnamese Americans to be endlessly grateful for their American heroes. Stories of suffering masses were favored over individual ones, and the timeline of progress attempted to lighten each story with resolution. Documentaries and monuments around the Vietnam War erased Southeast Asian Americans and their stories, as if their contemporary lives had no connection to the war at all.<sup>2</sup> In popular culture, films and television shows that feature the war include Vietnamese

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the dissertation, I use "post-war," not to suggest that the war is no longer lived in the diaspora's lives but to differentiate 1.5- and second-generation Vietnamese American experiences from those who have direct, first-hand experience with the war. I further discuss my usage of the "post-war" designation later in this introduction.

<sup>2</sup> I use "Vietnam War" not to dismiss other ways of naming the war but to use the terminology that the war is generally referred to, including the wars in Southeast Asia or the American War. When I asked my mom, "What do Vietnamese people call the Vietnam War?" she responded, "Which Vietnam War?" because Vietnam has had

bodies only to be raped or killed. These dominant cultural narratives limited Vietnamese lives: they were to incur endless amounts of violence while trapped in an unending time of war, become the objects of American benevolence, or, in the contemporary moment, disappear altogether.

The dominant American narrative could only be maintained through the disavowal of the knowledge that had been passed down through our families and communities. Tired of hearing about Vietnam War documentaries that claimed to provide a comprehensive history of the war or watching popular shows that included Vietnam as a backdrop to suggest “it’s okay, we’re healed now,” I turned to Vietnamese American cultural production to hear my family’s stories told in public spaces. It was there that I found the stories that reflected my mom, aunts, and grandma, the strong women in my life who held our family’s memories of the war and recalled to me what it was like as they made their lives in America. In a way, though, Vietnamese American cultural production made my family’s stories both recognizable and unrecognizable, as writers and artists made space for the everyday and the quotidian in a way that I had never given critical attention. The things I’d taken for granted, such as my mom’s stories, or the photos and ephemera that circulated within my family and community, became starting points for accessing different histories and memories that held knowledge to counter dominant narratives of the war. Vietnamese American cultural production gave me a different way of looking at the people and communities I was most familiar with and realizing how they had ways of speaking against dominant narratives that I hadn’t made intellectual space for. The more I engaged with post-war cultural production, the more I realized that these writers and artists were engaged in a kind of

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multiple wars. The war I refer to in this dissertation is what Vietnamese call the American War, or Chiến Tranh Mỹ. Viet Thanh Nguyen further discusses the inadequacy of naming the wars: see Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* (2016).

care work: their way of caring for memories and for each other were ways of resistance that contributed to a larger project of making space for themselves in a country that sought to relegate them to the margins.

American narratives deny Vietnamese communities nuance or complexity; it is through the steady erasure and flattening of refugees that the historicism of the Vietnam War attempts to provide a fixed narrative of the past that makes it seem as if there is nothing new to learn about the war because it is over. But Vietnamese artists and writers place knowledge production back into the hands of the community, centering ways of caring and speaking that articulate what it means to be a part of the post-war diaspora in America. Post-war Vietnamese American cultural production makes visible the ways in which imperialist historiography attempts to close off the war to make it easier to look away, and how refugees and the post-war diaspora look back.

This dissertation examines how post-war Vietnamese American cultural production does the work of historical retrieval. In doing so, it does not aim to provide a comprehensive history of the Vietnam War. Since the “end” of the Vietnam War in 1975, there have been numerous historical accounts that profess to capture complete histories from all perspectives of the war. Focusing primarily on soldiers’ narratives or military endeavors, Vietnam War documentaries and history books do the work of historicism, which seeks to give an “‘eternal’ image of the past” (Benjamin). In contrast, post-war Vietnamese American cultural production does not seek to create an elaborate history of the war itself but instead examines what it means to live in the post-war U.S. By virtue of producing counter-nationalist historiographies, the post-war generation uses cultural production to care for their communities and create archives that become antithetical to nationhood. I read cultural production to theorize the ways in which they disrupt

the violence of a progress-oriented schema of dominant American history and instead offer methods of care that allow the diaspora to work against state time.

My project critically examines practices of care in post-war Vietnamese American cultural production. I argue that care is a significant method of historical retrieval that resists dominant understandings of time, gender, and political action. The Vietnamese American literary and visual cultural products that form the archive of this dissertation demonstrate how historical retrieval happens by way of care. By examining cultural production created by the post-war generation, this project closely reads for practices of care to create a counter-narrative of war and imagine more caring futures for later generations. As Asian American studies scholar and writer Isabelle Thuy Pelaud has argued, Vietnamese American cultural production is always informed by histories of war.<sup>3</sup> To think about how the post-war generation responds to that history of war—being *from* that history, but not simply defined *by* it—I consider how cultural producers uncover and preserve history to take care of the communities that existed before us, and the ones that will come after. In the simplest terms, care allows Vietnamese American communities to form caring communities and envision caring futures. I focus on who gives and who receives care in Vietnamese America broadly: care of the community, the family, and the self.

My conceptualization of care is interdisciplinary, drawing from Asian American studies, women of color feminism, and Black feminist theory. I argue that the post-war Vietnamese American cultural production demonstrates how we can care for each other in a country that has historically never cared for us. The following sections conceptualize my discussion of care, history, politics, and gender to expand what it means to act politically and build community.

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<sup>3</sup> See Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, *This Is All I Choose To Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature* (2011)

## Care as Methodology

Care is an act of historical retrieval that reveals uneven power relations while tending to the wellbeing of others. I define care as looking after, preserving, and maintaining family, communities, and objects. Care is given through hard, intentional work of feeling concerned for and sustaining others, while revealing the state violence that requires someone or something to be taken care of. I grant a critical seriousness to the kinds of care given and reciprocated within families and communities, as well as across genders and generations. Creating a multiplying effect in that we care for others to build communities of care, care becomes a mode of protecting affective relationships to allow room for new questions to emerge around what it means to be part of the post-war diaspora and Asian America.

My discussion of care draws upon Black feminist theorists and women of color feminists who claim care as a revolutionary act that is necessary to sustain ourselves and one another throughout historical and ongoing violence. Care, when voluntarily given to each other with the intention of building community, becomes an important political act, especially as we direct care to each other because we are not cared for by the state. Black feminist theorist and activist Audre Lorde discusses self-care as warfare, as care becomes an important part of building community and caring for bodies that are not historically cared for. Lorde writes, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (130). Care for the self, Lorde argues, is necessary to fuel up against the fight against white supremacist violence. Black studies scholar Christina Sharpe defines care work in the wake of slavery as “a problem for thinking and of and for Black non/being in the world” (5). In the afterlife of slavery, care is “repair, maintenance, attention” (Sharpe 138). Sharpe describes care as a way of thinking

and creating to counter the ongoing violence against Black lives. On the temporality of care, literary studies scholar Sharon Tran writes about care as a feminist act that can unite past, present, and future. In her essay on *kawaii*, Tran examines how acts of care have the ability to critique neoliberal structures of care and the potential to “catalyze new forms of social assemblage” (Tran 20). Care disrupts forces of neoliberalism that depend on linear temporalities to move away from past atrocities. Black feminist and women of color feminists focus on care as a significant tool and act to attend to the historical and ongoing violence against Black communities and communities of color. Care encourages attending to the past to preserve the self and work towards a more caring future. It requires paying attention to various methods that have been developed to exist and survive in the everyday and imagining new ways of being and sustaining each other.

While formalized care theory focuses on care as an important moral act, it does not deeply discuss what happens in the absence of care on a larger systemic level or what happens when communities of color are not granted the privileges of being viewed as human. An ethical and philosophical discussion of care in Western feminist theory was formalized in the 1970s and 80s by Nel Noddings, Carol Gilligan, Virginia Held, and others.<sup>4</sup> Philosopher and educationist Nel Noddings discusses how care is a universal value and that all humans have the capacity to care. Care, Noddings argues, has three steps: first, the caring person must be present to offer care to the cared-for. Second, the caring person must give care. Third, the receiver of care must feel cared for. In this way, care is relational and transactional. Similarly, psychologist Carol Gilligan claims that all humans are born with the “requisites both for love and for citizenship in a

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<sup>4</sup> See Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (2013) and *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984); Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982); Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care* (2005)

democratic society” (90). But even if all humans have the capacity to care, what happens when communities of color are deliberately left out of who gets cared for? Rather than think about how we hold capacities for caring, my project diverges from care theory in that I am invested in thinking about how care occurs in the aftermath of imperialism and state violence within Vietnamese American communities, and more broadly, marginalized and racialized communities. I focus on care as a political act that Vietnamese Americans take to respond to ongoing violence, as they care for each other in a country that does not care for them. That is, living in the U.S. in the post-war, in a country that historically does not want them and continues to racialize them in violent ways, Vietnamese American communities do the work of caring for each other. My dissertation draws attention to the ways these acts are political and how they do the work of uncovering important histories that speak back to dominant conceptualizations of Vietnamese America. As feminist anthropologist Juno Salazar Parreñas argues, care is “never happy, innocent, and devoid of power, inequalities, and forms of violence. Care always requires work” (191).

In Asian American studies, care is most often thought about in the form of commodified, gendered, and racialized labor. There is a focus on the transaction and commodification of care, critically centering the capitalization of the laboring Asian women’s body to provide an act of service for others. Care is studied as a transaction that portrays the racialized and gendered body as more capable of caregiving. In *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History*, historian Catherine Ceniza Choy writes about the critical need to think of the professionalization of nursing and migration of Filipinos to the U.S. as a product of the U.S. empire and the ongoing project of colonialism in the Philippines. Choy describes an empire of care in which nurses migrate to higher-developed western countries, exacerbating inequalities of

health services in developing countries. Choy argues that the dominant discourse around Filipino nurses positions America as a place of opportunity, obscuring “the very important and complicated roles that both Philippine and U.S. governments, recruitment agencies, and professional nursing organizations, as well as the Filipino nurse migrants themselves, have played in facilitating this form of migration” (4). Sociologist Valerie Francisco-Menchavez looks at care transnationally in *The Labor of Care: Filipina Migrants and Transnational Families in the Digital Age* by studying the experiences of Filipina migrants in New York City and their families in the Philippines to think about care work, both paid and unpaid. When migration is presented as the only form of livelihood and technology becomes a way to keep the transnational family together, families develop care strategies to accommodate long distances, challenging neoliberal ideas of family and social reproduction. And through “communities of care,” Filipina migrants “construct their own brands of care, and use transnational sensibilities to relate to one another, thus forming both practical and affective bonds of support” (Francisco-Menchavez 15). So often Asian laborers, and especially Asian women, are tasked with caring for the state and caring for others, rather than caring for themselves or the ones they love. Francisco-Menchavez highlights how Filipina migrants tend to each other, emphasizing the political significance and importance of care within Asian American communities and the diaspora.

Asian American labor studies’ reveals how care makes visible and disrupts hegemonic understandings of race, gender, family, immigration, and nation. Within these discussions of care, we can understand how Asian women’s intimate labors make visible uneven power structures and the connections between immigration and empire. These circuits of care investigate how immigrant women are recruited for labor that they are assumed to be innately

caring, revealing intersections of empire and capitalism in recruiting the labor of women of color to uphold imperialism. My dissertation builds upon the connections scholars have made between care and labor to think about how care reveals uneven power relations and structural violence, disrupting a narrative of progress that America holds onto to appear caring despite its colonial and imperial agenda.

Building upon Black feminist theory, women of color feminism, and Asian American labor studies, I focus specifically on care that is not commodified to consider the strategies that Vietnamese Americans take to care for one another. I intervene into these conversations by thinking about care as a multidirectional and multigenerational practice in Vietnamese American communities that sustains the wellbeing of loved ones while retrieving histories that have been ignored. Instead of taking for granted these acts of care, I consider how they demonstrate important strategies of critiquing the state. Throughout the dissertation, I return to these guiding questions: how does care in Vietnamese American families, when volunteered and given with the intention of building community, engage in quiet acts of resistance? How is care a complex political practice that refuses homogeneity and embraces difference in the lived lives of the post-war diaspora? How can we focus on care as an important political act that grants Asian American communities, and Vietnamese Americans in particular, agency to speak against the progressive narrative that they are so often enveloped in?

### **Not Just a War: National Narratives and Reconfigurations of the Vietnam War**

There is a gross lack of care for Vietnamese people and the Vietnamese diaspora in dominant narratives of the war. The progress-building narrative of the nation focuses on how immigrants can be wrapped up in a narrative that touts exceptionalism, rather than think deeply

about the ways in which immigrants and refugees are met with racial, gender, and sexual violence. State liberal time operates on a clock that keeps ticking time moving forward, disregarding the bodies that are discarded or displaced. That is, state time operates in a way that is disinterested in the care of people of color. For Vietnamese communities, liberal time ignores how the war still figures into the lives of the diaspora and the post-war generation. Neoliberal disavowal seeks to divorce the past from the present, imagining that past violence no longer makes its way into the present. As Grace Hong writes in *Death Beyond Disavowal*, neoliberalism is dependent on structures of disavowal, refusing responsibility for the death of racialized communities.<sup>5</sup>

To work against the violence of state time, I pay attention to care as an act that disrupts liberal temporalities that narrate the war as past. Liberal time pushes one forward, unable to control the circumstances or timelines that we live in, or of the ones we love. But care can disrupt the progressive violence of state time to let others know they are not alone and that they are cared for. The temporality of care requires using knowledge of the past to make visible ongoing violence, while also attempting to disrupt a violent future. As my dissertation refers to this dominant American history to discuss the ways cultural producers challenge it and produce new ways of knowing, I outline in this section how the Vietnam War is narrated in national narratives and how Asian American studies scholars have critiqued the ways liberal nationhood disavows violence.

In dominant American history and popular culture, war is often told from the perspective of soldiers. War narratives center soldiers' accounts, masculinizing our understanding of militarization and ignoring domestic experiences of war. In public monuments and memorials,

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<sup>5</sup> Hong (2015): 7.

as well as television and film, the Vietnam War in particular is framed as a regrettable war that resulted in the loss of American innocence. Since the end of the war, Vietnam has been continuously imagined and read as a dark moment in American history, a heroic character's backstory, or a backdrop for dystopian fiction. Critiquing liberal cultural producers and state actors, Cathy Schlund-Vials presents a list of Vietnam War films that create a "tactically forgetful narrative of precombat innocence":

Michael Herr's journalistic *Dispatches* (1977) to director Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) to Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), the American War in Vietnam (and, by unquestionable proxy, dirty wars in Laos and illicit campaigns in Cambodia) is remembered as the frenzied exception rather than the systematic rule of U.S. foreign policy. (75)<sup>6</sup>

As sociologist Yen Lê Espiritu discusses in *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*, the dominant American discourse on the Vietnam War describes the war as a national tragedy, emphasizing American failure and in particular, the American soldier's loss of innocence. Rather than a home to human subjects, "Southeast Asia is figured as a journey backward in time to an anachronistic moment of prehistory—from orderliness to chaos, from innocence to violence... in short, 'hell'" (Espiritu 89). Espiritu argues that these narratives of the benevolent U.S. mobilized "beliefs in the fundamental decency of Americans and in their ability to promote democracy and freedom worldwide, while directing attention away from the geopolitical, military, and economic causes and the ongoing devastation of the Vietnam War for the majority of Vietnamese people, both in Vietnam and in the diaspora" (93). The focus is on the violence experienced by the benevolent U.S., rather than the violence they brought to

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<sup>6</sup> More recent film and television representations of the war include *This Is Us* Season 3 (2016), *Kong* (2017), Ken Burns' and Lynn Novick's *The Vietnam War* series (2016). Some interrogate the experience of Black soldiers in fighting a racist war, as seen in *Da 5 Bloods* (2020) and *Watchmen* (2019), but as Viet Thanh Nguyen has argued, Vietnamese people are reduced to subhuman figures, not given "the same interiority and backstory that are granted to white and black characters." See Viet Thanh Nguyen, "How 'Watchmen's' misunderstanding of Vietnam undercuts its vision of racism" (2019).

Southeast Asia or the aftermath of violence. Remembered as a dark chapter in the nation's history or the proper liberal subject's past, the Vietnam War is figured as a bump in the road to progress. Progress, a future-oriented schema of history, suggests that time has resolved the tensions of historical violence. This imagined future disavows imperialism rather than recognize the ways in which violence has lingered across generations.

By rendering Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War as figurative objects, the national imaginary is able to manipulate the past and place meaning onto this moment of history based on its changing motivations of the present. These motivations are connected to a "commonsense" schema of historical time; that is, the motivation to produce any given narrative about the war (or to disavow the war through silence) is to generate national consensus over history. There then becomes a balance in maintaining the war as a dark moment of history while also repetitively returning to the war to justify contemporary motivations, encouraging us to focus on liberalism multiculturalism's progress narrative rather than war's afterlife. Liberal multiculturalism, a term I borrow from Jodi Melamed, emerged in the 1980s and into the 1990s in response to race-based social movements. Multiculturalism, Melamed argues, allowed the U.S. to describe itself as "an internalized model of global diversity" and "disguised U.S. expansionism as merely a universal nation fulfilling its destiny" (Melamed 35). Drawing our attention away from the past atrocities of war and looking instead towards the liberal future that the U.S. is destined to fulfill, liberal multiculturalism's schema of linear time encourages us to ignore the United States' current imperial violence at home and abroad. Benjamin writes on historical materialism that the historical materialist remains skeptical of the ways in which the victors narrate the history. But

as Espiritu points out, because of the even-when-we-lose-we-win syndrome,<sup>7</sup> the Vietnam War has always been narrated in a way that positions the U.S. as both tragic and victorious.

As such, the representation of the Vietnamese American family within dominant discourses of American history begins with their status as refugees from a war-ridden country.<sup>8</sup> Framed as making the choice to leave Vietnam and the violence of the communist regime (rather than U.S. imperialism), the Vietnamese refugee's existence in the United States is prefaced by a narrative of individual choice and responsibility, then positioning the U.S. as the benevolent provider of freedom.<sup>9</sup> This linear progression of events echoes a temporality of neoliberalism, which adheres to a timeline of progress and disavowal. Disavowing consequences inflicted by war, imperialism, and colonialism, neoliberalism operates under repeated, violent erasure in order to move forward towards a liberated future, distanced from the mistakes of the past. Through mainstream media representation, "the United States and its warriors are positioned as friends and rescuers who are committed to ensuring the well-being of nonwhites around the world" (Espiritu 89).

The U.S. positioned itself as the caretaker and the refugees in the aftermath of their imperial conquests as the cared-for. This put forth a humanitarian aid crisis that drew attention away from U.S. violence in Vietnam to focus instead on the refugees in need of saving. These attempts to divert national attention away from the war as a race war were made visible by ethnic groups that mobilized together to protest the Vietnam War, which later led to the establishment of ethnic studies and Asian American studies as academic disciplines.

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<sup>7</sup> Espiritu (2006): 330.

<sup>8</sup> These discourses are most prominent in American media representations of the Vietnam War.

<sup>9</sup> See Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom* (2012).

## **Not Just a Movement: The Emergence of Asian American Studies**

An important moment in the history of the United States and American Studies itself, the Vietnam War is often remembered as a significant moment of protest. The motivations for protesting, however, varied among different associations and ethnic groups. As Daryl Maeda notes in *Chains in Babylon: The Rise of Asian America*, “While mainstream antiwar movements were predominantly white, the left segment included African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans along with the whites” (98). In the 1960s, viewing the war as imperialist, racist, and oppressive, “leftists opposed the war on the basis of a racial and economic analysis” (Maeda 98). Fighting against the oppression of people of color in the building of the U.S. empire, ethnic groups rallied together to form Third World solidarities. In 1968, the Third World Liberation Front formed at San Francisco State University and called for a strike, demanding “curricula and programs that reflected the histories, needs, and experiences of people of color” (Lee 305). After three months of protests, the first School of Ethnic Studies was established at San Francisco State University and UC Berkeley followed with the Department of Ethnic Studies.

Challenging American exceptionalism and racial liberalism, these interdisciplinary programs emerged to critique institutionalized forms of power and knowledge in the university and the nation. Asian American studies activists in particular made connections between the racialization and dehumanization of Asian in the U.S. and Asians abroad. In Maeda’s discussion of Asian American veterans, he describes how Asian American veterans experienced “‘common racialization,’ that is, being identified with the enemy because of their race” (104). Through the formation of ethnic political groups, such as Bay Area Asian Coalition Against the War and The Asian American Political Alliance, Asian American activists and veterans declared solidarity

with the Vietnamese. Instead of using the mainstream anti-war slogan “Bring Our Troops Home,” “Asian Americans stressed the need to end the genocide by using slogans such as ‘Stop killing our Asian brothers and sisters’ to emphasize the racial link between the Vietnamese and Asian Americans” (Maeda 123). With the recognition of common racialization, Asian American organizing “brought together Asians of various ethnicities and strengthened racial solidarity” (Maeda 120). The formation of the political category of “Asian America,” then, became dependent on anti-war politics. Coming together to acknowledge the common goals against U.S. imperialism despite the heterogeneous experiences of different Asian ethnic groups, “Asian American” as a designation marked a political framework that recognized the Vietnam War as a race war. The Vietnam War became a rallying point to strengthen pan-ethnic solidarity with the formation of Asian America and Asian American studies as a discipline.

The institutionalization of ethnic studies illustrated the resistance narrative that drove the origins of the movement, as early Asian Americanists and Asian American feminists prioritized and privileged militant forms of resistance. However, newly immigrated Vietnamese didn’t fit into the ideological narrative of the movement. American studies scholar Kandice Chuh argues in *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* that Asian American studies too has a “dominant” narrative that is rooted in its socio-political movements. This narrative, though vital to the establishment of Asian American studies as a discipline, has “tended to overshadow other possible narratives of the field’s emergence” (Chuh 5).<sup>10</sup> Isabelle Thuy Pelaud describes the absence of Vietnamese American scholarship or voices in Asian American studies as an ideological premise of the field: “Tied to the civil rights and antiwar movements, early Asian

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<sup>10</sup> In *Imagine Otherwise*, Chuh argues that we must challenge Asian American studies’ “historic promotion of uniform identity” by taking seriously the experiences of Filipinos in the U.S. Chuh describes how “Filipino America” is a category that “refuses to allow Asian American studies to solidify the boundaries of what constitutes its proper objects of knowledge” through its history of colonialism, labor, and immigration. (Chuh 35, 57).

Americanist activists indeed often empathized with America's enemies, the North Vietnamese, who were referred by the military and in Hollywood movies as 'gooks.' Very few of the early activists at the birth of Asian American studies expressed solidarity with the South Vietnamese who fought alongside Americans" (45). As Viet Thanh Nguyen writes in *Race and Resistance*, Asian American academics, or what he refers to as the intellectual class, can be understood as more ideologically homogeneous than Asian America as a whole. The goals of Asian American intellectuals, Nguyen describes, "can at least be characterized as being left-of-center, with the wide range of possibilities from liberal to Marxist that is implied, and it can at least be characterized as being invested in the value of an Asian American identity" (13). Because of this investment in the Asian American identity, Nguyen argues that Asian Americanists are given two ways to act in America: resist or accommodate; be the model minority or the bad subject. Nguyen urges Asian Americanist to think outside of this binary and recognize the ways in which Asian American communities hold different ideologies and beliefs that complicate the goals of academia. The passing of the Immigration Act of 1965 and the multiple waves of refugees that followed brought over Vietnamese refugees trying to make a life for themselves and their families in a new country. They did not immediately jump at the chance to participate in an anti-imperialism, anti-war social movement. Revealing the limitations of a binaristic resistance or accommodation model in Asian America, the uncomfortable and awkward position that the South Vietnamese refugees occupied after their arrival in the late 1970s and 80s led to a gap in knowledge of Vietnamese American experiences.

The gap is further accounted for when we look at the ways Vietnamese Americans both positioned themselves and were positioned upon their entrance to the U.S. By the late 1980s,

sociologists began depicting Vietnamese Americans as the new model minority.<sup>11</sup> At the end of World War II, the model minority myth emerged to shift attention away from Japanese American incarceration to Japanese American success, as liberal narratives sought to erase histories of U.S. imperialist violence. Popularized by sociologist William Petterson in 1966, the term “model minority” focused on the success of the Japanese American family. In his discussion of sansei students, Petterson notes that “all accept the American principle that it is love between the partners that makes for a good family” and they are “distinguished by their greater attachment to family” (40). To create a narrative that moved on from incarceration, the model minority myth focused instead on the Japanese American family as a place of love, healing, and progress.<sup>12</sup> Once again, with the ending of the Vietnam War, Vietnamese refugees were brought into the model minority myth to focus on how their success was made possible by the progressive, welcoming nation state. Positioned as the new model minority, Vietnamese Americans were said to hold strong family values and a work ethic that allowed them to rise out of the difficulties of being refugees to become successful American citizens. The model minority’s promise of individual freedom allowed Vietnamese Americans a chance to distinguish themselves from North Vietnamese communism and move closer to a form of social and cultural citizenship as new Americans.<sup>13</sup> This important historical economic and political context allows us to think critically about why Vietnamese Americans may publicly appear to have embraced the model minority myth when presented with binaristic options to resist or accommodate.

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<sup>11</sup> Asian American sociologists further discuss Vietnamese American’s depicted as the model minority: see Min Zhou, *Growing up American: how Vietnamese children adapt to life in the United States* (1998), Gilberto Q. Conchas, Cristina C. Perez “Surfing the “model minority” wave of success: How the school context shapes distinct experiences among Vietnamese youth” (2003).

<sup>12</sup> There are extensive studies on the genealogy of the model minority as racialization in Asian American studies: see Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (2013); Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (2017); Cindy I-Fen Cheng, *Citizens of Asian America: Democracy and Race during the Cold War* (2013).

<sup>13</sup> I provide a longer discussion of Vietnamese American anticommunist politics in Chapter 1.

Vietnamese Americans do not easily fit into a narrative of resistance because of the ways they have been racialized through the model minority status, as well as their own embrace of this temporary granting of cultural citizenship. I do not mean to point out Vietnamese Americans as exceptional in this way. Indeed, there is no doubt that there are many anti-affirmative action, anti-Black, pro-ICE, and pro-Trump Asian Americans who align themselves with white supremacy more so than not.<sup>14</sup> But this project doesn't seek to neatly divide the Asian American community into two. Rather, I deconstruct binary politics of resistance and accommodation by looking at care as a form of politics. On the surface, it may not seem like there are ways to reconcile the stark political differences across politically binaristic thinking. But paying attention to care, particularly as seen in Vietnamese American lived experiences and intimate relationships, reveals something more complex and nuanced understanding of what it means to be Vietnamese in the U.S., or to be part of a post-war diaspora that has seen how state violence attempts to destroy refugee and immigrant lives. We can read care as a critical Vietnamese American political practice that expands the goals of the Asian American movement. Through the preservation of these connections and histories, these cultural producers create spaces that do not adhere to a kind of community politics that have historically utilized Vietnamese Americans to speak for or against. Post-war Vietnamese American cultural production uses care to disorient what we know about the Vietnamese diaspora and propose new ways of tending to the past to make room for new kinds of knowledge to emerge. Importantly, this involves listening to women's stories and privileging softer forms of speaking that have not been historically seen as important forms of power.

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<sup>14</sup> Many post-war Vietnamese American activists, scholars, and artists, including some who are discussed in this dissertation, publicly work to critique the conservative, right-wing values that many Asian American communities hold.

### **Not Just Asian Leaders: An Asian American Feminist Project**

This project draws upon Asian American feminist frameworks to consider how a soft yet radical politics of care allows us to understand how the public domain of war is lived within gendered interpersonal and intergenerational relations. Because the dominant narratives of the Vietnam War are masculinized in both dominant American and Vietnamese history, favoring soldiers' narratives without thinking about how war affects domestic spaces or civilian lives,<sup>15</sup> I draw attention to how war haunts intimate relationships in families and communities, whether it is through the ways mothers communicate with their children or the lack of access the post-war generation has to learn about their families. My project contributes to a long Asian American feminist history as well as newer feminist theories developed by critical refugee studies scholars.

Asian American feminism emerged from Third World feminisms in the 1960s and 70s. As psychologist Judy Chu writes, the Asian American movement left Asian American women out of the decision-making process, as many Asian men felt that their "'manhood' had been oppressed for decades," and in attempt to show strength, the movement took on a largely "'macho' and male" identity (96). Historian Judy Tzu-Chun Wu writes about how Asian American women, in response to their lack of inclusion, co-created Third World feminism, "a broad-based U.S. Women of Color movement capable of spanning borders of nation and ethnicity" (Moraga and Anzaldúa). To express political solidarity with women in the Third World during the Vietnam War, Asian American women were inspired by Vietnamese women fighting the U.S. military because they saw visible Asian women as leaders, countering racialized and sexualized depictions of Asian women in the U.S. Wu writes that the

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<sup>15</sup> I further discuss masculine memorializations of war in Chapter 1.

“hypervisibility of Asian female revolutionaries helped Asian American women to create their own political subjectivity and to subvert their political invisibility, as they shared racial and gender status as well as anti-imperialist politics” (Wu 45).

While the circulation of images of Vietnamese women fighting in the military importantly contributed to the mobilization of Asian American women, Third World feminism of the 1960s and 70s did not include the experiences of Vietnamese women who came to the U.S. post-war. In “The Politics of the Interior,” the editors of *Asian Women* (1971) describe how though Asian American women were mobilized by revolutionary Third World women,<sup>16</sup> “the liberation of our revolutionary sisters in China and Vietnam have taken place within socialist revolutions. Conditions are different from America and alien to the Asian-American experience” (129). There is an urge for Asian American women to develop their own political ideologies that speak more directly to Asian American women’s conditions. Mitsuye Yamada’s important contribution in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) are foundational for Asian American feminism, yet there isn’t serious consideration of how the entrance of Southeast Asian American women post-Vietnam War might change or expand the scope of Asian American feminism. In “Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism,” Yamada writes about the importance of understanding her experience through her mother’s experience: “I have come to see connections in our lives as well as the lives of many women like us, and through her I have become more sensitive to the needs of Third World women throughout the world...My politics as a woman are deeply rooted in my immigrant parent's and my own past.” Yamada makes a connection between herself and Third World women through her mother’s past and her own, but what of the

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<sup>16</sup> *Asian Women*, the first Asian women’s journal in the U.S., was published by the University of California, Berkeley. Judy Chu notes that many of the first contributions were from Asian American women’s studies classes at Berkeley.

present or the future of Third World women? How do newly immigrated Vietnamese American women change how we understand Asian American feminisms? What does post-war Vietnamese American cultural production offer to Asian American feminisms?

The Immigration Act of 1965 brought over an influx of Asian immigrants, most of them Asian women due to family reunification and the growth of female-intensive industries in the U.S.<sup>17</sup> Employers sought out Asian women because they were “small, foreign, and female,” racializing and gendering women for being physiologically adept at manufacturing work (65).<sup>18</sup> As Asian women became primary income earners in their families, traditional gender roles within Southeast Asian patriarchal family systems shifted, but not dramatically. In *Family Tightrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans*, Nazli Kibria describes how Vietnamese American women walk an ideological tightrope. Although Vietnamese American women were primary income earners, they were still generally committed to upholding gender norms and worked hard to “incorporate the new realities of their lives into the ideological confines of the traditional family system” (109). Espiritu explains that “like many ethnic, immigrant, poor, and working class women, disadvantaged Asian women view work as an opportunity to raise the family’s living standards and not as the path to fulfillment or even upward mobility idealized by the white feminist movement” (94). In this way, Southeast Asian American women do not completely fit the goals of either the white feminist movement or the radical, anti-war, anti-imperialism origins of the Asian American women’s movement. In other words, while the origins of Asian American feminism were inspired by militant resistance of Vietnamese women fighting American imperialism, the reality of Vietnamese women’s lives in the U.S. is different, and Asian American feminism doesn’t yet account for those differences.

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<sup>17</sup> Espiritu (2008): 73.

<sup>18</sup> See Karen J. Hossfeld, "Hiring Immigrant Women: Silicon Valley's Simple Formula (1994), 65-93.

Within the last decade, different theories of Southeast Asian American feminisms have emerged to encompass a more expansive lens of Asian American feminisms that includes refugee perspectives. Lan Duong and Yen Lê Espiritu propose feminist refugee epistemologies (FRE) to consider how artists use feminist practices of artmaking to heal, form community, mourn, and draw attention to public grief and private trauma.<sup>19</sup> Analyzing Vietnamese and Syrian refugee art, Duong and Espiritu focus on how refugee artists challenge ways of knowing by forming refuge-making practices that reveal the complex interiority of refugee lives. They argue that feminist refugee epistemologies center women's lives in thinking about how hidden and unsaid things in domestic spaces make visible refugee precarity and situate refugees as knowledge producers. Hmong studies scholar Ma Vang draws upon FRE to examine a Hmong feminist praxis of care, focusing on how Hmong healthcare interpreters mediate relationships between refugees, shamans, and institutions to emphasize the importance of Hmong social and kinship structures. Hmong interpreters practice the language of care by centering local knowledge and advocating for their community issues and wellbeing. Vang argues that "a Hmong feminist approach to taking care of each other is not an additive to the existing forms of feminist theorizations, but rather shifts the frame of reference to emphasize non-Western and noninstitutional practices and epistemologies" (183). In *Treacherous Subjects: Gender, Culture, and Trans-Vietnamese Feminism*, Lan Duong develops trans-Vietnamese feminism to criticize nationalist community politics in Vietnamese America. Duong describes how the war and loss created a "trauma of betrayal" in Vietnamese communities, creating a collective anxiety that places blame on Vietnamese women who negotiate nationalism and patriarchy. Questioning why women are accused as being traitorous, Duong argues that Vietnamese women use

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<sup>19</sup> Duong and Espiritu (2012): 589.

collaboration to navigate the traditional ideas of gender, nation, and politics in Vietnamese America. Duong and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud further discuss the idea of traitorous collaborations in their reflections as art organizers in Southern California to argue that Vietnamese communities require Vietnamese women to act as loyal daughters to Vietnamese American in the rebuilding of South Vietnamese nationalism.<sup>20</sup> They call for an intersectional, transnational analysis of Vietnamese American politics that considers gender, nation, class, and sexuality.

FRE works to address refugee experiences that complicate and contribute to Asian American feminism by making visible the ways in which refugee communities disrupt traditional understandings of gender and contribute to the project of working against imperialism and ongoing state violence. Drawing upon Asian American feminism's anti-imperialist origins and FRE, I consider how Vietnamese American cultural producers reveal how care happens in quotidian spaces and disrupts traditional gender roles within Vietnamese American communities. In the way that Espiritu, Duong, and Vang focus on unlikely spaces in which refuge-making happens, I am invested in thinking about the everyday ways that Vietnamese Americans find ways to care for and sustain each other. Through my discussion of care as a praxis for political action, I consider how post-war Vietnamese American cultural production makes space for more complex gender relations and nuanced feminist knowledges to emerge.

### **Not Just the Second-Generation: Why the Post-War Generation**

While there has been a resurgence of interest in and circulation of literature and film around the Vietnam War, there are few monographs on post-war Vietnamese diasporic cultural production, and existing studies of Vietnamese American cultural production have mainly

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<sup>20</sup> Duong and Pelaud (2012): 262.

focused on first and 1.5 generation. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud's *This Is All I Choose to Tell* (2010) is the first long-length study of Vietnamese American literature. Pelaud examines texts mostly written from the perspective of first-generation Vietnamese Americans and focuses on recognizing the refugee's marginality and humanity, recognizing that Vietnamese American literature is heterogeneous with different desires and experiences. Pelaud describes how Vietnamese American literature "makes visible the complexities and contradictions that occur when the abandoned enter the nation that has abandoned them but emphasizes having rescued them" (49). More recently, Vietnamese American cultural studies scholars have focused on the refugee as an important ideological racialization to situate refugees as producers of knowledge rather than objects to be studied. Critical refugee studies scholars, such as Aihwa Ong, Yen Lê Espiritu, and Khatharya Um, reject the disavowal of violence in Southeast Asia and posit the refugee not as an object of investigation, but as a critical subject that may call into question the formation of the nation-state's liberal rescue narrative or making visible imperial U.S. violence abroad. In 2020, literary studies scholar Timothy August published *The Refugee Aesthetic*, in which he focuses on how Southeast Asian American writers and artists claim their refugee identity as a transformative position, creating work that reveals the differences across refugee experiences and reflexively critiques how refugees have been represented. While first-generation and 1.5-generation literature works against monolithic narratives of Vietnamese Americans and the war, more recent post-war cultural production departs from the project of proving one's humanity and explicitly engages in critiquing national narratives of the U.S. to create new ways of thinking about the war.

I focus on the "post-war generation" broadly because my dissertation is not focused on literature of a specific generation or generational proximity to war. It is not necessarily the direct

memories or experiences of war that I am concerned with; rather, I explore how the lived experiences of the post-war generation reveal the afterlife of war, or the ways in which the war has never really ended for the Vietnamese diaspora. Importantly, focusing on the post-war generation allows me to think more broadly about the multigenerational post-war diaspora and the complexity and nuance of their post-war experience. I am mindful that the designation “post-war” suggests that we are past the war, but I draw from Jodi Kim, who has argued that we live in the protracted afterlife of the Cold Wars.<sup>21</sup> The post-war generation always carries with them memories and histories of war. In the way Kim describes how the “ends” of the U.S. empire have not ended at all and are very much still part of our present, I consider how post-war Vietnamese American cultural production does not aim to resolve or provide an end.

I use “post-war generation” to recognize multiple generations of Vietnamese Americans as important knowledge producers about the Vietnam War and its afterlife. Because Vietnamese American communities have strikingly different experiences across generations, this results in multiple ways of speaking and communicating. As such, I consider how care becomes a form of communication and historical retrieval that all generations take a hand in participating in. Many second-generation Vietnamese Americans are hesitant to engage with the war for fear of their lack of knowledge or direct experience. Interviewing second-generation Vietnamese Americans, Yen Lê Espiritu finds that many admit to feeling uncomfortable discussing the war with their parents and as a result avoid those conversations:

Refugee families often adopt what Park calls a “don’t ask, don’t tell” strategy, as children implicitly know not to ask their parents about potentially painful topics about their background and migration history; instead they string together bits and pieces of their own memories and overheard stories to create a bearable and repeatable version of their family’s war and refugee experiences -- one that emphasizes academic and economic gains, which invariably, though not always intentionally, validates the myth of the United States as the land of opportunity. (169-170)

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<sup>21</sup> Kim (2010): 4.

Espiritu comes to the conclusion that the second generation uses academic and economic success to assuage the silences within the family space, particularly their parents' trauma and memories of war.<sup>22</sup> Lack of direct experience of the war becomes inhibiting, making the war and their parents' experiences largely inaccessible to the post-war generation. Caught between the mediation of their families and the dominant histories projected by the nation, the second generation, Espiritu suggests, is incapable of generating knowledge about the war and its afterlife. However, when the post-generation chooses to not ask their parents about those "potentially painful topics," I read this strategy and decision as an act of care and protection.<sup>23</sup> Children do not want to unsurface pain and trauma through questions that might reveal their ignorance to their parents' pain. By stringing together stories, the post-war generation may create a version that isn't simply "bearable and repeatable," but one that excavates something different about the past in caring ways. In other words, it is not uncommon for the post-war generation to feel as if they do not have the authority to speak about the war, but I argue that these feelings of discomfort come out of concern for the trauma the first generation holds, and this concern can be useful in reinterpreting the past or reimagining history as a dynamic process. Rather than think about the second generation as inhibited by their lack of direct experience, the post-war generation's distance from the war allows them to move carefully between the past and the future in a manner that has not been granted or been as accessible to the first generation.

In *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*, David Scott considers how remembering differs across generations, particularly in relation to the past and the future.

Interested in a contrast between "the generation that lived the catastrophe of the revolution's collapse as an absolute ruin... and a succeeding generation that had no direct experience of the

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<sup>22</sup> See Espiritu, *Body Counts* (2014): Chapter 6.

<sup>23</sup> I discuss protective care as a multidirectional, multigenerational act further in Chapter 2.

revolution or its collapses, and whose relation to these events is therefore temporally removed and intellectually and affectively mediated,” Scott argues that generations are “temporal institutions” (102-3). As temporal institutions “frame and reframe the conditions of social remembering,” Scott asserts that different generations will have different forms of affective relationships with the past, and therefore later generations may offer new possibilities of remembering (103). In this way, post-war cultural producers may return to questions of the past that seem to have been closed off. The investments of later generations might unlock new questions that imagine a different kind of future.

As a second-generation Vietnamese American, I resonate with the uncomfortable feeling of not knowing enough. I have always felt unauthorized to say anything about the Vietnam War. It was my family’s war, not mine. My grandparents experienced it, not me. My family was from there, but I’d never been. In school, the war was never discussed. As I grew up, I felt I knew nothing of the war. I purchased and read history books on the war, but much of them focused on the specifics about the historical timeline. This battle happened then. This massacre happened here. This was declared then. But why did any of this matter? How did my family fit in? Everything I didn’t learn and everything I didn’t know—it kept me from feeling I could contribute at all. But this is where post-war Vietnamese American cultural production comes in and where my project begins. As I argue in the following chapters, art and literature reveal how we might access new modes of historical consciousness by way of care.

## **Chapter Breakdown**

Viet Thanh Nguyen writes that “all wars are fought twice, once on the battlefield and the other in memory.”<sup>24</sup> The Vietnam War was the first televised war, and so much of its cultural memory is both textual and visual. Thinking about the cultural memory of the Vietnam War means acknowledging the ways in which it has been memorialized, photographed, and canonized. As discussed in the beginning of this introduction, the Vietnam War in popular culture almost always erases or brutalizes Vietnamese bodies in some way. Whether it is a documentary or television show, as a reader or watcher, we can assume that white American soldiers will be centered and Vietnamese bodies will be relegated to the background to be killed off, raped, or saved. Looking at Vietnamese American cultural production gives us alternative stories and images of war as Vietnamese people contest what the Vietnam War looks like in the public world. It refuses the disavowal that is necessary to uphold the Vietnam War genre. It refuses the temporality of the war, making visible the war’s afterlife. Post-war Vietnamese American cultural production provides a counter to these texts and images through manipulations of the genre to directly and inherently challenge the ways the Vietnam War has been narrated.

As Vietnamese American histories are prefaced by a violent war that dismissed the importance of Vietnamese lives, we can pay attention to the kind of ways Vietnamese Americans, for generations, have found ways to care and continue to create new ways of caring for each other. Monuments and popular cultural production in the U.S. reproduce the work as a spectacular site of violence; indeed, the repetition of the monument and the inundation of films of Vietnam as a war zone stamp out any possibility for nuance when thinking about Vietnamese subjectivity. As such, my examination of these cultural productions looks for care in unlikely spaces—in an antique shop, walking down a street, on a digital document, inside a restaurant.

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<sup>24</sup> Nguyen (2016): 1.

On the surface, these actions may seem insignificant, but these acts of care happen every day and require work, and they deserve recognition. These ways of caring encourage a different way of understanding how everyday acts shape a community and engage in political action. They demonstrate the ways communities and generations show up to fight for each other and sustain one another. I grant a critical seriousness to the ways people care for objects, communities, and each other to preserve these histories that allow for a more nuanced and complicated image of Vietnamese American to emerge.

Each chapter theorizes a different form of care to think about how care as a method of historical retrieval. Focusing on themes of time and gender, care demonstrates new ways of remembering. This meditation on care encourages us to consider how everyday actions of Vietnamese American communities are ways of speaking and navigating what it means to be part of a post-war diaspora. Engaging with these different ways of speaking, care urges us to expand and contribute to the larger project of Asian American studies in imagining what it means to be in a country that has historically never cared for you.

Chapter 1 focuses on *ephemeral care* to think about how artists preserve and create histories through the care of objects. Vietnam War memorials tell a history of the war as an event that has passed. These monuments not only ignore Vietnamese American lives and deaths, but they also suggest that there is nothing left to learn or know about the war. I consider how artists Trinh Mai and Dinh Q Le use ephemeral objects to tell new stories of war, and to demonstrate how the Vietnamese diaspora remembers and experiences the war differently. Ephemeral care becomes a significant practice that disrupts masculine remembrances of war. Encouraging the post-war generation to attend to the possibility of objects and the stories they

tell, ephemeral care works against the typical memorialization of the Vietnam War to disrupt linear timelines of history.

Chapter 2 looks at motherhood and storytelling, as I explore how *protective care* is given by mothers. Mothers give protective care by telling stories and giving warnings to keep their children safe, while also using their stories to critique the violence of the state. These stories, I argue, are important ways of speaking and acting politically, particularly as Vietnamese women are often enlisted or depicted as bolstering narratives of American exceptionalism. Disrupting the gendering of Vietnamese women as grateful and forgiving refugees, I pay attention to how mothers work to shield their children from harm while revealing their deep understanding of historical and ongoing state violence. In this chapter, I read Viet Thanh Nguyen's "Black-Eyed Women" and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* to consider how these texts highlight the stories women tell to protect their families. Arguing that storytelling as a significant political practice, I consider how protective care reorients different ways of thinking and existing in the Vietnamese diaspora, and how mothers create storytellers.

Chapter 3 examines *restorative care* as a process that draws attention to how racialized and criminalized communities respond to state violence by caring for each other and organizing together. Restorative care restores histories and relationships that are disrupted, violated, or disavowed through racist criminalization. Drawing from abolition work and restorative justice, I introduce restorative care as a practice that reveals the state's hand in criminalizing Southeast Asian American communities. Making clear that criminals don't commit crimes, but the state creates criminals, restorative care makes visible ongoing exclusionary immigration laws and tactics while also focusing on the actions that families and communities take to care for one another. I read Thi Bui's comic, "Refugee to Detainee" to listen to the stories of individuals and

families and think about how they resist and persevere together, and form lasting solidarities and coalitions across criminalized communities. Bui's comic underscores the ongoing state violence inflicted upon Southeast Asian American communities to disrupt national narratives of exceptionalism and immigration.

Chapter 4 turns inward, as I introduce *self-care* as a critical Asian American feminist practice that can make clear connections between imperial war violence and everyday sexual violence. I examine a comic that I co-created with Bryan Trinh for the *#WeToo Reader*, a special issue of the *Journal of Asian American Studies*. In the comic, titled "To my 21-year-old-self," I come to terms with calling what happened to me rape, think about what it means to grow up as an Asian American woman in the U.S., and come to articulate my own ways of speaking. I argue that self-care creates a space for me to make the connections between hypervisible war violence and invisible sexual violence of the everyday. By contextualizing the comic within a longer history of sexual violence against Asian women, and Vietnamese American women in particular, I read the comic as a form of self-care. Reorienting a neoliberal model of self-care and drawing upon self-care as an important Asian American feminist practice of community building, I argue that self-care can transform the way we think about combatting sexual violence and think about everyday legacies of war.

Finally, in closing, I look at an interaction between Ocean Vuong and Amanda Ngoc Nguyen to think about the possibilities and temporalities of care in digital spaces.

## Chapter 1 | The Things We Keep: Ephemeral Care and Visual Art

We are inheritors. Of water. Of land. Of memories. Of histories we do not always choose. Of ancestors. Of ghosts. Of grief. Of ghosts of ancestors, culture, memory, trauma. We are inheritors of stories. Of arrivals and escapes. Of flight. Of landing. Of the sometimes hard-to-trace paths, and the passage in between.

In Vietnamese, the word *hướng* means ‘path’ or ‘direction’, but (if you change the accent marks) it can also mean ‘to inherit’ (*hưởng*). The word *nước* means both ‘water’ and ‘country’. So *hướng nước* may suggest our inheritance of water, our passages across water, as well as the paths of our inheritance. When we lose the soil of a physical country to call home, we learn how to carry that country with and within us. We find it harbored in the bodies and skins and stories of family members and others. But we find it also in the whispers of imagined landscapes, future landscapes, materials repurposed, in new directions and new arrangements of texture, light, recollection, color. We preserve, we excavate, we recollect and repurpose, we remember and resist and reimagine.

Dao Strom, *Hướng Nước // Inheritance // Water*, 2018

This statement above framed the group exhibit, *Hướng Nước // Inheritance // Water*, displayed at the Portland Children’s Museum in Spring 2018. I had learned about the exhibit on Instagram and was excited to see it—it would be the first Vietnamese American art exhibit I had visited. In the corner of the exhibit sat a small wooden bookshelf, an installation from the De-canon group, which contained a collection of texts by Vietnamese and Vietnamese American writers, including Lê Thị Diễm Thúy’s novel, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* and Thi Bui and Bao Phi’s children’s book, *A Different Pond*. Hanging from the walls was a connected string of rubber bands. In Anna Vo’s artist’s statement, she described how the rubber bands, leftover remnants from militarization and French colonization in Vietnam, are a critique of global capitalism and North American imperialism. Trinh Mai’s *Family Tree*, one of the pieces I will be exploring in this chapter, hung on the wall in a neat pattern. Using a layering technique, Mai placed photos of different generations of her family over the pages of her late great aunt’s bible.

When I left the museum, I saw at least three signs pointing me to the Oregon Vietnam Veterans Memorial. A five-minute walk took me to an immaculately manicured, 8-acre outdoor war memorial. Walking up to the memorial, I met a large granite wall that provided context for

this community-created space: together, Oregonians raised funds to build a memorial, to honor the war dead. Behind the granite wall was a large spiral. Walking along the 1,200 foot spiral path, I followed the narration of war from beginning to end on short, black granite walls. The end of the spiral led me outside of the memorial, onto the hiking trails of Washington Park. I left the memorial astonished at the contrast that I'd just seen between a small exhibit by Vietnamese American artists critiquing American imperialism and this massive, permanent fixture in honor of American veterans—without a Vietnamese name to be found.

Struck by the contrast of the two spaces, I began working on this dissertation project to think about what it means for these two spaces to exist alongside one another. The monument sought to create a space of peace and solace to memorialize the war using materials that would stand the test of time and weather. The exhibit, on the other hand, utilized materials that were distinctly ephemeral and mundane—stringy rubber bands, old photos, paperback books. As I left the two spaces, I wondered, what does the Vietnamese American art offer to the realm of Vietnam War memorials? How does Vietnamese American cultural production, especially when created from things so ephemeral and presented in temporary exhibits, disrupt the way we remember the Vietnam War? And where do Vietnamese American communities fit into all of this?

To borrow from artist Dao Strom, I turn to Vietnamese American cultural production to think about how the diaspora has learned how to carry Vietnam “in the whispers of imagined landscapes, future landscapes, materials repurposed, in new directions and new arrangements of texture, light, recollection, color.” In particular, I focus on how the cultural producers repurpose and rearrange ephemera as a way to create history. Rerouting memory towards alternative objects and spaces of affective attachment, Vietnamese American art has a transformative power

that changes how we remember the Vietnam War. Ephemeral objects allow for “new directions, and new arrangements” of how we understand the war and the post-war diaspora, disrupting the presumptive permanency of the memorial and the nation’s liberal rememberings of war (Strom).

In this chapter, I consider how Vietnamese American art takes *ephemeral care*. Calling attention to the power of day-to-day objects and stories, artists engage in *ephemeral care* when they excavate and preserve ephemera, then animate it into cultural production. Drawing from cultural studies scholar Lisa Lowe, who importantly argued that Asian American cultural production reveals the fissures and intersections of power, I claim that ephemeral care is an important Vietnamese American act that animates ephemera to make public the knowledge that circulates within domestic spaces. Ephemeral care contributes to a different kind of archive, one that actively resists the overwriting of Vietnamese in memorials and archives and creates something new to understand Vietnamese American relationships to war and each other. National memorials, and in particular the Oregon Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial, close off history, but ephemeral care changes the way we think about documenting and archiving history, as these artists take ephemera and create cultural objects that are not ephemeral at all.

I examine the artwork of two Vietnamese American artists: Trinh Mai and Dinh Q. Lê. Both artists are motivated by questions around their families, yet their projects come to different conclusions of family and care. The chapter is organized by two themes of ephemeral care. In the first section, I focus on ephemeral care as a method of historical retrieval and a way to encourage the post-generation to engage in the production of knowledge and culture. I consider how Trinh Mai and Dinh Q. Lê use ephemera to encourage the post-war generation to engage in historical retrieval and form new forms of historical consciousness that memorialize the everyday. Ephemeral care asks the post-war generation to return to the past and attend to their

family's objects to think about what it means to be part of a post-war diaspora. In the second section, I focus on how ephemeral care introduces new gender relations that aren't structured by war, anticommunist community politics, and masculine nationalisms. I argue that ephemeral care is a feminist act that resists the masculinized, militarized forces in the memory and narration of the Vietnam War and offers new ways for the Vietnamese American family and communities to exist without being shaped or pressured by a politics of belonging.

### **Ephemeral Care and Diasporic Historical Consciousness**

Ephemeral care is the transformation of ephemera into cultural production. Ephemera holds knowledge, that when animated, becomes a way of reflecting a history and memory that isn't often heard. It isn't quite memorializing in the way the memorials do it; instead, it participates in memorializing the everyday. I play with the phrasing of "ephemeral care" to think about how artists *take care* of *ephemera*, and then create something that is *not ephemeral at all* to counteract an existing archive. I focus on ephemera because I am particularly interested in how ephemera becomes a powerful starting point in enacting questions that imagine something new, and Vietnamese American art becomes a manifestation of care for the preservation and survival of families and communities. Though this chapter focuses primarily on family photos and stories, I broadly define ephemera as the mundane objects and stories that exist and circulate within Vietnamese American communities. Rather than things that are permanent and valuable, I consider ephemera as objects and stories that are seemingly uninteresting and often ignored. Central to the idea of ephemera is its fleeting and discreet nature; this includes stories that are scrawled on the backs of photos or passed down through oral storytelling.

Ephemera includes photos with no context, that capture intimate relations but are ambiguous and mysterious to those who do not know the subjects. These mysterious and fleeting qualities provide possibility for different forms of knowledge to emerge. Reading ephemera as queer potentiality, performance and cultural studies scholar José Muñoz argues that ephemera is proof. In his discussion of the transmission of queerness, Muñoz writes that, “instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility” (6). Ephemera, then, has a queer potential of exposing the epistemological hierarchies of knowledge that depend on the “ideological underpinnings of discourses like rigor and evidence, and to understand their roles in maintaining certain protocols and conventions” (Muñoz 11). Rather leaving identifying traces, queerness exists in the ephemeral, or “alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself” (Muñoz 10). Ephemera exists fleetingly, at the margins, yet the queerness that exists after the performance becomes transformative in itself. Put in another way, the ephemera doesn’t necessarily have a magical quality in itself; it’s what remains or what it provokes that has the potential to transform.

Ephemeral care is animated through cultural production, creating new possibilities for the post-war Vietnamese diaspora. Ephemeral care focuses on what remains throughout and after war, encouraging the diaspora to participate in their own remembering of history and look

outside of dominant American forms of history to tell their own story.<sup>25</sup> It provides different ways of excavating history and creatively engages the post-war generation to create new ways of preservation and remembering for the future.

Ephemeral care disrupts the narrative and discourse of Vietnam War memorials by animating ephemera in the family archive and Asian American archives to tell a different story about the diaspora. Shawn Michelle Smith describes how “personal archives, with their quotidian images, always compete with institutional archives over the foundations of knowledge” (12). Thinking about how ephemera challenges institutional spaces of knowledge—primarily the memorial space—I consider how ephemera that circulates within the diaspora can become animated by cultural production, placing power into the hands of the diaspora to be knowledge producers. This is important when the most visible cultural products of the Vietnam War in the U.S. are Vietnam War memorials.

Monuments materialize knowledge; they document how the creator is remembering something. Historian Dell Upton, in his overview of monuments as “commemorative and didactic works,” writes that monuments always communicate specific claims about what to remember, and this remembering always happens through the architect’s lens (13). Memorial practices encourage a narrative and a certain kind of remembering that, Upton argues, “claim[s] to speak for everyone. This is a fundamental, necessary fiction of monuments, but it *is* a fiction” (25). Political scientist Jenny Edkins calls this form of time “linear, narrative time,” or that which is necessary for any concept of a nation to provide a “comforting, collective fantasy that provides answers where there are none” (94). This struggle to co-opt the dead into narratives of

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<sup>25</sup> As I discuss in the introduction to the dissertation, dominant American history comes in the form of memorials, monuments, documentaries, films, and television shows that seek to tell a narrative of progress and triumph around the Vietnam War.

nationhood require commemoration to “negotiate the necessary relationship between” grief as a process that is “private or national, and whose story should be told” (Edkins 94). That is, in order to uphold a national narrative, meaning must be closed off in order to provide a “comforting” fantasy that encompasses those that the nation permits into its narrative. For Vietnam War memorials, this means ignoring the millions of Vietnamese that participated in the war and whose lives continue to be shaped by war in the diaspora. This is certainly the case for the Oregon Vietnam War Memorial that I stumbled upon as well.

### *Memorializing War*

While it’s nearly impossible to discuss memory, memorials, and the Vietnam War without looking at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C., it’s especially important in this context as Oregonians were inspired by the D.C. memorial to create their own in 1987. Built in 1982 by architect Maya Lin, the Vietnam War Memorial documents only American casualties and leaves off Vietnamese names, demonstrating who is folded into narratives of remembering, nationhood, and citizenship. It’s not surprising that both the DC and Oregon memorial share this decision of who should be mourned and honored in this regard. Sociologist and critical refugee studies scholar Yen Lê Espiritu describes how the Vietnam Veterans Memorial “reconciled the conflicting memories of the divisive war by celebrating the traditional virtues of courage, self-sacrifice, and honor of the veteran but without reference to his cause” (88). However, despite the direct inspiration, I want to focus on two significant moments of departure that the Oregon memorial takes: first, the decision to include and narrate the everyday events of Oregonians during the war, and second, the architectural decision to design the

memorial in a spiral. These moments of departure are deliberate attempts to flatten and close off history through the spatial logics of the memorial.

The spiral path is lined with black granite walls, which are marked by the year. Each wall is split between two parts, or narratives. The bottom part of the wall centers Vietnam, or what is known abroad, and lists the names of soldiers who died. Vietnam is only represented through the death of American soldiers, or those who are no longer here. The upper part of the wall centers Oregon with a different kind of list: a few short sentences with descriptions of innocuous events that happened in Oregon that year. For example, “An Albany woman became Playboy magazine's Playmate of the Year.” Or, “In Lebanon, to the pleasure of all, the city held its annual Strawberry Festival.” Focusing on quotidian events that occurred in Oregon, the upper part represents what happened in the U.S. during the war: essentially, life went on. The ephemera of Oregonian life is monumentalized, alongside official history. The odd positioning and contrast between the upper and lower walls creates a flattening of the way in which war affects different spaces. Contrasting an idyllic U.S. and the violent terrain of Vietnam, the memorial suggests a relationship between the maintenance of American life through the casualties of war. There's a consistency to everyday life that is only maintained through the violence abroad. By reading the memorial to identify who is included—some of which are white American veterans, boy scouts, the Playmate of the year, the organizers of the festival—it's clear who gets to belong and be remembered.

The Oregon memorial's splitting of the granite wall is a significant point of departure from the DC memorial; this purposeful decision to highlight death in Vietnam and life in the U.S. positions a remembering of the war that violently and repeatedly erases and forgets its afterlife. Edkins provides an important reading of the Vietnam Wall's design as a black mirror

that forces visitors to gaze upon their reflections. In Edkins' discussion of the Vietnam Wall and the Cenotaph as two significant and controversial war memorials that move away from what's expected of the traditional war memorial, she writes:

They refuse to be readily incorporated into the national myth of glory and sacrifice for king or country. Instead they provide a site where relatives of the dead or fellow combatants can come to remember their loss, not to forget it. [...] The Wall mirrors the faces of its visitors, refusing to allow them to forget their own existence, their own survival. It gives no easy answers, yet it is a spot that prompts acceptance of the reality of death rather than the myth of sacrifice, as its designer intended it should. (108)

While the DC Vietnam Wall changes in height—its tallest height is ten feet and its shortest is eight inches—the Oregon memorial maintains a relatively steady height of about four feet throughout, making it more difficult for visitors to see their faces mirrored in the memorial's reflection. The top part of the wall that reflects the happenings of Oregon life is made using a different stone material with a color and finish that provides no reflection. The point closest to a visitor's line of sight flattens the war and instead focuses on “events both grave and blithe, nonsensical and notable, spectacular and ordinary.”

Another significant moment of departure from the DC memorial is the Oregon memorial's architectural layout of a spiral; at the end of the spiral, I was surprised to see that it opened up into a hiking trail. Rather than take visitors to the beginning of the memorial space, visitors are led outside of the memorial altogether into a particular spatial experience of Oregon: the public space of nature where one can continue on in quiet reflection. While the cyclical nature of a spiral does not usually conjure a narrative of beginning and end, the Oregon Vietnam Veterans Memorial begins its memory of war in 1959 and it ends in 1976. At the end of the spiral, 1976, the last plaque reads: “Such then, were some of the happenings in Oregon during these years of war, events both grave and blithe, nonsensical and notable, spectacular and ordinary, the multitudinous life of a place where 751 men were not to see again.” Because the

museum's spiral leads visitors to physically leave at the war's end, the end of the spiral and the mark of 1976 seem to suggest that this is the end of what we need to know.

The Oregon memorial's spiral, which clearly begins and ends, departs from the DC memorial, particularly in the temporalities that they evoke. In Maya Lin's design statement for the memorial, she describes the memorial as a cyclical, "moving composition":

The memorial is composed not as an unchanging monument, but as a moving composition to be understood as we move into and out of it. The passage itself is gradual; the descent to the origin slow, but it is at the origin that the memorial is to be fully understood. At the intersection of these walls, on the right side, is carved the date of the first death. It is followed by the names of those who died in the war, in chronological order. These names continue on this wall appearing to recede into the earth at the wall's end. The names resume on the left wall as the wall emerges from the earth, continuing back to the origin where the date of the last death is carved at the bottom of this wall. Thus the war's beginning and end meet; the war is 'complete,' coming full-circle, yet broken by the earth that bounds the angle's open side, and continued within the earth itself.

The DC memorial is designed to be changing and fluid, "understood as we move into and out of it." The temporal structure is deliberately nonlinear; it encourages a "moving composition" rather than a clear beginning or end. The Vietnam Wall is not closing off a moment, but rather it is cyclical in that it continues within the earth, and changes as visitors interact with it. These design decisions make the DC memorial, Edkins argues, "uniquely atemporal," as the "name of the first death sits side by side with the last" (82). Lin's statement and the Vietnam Wall's structure provide a stark contrast to the Oregon memorial's linear structure of time, as there is a clear delineation of when and where this history and remembering should begin and end. The forward path of the spiral that leads us to the seemingly neutral grounds of Washington Park on a hiking trail invokes that this is the end. There's also a clear ending in the marking of 1976: because U.S. military troops pulled out of Vietnam at the fall of Saigon in 1975, we only need to remember up to 1976 to fully commemorate the war. This desire to close off the spiral, or narrate an ending to the war, directly defies Lenin's discussion of the spiral as a dialectic of time. Knowledge, Lenin argues, "is not (or does not follow) a straight line, but a curve, which

endlessly approximates a series of circles, a spiral.”<sup>26</sup> As the spiral ends, leading its visitors outside of the memorial altogether, the memorial attempts to close off knowledge, rather than recognize knowledge as a curve that “endlessly approximates a series of circles.” It reflects the “subjective blindness” that situates itself and its visitors to remember a very specific past. The monument remembers war as a standing event, not thinking about how war *creates* or *erupts* or *destroys* or *repeats*.

Asian American communities disrupt the project of the memorial through their own methods of historiography and the building of archives. As a number of Asian American studies scholars have demonstrated, the archives around the Vietnam War lack stories and voices from Vietnamese Americans; archives are constantly being remade and reworked to incorporate the voices of Vietnamese Americans in different ways. Cultural studies scholar Long Bui, in his search to find Vietnamese Americans in the Vietnam War Center and Archive, describes Vietnamese Americans as “archival others.” While the archive aims to memorialize the war from all perspectives, Bui found that Vietnamese American perspectives were missing and were only visible through “gook” as a key search term. Bui notes how “‘gook’ marks the epistemological power and knowledge limits through which one can locate the Vietnamese as archival others,” a situation that makes Vietnamese people invisible except as “hypervisible gooks” (46). Historian Dorothy Fujita-Rony describes how Asian American archives are shaped by militarized rupture. Thinking about militarism as that which “demonstrate[s] how the U.S. political landscape has been constituted by U.S. military force and strategic expansion in the region and shaped by the transpacific flow of Americans overseas,” Fujita-Rony argues that community archives that grow out of the Southeast Asian refugee diaspora, such as the Southeast

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<sup>26</sup> Lenin, "On the Question of Dialectics" (1915). This historicist dialectical movement of thought is mobilized through the struggle of contradictory forces This dynamic typifies (Marxist/Leninist) "dialectical materialism."

Asian Archive in Irvine, provide important space for stories and artifacts to house ephemera like photographs, letters, personal items, and cultural artifacts (5). The archive provides a cultural space for later generations to document their own histories and challenge the silences produced by militarism. Projects like VietStories and the Vietnamese Boat People Podcast are dedicated to collecting and preserving stories from the Vietnamese diaspora.<sup>27</sup> Yet, what do we do with those raw forms? How do objects and stories move beyond an archive to becoming a cultural product that finds you? Ephemeral care contributes to the project of Asian American archives by providing a counternarrative to national projects, such as museums and memorials, and thus, has a public function that is distinguishable from that of the archive.

Ephemeral care resists Vietnamese memorials and encourages Vietnamese Americans to engage in practices of ephemeral care. Ephemeral care disrupts what memorials try to do because unlike memorials, which seek to close the war off as an American moment in the past, ephemeral care is an ongoing project that remembers the war and memorializes the everyday in the way that war memorials do not. Ephemeral care opens up new ways to think about history and engages later generations to look at the ephemera within their families, households, or elsewhere, create something that is not ephemeral at all. It encourages later generations to participate in the creation of history using what they have and what they know. Yen Lê Espiritu has described this as “critical juxtaposition,” a feminist refugee act of “deliberate bringing together of seemingly different memories and stories in an effort to reveal the contours and contents of power and of subversion that would otherwise remain invisible” (595). Ephemeral care engages in feminist refugee epistemologies by suturing together the past and present, and

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<sup>27</sup> Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project at the University of California preserves audio, video, and transcripts of Vietnamese American life stories. Likewise, The Vietnamese Boat People Podcast collects and preserves stories from the first-generation.

goes a step further to urge others in the post-war generation to do the same. In Mai's *Family Tree* and *We Are Here* and Le's *Crossing The Farther Shore*, both artists take something from an archive and create cultural products that demonstrate how objects tell a story. They use the archive to animate something new, providing venues and models for the post-war to revisit their family archives and contribute to the creation of new knowledge.

### ***Family Tree***

*Family Tree* creates and encourages interaction in the family by drawing on the intimacies of intergenerational relationships. The project celebrates remembrance and participation in history, but it deviates from traditional and national modes of memorialization in that it speaks against linear timelines that locate the Vietnam War as simply past. Through the construction of a family tree, Mai uses her own methods of preservation and retrieval to look at the past through a different lens as she excavates collective and connected histories, creating an opening to imagine a new way of remembering the war. As part of the post-war generation, Mai's configuration of her family tree is important as she draws upon the ephemera passed down from her older family members. The project is an amalgamation of family objects, oral histories, and postmemory, "a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (Hirsch 22). Bringing together old photos and the pages of a prayer book, Mai utilizes the objects that have circulated within her family as a foundation to honor her family and consider their relationship to war, history, and time. The desire to preserve her family history is what begins the project; Mai sifts through the objects that her late great aunt kept, recognizing how the quotidian everyday moments are as significant to her family's history

as their move across the Pacific. By working through the ephemera that is passed down across generations, Mai makes connections between the private moments within the family, such as folding paper boats or cricket-fighting in Saigon, to the public histories of boat people.



Figure 1. Trinh Mai's *Family Tree*<sup>28</sup>

*Family Tree* engages in ephemeral care in the way it encourages the diaspora to understand their family ephemera as objects of knowledge. Pushing up against the discourse of national memorials and monuments funded by state or community initiatives invested in the preservation of victorious American narratives, *Family Tree* acknowledges the multi-layered and textured experiences of different generations of the diaspora. Unlike the war memorial's projection of linear time, Mai physically places memories of everyday life alongside the family's experiences of war. Contrasting the day-to-day with the fight for freedom, she reminds the

<sup>28</sup> Photos of *Family Tree* are provided courtesy of Trinh Mai. For more photos, see: <http://trinhmai.com/family-tree>

diaspora that these experiences of the mundane and traumatic are intertwined, and that we need only to examine our family photos differently to see that.

In her artist's statement, Mai describes the motivations for the project:

Inspired by the need to excavate my Vietnamese roots, this growing series strives to document my family history. Upon the pages of my late great aunt's prayer book, I've incorporated family photos and imagery drawn from both personal memories and the memories of various family members. From childhood pastimes of cricket-fighting to our fight for Freedom. From memories of folding paper boats and sending them down the rain-soaked streets of Saigon to our voyage as boat people....In my aim to preserve family history, I have found both the day-to-day memories as equally important as the life-changing experiences and significant struggles. What began as a way to honor my family and more deeply grasp the perspectives of my predecessors grew into a deeper meditation to gain a better sense of family. ("Family Tree")

The photos that Mai builds her work upon are not necessarily extraordinary on their own, yet once they are transformed into cultural products, there is potential in the ways they might enact action or encourage new ways of thinking. A significant part of *Family Tree* centers around the interactions that occur across multiple generations. Using various mediums, such as acrylic, painting, and printed images, and noting that the layering is "symbolic of the whole layering of history," Mai creates a layering effect with old photos, letters, and paintings of family members, dead and alive. The way Mai layers the photos using negative space is also indicative of how layers of history get blurred together overtime. For example, in some of the photos the images are positive, or solid, in that we cannot see the words behind the bodies. But in some silhouettes, we see the text underneath the silhouette or an image of a family member looking back at us. In this way, it's impossible to see the silhouette without seeing what lies behind it. There's a transparency and awareness to the way perspectives and generations are layered atop each other, dependent on and informing one another. It almost asks viewers to think about what we can discover if we look at ephemera within our family's perspectives. What might we see and discover? What does it mean for us to think about the layers that shape us and our family history?



Figure 2. Three panels from Trinh Mai's *Family Tree*

Unlike the way memorials frame the war as ending with the departure of the U.S. or the deaths of soldiers, in *Family Tree*, death doesn't mean a close or an end. Instead, we can imagine, visualize, and articulate interactions with ancestors who have passed. Though Mai uses her great aunt's prayer book as a foundation for the panels, she prioritizes the pictures of her family in the project. We see that there are words in the back, but they don't get the most attention; they are highly obscured in a way that makes them feel much less significant than the photos and symbols. This differs from the war memorials that not only omit the names of Vietnamese who died, but also reduce Vietnamese deaths to a number. The decision to only commemorate American casualties, Jenny Edkins argues, makes the DC memorial a "standard war memorial. A wall carved with the names of all the Vietnamese victims of the war would be sixty-nine times the size and would stretch the whole distance between the Washington and Lincoln monuments" (75). The decision to document only American casualties and leave off Vietnamese names demonstrates who is folded into narratives of remembering, nationhood, and citizenship. In contrast, *Family Tree* brings forth images of her family so we not only see faces of ancestors but also can interact with them. Rather than close off the past as over, Mai engages and encourages unmediated interactions by positioning silhouettes looking at one another. Mai

points out that in one part of the project, her great-grandmother's profile and a younger cousin's profile look in the same direction ("Honoring Life"). Mai shares that this positioning is a "kind of asking the younger generation to take a look back as well as the elders looking back into their history" ("Honoring Life"). This deliberate placement of the photos seems to grant different generations the ability to move between the past and the future, disrupting a linear perspective of time. This reaching into the past and forward into the future allows her to not only listen to histories within the family space, but to speak and interact with them. This enactment, not quite possible through the archive alone, can be read as a performative process that imagines interaction across generations to draw new perspectives around the present moment and the future. The ephemeral is able to move away from a linear understanding of time by making legible the past in the present, and these interactions allow for a different kind of knowledge to emerge. What kind of questions, for example, might we ask the older generation if we could speak to them? What kind of experiences have they had that inform our own lives?

*Family Tree* plays with the concept of the family tree not only in its framing but the positioning of the various pages. Whereas a traditional family tree is organized by reproduction and a lineage of generations, *Family Tree* creates a new structure for understanding the family. Each page uses the foundation of her late great aunt's prayer book; the artwork is not arranged in a linear order according to page number. Rather, these pages are scrambled, not following the prayer book's original order. Doing away with the original order of the pages suggests a nonlinear way of understanding the family tree. As the pages sit side by side in neat rows and columns, this positioning defies the structure of the tree and its hierarchy, disrupting the framework of lineage in the traditional family tree. Generations are not clearly distinguished, as we can see figures that look like grandparents, mothers, and young children throughout the

panels. The hierarchies of generations are collapsed by the overlapping images of living and dead, past and present, placed side by side together or even hand in hand, on the same page. There isn't a clear origin story of where the family begins and ends—rather Mai calls attention to how the family exists alongside each other. In doing away with the linear form of a family tree, she allows generations to sit with one another, which seems to allow for a different kind of care to happen across generations. Often, in Vietnamese tradition, the living must take care of the dead. We light incense, pray on death anniversaries, and give offerings to those who have passed. But through ephemeral care, we can see how the dead might take care of the living, encouraging us to ask different questions and create new ways of thinking. Care becomes multidirectional across generations, past, present, and future, allowing for a different mode of historical consciousness to emerge.

In Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*, the protagonist claims, “We are the lame second generation” (29). This playful self-degradation is common across the post-war generation, who often feels they do not have access to memories of war. Yen Lê Espiritu describes in her ethnographic study of the second generation how they do not have access to direct experiences of war and therefore feel unauthorized to speak or engage with it.<sup>29</sup> Taking ephemeral care, however, becomes a way to engage the post-war generation to think about how they might approach the past in different ways. Imagination through ephemera raises “what-if” questions that can encourage later generations to ask questions we haven't yet formed and tell us something we don't yet know.

### ***We Are Here***

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<sup>29</sup> See Espiritu, *Body Counts* (2014): Chapter 6.

*We Are Here* is a photographic essay that layers old photos from her family archive in contemporary spaces. The project creates stunning visuals, in that she carefully cuts the images of family members, often clothed in traditional Vietnamese wear, both formal and casual, and places them in urban spaces in different parts of the west coast. The contrast between old and new create a juxtaposition of what is here and what is not here, and the nuances in between. Mai describes the origins of her project as a conscious play on the nuances of what it means to be “here”:

The idea for this photographic essay stemmed from the title of one of my shows, entitled "We Are Here", whose meaning resonated with me on many different levels. One, is that "we have arrived" as individuals and/or as a people. Another meaning states that “we are present”, consciously living in this moment. And another meaning, a statement that might come from the perspective [of] our ancestors, is that “we are (still) here”. Using some of my photography in conjunction with photos from our family archive, relics of the past find their way into contemporary environments.<sup>30</sup>

Mai’s description of her project provides agency to the ephemera itself, in the way that Munoz describes ephemera as holding some possibility that can be interacted with in its epistemological sphere. Mai sees the ephemera as finding their way into the present. She uses her artistry to enact the ephemera and allow it to claim a presence in the now, and in the future.

Mai takes ephemeral care in the creation of *We Are Here* in the way she demonstrates what happens when we allow ephemera to perform and enact questions in cultural production. But unlike *Family Tree*, which does a really beautiful layering process using mixed media in a kind of collage, *We Are Here* is a more straightforward project. Mai cuts her family’s images and places them in photos that she has taken in urban spaces. Yet, the simplicity of the project somehow creates a more jarring effect that disrupts what we know about the present. She photographs a downtown street with stop lights, the exterior of a grocery store, and sliding doors with a neon “open” sign sitting above it—these are familiar sights to the contemporary eye. But

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<sup>30</sup> See: Mai, “*We Are Here*,” <http://trinhmai.com/we-are-here>

the layering of old black and white photos on these colorful spaces forces the viewer to reckon with what it means for ancestors, ghosts, or relics of the past to occupy the present in the same way we move about them.

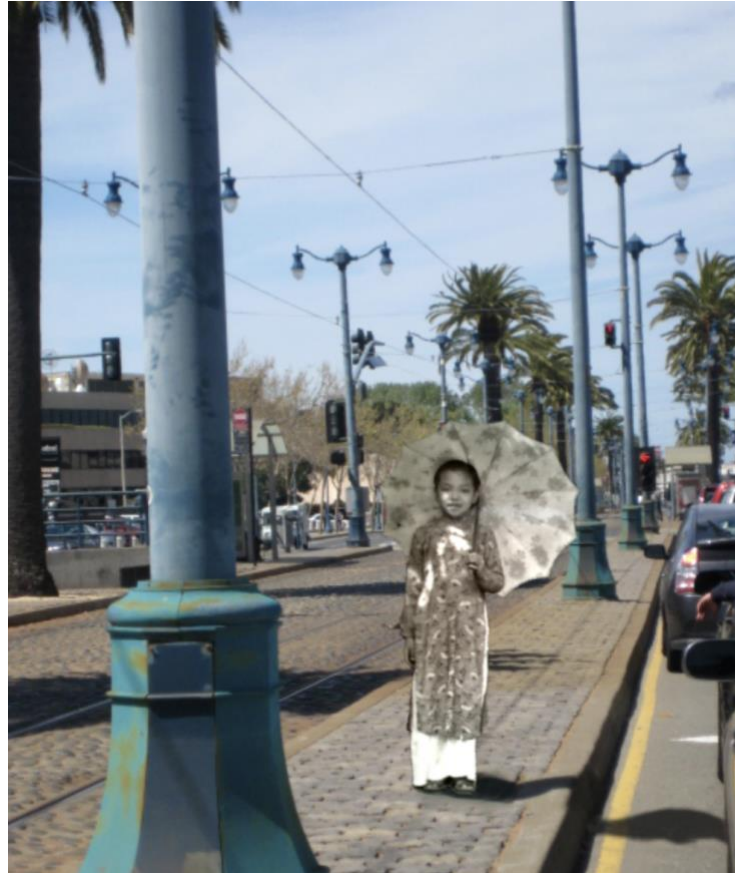


Figure 3. A young girl holding an umbrella poses on a sidewalk. Panel from Trinh Mai's *We Are Here*.<sup>31</sup>

The photos that she chooses are also not sensational in themselves, and she integrates them into the contemporary scenery in a way that elides the distance of space. Put in another way, despite the contrast in old/new and here/not here, the positioning and layering creates a narrative and story that makes sense. A man puts his arm around a young boy as he waits for the bus stop. On a sunny day, a young girl walks on an unshaded street using an umbrella to shade her body (Figure 3). Smiling women exit a building with open sliding doors, some of them

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<sup>31</sup> Photos of *We Are Here* are provided courtesy of Trinh Mai. For more photos, see: <http://trinhmai.com/we-are-here>

carrying umbrellas for shade and another about to place her *nón lá* on her head. These images disrupt the present, but in a way that makes sense, in a way that is consistent with what we know about people occupying spaces. The project doesn't allow us to easily situate the war in the past, rather insisting the ways they could have been and still are present.

Through this project, Mai urges the post-war generation to revisit and rummage through their family archives and think about what it means to be here. She takes ephemeral care by layering the photos atop our contemporary lives, forcing us to think about ourselves not as detached from the past but the past as a significant part of our daily lives. Rather than think about old family photos as representing that which is no longer here, we can reorient our thinking to recognize the ways our ancestors and our past are still present. This layering of past and present differs significantly from the way the Oregon Memorial attempts to address the mundane and the war. As I discussed earlier, the memorial presents the preservation and possibility of everyday life as made possible by the war. And the past is set in the past—we move out of wartime once we walk outside of the memorial, into the present. *We Are Here*, however, takes the contemporary moment and layers atop it, connecting old memories from our family archives pre-war and during war to the post-war generation. What it means to be “here,” or being present in the U.S., is tied to the past. She grants participatory power to both the ancestors in our past and the post-war generation, urging us to recognize how the war is a multigenerational and ongoing experience that cannot be closed off.

How do we imagine the ways they are here in our lives, living through us and our imagination, moving through the spaces in the way that we do? How do we actively carry their presence in ways that honor them and humble us? By animating these mundane photos, the project upsets a narrative that places ancestors, lost, and loved ones in the past, asking the

diaspora to reckon what it means for us to be here. It is through ephemeral care that she makes visible our inextricable ties to the past and urges us to do the same.

### *Crossing the Farther Shore*

Refugees are often framed as those who come with no possessions. This emphasis on loss and nothing-ness not only reinforces the need for saving and rescue narratives of the U.S., but it also makes it seemingly impossible for refugees to contribute to the memory of war. It dismisses the significance of lived experience and the potential to create history through the ephemera that remains. Thinking about loss as possibility, I consider how Dinh Q. Lê animates and materializes loss in *Crossing the Farther Shore*. As David Eng and David Kazanjian write, “loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained.” Whereas Mai is honoring her family using the ephemera that has been passed down to her, Dinh Q. Lê performs a different kind of excavation by pairing photos found in an antique shop and stories archived from Vietnamese Americans to create something new. *Crossing the Farther Shore* engages in ephemeral care by demonstrating what can be created through loss and imagination. Creating a structure of memories that traces the family and the diaspora transnationally, Lê encourages the post-war generation to take ephemeral care by considering what we can create through the performance of loss.



Figure 4. Dinh Q. Lê's *Crossing the Farther Shore* as displayed in the San Jose Museum of Art<sup>32</sup>

*Crossing the Farther Shore* is made up of hundreds of thousands of photographs, strung together to create seven large rectangular prisms. The structures hang from the ceiling, similar to mosquito nets often found in Vietnamese homes. From a distance, the nets appear to be texture panels, and it is unclear what makes up the nets. But once viewers are able to walk up close to the structures, they can read the stories and see the faces that form these protective structures of memory. There are individual and family portraits, and some photos seem to capture glimpses of moments around the dinner table, at the beach, or on the road. There are a mix of candid, animated photos and posed, intentional ones of all different ages. The rectangular prisms vary in size, but notable about all of them is that not all of the photos are facing outward. They alternate between the front and backside, and many of the photos have handwritten inscriptions on the back, written in English, Vietnamese, and Chinese:

On the verso of each photograph are inscriptions from their former owners and handwritten texts culled from two sources: the epic 19th century poem *The Tale of Kieu*, and recollections of Vietnam from Vietnamese Americans gathered from the Houston Asian American Archives at Rice University's Chao Center for Asian Studies. Stitching together unknown and private

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<sup>32</sup> I took these photos of *Crossing the Farther Shore* in November 2019 when it was displayed as part of Dinh Q. Lê's larger exhibit at the San Jose Museum of Art, *True Journey is Return*. All photos of the exhibit are provided from my personal archive.

identities with personal, cultural, and historical narratives, Lê created what he calls “a sleeping, dreaming memory of Vietnam.” (Lê, *Crossing the Farther Shore*)

This sleeping, dreaming memory combines stories from classic Vietnamese literature and recollections, or memories, from the diaspora. Not arranged in a linear way, the versos do not necessarily tell a clear story. As visitors walk around the structures, they can read bits and pieces of memories, but there is not a clear linear way of understanding when the tale ends and begins. In the same way, visitors read snippets from the oral storytelling project of the Houston Asian American Archives that capture the diaspora’s stories, from memories of war to mundane day-to-day lived experiences of Vietnamese Americans. Fact and fiction, experience and fantasy, are merged together.

Hanging from the ceiling, the mosquito net structures protect and preserve a history. On the structure of the nets, Lê shares, “The work was inspired by my childhood memory of being in a refugee camp in Thailand, where we would share communal spaces with other families. At night, each family would put up mosquito tents to sleep under. I remember sleeping in these nets and thinking about the past, thinking about Vietnam, thinking about what we left behind” (Lê, “Exchanges with Dinh Q. Lê”). The structure calls attention to what the family left behind and the significance of the memories they hold, as well as what has to be imagined. While the nets appear to be fragile, made of pieces of paper tied together by string, they are also incredibly strong. Together, the structures weigh about 300 pounds. Shared memories collected over time build a kind of weight, but Lê lightens the weight using the memories and ephemera to create protective structures.

The nets represent the weight of collective memory, the heaviness built up over time and buried under the dominant narratives and modes of remembrance. Archives might contain millions of stories, and antique shops millions of photos. Yet it is the memorials that are given

then most visible cultural space in the U.S. through concrete, granite, and marble. By creating heavy nets, literally in weight and metaphorically in memory, Lê lifts the weight of collective memory through the enactment of these structures. The nets mindfully invites viewers to interact with these memories while also being respectful of the strength and fragility of the nets. And while viewers can walk around the structures and peer inside of them, the structures are closed and protected. *Crossing the Farther Shore*, bound together by different memories and generations, simultaneously protects and calls attention to the strength of these stories, however fragile, fictional, or imaginative. The physical weight of the structures echoes the weight of collective memory and loss itself, demonstrating how that loss can produce something protective. In this way, the lightness of ephemera is transformed into a physical art object, giving permanent weight to what seemingly disappears or is lost.

When Lê returned to Vietnam as an adult, he felt a deep connection: “It was a connection to the history, like when I found the burial ground of my family. I saw three to four generations buried there, and you understand how deep the roots are” (Valverde 60). Discovering his family’s ancestral roots in Vietnam becomes a way for him to connect to a history that he did not have access to before. But *Crossing the Farther Shore* is not centered around his own family photographs; rather, he imagines that the family photographs that he finds in the antique shops are a kind of surrogate family. In Saigon, Lê noticed that antique stores contained many old family photographs. Though he never found his own family photos, he collected the ones that he found of strangers:

I’m obsessed with these photographs because they remind me of my childhood. Over the years, they have become my surrogate family photographs. But these images are also records of life in South Vietnam—happy moments, before and during the Vietnam War, that no one ever gets to see. Even today, when you Google the word “Vietnam,” a large number of the images that appear are of the Vietnam War. And so, with this work, I wanted a different kind of image to emerge. (Lê, “Exchanges with Dinh Q. Lê”)

While Lê does not have a direct connection with these photos, they become objects that he grows an affinity to and remind him of his childhood. Ephemera holds a unique duality in that it holds a deep individual connection within the family while also evoking and inciting affective responses from those who are simply a part of that history. These objects can make us think about the ways in which our histories cross and interact with one another. Through ephemera, the private space of the family can be revealed as a point of entry for thinking about overlapping experiences.

Underlying the creation of this permanent structure that takes ephemera and makes something not ephemeral at all is an undeniable sense of loss. As viewers, we know that Lê went to Vietnam in search of these family photos because he lost his own. When we walk around the structures, we witness loss. Performance studies scholar Rivka Eisner describes how witnessing performance and art “entails reckoning with the impossibility of ever fully recognizing the extent of others’ absences and losses. However, it is still critical to witness the impossible-to-witness, to reckon with what you realize you do not fully comprehend, recognizing at best that one can never encompass the extent of even one person’s loss” (341-42). While it is not possible to fully comprehend all that has been lost and cannot be found, *Crossing the Farther Shore* takes care of what remains and encourages the diaspora to do the same. Despite what has been lost, through the animation of ephemera, different forms of historical consciousness can be recovered to provide alternative ways of knowing and understanding for the Vietnamese diaspora.

### ***Ephemeral care and disrupting gender roles***

Mai and Lê work within and against the limitations that are placed upon them not only by the dominant nationalist narratives projected in both the U.S. and Vietnam, but also Vietnamese

American communities. The singular narrative of war for both American and Vietnamese American history has privileged masculinist histories. Privileging soldiers' experiences, American history and mainstream media reinforce militarized representations of war by centering the battlefield. In Vietnamese America, there is a similar privileging of masculine histories. In Vietnamese American communities, streets are renamed after war heroes, "'fathers' of the lost nation, imposing the names of 'Great Men' on the Vietnamese landscape" (Espiritu 135). The Vietnamese American community has created Little Saigon(s) and Internet memorials to remember the lives and deaths of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, creating important spaces for the diaspora to preserve, mourn, and narrate history, yet only the names of the men who fought in the war are remembered. Vietnamese American communities also demand the post-war generation to display filial responsibility in dutifully adhering to anticommunist politics.<sup>33</sup> The war is a guarded memory, and those who can speak about it are marked by generation, gender, or proximity to the war. These two ideological forces, the nation state and the Vietnamese American community, reinforce traditional gender roles for the post-war generation, asking them to hold up narratives of forgiveness or belonging. Because national and community formations are built upon imagined communities threatened by alternative histories or ideologies, post-war cultural producers must carefully select how to revisit the past or create alternate images of remembrance. Ephemeral care is an important Vietnamese diasporic feminist act that makes visible the ways Vietnamese American cultural producers can disrupt traditional gender roles that reinforce a nationalist and patriarchal forms of belonging and offer alternative ways of caring for one another in families and communities.

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<sup>33</sup> On Vietnamese American community politics and gender, see Lan Duong, *Treacherous subjects: Gender, culture, and trans-Vietnamese feminism* (2012); Thuy Vo Dang, "The Cultural Work of Anticommunism in the San Diego Vietnamese American Community" (2005)

Memorialization matters not just because of particular monuments, places, and things, but rather, because it is a subject-making process. The masculinist way that war is remembered is offset by the public role Vietnamese American women have played since the war, as dominant American narratives expect Vietnamese American women to give thanks to the state and bolster a narrative of American innocence and heroism. In the way that the memorial relies on the silence of Vietnamese and Vietnamese American lives and deaths to maintain a narrative of victory and tragedy, the Vietnamese American woman is an important actor in advancing the narrative of the Vietnam War as an ugly period of history, but nevertheless one that is in the past. I read the grateful refugee as a gendered subject necessarily situated within the Vietnamese American family to justify a narrative of thanks. The post-war Vietnamese American family and community has been constituted through nationalist ideologies about memorialization: the older generation are the grateful refugees, and the younger generation are dutiful and devoted children.

The loss of the American soldier's innocence is reinforced by characterizations of the Vietnamese refugee as the grateful refugee. As a result, this shaped the proper emotional posture of those who migrated. In *The Gift of Freedom*, Mimi Thi Nguyen argues that the United States took on the position of the defender of the free world. The gift of freedom, then, becomes a form of intervention and deliverance, with the first gift being an "object of intervention in the Cold War and the second gift as an "object of deliverance in the aftermath of military defeat" (Nguyen 23). This debt requires the refugee to not only be thankful for the gift; the refugee is also "recruited to testify to the gift of freedom and to recompense the debt through its extension to others" (Nguyen 29). The performance of thankfulness that that refugee must perform to position themselves for a precarious form of citizenship in the U.S. Through the figure of the grateful refugee, the U.S. is able to absolve itself from their occupation and involvement in

Southeast Asia, as well as South and Central America and the Caribbean, to justify violence and loss.

The gift of freedom required the thankfulness of the good refugee; the gendered public performance of the grateful refugee was tasked on Vietnamese women like Phan Thị Kim Phúc and Tung Trinh. In Mimi Thi Nguyen's discussion of Phan Thị Kim Phúc, commonly referred to as the "napalm girl," Nguyen analyzes various interviews between Kim Phúc and American news outlets. At the national Veterans Day commemoration in Washington DC in 1996, Kim Phúc demonstrates her forgiveness on stage. Addressing her "dear friends," in the audience, she says, "Even if I could talk face to face with the pilot who dropped the bombs, I would tell him we cannot change history but we should try to do good things for the present and for the future to promote peace" (Nguyen 84). In another exchange between Kim Phúc and the man who claims that he was the one who dropped the napalm bombs in Trang Bang: "'She just opened her arms to me. I fell into her arms sobbing,' he testified. 'All I could say is, I'm so sorry. I'm just so sorry. She [Kim Phúc] patted Plummer's back. 'It's all right,' she told him. 'I forgive, I forgive'" (Nguyen 117).

Likewise, in the documentary *Bolinao 52*, Tung Trinh plays the role of the forgiving Vietnamese refugee woman. While stranded in the middle of the ocean during their escape from Vietnam, Tung and other refugees sought help from a passing U.S. navy ship. The ship refused and continued on. Years later, Tung meets a man who was aboard the ship. He expresses how terrible he felt to Tung, who empathetically listens. At the end of their encounter, they embrace, thanking one another, and Tung tells him, "I hope you're happy now. Don't feel so much bad like before." These repeated performances of gratefulness suggests to the American public that

if Kim Phúc can forgive napalm and Tung Trinh the abandonment at sea, then surely we can move forward from the tragedy of the Vietnam War.

While the Vietnamese American family was actively solicited to perform thanks, the Vietnamese American community was also invested in principles of neoliberalism and American exceptionalism. As Nhi Lieu has written, Vietnamese American communities embraced the neoliberal as they settled in the U.S. in the 1970s and formed communities against “the backdrop of Cold War anticommunism and Reagan conservatism” (Lieu 27). When the Vietnam War ended in 1975, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam began enforcing communism in Vietnam, erasing all remnants of South Vietnam, including changing city and street names and banning books and music written before 1975. On the other side of the coin, as Vietnamese Americans began building communities in the U.S., to define themselves against communist Vietnam, Vietnamese American communities embraced conservatism and anticommunism. These neoliberal ideologies of freedom and individualism were not only distinctly American but also very distinctly *not* North Vietnamese. And when sociologists began depicting Vietnamese Americans as the new model minority in the late 1980s, the model minority’s promise of individual success and freedom allowed Vietnamese Americans a chance to further distinguish themselves from the North Vietnamese communism and move closer to a form of social and cultural citizenship as new Americans.

Anticommunism became a defining part of the Vietnamese American communities, and this included extreme censorship of any cultural products that seemed to sympathize with or support the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Anything from Vietnam is protested because it’s seen as sympathetic to the communist government: “Cultural control of the ethnic population involved protesting all forms of arts and art exhibitions that appeared to cast a positive light on

Vietnam—boycotting performers, artists, and officials from Vietnam” (Valverde 59). These acts of censorship reveal the importance of erasure to maintain a singular narrative.

Family and community became elided as literal and symbolic terms. For the post-war generation, this means that being a part of the community was to be a filial daughter or son who abides by the rules of anticommunism. Lan Duong describes her experience organizing an art exhibit with diasporic Vietnamese artists in Orange County, which is home to the largest Vietnamese diasporic population, and being met with aggressive attacks from anticommunist protesters. Although the exhibit was meant to allow the community to “look critically at the ways in which many parties engaged in censorship, including the United States, the diasporic community, and Việt Nam itself,” protesters focused on the exhibit’s display of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam’s flag and a bust of Ho Chi Minh (Duong and Pelaud 246). Criticizing the woman organizers for not behaving as dutiful daughters to the country, the protesters used sexist artwork and imagery: “A photoshopped picture of a young woman with a red star on the seat of her bikini and, next to her, a bust of Hồ Chí Minh’s in the toilet. An older woman in an *áo dài*, her fingernails painted in the design of the southern Vietnamese flag, called us ‘whores’” (Duong and Pelaud 247). Attacking the women for their apparent lack of knowledge about community politics and war, as well as their age, older members of the Vietnamese community called them traitors. Displaying images of women aligning themselves with the state, the protesters accused Duong and other organizers of betraying “the ideal of Vietnamese diasporic womanhood” by allegedly collaborating with the communist government and communist sympathizers (Duong and Pelaud 247). This experience, meant to shame and enforce a politics of community, reveal the precariousness of creating art in the Vietnamese diaspora, particularly for Vietnamese women who threaten the politics of community. The seemingly traitorous art of the later

generation disrupts a narrative of forgiveness and exceptionalism that the Vietnamese American family had been tasked to embrace.<sup>34</sup> As those who do not perform or align themselves with anticommunism are ostracized for not completing their filial duty to the community, Duong urges scholars to be critical of the ways in which Vietnamese American communities demand a politics of being “‘with’ or ‘against’ one’s community” by attending to “issues of gender, sexuality, and class that too often undergird narratives of the nation and the community” (Duong and Pelaud 251).

Though glimpses of communist sympathizing within the community quickly lead to criticism and anger, ephemeral care introduces new gender relations that are not structured by a politics of being for or against one’s community. Without displaying images of war, violence, or nationalist symbols, these artists provide alternative images of women and men caring for one another, navigating around and disrupting nationalist and masculine representations of war. Mai and Lê think about community, not as structured through nationalist ideologies of memory, but through care. In doing so, the artists re-imagine what it means to be in the post-war diaspora outside of the constraints of national or community narratives.

### ***Family Tree***

*Family Tree* is a feminist project in the privileging of the ordinary over the spectacular; that is, it isn’t simply feminist because it prioritizes women’s perspectives, but that it makes visible the intimate relationships that are often obscured by masculinist narratives of war from the perspectives of soldiers. By highlighting the ways in which family members take care of each other, the project disrupts traditional gender roles that relegate women to be caring subjects

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<sup>34</sup> See Duong’s *Treacherous Subjects: Gender, Culture, and Trans-Vietnamese Feminism*, 2012.

for national and community ideologies. Instead, Mai takes ephemeral care to demonstrate how different members of the family can become caring subjects and allows the family to be simply ordinary.

Mai creates the project with the intention to gain a deeper sense of family and document her family's history. This act of commemoration is a form of care that creates space to narrate her history without aligning herself with the politics of Vietnamese American community; instead, Mai momentarily separates the lines between family and community. The project centers the family without tying the family to a necessary representation of belonging and cultural citizenship in Vietnamese America. She is honoring her family, allowing for a better sense of family to emerge. Instead of acting as a filial daughter to her community to take responsibility for holding up a narrative of thanks, belonging, or cultural citizenship, Mai is simply making room for her family to exist and interact with one another. This departs from the role that Vietnamese women are asked to perform in the community space. Instead, Mai creates a space to honor her family without reinforcing a narrative of thanks to the state or to the anticommunism of the community. Because the Vietnamese American community and family is so inextricably tied to the neoliberal state's narrative of war, it's important to recognize that *Family Tree* does not explicitly align itself with the logic of anticommunism, nor does it perform thanks to the state.

Through this space of remembrance, she performs care to her family rather than to any form of nationalism, be it American, South Vietnamese, or Vietnamese. Importantly, Mai doesn't include any markers that identify whose "side" she is aligning herself with. While this might simply be an omission, anticommunism and South Vietnamese nationalism is so important to Vietnamese American communities. Though the Vietnamese American family has been

historically narrated through the lens of war and anticommunism, *Family Tree* allows the family to, even for just a fleeting moment, disrupt historical time and imagine new conversations and bonds within the family. Diasporic post-war cultural production can become a space to narrate a different version of Vietnamese diasporic history without having to adhere to nationalism or anticommunism.



Figure 5. Muted expressions in family portraits. Four panels from Trinh Mai's *Family Tree*.

A striking visual feature of *Family Tree* is the muted expressions of the portraits. For the most part, each panel holds images of people with muted expressions, who look straight at the camera or focus their gaze elsewhere. In some images, they smile as they look at another family member. These relatively quiet expressions provide a contrast with the sensationalist images of war that often frame refugees and Vietnamese people as victims or extremely happy families

situated in the U.S. Contrasting the figures of forgiveness and happiness, such as Kim Phúc and Tung Trinh, Mai's *Family Tree* provides more natural feelings and expressions. By forefronting these quiet expressions in the project, she highlights the importance of these ephemeral objects in allowing a different sense of family to emerge. The project prioritizes the mundane over the sensational, presenting us a form of care that creates space for the Vietnamese American family to be visible in an ordinary way that isn't typically granted to the refugees or the diaspora.

Finally, a key feature of *Family Tree* are the images of family members holding one another. Intimate silhouettes take up the pages, and within the traced silhouettes are images of her family holding one another. This act of holding is seen across two girls with their arms around one another, an elderly woman embracing a toddler, or what looks like two parents holding two children. The family holds each other, and the silhouettes hold these memories, demonstrating how later generations can take care of one another. As the project makes space for different generations to hold and care for each other across time, *Family Tree* takes ephemeral care to disrupt the dominant narratives of Vietnamese women occupying the position of taking care of *others*. She must take care of the nation and the community's well-being and emotional states—particularly white American guilt, the white American soldier, the nationalist Vietnamese American community in mourning. Women are seen as caretakers, never being taken care of. *Family Tree* disrupts this gendered dynamic and responsibility of care to show how different members of the family can take on caring roles. In one panel, silhouettes look at each other. They aren't clearly gendered, nor are their ages or generations clear. Both men and women, across generations, can take care of each other. We can care for one another without feeling the pressure of a community that demands women function as bolsters for belonging.

### *Crossing the Farther Shore*

Through the creation of a surrogate family in *Crossing the Farther Shore*, Lê disrupts traditional gender roles of the Vietnamese American family. He does not adhere to the responsibility of the filial son by holding up anticommunist narratives within Vietnamese America, nor does he give thanks to any sort of national institution that grants citizenship and belonging. Instead, Lê takes ephemeral care to disrupt politics of anticommunism and masculinist representations of the war in the U.S. and the Vietnamese American community.

Dinh Q. Lê, who was born in Vietnam and came over as a refugee in the late 70s, grew up in Simi Valley, California. Lê describes Simi Valley as the “center of conservatism,” and the Vietnamese American community’s anti-communism coupled with Hollywood portrayals of the Vietnam War left Lê feeling like he did not belong in the U.S. (Valverde 59). In an interview, Lê says, “I was trying to adapt, but it was all wrong. I was lost in America” (Valverde 60). Kiều Linh Caroline Valverde has described how much of Lê’s art is about “taking dominant narratives and images, deconstructing them, and then creating new forms in their place” (63). Particularly for the Vietnamese diaspora, it seems important to be able to come to meaning on one’s own rather than simply choose between the options that are given. The highly publicized Vietnam War meant that Vietnamese refugees entered a space in which their roles had already been defined for them through images of war or Hollywood depictions.



Figure 6. A closer look at Dinh Q. Lê's *Crossing the Farther Shore*

Crossing the Farther Shore uses ambiguity to disrupt traditional understandings of gender. On the back of a photo reads, “Another deputy commander killed a young refugee in his twenties. He was one of the most brutal in the camp. and did many of the beatings the mother of the boy who was killed made an official complaint and the matter is now under investigation.” The inscription draws attention to what seems to be violence in a refugee camp. It’s unclear who the deputy commander is or to whom he declares his allegiance, but he was brutal and violent. Unlike the memorials (both Vietnamese American and American) that glorify the military, this deputy commander is the villain in this story. Though Vietnamese women are often depicted as demure and forgiving, this mother is the opposite of that. She demands justice through an official complaint, and she is victorious because the matter is now being investigated. Providing an alternative story to the gender roles glorified and elevated in American culture, this inscription disrupts the discourse around the Vietnamese diaspora. Also notable in this story is the lack of identifying markers that make the story distinctly Vietnamese. Because of the context of the artwork, we can assume that this is probably a Vietnamese story about Vietnamese refugees in a camp. But there is nothing within the story that confirms where the refugee camp

is, who the young boy and his mother are, and when this occurred. The time and space of the story is unclear. The lack of specificity calls into question who is to blame for this violence—who is this deputy official? Is he American? South Vietnamese? North Vietnamese?

Obscuring the answers to these questions, not allowing viewers to understand who the culprit of violence is, seems deliberate. Through ephemeral care, carefully animating these images and stories but purposely withholding information at the same time, Lê complicates simpler narratives of victory and valor.

Finally, *Crossing the Farther Shore* speaks against masculine nationalisms that frame the Vietnamese diaspora. As *Crossing the Farther Shore* is trying to display a different image of Vietnam, this means not only displaying it only as a country of war and victimhood but also a place that had and continues to have happy moments. Rather than celebrate the militaristic and masculine histories of the war, Lê wants us to pay attention to these happy moments. On the back of one photo, someone describes helping out at a Tết festival each year: “I help out in the Tet festival and so does my kids and my wife and it’s fun. We build a Vietnamese village and we help people help the kids have fun in there. Because when you go in there you don’t see it’s an American fair only. It’s an American fair but we also build the Vietnamese tradition in there so it’s fun” (Lê, *Crossing the Farther Shore*). This inscription is notable for a number of reasons: first, the speaker wants to make it clear that the festival is both American and Vietnamese. The building of tradition is important to them, something the speaker wants to pass along to the next generation. Second, there’s no additional information about who the speaker is. We might assume that this is the husband and father speaking, but there’s nothing that indicates this is a heteronormative relationship. Rather, the speaker’s identity is left open-ended and unsaid, keeping our understanding of this family ambiguous. Finally, as these inscriptions were

created from contributions written by Vietnamese Americans in the Houston Asian American Archives, Lê counters militaristic representations of memory and war in the U.S. and Vietnamese America by remembering and historicizing the building of community. The speaker just wants us to know that they are helping “people help the kids have fun.” They are living in the afterlife of war, sharing tradition, and having fun. This simple act is memorable enough. They don’t need to perform a filial duty that reinforces a politics of anticommunism. Instead, they can just have fun.

### ***Conclusion***

Historically, the Vietnamese diasporic family has been called upon to bolster narratives that are not their own. Through the ways that Mai and Lê animate objects and stories, they take ephemeral care to disrupt dominant discourses around Vietnamese Americans. They disrupt the ways Vietnamese Americans have been left out of memorials and public memory, as well as the ways they have been called upon to perform for the nation and community. Their works allow the family to speak for itself and encourage us to think about what happens if we listen to ephemera and imagine what it might be saying.

The opening of possibility is what makes post-war diasporic cultural production powerful. Trinh’s project begins with a desire to honor her family. By sifting through the family photos available to her, she gains a stronger sense of family. She is able to do this, in part, because of the objects that have been passed down in her family. Dinh, on the other hand, is looking for something that he has lost. Many Vietnamese refugee families did not have the opportunity to take their family photos with them, or perhaps didn’t have access to take family photos at all. Describing the importance of preserving these photos of South Vietnam as forms

of history, Lê says, “Fortunately, they [the government] haven’t gotten to these photographs. I’m trying to protect this documentation because I don’t want them to fall into disuse and disappear. Once it’s as an artwork, hopefully it will be taken care of in the future” (Walley Films, *Crossing the Farther Shore*). This hope for the photos and memories to be taken care of in the future places some form of responsibility on the post-war generation to remember that there are narratives that exist outside of the ones they have been given. This requires ephemeral care: relooking at the past and creating something new. Ephemeral care urges the post-war generation and future generations to enact different questions and possibilities for the diaspora. It might happen in family and community archives, but it might also take us to an antique shop in Vietnam. What else could be known if the post-war generation continues to create new epistemologies from the things we carry?

## Chapter 2 | Storytelling, Protective Care, and Motherhood

last night my mother left her body after a beautiful fight through cancer, at age 51. born in war but having lived in peace, she now begins her journey through the bardo. in this photo, i had invited her on stage after my lecture last summer. i wanted to honor her, along with all working class mothers who put their heads down through decades of back breaking work so their children can put their heads up [...]

what can a son say to the great loss from which he owes his own life? only that my world has changed forever. it can never be what it was. it is absolutely less—and yet perennially more because of what you have given me, Ma. you taught me that our pain is not our destiny—but our reason. you gave me all the reasons. thank you. i bow to you. i will see you again. every word was always for you. every sentence a life (-giving) sentence. cảm ơn mẹ cho con một đời sống tốt đẹp vô cùng.

Ocean Vuong, *Instagram*, November 3, 2019

Vietnamese American literature has been getting a recent spotlight in popular literature. With Viet Thanh Nguyen’s Pulitzer Prize win in 2016 for his novel, *The Sympathizer*, the success of his following collection of short stories, *The Refugees* (2017), cartoonist Thi Bui’s acclaimed graphic novel *The Best We Could Do* (2017), and Ocean Vuong’s rising popularity with first, his poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016) and then his novel, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019)—Vietnamese American literature is trending. These texts, which explicitly deal with the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the stories of the refugees who live in that aftermath, and their rising popularity seem to suggest that the U.S. is ready to hear voices from the post-war generation on the Vietnam War. We’ve come a long way, and now we’re ready to have these voices circulated in the popular sphere of American culture. This narrative, likely at least partially true, echoes a temporality of progress, suggesting that with time, wounds will heal and amends might be made.

The above epigraph from Ocean Vuong’s Instagram, a caption dedicated to his mother after her death, might be read in a similar way. The American immigrant narrative has always been about providing immigrants with opportunities. In turn, the first generation puts their heads down so the next generations may look up. Because the dominant narrative of generations

follows a linear timeline of progress, a liberal reading of Vuong's question, "what can a son say to the great loss from which he owes his own life?" might dismiss this as an ode to the first generation for putting their heads down through decades of back breaking work so their children can put their heads up. It can be tempting to apply a liberal reading to this caption and to Vietnamese American literature; it's an easier way to interpret the text and it certainly fits into a liberal understanding of the world. But neither the caption nor Vietnamese American literature fit neatly into the temporality of progress, despite the ways in which popular culture attempts to envelope it into a liberal narrative. Instead, Vietnamese American literature can reorient the way we understand how time and care work in the post-war diaspora.

This chapter does not aim to repeat the idea that "your parents' sacrifices create opportunities for you," as this narrative has repeatedly been used to project a linear framework of temporality and generations, suggesting that with time, everything gets better. This liberal narrative places responsibility for progress on the individual family and has been used to hurt Asian Americans and people of color, placing accountability on communities of color and absolving the state of past violence. Thinking of sacrifice in terms of progress reinforces individual responsibility on the family (and in this case, the refugee family) to create opportunities for the next generation rather than demanding structural and systemic accountability. Importantly, Vuong's caption is dedicated to his mother. Rather than thanking the state or the liberal clock that takes away the hardship from previous generations, he reorients us to think about what his mother taught him: that "pain is not our destiny—but our reason." She has cared for him in a way that helps him understand that while Vietnamese refugees come from a history of pain, they are not defined by it. He honors her, reorienting and centering our focus on her, in a way that doesn't honor the state or allow the temporality of progress to resolve the

violence of war. He does not naturalize her suffering in a way that prevents him from sharing it. And this chapter argues that that reorientation makes all the difference.

In this chapter, I examine Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and Viet Thanh Nguyen's short story "Black-Eyed Women" to consider how *protective care* can open up new ways of existing in the post-war diaspora. I theorize protective care as a Vietnamese American feminist practice that protects through warnings and storytelling with the intention of keeping others safe. These protective acts critique state violence and pass down methods of speaking to demonstrate how language is a form of care. Care within Vietnamese American families has not been granted critical seriousness because it is often gendered labor within the domestic space; not recognized as a legitimate form of political action, care is admired but not studied. My reading seeks to provide an alternative framework for approaching the lessons taught by Vietnamese mothers to honor protective care as a powerful and political act. In the public sphere, Vietnamese women have historically been called upon to perform for the state and perform the verbal and gendered labor of thanks to uphold a neoliberal narrative of disavowal and the Vietnam War.<sup>35</sup> I call attention to the political acts Vietnamese mothers make in the domestic space to create new ways of acting and being in the post-war diaspora. While women are generally thought to have nonpolitical roles of providing care in the home, especially in roles as mothers, the production of these texts and what we see in them demonstrate how care can begin with motherhood and can be taken on by those touched by care. That is, care can create caring subjects.

This chapter argues that Vuong's and Nguyen's work deconstructs the binary schemas of political subjectivity—loud resistance or silence, sacrificial labor or indebted performance—

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<sup>35</sup> Mimi Thi Nguyen discusses this extensively in *The Gift of Freedom*.

through acts of protective care. I situate protective care in terms of a cultural context of feminist resistance to storytelling as a political act, and then in terms of debt and sacrifice to consider what it means to honor parents rather than owe them. In my readings of “Black-Eyed Women” and *On Earth*, I examine how mothers’ stories become a way for both the characters and readers to learn about the historical violence of the state on Vietnamese and Vietnamese American women and families. I seek to make two interventions: first, I argue that protective care disrupts gendered understandings of resistance. Asian American politics has historically favored masculine forms of protest that signal militant resistance. Protective care offers a soft form of power that privileges protection over loud protest. Drawing from the way literary theorist King-kok Cheung considers silences as forms of political action, I center the ways Vietnamese American women, and especially mothers, use protective care to share knowledge and create space to critique the state. Second, I consider how protective care makes space for later generations to tell stories that both honor mothers and resist ongoing state violence. In both “Black-Eyed Women” and *On Earth*, the narrators share the stories their mothers have told to protect them. Learning from their mothers the power of language, the narrators become storytellers, writing stories that honor their mothers and create new historiographies for the post-war diaspora.

### **Protective care as protest**

Western forms of protest, such as speaking out or making noise, have been privileged in the realm of Asian Americanist politics, and these politics have been historically masculinist forms of public resistance. In *Articulate Silences*, King-kok Cheung focuses on silence as a way of working against or around Western privileging of speech and vocalization. Used as a weapon

against Asian Americans, silence, as Cheung argues, is seen as feminine: “Precisely because quietness is associated with the feminine, as is the ‘East’ in relation to the ‘West’ (in Orientalist discourse), Asian and Asian American men too have been ‘feminized’ in American popular culture” (Cheung 2). In response to the gendering of silence, Asian American studies has taken on a “western” approach in favor of louder forms of political action and resistance. *Aiiieeeee!* *An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, the 1974 anthology that has been read as marking the beginning of Asian American literature, argues for the importance of having a loud voice. The editors argue that “Asian American, so long ignored and forcibly excluded from creative participation in American culture, is wounded, sad, angry, swearing, and wondering, and this is his AIIIEEEEE!!! It is more than a whine, shout, or scream. It is fifty years of our whole voice” (xxvi). Suggesting that loud, verbal forms of militant protest are the answer to the suppression of Asian American voices, the *Aiiieeeee!* editors overlook how silence can be a form of communication. Turning our attention to different forms of speaking that work outside of loud resistance, we can learn other ways of acting and being in the world.

Though the women in these stories are certainly not silent, in Vietnamese American communities, women’s stories are not given weight. As Vietnamese diaspora studies scholar Natalie Huynh Chau Nguyen writes in her collection and analysis of first-generation Vietnamese women’s stories, “Women’s stories, in particular, are still largely unknown and undocumented...It is also the [first] generation that is the least heard in the public arena” (5). Women are dismissed for the ways they do speak, and they are only listened to when their stories benefit patriarchal narratives of war. By paying attention to the stories mothers tell to understand how they are protecting and caring for their children, I argue that these stories are political acts and powerful ways of recognizing violence, critiquing the state, passing down knowledge, and

protecting others. In my analysis, I understand politics to be acts of consciousness raising and providing ways of looking outside of state-sanctioned narratives; that is, these political acts reveal and critique ongoing histories of imperial violence. My interpretation of what it means to act “politically” is broad; from consciousness raising to passing down important knowledge of violence, acting politically, in this chapter, includes the quiet disruption of dominant narratives and reorienting the perspective of the post-war generation. Acting politically also means telling stories that disrupt the language of filial responsibility to the liberal family or the state, and instead to focus honor and care onto the first generation by way of resistance. Granting critical seriousness to the stories passed down by Vietnamese American women, in particular mothers, and those are touched by these acts of care, I consider how protective care makes room for later generations to think about politics and disruption in a different way.

A common theme in Asian American literature is the tension in relationships between mothers and their children. From Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club* to Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge*, first-generation mothers are constantly telling their children to remain silent and anonymous and to conform with the demands of the model minority. This desire to keep their children quiet can be read as urging children to take up the debt that the first generation owes to the state, as it is through American exceptionalism or humanitarian aid that Asian American families were allowed to come to the U.S. and stay. Literary studies scholar erin Khuê Ninh takes up the issue of filial obligation and debt in *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter*. Describing how Asian American families place the responsibility of economic success onto their children, Ninh argues that parents enter themselves and their children into a contract of filial obligation, where “the parent-creditor brings into being a child-debtor who can never repay the debt of her own inception and rearing. Such debt is structural, a matter of position rather than payment, and

places the child ever in violation” (16). Arguing that children, especially daughters, become forms of capital and currency that allow for assimilation into America’s exceptionalism narrative, Ninh pushes against the idealization of the mother-daughter relationship in Asian American literature. This reading of the family positions parents as liberal figures vying for state acceptance and inclusion, reinforcing a narrative of bad first-generation parents who primarily care about the way their family functions in a political economy rather than caring for the emotional or physical wellbeing of their children.

The language of debt has also been used to highlight how the Vietnamese American family was enlisted to perform its thanks to the American public. In Chapter 1, I have discussed how debt shapes the proper emotional posture of the refugee. As Mimi Thi Nguyen describes in *The Gift of Freedom*, the United States positioned itself as defender of the free world, rendering the refugee the object of intervention and deliverance. This narrative required Vietnamese women, and particularly Vietnamese mothers, to perform this debt and be publicly and performatively grateful to the U.S. for saving them. As women are enlisted to perform their forgiveness and thanks, they are highlighted as loving mothers to their successful children.

Both Ninh and Nguyen use the language of debt and repayment as a way to critique the Asian American family and the limited roles different generations are given in post-war America. First generation women and parents perform in ways that reveal how they are attempting to pay their debt to the state or using their children as capital to be further enveloped into a narrative of exceptionalism and assimilation. While this is certainly the case for many Asian American families, framing all Asian American families in terms of political economy and debt to the state limits how we understand the choices Asian American families make. Reducing the choices a family, and in particularly first-generation mothers, make in the wake of their

arrival to the U.S., limits the possibility of different narratives for Asian American families, dismissing the ways mothers use different methods to protect their children and teach them what it means to exist and survive in the post-war diaspora.

Owing ties parents and children to roles of creditor/debtor, and this pits generations against each other in a structure of indebtedness. Shifting the conversation to honoring, I focus on how mothers critique the state and in turn teach their children to do the same. I read these texts to think about how they honor the choices that women have made in the domestic sphere by recognizing the ways mothers protect, and how mothers teach their children to resist through storytelling. That is, when mothers give protective care through stories, they create a new generation of storytellers. Reading between the lines of the stories mothers tell their children, we can see how first-generation mothers demonstrate a deep understanding of the racialized and gendered conditions of being women of color raising families in the U.S. To ensure that their children are protected and safe, they tell stories with warnings interlaced in the tales. This, in turn, allows their children to go on to tell stories that continue to critique the state and honor their mothers.

Sometimes care comes in the form of silence, putting your head down so the next generation can look up. Sometimes care means using stories to warn children of the dangers that might await them in a world that tells them they do not belong. These attempts to protect, to keep others safe and alive, and fed and sustained are political acts, and that we can honor the lessons mothers teach and new ways of thinking and being they create. Protective care opens up spaces of critique for later generations to understand what it means to be part of the post-war diaspora. Rather than read Vietnamese American families as making choices that leave the second generation in violation of the debts they owe their parents or the state, I read “Black-Eyed

Women” and *On Earth* to consider how mothers use care to critique the state while keeping their children safe as best they can.

### **Reading Silences and Protection as Care in “Black-Eyed Women”**

“Black-Eyed Women,” the first short story in *The Refugees*, is narrated by a thirty-eight-year-old Vietnamese ghostwriter, who writes for those who have been struck with fame after surviving tragic circumstances. She lives with her mother, a first-generation Vietnamese woman, who communicates in the form of stories. One night, the narrator and her mother are visited by the ghost of the narrator’s dead older brother, who was killed at the age of fifteen when the family escaped Vietnam. Each member of the family carries trauma in their own way: the brother who was killed trying to protect his sister, the sister who was raped by the pirates who killed her brother, and the parents who witnessed both violent events but could do nothing to protect their children. While violence of the death and rape haunt the family, neither the mother nor daughter speak of it. When the brother visits his mother and sister, the narrator recalls what happened to her, what she and her mother never speak of but still remember. At the end of the story, the narrator begins to write her own book.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator shares her mother’s first warning: that writers should never put their names on things. When the narrator says she wouldn’t mind being mentioned in the acknowledgements of a book she is ghostwriting for, the mother tells her a story about a reporter in Vietnam who wrote about the government torturing people in prison. The government, in return, sent the reporter away, never to be seen again. “In our home country...that’s what happens to writers who put their names on things,” the mother says. On the very first page of the story, the narrator is already told to remain invisible. Indeed, the

narrator's name is never mentioned in the story at all. In her mother's eyes, silence and anonymity are necessary means of survival. The mother's reasonable desire to keep her daughter safe and alive creates a protective cloak of silence, a life kept in the shadows of ghostwriting to mourn the tragedies of others but never her own.

Silence becomes a cloak with which mothers must drape their children; it demonstrates a deep understanding of danger and creates a form of care and communication. It is easy to deduce that the narrator's mother's desire to keep her daughter silent is reinforcing narratives of the model minority, encouraging her daughter to remain silent. When Vietnamese Americans entered the U.S., they were soon lauded for being the new model minority; they worked hard and didn't complain, creating their own communities and thriving in the U.S. The mother's urging to remain anonymous and invisible seems in line with the idea that "in order to be recognized by mainstream society—in order to be at all," Asian Americans must mimic the model minority stereotype (Eng and Han 677). But I read the mother's warning as a form of protective care. The mother wants to protect her daughter from the government, or anyone who hurts "writers who put their names on things." A name becomes a form of recognition and can be a potential path to violence. These things must be hidden away as best as we can, because the more we reveal, the more vulnerable to violence we are. Whereas the model minority myth is the condition for national belonging in the U.S., this warning arises from the understanding that belonging is undermined by routine violence. Her mother's story is an instructive tool that reveals the falseness of the model minority belonging in the U.S., or in any nation.

As a Vietnamese woman whose life experiences are shaped by U.S. and Vietnamese governments and war violence, the mother critiques the state while using the ephemeral nature of the oral story as protection. She protects herself by not tying her name onto a story or leaving

evidence of something that can persecute her later, and it becomes a way for the mother to warn her daughter of their precarious position they occupy as refugees. A liberal narrative posits that refugees have been rescued and are safe in the U.S. But the mother uses tales, “all of them proof of what my mother said, that we did not belong here.” Although Vietnamese women are centered in the media for the ways they testify to American exceptionalism, the mother reveals how refugees and the postwar generation are not safe. She tells her daughter to be silent, but also be critical and watchful. Importantly, when the mother tells stories, she does not exempt either countries for state violence; that is, both the Vietnamese and American governments are institutions to be feared and vigilant against. Speaking against governments for state-sanctioned violence against refugees, the mother uses oral storytelling to protect her daughter, in a way that keeps her anonymous yet passes down the understanding that “we did not belong here” (7). Through these tales of woe, the mother is able to warn her daughter of their precarious situation while also demonstrating that there is only so much they can protect each other from.

This desire to protect becomes more apparent when we learn later in the story that the mother witnessed a pirate rape her daughter, and she was unable to protect her. When the narrator’s brother returns as a ghost, the narrator recalls their escape and his death. Along with their parents, she and her brother escaped Vietnam on a heavily overcrowded fisherman’s boat. At sea, their boat is approached by pirates. Acting quickly, the brother takes his sister, thirteen years old at the time, to the engine room to hastily disguise her as a boy: he slashes her long hair off into a boy’s cut, bounds and flattens her small breasts with fabric, and smears engine oil on her face. But the disguise doesn’t fool the pirates. Stopping in front of the sister, “this little man, who spoke some of our language, stepped close and lifted my chin. ‘You’re a handsome

boy,' he [says]" (15). The brother stabs the man with a pocketknife, the man kills the brother with a blow to the head and rapes the sister:

When I turned my face away and saw my mother and father screaming, my eardrums seemed to have burst, for I could hear nothing. Even when I screamed I could not hear myself, even though I felt my mouth opening and closing. The world was muzzled, the way it would be ever afterward with my mother and father and myself, none of us uttering another sound on this matter. Their silence and my own would cut me again and again. (16)

Though we read the story of the brother's death and the narrator's rape, the story is never spoken. The narrator recalls the memory in her mind, only triggered when her brother asks, "Does it still hurt for you?" to which she replies yes (15). As she recalls her brother's death, she writes that she can still hear the sound of the man killing her brother with the back of a machine gun: "The crack—I could hear it still." Her rape, however, is silent. When she turns her head and sees her parents screaming, she "could hear nothing." Even when she screams, she cannot hear herself. Her brother's death is deafening, and the trauma and silence that comes after cuts her "again and again." In a way, her memory echoes the way in which gendered violence is often remembered: the brother's loud death by machine gun and the narrator's silent rape might reveal how the schema of gendered violence amplifies the lives and deaths of men and the silencing of women's violence and stories. Predominant in the narrator's memory of the rape is silence and noise. After her brother is killed with the crack of the machine gun, her experience is silent, and this is what cuts her again and again. Yet, as she recalls her memory, it's full of screaming. A significant part of the story is figuring out how to speak, or find ways to articulate the silences so she is no longer cut by them.

Learning to articulate the silences means listening to ghosts and telling stories. When the brother first appears, the mother is the only one who sees him. The mother goes into the narrator's room and tells her to come out and greet her brother, to which the narrator is skeptical and doubting. The mother is annoyed with her daughter's dismissal, saying that she doesn't

know anything about ghosts. It is only when the narrator sees her brother's ghost herself that she believes what her mother had been telling her along.

The mother's insistence on the importance of ghosts and tending to their stories and souls is a form of protective care that she gives to her daughter. Listening to ghosts and their stories—this becomes necessary for the narrator to find ways to break the silence and speak. When the narrator interacts with her brother's ghost and confronts the memories and emotions that he conjures, she is able to weep for the silences within her family and the violence inflicted on the girls who never came back. His ghostly presence and the questions he invokes make visible the axes of violence that led to his death and their separation, and the reverberations of trauma that she feels in her everyday life. Sociologist Avery Gordon describes how the haunting and appearance of ghosts notify “what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us” (Gordon xvi). Haunting, Gordon argues, is distinctive from trauma for “producing a something-to-be-done,” or “forcing a confrontation, forking the future and the past” (Gordon xvi). In this way, her brother's ghostly presence forces a reckoning between the narrator, her silence, and her past, and what it might mean to acknowledge what lingers.

For those who have been kept silent and hidden for so long, they have to figure out their own ways to carefully tread out of the quiet. “Black-Eyed Women” ends as the narrators' agent calls her with another writing job. She declines, saying “I was writing a book of my own.” Once her brother leaves, she tells her mother, “I haven't said all I wanted to say” and begins to write down her mother's stories (19). In this closing moment, the narrator shifts from a silent ghostwriter to a writer of Vietnamese stories. The narrator resists the American narrative that requires the Vietnamese woman as past refugee who needed to be saved or present refugee who

must now perform forgiveness for generations to come. The violent temporality of these liberal narratives is disrupted through the narrative of the ongoing trauma and the recognition of the ghosts that haunt the present. The story honors the dead instead of dismissing them; the narrator sits with the dead to mourn them, and she listens to what they have to say. She is able to take on responsibility for what her parents could not talk about and recognize the struggle over “what to remember, whom to recognize, and how to represent the past” (Nguyen, “Just Memory” 156). Instead of resigning to stories that remind her that the Vietnamese do not belong in America, she confronts and breaks her narrative of silence to recall Vietnamese lived experiences.

By writing down her mother’s stories, the narrator honors her mother’s stories. She notes that when she begins to document what her mother is saying, her mother responds, “‘Writers.’ She shook her head, but I think she was pleased” (21). It’s a change from being relegated into the shadows, or only being listened to when the purpose of the story is to bolster up others, but not yourself. What does it mean for the Vietnamese diaspora to tell stories for themselves? And to recognize these stories as worthy of being told? In this way, the narrator is able to honor what her mother knows and the ways in which her mother has tried to protect her through storytelling. The next generation, then, is able to recognize the protective care their parents have given them and honor them in return.

By honoring the dead and honoring her mother’s stories, the narrator uses writing as a way to change the silence that has been cloaked around her family and disrupt a narrative of debt and thanks around Vietnamese refugees. From her mother, the narrator has learned that writing is always a political act, or something that can be viewed as a tool of disrupting or resisting the government. Through writing, the narrator claims that these stories need to be known. The stories contain the memories that the state has tried to repress or overwrite through the

overwhelming responsibility placed on Vietnamese refugees to give thanks and be grateful for being saved. The narrator ends by saying, “as they haunt our country, so do we haunt theirs.” Claiming the position of the ghost, or the one who haunts, the narrator plays with the duality of ghostliness and writes herself into American history. Just as the dead haunt the present, the Vietnamese diaspora haunts the U.S. By listening to and telling stories, the diaspora becomes ghostly in forcing a confrontation of what the U.S. wants to understand as the past. These stories that honor the first generation become “garments shed by ghosts,” left to be found by a later generation.

In the same way the narrator leaves stories left behind to be found by others, Nguyen makes space for these stories to be heard but also seems to ask his diasporic readers what it might mean to write down these stories. In *The Refugees*, Nguyen uses the short story collection to archive a number of stories from the Vietnamese diaspora. As Nguyen has argued, telling stories becomes an important way to acknowledge both the humanity and inhumanity of the diaspora, providing them with a complexity that isn't often granted. Particularly for Vietnamese women, who are positioned to forgive and give thanks to the U.S., storytelling becomes a significant framework for understanding the diaspora beyond a single narrative. Recognizing the ways mothers protect through storytelling and care, “Black-Eyed Women” reminds us how we can honor the ways mothers have protected us by telling their stories and finding new ways to haunt the U.S.

### *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

In this chapter's opening epigraph, Ocean Vuong writes in memory of his mother's passing. He questions what it means to bow and honor the labor of “all working class mothers

who put their heads down through back breaking work so their children can put their heads up.”

As Vuong writes that he is indebted to his mother for his life and how she changed his world, I consider how protective care pushes the next generation to use storytelling as a powerful political practice. By shifting the focus away from the indebtedness between the refugee and the state, I center what it means to honor the lessons of mothers who taught their children to look up by telling stories that continue to resist and critique the state.

Ocean Vuong’s debut novel, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, is a letter to his mother that she will never read. Vuong’s novel takes the stories, memories, and knowledge that are passed down across generations and highlights the care that is shown by mothers and other family members and makes visible the beauty of their everyday experiences. Protective care is shared through storytelling, revealing the complexity of Vietnamese American experiences to honor what has survived and to honor the knowledge that is passed down. Through care, we can remember where we came from and reimagine what we can be.

Mothers in *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* give protective care to their children through the act of naming. Similar to how the mother in “Black-Eyed Women” tries to protect her daughter by urging her to never put her name on things, the concealment of names is an important way of passing down protection. Naming functions slightly differently in *On Earth*, however, as a name becomes a shield to hide beauty. At the beginning of the novel, we learn that being desired means being in danger, and therefore protection is necessary to keep what is beautiful safe. For the narrator, this begins with how he received his nickname, Little Dog:

Little Dog was what Lan called me. What made a woman who named herself and her daughter after flowers call her grandson a dog? A woman who watches out for her own, that’s who...Because evil spirits, roaming the land for healthy, beautiful children, would hear the name of something hideous and ghastly being called in for supper and pass over the house, sparing the child. To love something, then, is to name it after something so worthless it might be left untouched—and alive. A name, thin as air, can also be a shield. A Little Dog shield. (18)

Lan, Ocean's grandmother, gives him a "Little Dog shield" in the form of a nickname that protects him from evil spirits. To juxtapose Little Dog, "something hideous and ghastly" with Lan's own name, is to think about what it means to protect, as well. Lan names herself after "Lily," or other interpretations might include orchid. In naming herself, Lan takes on the role of protector, and Little Dog becomes the protected. But this knowledge seems to also be learned, as Lan "named herself and her daughter after flowers" before calling her grandson a dog.

While we can read this practice as the suggestion of the patriarchal nature of the Vietnamese family, it also demonstrates how Lan changes her approach to protecting the next generation after being unable to protect her daughter. Little Dog recalls a time when he ran away from home. Climbing up a maple tree in a nearby playground, he listened to the neighborhood and heard "a woman calling in a dog or a child" (154). Soon, his grandmother appears, calling for him. She tells him, "'Your mom. She not normal okay? She pain. She hurt. But she want you, she need us. She love you, Little Dog. But she sick. Sick like me. In the brains'" (155). Little Dog is quiet, and Lan continues: "You don't need to be scared, Little Dog. You smarter than me... You don't need to be scared. No need" (155). This memory illustrates Lan's understanding that both she and her daughter are "not normal," and sick in the brains. Both Little Dog's mother and grandmother have experienced the war in a way that Little Dog has not—they have experienced what it means to be hunted, living in danger and running from war but surviving it.<sup>36</sup> This emotional and mental trauma makes them "sick," but Lan tells Little Dog that this does not stop his mother from loving, wanting, and needing him. Though the ways they love are fractured, they have also changed the way they love over time, as Lan demonstrates

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<sup>36</sup> While a large part of the novel is dedicated to Lan and Hong's violent experiences of the war, leaving Vietnam, and the trauma they carried as they created a life for themselves in the U.S. My discussion of the novel in this chapter, however, focuses primarily on the relationships between Little Dog and his mother and grandmother to examine the stories they tell to give each other care.

when she intentionally names her grandson after something worthless instead of something beautiful, as she did with her daughter. Lan tells Little Dog he does not need to be scared because he is smarter, but perhaps it is also because she has given him a Little Dog shield, one that she could not give her daughter.

Because health, beauty, and youth are hunted, she gives protective care in the form of a name. This shield becomes her way of watching out for her own. To protect him from anything that might hurt him, to love him, is to name him “after something so worthless [he] might be left untouched—and alive.” By highlighting the name as a shield, one that is “thin as air,” Little Dog centers the practice of giving nicknames as one that is worthy of being honored. There’s an acknowledgement and understanding of the dangers of beauty, the dangers of desire that leave the ones you love most vulnerable. The Little Dog shield, though thin as air, becomes a learned form of care that keeps the next generation alive. Highlighting the power of language and a nickname makes visible the care that it takes to provide protection and knowledge to survive.

In the way nicknames are used as protection to redirect “evil spirits, roaming the land,” language is also used to reorient how the characters interpret and understand the world. In the presence of violence, Hong uses imaginative stories to protect Little Dog the best she can. Little Dog recalls a walk with his mother to a church and soup kitchen and seeing blood on the floor: “I remember the sidewalk. How it started to bleed: little drops of rouge appearing beneath the cart. How there was a trail of blood behind ahead of us. And behind us. Someone must have been shot or stabbed the night before. How we kept going.” His mom repeatedly tells Little Dog to not look down and instead reassures him to look up:

I remember you saying, “Little Dog, look up. Look up. See? Do you see the birds in the trees?” I remember it was February. The trees were black and bare against an overcast sky. But you kept talking: “Look! The birds. So many colors. Blue birds. Red birds. Magenta birds. Glittered birds.” Your finger pointed to the twisted branches. “Don’t you see the nest of yellow chicks, the green mother feeding them worms?”

I remember how your eyes widened. I remember staring and staring at the end of your finger until, at last, an emerald blur ripened into realness. And I saw them. The birds. How they flourished like fruit as your mouth opened and closed and the words wouldn't stop coloring the trees. I remember forgetting the blood. I remember never looking down. (231)

She distracts her son by redirecting his vision away from the blood and remains of violence.

While the trees are black and bare, she keeps talking; her story distracts him, but it also reorients his way of seeing. Throughout the passage, Little Dog repeats what he remembers: what his mom said, the month, the way her eyes widened, and the way he stared at the story she conjured until it “ripened into realness.” Her imagination reoriented his way of seeing as he sees birds that “flourished like fruit” as “words wouldn't stop coloring the trees.” What he remembers is the story she weaves for him, allowing him to forget the blood on the floor and never look down.

Through his mother's imagination, Little Dog sees something other than the narrative that he steps on. As Vietnamese Americans are given a narrative to step into, his mother tells him to look up rather than down. While they walk with blood in front of them and behind them, she tells him to look up rather than look forward. The blood from unseen violence in the neighborhood is emblematic of the bloodshed from war violence, which is simultaneously behind them and ahead. Looking up becomes a way of subverting the narrative that has been given; that the war is written into the past and the liberal future provides some way of moving away from the war. Rather than follow the linear timeline of war and American history, insofar as past violence is the condition of possibility for present and future liberal freedom, his mother reorients his way of thinking so he can choose to look another way.

After recalling how his mother told him to look up at the trees, Little Dog writes:

Yes, there was a war. Yes, we came from its epicenter. In that war, a woman gifted herself a new name —Lan—in that naming claimed herself beautiful, then made that beauty into something worth keeping. From that, a daughter was born, and from that daughter, a son. All this time I told myself we were born from war—but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty. Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence—but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it. (231)

Lan claimed herself to be beautiful in the epicenter of the war, and in this passage he claims a new story and starting point for himself. Instead of being “born from war,” he understands his family to be “born from beauty.” The American timeline of Vietnam and the war begins and ends with war and violence, and so “all this time,” Little Dog told himself that they were born from war. But through his mother’s reorientation, he’s able to think about what it means to be Vietnamese or Vietnamese American without essentializing their existence as tied to the war. Instead, they were born from beauty. In the way his mother describes the birds that “flourished like fruit” as she spoke what she imagined into reality, he aligns their story with growth and the possibility of imagination. Whereas the violence of war ends a story, Little Dog recognizes that the violence failed to spoil them and failed to color their story. It is through the protective care that she shows him that he’s able to disrupt the timeline that he has been told his whole life, that he begins and ends with war. He looks up.

As Lan claimed her name and that her beauty was “something worth keeping,” Little Dog also uses his novel to preserve and change his family’s story and his own. At the end of the novel, he writes how he and his grandmother were watching a herd of buffalo run off a cliff:

“Why they die themselves like that?” she asked, mouth open. Like usual, I made something up on the spot: “They don’t mean to, Grandma. They’re just following their family. That’s all. They don’t know it’s a cliff.”  
 “Maybe they should have a stop sign then.” (179-180)

Watching the buffalos, his grandmother is shocked that they all followed each other off the cliff. Little Dog’s quick response is to reassure that it’s okay. They didn’t know and didn’t mean to, so no one is really at fault for the inevitable cliff. As Little Dog reflects on the inevitability of cliffs, he thinks about his bipolar disorder and medication. Though the medication is meant to mediate sadness, in his elated moments, Little Dog wants to claim both his sadness and his elation rather than relegate them to the pills that he takes: “I made them, damnit” (181). As he

describes his movement between happiness and sadness, Little Dog writes: “It’s like when all you’ve been seeing before you is a cliff and then this bright bridge appears out of nowhere, and you run fast across it knowing, sooner or later, there’ll be yet another cliff on the other side. What if my sadness is actually my most brutal teacher? And the lesson is always this: You don’t have to be like the buffaloes. You can stop” (181-182). Whereas Little Dog immediately responded to his grandmother’s question by rationalizing the buffaloes’ decisions as inevitable, he recognizes that “You don’t have to be like the buffaloes. You can stop.” This shift seems to account for the possibility that Lan posit: “Maybe they should have a stop sign.” Lan’s suggestion seems to open up a different answer for Little Dog’s understanding of himself, that his narrative and his way of existing in the world does not have an inevitable path.

In a similar way, Little Dog seems to ask about his family’s relationship to cliffs, what is inevitable, and what can be changed. I suggest this not to collapse what it means to live with bipolar disorder with what it means to be part of a post-war family in the diaspora, but Little Dog writes that there is always a way to stop, or change. To exist in the post-war diaspora might mean existing in a way that isn’t predicated by war or attached to repaying debt to the country that has taken you in, but to recognize where you’re from while shaping your own future, as if the end, or the “cliff was never written into this story.” Through their protective care, both Lan and Hong push Little Dog towards a new way of seeing and orientation. They protect him in ways that they can with stories and nicknames, making space for him to imagine different endings and beginnings that exist outside of narratives that he is given. This way of tending to the next generation creates and reorients new ways of existing, disrupting the narratives that are given to the post-war diaspora.

Throughout the novel, Little Dog recalls what it was like to grow up as a queer, 1.5-generation Vietnamese American in the U.S. In Little Dog's relationship with Trevor, a white male teenager, Little Dog sees the racialized and toxic masculinity that separates and ties their experiences together. His relationship with his mother, too, involves the both of them recognizing the vulnerabilities and dangers of being queer and brown in the U.S. Part of this involves thinking about the relationship between brown communities and characters in the text, as Little Dog does when he works as a farmhand on a tobacco plant with migrant workers from Mexico and South America, and his mother does when she works in the Vietnamese nail salon. By recognizing the ways in which brown communities are implicated differently yet politically tied together by the ways in which systems of oppression work to keep them in vulnerable positions, both Little Dog and his mother grapple with understanding how to survive throughout violent conditions of being brown.

When Little Dog tells his mom that he likes boys and offers to leave if she no longer wants him, his mother asks him if he's going to begin wearing dresses: "They kill people for wearing dresses. It's on the news. You don't know people. You don't know them" (130). He reassures her that he will not, though this isn't completely true. His mother responds with a story, sharing that she was once pregnant before Little Dog but was pressured to abort her son because the family did not have enough resources to raise a child. She tells Little Dog, "Unlike your brother... you were not born until we knew you'd live" (133). In the evening, when they've returned home, she shakes her head as she "takes in the son [she] decided to keep" (140).

Protective care is given again through the form of a story; within the story, the mother embeds warnings and care to protect her son. There are a number of ways Hong could have reacted in the moment, but her first reaction is to tell him that "they'll kill you... you know that."

Though the first question she asks him is about whether or not he's going to begin wearing dresses, seeming to reveal only one aspect of her understanding of queerness, her warning demonstrates her understanding that her son, a queer brown boy, is now even more vulnerable. She tells him a story about her abortion, recalling how she saw her baby, "a brownish blur on its way to the bin." I read Hong's description of the baby as "brownish" as her demonstrating that she understands the precarity of what it means to be queer and brown in the U.S. Recognizing how her son's intersections of race and sexuality will endanger him even further, her first impulse is to protect by sharing a story. For queer brown lives, Jorge Cortiñas writes, death is always a threat because of "the ways brown queer lives are actively shortened. The aim is to erase brown queer lives, diminish them, gentrify them out of the neighborhood, deport them, profit from them, pave them over, and be done with them" (185). Hong's response seems to suggest that she may have already begun suspecting that, as Cortiñas writes, "every brown queer death is premature." When she says "they'll kill you," we can assume "they" refers to heteronormative white supremacist violence, or what Cortiñas describes as "the dominant social order that has always been hostile to or cavalier about brown lives" (185). The story about her abortion also suggests that she understands the abortion as a premature death, implying that she understands the history of war as enacting economic violence in that diminished brown lives. And so, her immediate response is to protect and within her warning is the knowledge of the dangers Little Dog will face. She tells him that he is all that she has, and we see her attempt to practice care in the way she believes he needs it. Alongside the "challenges brown queers face when building the resources and systems" of mutual care, his mother attempts to show him protective care by telling him a story of what she has lost, and that she does not want to lose him too (Cortiñas 185).

One such space that Little Dog honors is that of the nail salon. The nail salon becomes a space to observe how the body becomes a canvas to be read and how one positions the self in the world, and it also becomes a space of knowledge and survival. A nail salon, on the surface, is a place where client and manicurist agree to an exchange; the manicurist provides beautiful nails for a service. Little Dog notes that he hates how his mother's cracked and battered hands because of her salon work. Yet, Little Dog also honors the exchange of knowledge and protective care that happens within the salon space. By honoring his mother's work at the salon, he demonstrates how her protective care has allowed him to tell stories about her, preserving and embellishing her all at once.

Observing the classed and racial dynamics of the salon space, Little Dog notes how his mother and other manicurists reveal their deep knowledge of what it means to be a first generation immigrant and refugee in America. Little Dog notes how "sorry" is the predominant refrain in the salon, as he watches "as manicurists bowed over a hand or foot of a client, some young as seven, say, 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry,' when they had done nothing wrong" (94). As sorry became a tool and currency, it "no longer merely apologizes, but insists, reminds: I'm here, right here, beneath you" to position the self below the client both physically and metaphorically. I read "Sorry" as Little Dog's way of documenting the source of women's power, as "sorry," after all, isn't a genuine apology from the speaker; it is empty in apology but full in understanding of the racialized, gendered, and classed position that she has to speak from in the salon space. When Little Dog tells his mother that he hates everything that made her hands "callused and blistered long before [he] was born," he recognizes that the salon was always a tenuous space that holds the knowledge of "what it means to be awake in American bones: 'aching, toxic, and underpaid'" (94). He describes how the salon is "more than a place of

our work and workshop for beauty, it is also a place where our children are raised,” a kitchen where “women squat on the floor over huge woks that pop and sizzle,” where “folklore, rumors, tell tales, and jokes from the old country are told,” a “makeshift classroom where we arrive...hoping the salon would be a temporary stop” (82). The salon contains noxious fumes that taint the lungs of those who must work in it, providing a lingering knowledge and understanding of what it means to be in the salon, what it means to be in America as a new immigrant, as “being sorry pays” (94).

Saying sorry pays; whether the manicurists are actually apologetic is another story. Rather, Little Dog describes how his mother listens empathetically to her clients and provides services to the best of her ability to support her family. In one such case, a client laments the death of her loved one to cancer. Hong empathizes, saying in English that she too lost her mom from cancer. The client reveals she’s speaking about a horse, and Hong nods quietly—but when the client leaves, Hong is in shock:

“‘A fucking horse?’ you said in Vietnamese. ‘Holy shit, I was ready to go to her daughter’ grave with flowers!’ For the rest of the day, while you worked on one hand or another, you would look up and shout, ‘It was a fucking horse!’ and we’d all laugh.” (11)

By sharing the obvious disdain and ridicule that Hong reveals after the client leaves, Little Dog reveals how Hong switches not only from English to Vietnamese, but also from “I’m here, right here, beneath you,” to “a fucking horse?” Revealing the way she code switches, he shows us how she understands the power dynamics of the salon space and how she functions within it. As Miliann Kang writes in her study of Korean women in nail salons, Hong reveals how she and the other manicurists “clearly understood the expectation that they attend to their customers’ feelings, and they did so consciously and at times humorously, rather than as victims or blind followers of the dictates of beauty service” (18). Demonstrating “their more nuanced understanding of the work that they perform on a daily basis,” Little Dog shares his mother’s

interactions with her customers to make us aware of her purposeful emotional and embodied performance (Kang 18). Making us second guess what Hong says in the public space of the salon, as readers, we can consider how the Vietnamese woman functions in the dominant American narrative of the aftermath of the Vietnam War. While the Vietnamese woman has, for so long, played the role of the forgiving and thankful refugee, Little Dog reveals the different layers that might lie underneath that role. What it means to be in America is understanding that sorry pays. Instead of thinking about the ways in which he owes his life to the U.S., he recognizes that everything he has is through his mother's backbreaking work. The broken battered hands, the emotional work that she does in the salon - she does this for him, rather than paying thanks to any state. He honors the salon space for the ways his mother has worked to provide for him and share the knowledge of what it means to survive in America.

As in "Black-Eyed Women," a central part of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is how Little Dog finds words to preserve and write his mother's stories. He honors the ways she has protected him through language by writing down the things she has taught him. After a long day of work, his mother asks him to *chào giò*, or the practice of using a tool, such as a coin, to scrape and scratch the back. Scraping the back catches and releases the bad winds from the body to heal it. While the deep scratching of the coin will leave a bruise behind, the body will heal. As Ocean scrapes in the way his mother taught him, he describes how scraping the back, like writing, simultaneously mars, preserves, and heals the body. It is through touch and writing that he is able to "change, embellish, and preserve [her] all at once" (88). To honor his mother, he writes about and for her. In the way that his mother tells stories to protect him and share knowledge, Little Dog becomes the storyteller, of both her stories and his own.

In both “Black-Eyed Women” and *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, the younger generation uses writing to document these stories, shedding them like garments for others to find. Through writing, they participate in historiography, making visible how a mother’s care aims to protect, and in ways that can do harm. Both narrators also use care to protect their mothers from being written off within the liberal narrative that seeks to boil them down to helpless women or grateful refugees. Storytelling becomes a form of protective care that works across generations, to protect and preserve each other. Through their writing, they reveal what had to be forgotten to maintain a narrative of neoliberal disavowal and liberal personhood, and how these smart women, who understand what it means and takes for them to exist and live in this world, teach their children to navigate and survive. The intimate knowledge that women across generations share allows for a more complex history to emerge. That even though they are framed by war, thought of as remnants from war, or forgotten because of the war, Vuong highlights that the Vietnamese American family is “born from beauty.” They were beautiful before, and remain beautiful after.

### *Conclusion*

Vietnamese American communities exist, not simply because they were saved or assimilated to become the new model minority—part of this might be true—but also because of the protective care that mothers have given to their children. Honoring the protective care of mothers means acknowledging the work that women do to provide for their children and reorient the way we think about what it means to exist before and after the war.

Vietnamese American women’s experiences have been co-opted to represent narratives of forgiveness and thanks. What might have happened in the domestic space, stories shared and

passed down across generations or warnings whispered by mothers to their children, are not highlighted. My readings of “Black-Eyed Women” and *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* center the ways in which women have used storytelling to demonstrate protective care. From these mothers and grandmothers, protective care is given through language and storytelling to share knowledge of the precarious situation of being in America, while also creating space for later generations to imagine what it might mean to expand different ways of being Vietnamese American in the post-war diaspora. Part of this imagination requires the production of a new narratives through writing and creation. Both narrators of the texts, the unnamed daughter in “Black-Eyed Women” and Little Dog in *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* turn to writing. Through storytelling, mothers create storytellers. While these quiet stories might be read as passive and ineffective by those who privilege the language and volume of resistance, protective care is intended to keep the next generation safe and alive, and this makes it a powerful political act.

It is important to emphasize that this attempt to preserve and care for the wellbeing of others is not an easy act, nor is the attempt always a caring act. Both Viet Thanh Nguyen and Ocean Vuong use their texts to demonstrate how attempts to protect can also harm. I do not want to flip the script to say that mothers are always caring because there are moments where their attempts to care take the form of abuse. In *On Earth*, Little Dog reveals how abuse and violence have shaped his complicated relationship with his mother and himself. This chapter looks at moments of protective care to think about care as something to be studied and understood for its potential, but as this issue of care is complex, we cannot prejudge that all attempts to care will be protective or productive. In this way, while care can be acts of love or harm, they can also be none of those things. But in some of the moments I have chosen to

analyze, we can see that some of these acts protect, and that is worth honoring and preserving in itself. Through the act of writing, Nguyen and Vuong use stories to “change, embellish, and preserve” mothers’ stories and leave “garments shed behind by ghosts,” waiting to be found by the next generation. And in a world where Vietnamese communities are used to bolster victorious war narratives, storytelling by the post-war generation is necessary to grant a complexity to Vietnamese Americans in a way that the first generation was not given.

To return to where I began the chapter, Vietnamese American literature has recently gotten the spotlight, but a fair amount of these texts that have been lauded in popular culture are written by men. It is impossible, however, to seriously consider these texts without thinking about the contribution of women in carrying these stories and protecting the ones they love. Perhaps working-class mothers not only “put their heads down through decades of back breaking work so their children can put their heads up,” but also used protective care to make room for new ways of thinking and caring for others.

### Chapter 3 | Restorative Care in Southeast Asian American Communities

In the wake of the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Nina Pop, 2020 saw a surge of regional and national Black Lives Matter movements demanding justice against police brutality. Along with increased BLM movements, mutual aid programs circulated widely, and organizations that center Black life and survival, including The Minnesota Freedom Fund, the Color of Change, and the Black Visions Collective, saw an increase in donations as individuals participated in the social movement by contributing their funds. The movements have also led to an increase in conversations around abolitionist practices, particularly with protests organized around defunding the police and de-policing public schools. Though these organizations and conversations have long done the work of working against anti-Black state violence and white supremacy, the current moment has made their efforts more visible in mainstream media.

Thinking about police brutality, abolition work, and mutual aid together, we can see how conversations around state-sanctioned violence comes hand-in-hand with thinking of alternatives to the current carceral system that criminalizes Black and indigenous people and people of color. Turning to reparation and restoration rather than retribution and punishment, abolitionist work asks for alternatives to the criminal justice system that perpetrates racist, sexist, and gendered forms of violence. Abolition requires the imagining of alternative futures, as the current carceral system follows crime with violence and incarceration and, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore says, “prisons are catchall solutions to social problems” (5).<sup>37</sup> Finding a solution that exists outside of the prison system means thinking about alternatives that don’t yet exist. This is where mutual

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<sup>37</sup> Gilmore, *Golden Gulag* (2007).

aid, community work, and restorative action become significant in abolition work; the collective work of imagination and resistance is necessary to see something other than the current racist system of punishment.

While there is indeed a rising intensity in participation and demands from organizing and demonstration, it is important, too, to think about how to sustain this kind of work on individual and community levels. When the donations slow down and protests decrease in mainstream visibility, will there still be steam left for what Angela Davis calls on-the-ground work? Commenting on the extraordinary activism of the current moment, Davis shares that “activists who are truly committed to changing the world should recognize that the work that we often do that receives no public recognition can eventually matter” and that “bringing people together in movements, creating solidarity [means] representing ourselves not primarily as individuals, but as members of communities of struggle.”<sup>38</sup> Sustainable action and imagining different futures require the hard and arduous work of community building, and part of this has also involved different communities looking at themselves to think about what privileges they have been afforded, how they participate in anti-Blackness, and what actions they can take to organize. But importantly, to sustain the movement and create change, we must recognize struggles against white supremacy as collective rather than separate.

To think about the possibilities for radical transformations of how we think about justice or restoration in Asian American studies, I theorize restorative care as a practice that families and communities take to form solidarities and work towards healing from historical and ongoing state violence. Asian Americans have historically been seen as disconnected from the politics of criminalization, but restorative care connects Asian Americans to a larger conversation around

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<sup>38</sup> Angela Davis, “An Extraordinary Moment’: Angela Davis Says Protests Recognize Long Overdue Anti-Racist Work,” June 19, 2020, [www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/06/19/angela-davis-protests-anti-racism](http://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/06/19/angela-davis-protests-anti-racism)

criminalization and abolition to make links between the ways the state criminalizes people of color to deport or incarcerate them. Restorative care restores an understanding of history that ties racialized groups together and makes clear that the punitive process that refugees and immigrants experience is part of state-sanctioned violence and mass imprisonment. Like restorative justice, restorative care aims to do the work of healing by listening to the stories of those who are criminalized and their support systems around them. But unlike restorative justice, which seeks to reconcile the relationships between attacker and victim, restorative care makes clear that the crime is U.S. imperialism and racist criminalization. Restorative care works to restore the relationships torn apart by the state, as well as the histories that allow us to make connections between historical and ongoing state violence.

In this chapter, I turn to Thi Bui's comic, "Refugee to Detainee: How the U.S. is Deporting Those Seeking a Safe Haven" (2018). Bui's comic is exemplary in the way she explicitly calls out Vietnamese American communities to think about themselves within the politics of criminalization. The comic contributes to the work of restorative care by introducing the official nationalist account that reproduces a discourse about external threat and a counter-nationalist account that uncovers disavowed violence. By making clear the importance of abolition work to Vietnamese American communities, and Asian American communities more broadly, Bui uses her comic to contribute to the current praxis of restoration. As I read her comic, I think about two modes of restoration: first, I consider how Bui restores the historical aspect of criminalization by outlining the context in which refugees are criminalized by the state. By drawing our attention to the historical laws and restrictions implemented to criminalize refugees and immigrants, Bui uses her comic to account for the transformation of the refugee to detainee to mark this process as man-made, state-sanctioned violence rather than natural.

Second, the comic provides alternatives to the carceral system and contributes to abolitionist work through the work of restorative care. Restorative care, motivated by families and communities to support victims of state violence, both those directly injured but also indirectly their families, provides new frameworks for healing within communities that don't rely on retribution or the criminal justice system. I read Bui's comic to focus on multiple factors that inform restorative care work, including punitive crime and deportation laws in the neoliberal era, U.S. histories of racism and xenophobia, solidarity work in liberation struggles, and familial and other relational forms of support. I argue that we can think about the fight against criminalization and deportation as an important part of abolition work, one that clearly demonstrates how punitive systems of oppression inflict violence on communities of color. At the end of the chapter, I consider what restorative care has to offer in the wake of recently heightened awareness of anti-Asian American violence in 2021.

### *Historicizing Solidarity*

I have been thinking about what it means to sustain action and form solidarities through communities of struggle, especially as different ethnic communities have come together to participate in antiracist work. In Summer 2020, across the U.S., protests have been organized around identities and communities, such as rallies like Latinx for Black Lives or Asian Americans for Black Lives. Something that has stood out to me is the way different Asian Americans communities situate themselves in the Black Lives Matter movement through model minority discourse, in that Asian Americans must publicly and loudly denounce the benefits and privileges afforded to them as the model minority. As different communities figure out how to participate in BLM through pan-ethnic solidarities and cross-racial alliances, the trap of

flattening the category of Asian American emerges once again. Asian Americans are often flattened through a lens of model minority, reframing the conversation around Asian Americans around successful, wealthy, often East Asian Americans without thinking about the ways in which other Asian American groups experience racialization and state violence differently and everyday. The most violent effects of racial capitalism are unevenly distributed across the category of Asian American, which the model minority myth disavows.

The cultural product that has most grabbed my attention is the wide circulation of “Letters for Black Lives” on social media. First written in 2016, Letters for Black Lives describes itself as “a set of crowdsourced, multilingual, and culturally-aware resources aimed at creating a space for open and honest conversations about racial justice, police violence, and anti-Blackness in our families and communities” (“About”).<sup>39</sup> Created as a resource for Asian Americans, the letters hope to provide the younger generation (signed “Your children”) with a resource to talk to the older generation (“Mom, Dad, Uncle, Auntie, Grandfather, Grandmother, Family”) about anti-Blackness and police violence.<sup>40</sup> First written in English and then later translated in various languages, ranging from Vietnamese to Mandarin to Tagalog, the document began on Google Docs in 2016 and was updated in 2020 to address the current resurgence of Black Lives Matter movements. The letter says that support includes “speaking up when I see people in my community—even my own family—say or do things that diminish the humanity of Black people. Our silence has a cost and we need to talk about it.”<sup>41</sup> In short, the letter urges the older generation to reconsider their anti-Blackness, addresses the lack of consequences for police

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<sup>39</sup> “About,” Letters for Black Lives, 2016, <https://lettersforblacklives.com/about-the-letter-ed27ea67eb2e>.

<sup>40</sup> “Mom, Dad, Uncle, Auntie, Grandfather, Grandmother, Family,” *Letters for Black Lives*, 2020, <https://lettersforblacklives.com/mom-dad-uncle-auntie-grandfather-grandmother-family-c7525176ed14>.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

brutality, and provides brief historical context for how Black people have been racialized since slavery.

I saw these letters, with goals to do a kind of antiracist work within the family, reposted repeatedly on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and I couldn't help but find them to be more performative than substantially effective. While the original letter and the translations that came after it were likely produced with well-meaning intentions in support of BLM, the letter disregarded longer interconnected histories of racialized violence in the U.S. This isn't to say that the letter wholeheartedly embraces the myth of inclusion, as there is a short paragraph in which the letter expresses that they are "eternally grateful for the struggles you have endured in a country that has not always been kind to you. We have been blamed for bringing poverty, disease, terrorism, and crime. You've suffered through a prejudiced America so that I could have a better life."<sup>42</sup> But the language diminishes anti-Asian violence by describing it as simply the U.S. not always being kind to Asian Americans, and simply suffering only through blame and prejudice rather than systemic and state-sanctioned violence. The letter participates in the erasure of the ways in which Asian Americans have been attacked, such as through the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Page Act of 1875, Japanese American incarceration, racial profiling post-9/11 against South Asian Americans, and criminalization of Southeast Asian Americans. Rather than use their platform to restore historical context and frameworks for thinking about how state violence is interconnected across racialized groups, the letter falls into the trap of flattening Asian American communities, ignoring imperial, colonial, and capitalist contexts that create different immigration histories, economic statuses, and experiences of criminalization. By focusing its attention on the ways Asian Americans have privilege and closer proximity to

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

whiteness, the letter reinforces a model minority narrative as true for all Asian Americans, ignoring how Asian Americans have historically participated in protest and resistance against state-sanctioned violence against communities of color. Model minority narratives erase Asian American resistance in order to maintain the idea that Asian Americans are different from other ethnic groups; restoring that history of protest would demonstrate how Asian Americans have been part of the struggle and resistance.

And though the letter writes that “these struggles also make it clearer than ever that we are all in this together, and we cannot feel safe until our Black friends, loved ones, and neighbors are safe” it suggests that Asian Americans *are* safe—that their work for themselves is done and that they must participate in BLM because Asian Americans have reached a safe place in the U.S.<sup>43</sup> The letter ignores the ways in which Asian Americans, and more specifically Southeast Asian American communities, have been racialized in ways that are connected, not separate, from Black communities. While this letter may certainly ring true for some, the fact that it has been translated and reposted so frequently without revision or addendum for the different ways in which Asian American communities have vastly different experiences with police brutality, militarized violence, immigration, and deportation demonstrates how Letters for Black Lives also perpetuates an anti-Black violence in the assumption that Asian American communities are always anti-Black. I don’t mean to dismiss very real anti-Blackness in Asian American communities, but the letter presumes that all older, first-generation Asian American are obviously anti-Black, allowing the younger, second generation to easily position themselves as doing anti-racist work without thinking critically about how liberal Asian Americans participate in and profit from racist systems and institutions. I can’t help but wonder how futile or how

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

sustainable these efforts are if they do not address larger structures of systemic violence that tie communities of color together.

I discuss Letters for Black Lives, not to say that this work is unimportant or meaningless, but instead to think about how sustainable community action requires a kind of restorative work that helps historicize state-sanctioned violence against racialized communities. The hashtags and letters will inevitably trend down on social media, but the activism cannot stop. Finding meaningful ways to sustain action means doing work that will not be as glitzy on the Internet but, with time, can and will eventually matter. Rather than look at Asian American communities across generations and tell them that they have to simply stop being racist or anti-Black, how instead might we think about the ways systemic racism uses different state-sanctioned laws and protections to tear apart communities of color, and what those communities do to center each other and work together?

Often, discussions around Asians Americans and BLM involves the positioning of Asian Americans *for* or *against* Black Lives. On one hand, Asian Americans denounce the model minority status and declare an antiracist, pro-BLM stance; on the other, Asian Americans defend the multicultural, liberal, anti-affirmative action Asian American subject. Calling this a “contested field of splitting Asian Americanness,” social psychologist Wen Liu has written about how Asian Americans, in response to Peter Liang’s murder of Akai Gurley, have been split on declaring their stance for or against BLM (423). Critiquing the Asians 4 Black Lives activists that emerged to counter conservative Chinese Americans who defend Liang, Liu writes that #Asian4BlackLives blogs often cited MLK and Malcolm X to highlight intersections of racial violence at home and abroad. Arguing that forming meaningful solidarities is not as simple as falling back on an older narrative of Third World solidarity, Liu describes this utilization of the past Afro-Asian relations as anachronistic, as “almost none of the platforms addressed the drastic

changes in the conditions of the so-called Third World—that the Cold War framework that allowed for the formation of a capitalist West and a communist East has completely collapsed” (440). I agree with Liu that calling upon an Afro-Asian solidarity that largely depends on Third World anti-imperial struggles is not so productive. Third World solidarities emerged, at least in part, to protest the wars in Southeast Asia and the enlisting of Black soldiers to fight for a racist America, as well as the realization of Asian Americans that American imperialism was killing Asians abroad. Furthermore, attempting to recoup an anachronistic Afro-Asian solidarity of the 60s erases post-1965 Asian Immigration, particularly the entrance of post-war Southeast Asian American immigrants and refugees. In other words, rather than only build off of Third World solidarities, Asian Americans must consider the ways in which Asian American communities too have experienced and still experience state violence. Instead of dismissing the lived experiences of Southeast Asian Americans as an additive outlier of the Asian American experience, I want to center Southeast Asian American experiences to think about how care and resistance within these communities contribute abolition work in meaningful ways.

Restorative care situates Southeast Asian American communities’ struggles against deportation within the abolitionist discourse, as families and communities take care of each other to work towards a society that sustains each other without relying on violent systems of policing and incarceration. Contributing to the long-standing work of abolitionists and Black feminists, including the Combahee River Collective’s commitment to the struggle against interlocking systems of racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, restorative care makes clear that the criminalization and incarceration of people of color is rooted in white supremacy. Angela Davis writes in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* that the defense of immigrant rights is an urgent aspect of decriminalization, as “dismantling the processes that punish people for their failure to enter this country without documents” reveal the ways in which “black, Chicano, Vietnamese, Native

American or poor, regardless of their ethnic background” people are “sent to prison, not so much because of the crimes they have may indeed committed, but largely because their communities have been criminalized.” Prison studies scholars Jodie Michelle Lawston and Martha Escobar argue that because “human immobilization is at the heart of the U.S. social formation,” immigrant incarceration and deportation extends the U.S. prison regime by expanding imprisonment (3). Centering the struggle against deportation and criminalization in Southeast Asian American families and communities, restorative care works to restore two things: first, the histories that allow us to make connections across historical and ongoing violence, and second, the family and community relationships that the state destroys through criminalization and incarceration. Restorative care provides alternatives for carceral punishment and state-sanctioned retribution, indirectly and directly contributing to abolitionist work and restorative justice. Shifting the way we think about Southeast Asian American refugees, immigrants, and post-war generations, restorative care highlights the Southeast Asian American community and their actions to help contextualize what brought refugees to the U.S., bolster the passed down knowledge across generations, broaden our understanding of U.S. imperialism in our own community, and finally, strategize what justice might look like outside of the prison system. Imagination and collaboration are necessary in imagining nonviolent futures because, as activist and abolitionist Mariame Kaba writes, prison-industrial complex abolition is an imaginative “vision of a reconstructed society in a world where we have everything we need” (45).

Restorative care becomes particularly important for Vietnamese Americans communities precisely because of the ways Vietnamese Americans are often brought into a narrative of model minority. As Vietnamese American studies scholars such as Viet Thanh Nguyen, Thuy Vo Dang, and Ly Thi Hai Tran have argued, Vietnamese American communities have historically embraced the model minority status to maintain a pro-nationalist project in the formation of

Vietnamese America.<sup>44</sup> This nationalist and liberal project dislocates them from the larger Southeast Asian American refugee and post-war population, and the attempt to move closer to whiteness does not promise citizenship or inclusion. Through the work of restorative care, we can restore the importance legacies of imperialism that locate Vietnamese Americans within Southeast Asian American and post-war communities, reminding us of forgotten wars and histories that Vietnamese American disavow when holding on to their model minority status. There is a responsibility to think about the Southeast Asian American refugee experience, as well as current immigration crises, refugee camps, and detention centers, as not simply an additive outlier to the Asian American experience but one that can transform how we understand Asian American politics in relation to BLM. In this way, restorative care becomes an important way to form multiethnic alliances, not only within the Southeast Asian American refugee community but across other groups as well. As the Combahee River Collective has argued, centering the experiences of those most marginalized is revolutionary: “We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”<sup>45</sup> The Combahee River Collective’s struggle against the violence of racial capitalism are instructive in the present, particularly in thinking about centering the experiences of Southeast Asian American criminalization and deportation.

Drawing from restorative justice and abolitionist work, restorative care centers the criminalized and focuses on healing. While difficult to clearly define, restorative justice

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<sup>44</sup> On Vietnamese American community politics, see Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *Race and Resistance* (2002); Ly Thi Hai Tran’s “‘Outsiders No More?’: The Discourse of Political Incorporation of Vietnamese Refugees in the United States (1975-2020)” (2020); and Thuy Vo Dang’s “The Cultural Work of Anticommunism in the San Diego Vietnamese American Community” (2005).

<sup>45</sup> The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977).

promotes repair and reconciliation between the victim, offender, and community. In practice, restorative justice can take various forms, such as victim-offender mediation to make amends for harm done, family group conferencing to involve support systems, and healing circle programs to make space for community voices to be heard. Importantly, restorative justice minimizes the “kinds of behaviors that will bring people into contact with the police and justice systems” through “alternative modes of making justice... alternatives that range from conflict resolution to restorative or reparative justice.”<sup>46</sup> Fania Davis describes how the fundamental guiding principle of racial and restorative justice is to resist co-optation and professionalization to shift “the locus of power from systems and professionals to communities and ordinary people” (430). Instead of relying on racist systems, Fania Davis argues that we must place power in the hands of ordinary people to foster “community self-determination and a strong equity consciousness” (430). Likewise, restorative care is about restoring and healing the interpersonal relationships that are destroyed by legal structures.

Restorative care departs from restorative justice in its deliberate naming of the state as the origins of “crime” and its focus on actions the community takes to resist the state. Families support each other throughout jail sentences and deportation limbo. Community groups come together to provide opportunities and spaces to rehabilitate and support those entering back into the world. When we focus on U.S. imperialism and racist criminalization as the crime, the temporality of criminalization becomes clearer: criminals don’t commit crimes; rather, crimes create criminals. Restorative care brings back a prior understanding of history that changes our understanding of crime and healing by focusing on community actions to support one another and fight for freedoms together.

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<sup>46</sup> Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003)

### ***Criminals Don't Break Laws, Laws Create Criminals***

“Refugee to Detainee: How the U.S. is Deporting Those Seeking a Safe Haven” was published in 2018 by *The Nib*, an online daily comics publication that focuses on cartoons on current affairs. The comic is published as a scroll comic, a modern take on the comic book form that presents a series of images that the user scrolls through from top to bottom. While *The Best We Could Do*, Bui’s graphic memoir, received national praise and was incorporated into numerous city-wide and university-wide required reading lists for its illustration of her family’s multigenerational experience of the Vietnam War, “Refugee to Detainee” reflects Bui’s activism in Southeast Asian American communities, particularly around abolition, criminalization, and deportation. Paying attention to how Southeast Asian American communities were both brought into the narrative of exceptionalism while subsequently being criminalized by changing immigration laws, Bui’s comic restores our understanding of how immigration and policing work together to justify violence. The comic restores histories of laws that have criminalized refugees and immigrants while also centering families to reveal the ways state violence disrupts interpersonal relationships. We hear the stories of Andy Trinh, Dy Nguyen, and Ngoc Hoang, and we also hear from their families and, most significantly, the women in their lives. By providing context for how the state used immigration and citizenship laws to legitimize detaining and deporting refugees, Bui provides an overview of history that remembers the past differently to acknowledge the constant criminalization of refugees and immigrants over time. To recognize how we got here, Bui recalls complicated histories of immigration laws that have changed to justify American goals, restoring the historical past by demonstrating how 1996 immigration laws continue to affect us.

One of the comic's central questions is "How did these people, once accepted by America as refugees of war, end up begging not to be sent thousands of miles away from their families?"<sup>47</sup> Bui raises this question midway through the comic to call attention to the racist immigration laws that shape the Southeast Asian American family and their incarceration and deportation. While the Immigration Act of 1965 reformed exclusionary immigration laws through the language of family reunification, it did so with goals of recruiting professional immigrant labor, enforcing heteronormative immigrant family formation and reproduction, and bolstering a narrative of American exceptionalism, shifting focus away from their imperial violence. Southeast Asian Americans were accepted by America as refugees of war and began entering the U.S. in 1975, not because of American exceptionalism but to draw our attention away from American imperial violence abroad. Composed amidst American-backed race wars in Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, and South America, the Immigration Act of 1965 allowed the U.S. to put forth a narrative of welcoming immigrants and refugees while strategically distracting from the reality that the migration of immigrants and refugees are a consequence of U.S. violence. As such, the representation of the Vietnamese American family within dominant discourses of American history begins with their status as refugees from a war-ridden country. As sociologist Yen Lê Espiritu discusses in *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*, the American narrative on the Vietnam War mobilized "beliefs in the fundamental decency of Americans and in their ability to promote democracy and freedom worldwide, while directing attention away from the geopolitical, military, and economic causes and the ongoing devastation of the Vietnam War for the majority of Vietnamese people, both in Vietnam and in the diaspora" (Espiritu 93). Framed as making the choice to leave Vietnam and the violence of

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<sup>47</sup> Thi Bui, "Refugee to Detainee: How the U.S. is Deporting Those Seeking a Safe Haven," *The Nib*, June 13, 2018, <https://thenib.com/refugee-to-detainee-how-the-u-s-is-deporting-those-seeking-a-safe-haven/>

the communist regime (rather than U.S. imperialism), the Vietnamese refugee's existence in the United States is prefaced by that of individual choice and responsibility, then positioning the U.S. as the benevolent provider of freedom.

The Immigration Act of 1965 allowed the U.S. to posit a narrative of liberalism and welcome, shaping U.S. cultural discourse around immigration and war, when in reality, the Act enabled the U.S. to further enforce a police state. Asian American studies scholars have critiqued the Immigration Act for enabling criminalization. Jian Neo Chen argues that the Immigration Act worked to build a "stronger state apparatus (militarized border architectures, law enforcement, agencies, detention centers, documentation check points and processing, policy making, courts) for enforcing borders between the geographies and bodies considered inside and outside the national body and territories of the U.S. nation-state" (270). Likewise, Dylan Rodriguez describes how the Immigration Act sought to include the good liberal Asian American subject, decriminalizing Asian American populations while subsequently criminalizing Black and Brown communities and facilitating "the effective expulsion of criminalized populations from U.S. civil society" (257). Immigration laws change according to the state's desires.

The comic presents a nonlinear representation of time in Southeast Asian American communities by moving back and forth across historical periods to demonstrate how the state and federal laws enforce different futures and possibilities. Bui historicizes immigration law to focus on the cracks of American exceptionalism, and what's lost when we only see images of criminals and state-mandated law as dichotomous and unconnected. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes in *Golden Gulag*, "Defined in the terms of the secular state, crime means a violation of the law. laws change, depending on what, in a social order, counts as stability, and who, in a social order, needs to be controlled" (12). Rather than focusing on the "crimes" committed, Bui

highlights three laws to demonstrate how criminalization works: The Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, The 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, and the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effect Death Penalty Act. These laws were “born of fear of terrorist attacks and rising crimes—as well as the racism and xenophobia that have always plagued the US... created by a republican-majority congress with an agenda... and delivered a democratic president Bill Clinton to prove that he was ‘tough on crime.’”<sup>48</sup> Bui then goes on to describe how the 1996 immigration bill “expanded the list of deportable offense and made detention mandatory for undocumented people and green card holders with convictions from this list even if the offense occurred decades before.”<sup>49</sup> Through the combination of these laws, the state laid the foundation to support federal agents and local police in rounding up immigrants. The pressure to appear “tough on crime” combined with the “racism and xenophobia that have always plagued the US” led to the criminalization of immigrants, undocumented people, and green card holders.

The comic begins with Borey Ai’s story, known to his friends as PJ. A Cambodian refugee who arrived in the 1980s with his family, PJ witnessed his seven-year-old cousin die in a school shooting in 1989. As he was bullied in and out of school, PJ turned to a gang for protection and was later tried at the age of fourteen “as an adult in a criminal court,” one of the “youngest children ever.”<sup>50</sup> During his time in prison, he worked toward his GED while helping others, ultimately earning parole in 2016. However, upon his release, PJ was arrested by ICE and marked for deportation to Cambodia. A grassroots campaign to “#BringPJHome” and

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<sup>48</sup> Thi Bui, “Refugee to Detainee: How the U.S. is Deporting Those Seeking a Safe Haven,” *The Nib*, June 13, 2018, <https://thenib.com/refugee-to-detainee-how-the-u-s-is-deporting-those-seeking-a-safe-haven/>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

ultimately “KeepPJHome” mobilized against PJ’s re-detention and deportation, and PJ was released in 2018.



**Figure 2.** The fragmented White House. Thi Bui, “Refugee to Detainee: How the U.S. is Deporting Those Seeking a Safe Haven.” *The Nib*, June 13, 2018<sup>51</sup>

Immediately following PJ’s story is an illustration of the White House, yet it is fragmented and split down the middle. On the left reads, “Many people are quick to dismiss immigrants as criminals who have broken the law.”<sup>52</sup> On the other side of the house: “But what laws actually make PJ and other refugees deportable?”<sup>53</sup> By presenting this broken image of the White House, Bui reorients the way we see this iconic image of American exceptionalism. In her illustration, we cannot see the White House without seeing the crack. Yet, even with the fragmentation, the image of the house remains coherent and intact. The two pieces comprise a whole, revealing how assumptions, or the ways in which people are “quick to dismiss immigrants” as being criminals of their own fault, must be accompanied by the historical question of what immigration laws exist to criminalize refugees. She restores a trajectory of how these laws come to be to bring a historical approach to the quick dismissals of immigrants and refugees.

<sup>51</sup> All images of “Refugee to Detainee” are screenshotted from the original comic. See the full comic at: <https://thenib.com/refugee-to-detainee-how-the-u-s-is-deporting-those-seeking-a-safe-haven/>

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

Through this fragmentation, Bui ties the White House, a familiar image in American history, with PJ and other refugees, figures who have been hypervisible in the media for their vulnerability and helplessness as refugees. Cultural studies scholars Martha J. Cutter and Cathy J. Schlund-Vials describe how graphic narratives can change and revise historical images to reorient our understanding of them: “By contrast to photographs, which frequently and mechanically capture moments in time, multiethnic graphic novels are able to revise the static iconicity of such famous historical images by making them mobile and fluid within the space of the graphic narrative page, while at the same time harnessing the synergetic power that images and texts together can create” (6). Cutter and Vials describe how American exceptionalism is disrupted and “undermined when situated adjacent to the experiences of those who struggle with basic rights recognition and political enfranchisement” (5). By juxtaposing PJ’s story and the comic’s reconfiguration of the White House, Bui makes “mobile and fluid” how we interpret dominant images and narratives and how listening to individual stories can reorient the way we understand American history and time.

In PJ’s story, Bui emphasizes the ways in which PJ does not have agency. He’s moved from place to place based on the circumstance—the violence of a school shooting, the ways in which he’s bullied and turns to gangs for protection, how he’s picked up by the court and is tried as the youngest child ever. As Bui describes how PJ moves from childhood to adulthood, in both age and the way he is represented within the legal system, she focuses on the lack of control he has in the ways he’s moved. As a child, he fled Southeast Asia with his family. Forced to leave because of war, the family had to leave the only place they called home to seek refuge elsewhere. In the U.S., PJ faces violence again, and he finds his form of refuge in a gang, a place that could provide him some forms of protection. But being convicted as an adult, we learn that his status

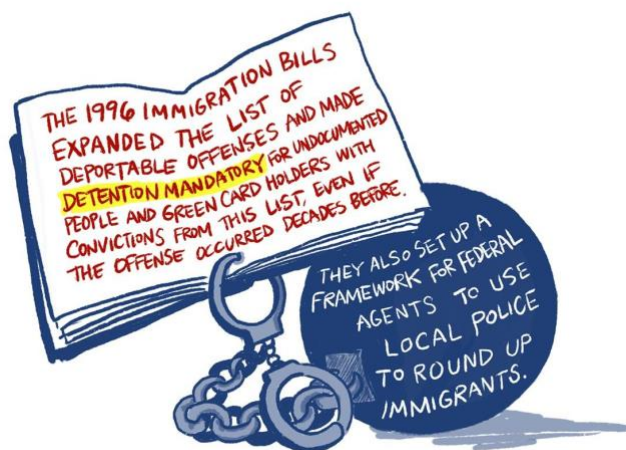
as a child of refugees taken away: here, he moves from refugee to detainee. By understanding PJ's story, we can see how he demonstrates how refugees experience a different kind of temporality, or what critical race studies scholar Eric Tang calls "refugee temporality." Tang describes how refugees challenge us to keep time differently based on the ongoing violence that they face as refugees and once they are situated in the U.S. As neither their citizenship nor safety are guaranteed, refugee time demonstrates an unbroken temporality of violence and the "the cycle of uprooting, displacement, and captivity that defines the refugee experience persists long after resettlement" (Tang 5). For PJ, his life has been framed by violence before he is able to form his own story. When he is in prison, we see how he works to earn his GED and help others, yet immediately after he is granted parole, he is arrested and ordered to Cambodia, a place he has never experienced and a place his family fled before he was even born. By highlighting the ways in which agency is taken away from refugees and how the cycle of "uprooting, displacement, and captivity" continues after resettlement, Bui demonstrates to readers that the state is the perpetrator of violence, not PJ. Those who are "quick to dismiss immigrants as criminals who have broken the law" will seek to disavow the connections between war and ongoing state violence in PJ's life.<sup>54</sup> It is easier to frame him as an undeserving immigrant who broke the law and is now being tried as a criminal; if you don't want to be criminalized, don't do anything that would frame you as that in the first place. Understanding the context for how the state is able to create a narrative of violent immigrants highlights "the racism and xenophobia that have always plagued the U.S.," how laws are created by a "Republican-majority congress with an agenda," or delivered by presidents who have to uphold

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<sup>54</sup> Bui, "Refugee to Detainee: How the U.S. is Deporting Those Seeking a Safe Haven," *The Nib*, June 13, 2018, <https://thenib.com/refugee-to-detainee-how-the-u-s-is-deporting-those-seeking-a-safe-haven/>

that they are “tough on crime.”<sup>55</sup> By pairing together PJ’s story with the historical and political context that makes him “deportable,” Bui emphasizes that we’re unable to understand the context of PJ’s story without acknowledging the historical context that frames and legally justifies the way he is moved.

By making these forms of violence visible, Bui helps readers understand how we got here and how state laws enforce a different sense of time for refugees and immigrants. The comic as a visual form allows us to recognize the ways in which these laws shape the lives of refugees and immigrants, pairing the laws with images of a fragmented white house split down the middle, dogs baring teeth on chain leashes and spiked collars, and forms of media and protest that perpetuate racism and xenophobia.



**Figure 3.** The 1996 immigration bills with a ball and chain. Thi Bui, “Refugee to Detainee: How the U.S. is Deporting Those Seeking a Safe Haven.” *The Nib*, June 13, 2018

One image that stands out is a ball and chain attached to a pair of handcuffs (Figure 3). The handcuffs hold together and prop up a book that reads, “The 1996 Immigration Bills expanded the list of deportable offense and made detention mandatory for undocumented people and green

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

card holders with convictions from this list, even if the offense occurred from decades before.”<sup>56</sup> Despite Clinton’s remarks expressing regret about the bill, the book floats above these symbols of detainment and arrest. The weight of the bill is chained to the heavy ball. Even though there might be regret at what the bills did, the legacy of the bills still allows federal agents to use local police to round up immigrants. Highlighting this liberal narrative of regret at past violence, Bui makes visible the ways state-enforced violence continues on, and how the federal framework for criminalizing undocumented people and green card holders literally weighs down the possibility of different futures in racialized communities. American studies scholar Lisa Marie Cacho describes how neither of the 1996 laws “needed to differentiate serious felonies from petty misdemeanors because the legislation did not purport to reassign more appropriate punishments to crimes committed and convicted in the past. Like gang enhancement sentencing, these laws intended to punish and prevent the future crimes that immigrants were imagined as likely to commit” (95). Instated to detect “the abnormal, the immoral, the criminal,” these laws work to round up Southeast Asian Americans who are already imagined as criminals (Cacho 95). Regret, apologies, and liberal narratives of progress do not erase the bills that still violently disrupt the lives of refugees and immigrants and the imagined Southeast Asian American criminal that is always deserving of punishment.

The relationship between past, present, and future is founded on the idea that *present fears* prevent *dangerous futures*—yet what happens is that for refugee communities, their future is shaped by racist fears. Past laws, when put into place, determine what is possible for Southeast Asian Americans. Formed by present fears and anxieties around conditions of war, these laws create the conditions of living for Southeast Asian Americans. Federal laws that

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

enforce precarious citizenship become a form of the past maintaining a racist and xenophobic present and future. By making the relationship between federal law and refugee futures visible, Bui critiques the structures that have to be dismantled in order for new futures to be imagined. One of the panels draws on a support group for Vietnamese detainees in San Jose. An attendee says, “if you’re an immigrant, if you make one mistake, they punish you forever.”<sup>57</sup> Describing punishment as “forever,” the attendee emphasizes that time works differently for immigrants, refugees, and detainees. They operate under this form of time that has been established prior to their existence but continues to monitor their future.

### *Forming Solidarities Across Southeast Asian Americans*

Restorative care makes visible the historical links of oppression across Southeast Asian American communities, which becomes particularly important for Vietnamese Americans who have historically embraced their model minority status. As the comic describes how deportation laws put Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Lao communities in danger, Bui addresses them collectively as Southeast Asian refugee communities. Encouraging people to participate in the grassroots campaigns and work together across ethnicity and experience, “Southeast Asian” becomes a significant political identity that urges different communities to take restorative care of each other. This is not to say that all lived experiences of Southeast Asian Americans are the same; rather, we can organize together in struggles for liberation.

Opening the comic with PJ’s story, whose parents originally came to the U.S. from Cambodia, Bui introduces Southeast Asian refugees and deportation by centering Cambodian Americans. Highlighting the shooting he witnessed as a first grader in Stockton, Bui reminds us

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

how PJ's story was intercepted with violence at a young age. This violence was not uncommon; according to historian Sucheng Chang, "in California, Massachusetts, Washington, and Minnesota in particular, a large number of Cambodians are trapped in a vicious cycle of welfare dependency, helplessness, hopelessness, and despair; they live in environments that are often filled with crime and violence" (155). Cambodian Americans have drastically different experiences from other Southeast Asian refugees in the U.S., so the grouping together of "Southeast Asians" might seem odd. As Eric Tang notes in *Unsettled*,

The economic, political, and geographic trajectories of Cambodian refugees are distinct from those of Vietnamese refugees, whose ethnic economies and professional classes are prevalent. This is not to say that Vietnamese refugees do not share the hyperghetto status with Cambodians...However, their economic heterogeneity remains far greater than that of their Cambodian counterparts. (9)

Despite the lack of shared experience and "hyperghetto status," Bui still uses the comic to call attention to the idea of Southeast Asian refugees as a collective. In many of the specific examples she uses in the middle of the comic section, Bui focuses on Vietnamese American families. I find that this call to a collective Southeast Asian American identity is done deliberately to form solidarities across multiethnic and heterogeneous groups of Southeast Asians, encouraging us to think what is made possible through restorative care and communities.

Based on surnames (Nguyen, Hoang, and Trinh), I read these three examples as coming from Vietnamese families. By spending a large part of the comic focusing on how deportation has affected Vietnamese American families, Bui seems to be calling attention *to* Vietnamese communities, as well as calling for the attention *of* Vietnamese communities. Vietnamese Americans have been absorbed under the new model minority category, and part of the Vietnamese American community has been glad to adopt the title for its vague promises of assimilation, acceptance, and closer position to whiteness. In other settings, Bui has acknowledged how as a Vietnamese American, she sees herself in a privileged position as a

successful writer. In an interview about her upcoming book on Southeast Asian deportation, Bui shares:

The folks that I interview also tend to have come over as refugees of the Vietnam War— but not just Vietnamese people but also Cambodians and Lao people. They didn't have the same 'model minority' success that I am enjoying, even though we have so many similar origins. I feel like it's this untold shadow story of the refugee experience. (Burkhalter)

By using “model minority” to describe her success, she acknowledges that there is something double-sided about her success. While she is able to tell stories, there are ways in which her stories can be co-opted to represent and become absorbed into the very structures she critiques, or work against the communities whose voices and concerns she hopes to amplify. And while the usage of “model minority” may refer to her success, and therefore absorption into privileged status of successful Asian American, we might also think about how Bui’s positionality as a Vietnamese American writer gives her more visibility in that Vietnamese refugees were the most visible during and after the war. Vietnamese American writers, too, have also been receiving the spotlight in popular culture and literature with recent authors receiving national awards and the nation’s spotlight. In this way, by focusing on how Vietnamese families have been affected by ICE and state violence could be a reminder to both Vietnamese communities as well as those who hope to absorb Vietnamese Americans into the model minority category, that the model minority status is fragmented and tenuous. It can be taken away through state laws and violence—calling attention to the fact that no one is safe and reminding Vietnamese communities of what they have to remember before accepting, let alone embracing, empty promises of citizenship and belonging. Following this section on individual families, Bui writes that “fear is rippling through South East Asian refugee communities.”<sup>58</sup> Because she deliberately includes these Vietnamese families in her discussion of a collective political identity as

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Southeast Asian refugee communities, Bui calls for Vietnamese communities to recognize that they can't understand themselves as separate from other Southeast Asian refugee populations. Using "Southeast Asian" as a political category is not an attempt to read Southeast Asian communities as experiencing the same thing, but to restore our understanding of the overlaps in history, and how these shared histories can form lasting political solidarities. She urges her Vietnamese American readers to think about ways in which we can respond together to create a more caring future for Southeast Asian American communities.

Bui gives Southeast Asian Americans a common goal to rally against: historically racialized law violently enforced by the state. In a similar way to how she describes the immigration, crime, and antiterrorism acts in the first section of the comic, Bui uses graphic depictions of angry, teeth-baring dogs wearing collars that read "ICE" and "DOJ" to represent images of the fear attacking Southeast Asian communities (Figure 6). The dogs visually represent the historical continuities of violent and hateful state institutions that threaten to separate families and communities; the imagery of the dogs also ties Southeast Asian refugee communities to a longer history of anti-Black state-sanctioned racism. Evoking this sense of collective fear, the dogs bare their teeth as they look above a woman who stands beneath them, brandishing a rolled-up newspaper as she looks directly up at them. This image of ICE and DOJ overlooking the advocacy of the Southeast Asian community demonstrates the urgency, strength, and bravery of those who are "scrambling to respond" to protect refugee communities.



**Figure 6.** Fear is rippling through Southeast Asian refugee communities. Thi Bui, “Refugee to Detainee: How the U.S. is Deporting Those Seeking a Safe Haven.” *The Nib*, June 13, 2018

Not unlike Lisa Lowe’s urge for Asian American cultural producers to think about the importance of heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity, Bui uses the comic to “destabilize the dominant discursive construction and determination of Asian Americans as a homogenous group,” in particular calling attention to different groups of Southeast Asian Americans to think about how they can recognize the different situations that they have entered into, while also “underscor[ing] Asian American heterogeneities (particularly class, gender, and national differences among Asians)” (Lowe 67). By doing so, Bui encourages us to think about how to “organize, resist, and theorize as Asian Americans” without essentializing sameness and differences across Southeast Asian ethnic groups (Lowe 68). In a way, this call to solidarity is not unlike what literary scholar Vinh Nguyen calls “refugeetude,” a “coming into consciousness of the forces that produce and structure ‘refuge’ and ‘refugee’” (110). This coming into consciousness can produce different forms of politics that work against the state violence, whether that be through resistance or forms of solidarity with other refugee populations. Raising the question of what is possible when refugees create meaning and imagine futures, Nguyen suggests that “refugeetude could become shared intimacies between refugee subjects and

cultivated affinities with others. In its most potent form, refugeetude is refugee subjects recognizing who they are, how they have come to be, and who they might become with others” (124). In this way, without collapsing the category of refugee altogether to think about everyone’s experience as the same, Bui pushes us to expand what it means to be a refugee, what it means to live under different temporalities, and what it might look like to act together.

### ***Restorative Care in the Family***

While a central part of Bui’s comic traces the historical laws and restrictions that shape immigrant and refugees’ lives, equally important are the individual stories that she turns to provide a subjective experience and account of history. These intimate stories highlight the ways in which detainment shapes the formation of the Southeast Asian American family. Resisting a narrative of criminalization, the comic centers the Southeast Asian American family, shifting our focus away from the reasons for which these individuals are detained and allows us to hear the narratives of those who lean on each other to survive in the wake of state violence. Restorative care reveals how different members of the family take on roles of caretaker, shifting normative understandings of gender roles in the family. Out of criminalization, families turn to each other to find support and take on roles of care, such as shielding each other from harm while the state tears families apart. Care consists of actions that respond to state violence by holding each other together. Centering the family as a collective group that is torn apart by ICE rather than focusing on mistakes or crimes of detained individuals, the comic makes visible the systemic conditions that seek to control Southeast Asian American families and communities. Restorative care highlights the importance of community and family support to show us how multiple generations critique and respond to criminalization.

Rather than centering the focus on their individual actions that led to their detainment, Bui focuses on the uncertain duration of their detainments and the unclear conditions that would allow them to be released. Andy Trinh, Dy Nguyen, and Ngoc Hoang were arrested and subsequently turned over to ICE. Andy Trinh is locked up for possessing pot. This, combined with a previous drug conviction, allowed the state to lock him up in a cell with one other roommate, even though he'd never been violent or disruptive before. For 10 months, he was detained until the AAAJ was able to win his case and he was released. Dy is separated from his wife and daughter and detained for over half a year before he is released under supervision but still has an order of removal that makes him vulnerable to detainment and deportation. Ngoc, when returning to the U.S. after burying his grandmother in Vietnam, is also detained by ICE. While Bui describes how some of Andy's actions resulted in him being detained, the focus is less on what he did to "deserve" that sentence, but what uncertain conditions regulate his movement throughout the system. And unlike in Andy's story, Dy and Ngoc's reasons for detainment are unclear: Bui is careful to say that Ngoc "acted out" and "got in trouble," but she deliberately keeps his actions unknown. In the way that ICE is unclear in its justification for what counts as a crime, a reason to be detained, a justification for being deported, and the path to releasing detainees and stabilizing their lives and citizenship, Bui mirrors this uncertainty and lack of clarity by withholding what it is that Andy, Dy, and Ngoc have done. By drawing attention away from their individual actions, she redirects our attention and blame away from them so we can more clearly see how their detainment is defined by unclear terms. Instead, the clearest moments in this section are in the emotions that the families feel when their loved ones are taken away from them. Redirecting the focus onto the families allows readers to understand how detainment

and the threat of deportation shapes families and how the state takes deliberate action to separate Southeast Asian American families for unclear reasons.

Sharing and centering these stories shows how it is not just about the detainees, but the way it affects parents, spouses, and children, and in particular Bui calls attention to how women have to bear a significant amount of the burden of emotionally tending to and caring for others in Southeast Asian American families. Underscoring the violence of the state and using these stories or “cases” to think about how families and their futures are directly affected, Bui includes quotes from women who are directly affected by the detainment of their family members to center how these unstable conditions place responsibility on women to emotionally support their families. Allowing women to speak to how detainment affects how they must take on different roles as sisters, mothers, and wives, Bui makes connections across intergenerational trauma and state violence to highlight how care works in the family and critique how systemic violence shapes Southeast Asian American families. When Andy is detained, he and his sister Lisa tell his parents that he is “working in another state, to spare them from worrying.”<sup>59</sup> Though Andy is incarcerated, Lisa must carry the burden of shielding her parents from emotional pain and harm. For Tammy, Dy’s wife, she must carry a similar kind of burden in protecting her daughter as best she can. Tammy shares that Dy was raised by a single mother who was always working and says that she is “terrified at the possibility of having to raise Chari by [her]self if Dy gets deported to Viet Nam.”<sup>60</sup> Because Dy “grew up lacking the love, attention, and care from both his parents,” she does not want their “baby girl to have to go through the same experience as her father” (Figure 4).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 4.** Tammy worries for her daughter’s future. “Refugee to Detainee: How the U.S. is Deporting Those Seeking a Safe Haven.” *The Nib*, June 13, 2018

Looking forward, Tammy recognizes how their experience of time, futurity, and possibility is dependent on how cycles repeat themselves. If Chari grows up without a father, she might have the “same experience,” not only as Dy but possibly of Tammy’s. As a young Southeast Asian American girl, if this cycle is to continue, Chari could experience what her mother is going through as well. Tammy’s fear reveals the insidiousness of state violence, particularly in the way it shapes futures, disrupts possibility, and repeats cycles of violence.

Without understanding the context of state violence, it might look like these men are simply absent. Yet it’s through understanding the intergenerational violence that the state enforces on Southeast Asian American families that we can understand how the family and gender roles become shaped and fragmented through detainment and deportation, and that we can see how different figures in the family take on caring positions to protect one another. Importantly, the comic highlights how men take on positions of care as well. In Figure 5, Lisa shares that when her dad eventually learned that Andy was incarcerated, not working in another state, he was “so sad he hid the newspaper in his car, ‘cause he didn’t want my mom to see it.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 5.** Lisa shares how her dad hid the newspaper in his car. Thi Bui, “Refugee to Detainee: How the U.S. is Deporting Those Seeking a Safe Haven.” *The Nib*, June 13, 2018.

Their attempt to shield the mother from feeling sadness demonstrates the ways in which other family members try their best to protect others from sadness and harm. Rather than sharing the heaviness of sadness with his wife, the father takes the position of protector, in the only way he knows how. In Ngoc’s case, Ngoc takes responsibility for burying his grandmother, their last relative in Vietnam. This role of caring for the family and honoring their burial traditions leads him to be detained by ICE. When Bui speaks on the phone with Ngoc’s sister, Gina, she cries as she shares that “we’re all here as a family. We just want [Ngoc] to be a good father for his children. And to be here for my parents, who already lost a son. And I want a big brother.”<sup>63</sup> Gina’s wish for her brother to be a good father, son, and brother becomes contingent on his release from ICE, and through her sadness, she calls attention to the ways in which ICE prevents Southeast Asian American families from having good fathers, sons, and brothers. In this way, detainment prevents men from being present, let alone allowing them to become caring subjects in the family. Yen Lê Espiritu has described how Vietnamese American families have been shaped by racialized and gendered understandings of Asian American women. As employers

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

sought to hire Asian American women because they believed Asian women's bodies to be "small, foreign, and female," and therefore less threatening and more productive than male bodies, Vietnamese men violently responded to the threat of masculinity as women became the "breadwinners" in the family (Espiritu 74). Racialized and gendered understandings of women's bodies then shaped the social dynamics of the family, demonstrating how state violence shapes intimate familial relationships. Bui's comic does not necessarily refute Espiritu's findings, but instead demonstrates how families respond to state violence through care for each other. In attempts to care, they take on responsibility by shielding others in the family from understanding the violent conditions that they live in. I highlight this not to suggest that in response to state violence, individuals must take on heavy burdens of care for each other rather than critiquing the state itself, but to recognize these caring gestures as important in the way they attempt to sustain and restore each other from harm. Not unlike my discussion of maternal care in the previous chapter, restorative care is about restoring the family relationships that are destroyed by legal structures. Care, overall, becomes a multigenerational, multidirectional political act that imagines different possibilities for future generations, particularly when the state shapes families in such a way that extinguishes possibilities for nonviolent futures. In this way, care makes visible violence while sustaining the family.

Lisa, Gina, and Tammy share their stories with Bui to underscore how racist immigration laws influence gender relations in the family, using their individual and family's experiences to demonstrate how the state holds their family in a cycle of violence. When Gina says "we're all here as a family," she reveals who gets to be present and who gets to have a future. Because refugee time is continuous and cyclical, representing constant "uprooting, displacement, and captivity," refugee families are not allowed to be "here" when following the temporality of the

state. Dy and Ngoc are held in time by the criminal justice system, and their families are subsequently also suspended from thinking about what possibilities are available to them in the future, creating gender relations that limit and prevent the present and future involvement of men's roles in the family.

Through caring gestures, there are ways in which the women in the family work to create possibility for the future. Within the family, restorative care becomes a collective process. Though Southeast Asian American families are deeply affected and shaped by state-sanctioned violence, families hold each other together instead of responding through a crime-and-punishment logic. Often, when children act out, parents punish. And whether it's through retribution or rejection, punishment within the family can come in many forms. But if we refocus our attention away from individual actions and recognize the crime to be state-sanctioned violence that attempts to criminalize children, punishment doesn't follow. Rather, parents, siblings, and community members can mourn together and heal each other. Intergenerational practices of restoration and struggle, rather than punishment, can begin to create healed people.

### ***Restorative care in the community***

Through community work, restorative care works to disrupt cycles of crime and punishment and bring communities together to hope and resist. The practice of restorative care involves actively working within families and communities to make space for others to thrive. Bui's amplification of Asian Prisoner Support Committee (APSC) gives readers an example of what communities can do when they come together to restore each other and critique state violence. The APSC works with inmates and formerly incarcerated people in the Bay Area. Ke Lam, who works with the APSC, came to the U.S. as a refugee, was incarcerated, and now serves as a mentor to ex-prisoners. Ke himself has a deportation order and is at risk of

deportation, but he believes in the APSC’s mission to “restore our formerly incarcerated Asian Pacific Islander brothers and sisters back into the community...and in turn help bring healing back into communities.”<sup>64</sup> Ke asks, “how can we restore someone to the community if they are only defined by their crime or the worst choice in their life?” (Figure 7).<sup>65</sup>



**Figure 7.** Restoration and healing. Thi Bui, “Refugee to Detainee: How the U.S. is Deporting Those Seeking a Safe Haven.” *The Nib*, June 13, 2018

Ke’s story is the last one included in the comic, after Bui has thoroughly discussed how U.S. militarism brought Southeast Asian refugees to the U.S., how state laws shift without warning and make citizenship precarious and unstable, and how families are disrupted because of the ambiguous and violent deportation laws. With this context, we are able to read Ke’s question differently: it is not because Southeast Asian Americans are “defined by their crime or the worst choice in their life,” but because Southeast Asian American lives change depending on violent government policies and laws that racialize and punish. That the choices they make are not the same as the freedom of choice that American exceptionalism touts, but they must make choices based on how they can survive the violent conditions that they live in.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

By focusing on “how we can restore someone to the community” rather than define them through crime or to punish them, first through incarceration and then by definition of their crime, he disrupts the sequence of “crime and punishment” to imagine how healing can change how racialized and criminalized communities imagine the future. Angela Davis argues that understanding what prison means today requires severing the link between punishment as the logical next step to crime. In *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Davis asks:

How often do we encounter the phrase "crime and punishment"? To what extent has the perpetual repetition of the phrase "crime and punishment" in literature, as titles of television shows, both fictional and documentary, and in everyday conversation made it extremely difficult to think about punishment beyond this connection? How have these portrayals located the prison in a causal relation to crime as a natural, necessary, and permanent effect, thus inhibiting serious debates about the viability of the prison today?

Because of the repetition of “crime and punishment” as a normal cause-and-effect sequence of events, the temporal experience of crime requires that punishment must follow as the “natural, necessary, and permanent” solution. Ke’s question, however, breaks up the seemingly insoluble link between crime and punishment by raising the possibility of restoration. He highlights how the temporal experience of punishment lasts beyond the amount of time they serve behind bars, but with community care, we can disrupt punishment as the necessary causal relation to crime. It is through these practices of restorative care across generations that emphasize the importance of helping others up when they’ve fallen down. In the above image of Ke, he holds a bike upright to help a child step on. This image, contrasted with the previous family narratives that fear of intergenerational cycles of separation and state violence, offers a glimpse of how healed people might heal people. Teaching is a difficult process, physically and emotionally, that requires time and patience. When learning to ride a bike, the student will inevitably fall. Both the student and teacher can get distressed and frustrated. And while some might learn faster than others, bike riding is not for everybody. In the process of healing or reentering the community, ASPC works to sustain hope and encourage communities to come together and support each other.

Ke and ASPC’s restorative care work provide abolitionist alternatives to crime by listening to those who are incarcerated and fighting for their freedoms. ASPC’s recent work demonstrates the power of community action and how restoration can be possible through care, community, and solidarity. In 2019, ASPC created “Hope is Contagious,” a digital project that includes stories of the Southeast Asian American community coming together to fight for their incarcerated community members’ freedoms. The project hopes to fuel and sustain resistance against ICE to “highlight individuals who have survived, persisted, and resisted the many fronts of state-sponsored violence.”<sup>66</sup> The essay includes community and family members’ stories, and ASPC shares what it means to live in limbo, or how communities support each other by sending letters to loved ones. In one excerpt, ASPC shares how families, friends, community members, and attorneys rallied and chanted “Bah Yung Pra Chang, Ung Niek Chanegh. When we fight, we win!”

This chant traveled from a family event at the Center for Empowering Refugees and Immigrants (CERI) office, to the San Francisco ICE facility, to the Governor’s office in Sacramento, and to Oakland and San Francisco City Council meetings. In response to the pressure, Governor Newsom issued two pardons, and two other Khmer detainees won post-conviction relief. When all four Bay Area Khmer detainees were freed and made safe from deportations, the community reunited and chanted one more time, “Bah Yung Pra Chang, Ung Niek Chanegh. When we fight, we win!” (“Hope is Contagious”)

The chant, moving from the family and community space, to larger institutions like the governor and city council offices, successfully put pressure onto the state to issue pardons. ASPC argues that “when one person’s hope results in their freedom, hope becomes contagious.”<sup>67</sup> They highlight how hope and resistance are driving forces that keep moving us, leaving suggestions at the end of the page on how to continue fighting the fight. This kind of restorative care not only

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<sup>66</sup> Asian Prisoner Support Committee, “Hope is Contagious,” <https://www.asianprisonersupport.com/hope-is-contagious>

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

demonstrates how community action can direct critique and attention to state violence, but how communities can hope and win together.

In early 2021, ASPC began the #Pardons4thePeople movement, which urges Governor Gavin Newsom to use his clemency power to pardon refugees and immigrants facing deportation in California. ASPC circulated a digital toolkit via Google docs that includes actions steps, such as posting sample tweets for Twitter or reposting infographics that include images of those facing deportation and hashtags to learn more. An important part of the digital toolkit includes a brief biography of applicants for clemency, which are intended to be included in emails to Governor Newsom. The document restores an intimate history for each of the applicants: Bounchan Keola, a Khmu refugee who resettled in the U.S. after the Lao government sought to wipe out the Khmu minorities; Maria Luna, a drug and alcohol counselor to formerly incarcerated Asian Americans; An Nguyen, who cares for his family; or Justin Chung, who takes care of his elderly mother. Without sensationalizing immigrants and refugees in danger of deportation, the toolkit and the #Pardons4thePeople movement focus on the importance of each individual to their community and family. Importantly, ASPC does not put forth an exceptionalist narrative for each applicant, as no one is more deserving of another for clemency or basic freedoms. Nor does ASPC allow them to be framed only through the state's definition of crime and criminality. Rather, these digital projects work to provide hope and resources while restoring each other's histories and humanities.

I bring up ASPC's recent work to show how restorative care can happen at all levels, in generative ways that are accessible and approachable. There are forms of protest, after all, that require positions of education and privilege that not everyone is going to have, but that does not mean that other forms of caring and healing should be overlooked or ignored. In Bui's comic,

she shares how families care for each other, whether it is trying to hide terrible news or taking on responsibilities for one another. There are different ways that families already practice healing and caring to make their lives more livable; I simply claim these acts as restorative care to call attention to the important critical and political work that is being done in these intimate spaces. There are a wide range of possibilities within restorative care, which broadens the work of resistance to encompass both the intimate individual levels and the larger community.

### *Conclusion*

Since February 2021, there has been an increase in violence against Asian Americans, particularly against Asian elders and women. The pandemic has fueled anti-Asian racism and hate crimes, and in response to one particular video of violence in Oakland's Chinatown, in which a young Black man was recorded pushing an older Chinese man to the ground, Asian American celebrities have attempted to express support for victims by calling for the arrest of the man responsible and offering a \$25,000 cash reward for information leading to his conviction. The celebrities' call for "justice" gained traction in Asian American media outlets like MSNBC Asian America and NextShark. Recognizing that this disturbing hunt to hold one individual accountable reproduced racial violence rather than critiquing larger systems of oppression, Asian American activist groups immediately gathered together to reject increased policing and the reliance on carceral systems, calling instead for community support and care. Bui responded too, writing, "Asian Americans cannot look for safety from the same agencies that terrorize Black Americans. We have to resist the us vs them mentality. COVID has made life difficult for so

many people. The resources we have are better spent making sure everyone's basic needs are met.”<sup>68</sup>

The pandemic has only exacerbated existing health disparities and social inequities, and the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes cannot distract from the larger goal of dismantling the systems that position communities of color to be more vulnerable to violence and death. The former U.S. president and other politicians' racist referrals of COVID-19 as the “China virus” or “kung flu” have certainly fueled anti-Asian hate crimes, but the pandemic has also revealed how the virus disproportionately affects Black, indigenous, Pacific Islander, Latinx, and Southeast Asian American populations. In response to the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes, poet and community leader Terisa Siagatonu posted on Twitter, “the violence we see (physical assault of Asian folks) vs. the violence we don't see (poverty, houselessness, unemployment, the hoarding of resources on a city/state/federal level that's led to an increase in crime & intra-community turmoil rooted in white supremacy.”<sup>69</sup> Siagatonu does the work of calling our attention to what isn't easily seen under the surface of violence. Redirecting our attention away from individual choices and behaviors, she encourages us to critique larger systems of state-sanctioned violence that create unlivable conditions for communities of color. She, along with Bui and other community leaders, practice restorative care through the restoration of history to sustain the common goal of fighting white supremacy while supporting each other.

Bui ends the comic by writing: “On one side of the coin is: hurt people hurt people. On the other side of the coin is: healed people heal people.”<sup>70</sup> Breaking the cycle of crime and punishment and highlighting how we can find hope through collective resistance, restorative care

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<sup>68</sup> Thi Bui, Twitter, February 4, 2021, <https://twitter.com/msthibui/status/1357518143044808704>

<sup>69</sup> Teresa Siagatonu, Twitter, February, 6, 2021, <https://twitter.com/terisasiagatonu/status/1358150202612273152>

<sup>70</sup> Bui, “Refugee to Detainee: How the U.S. is Deporting Those Seeking a Safe Haven.” *The Nib*, June 13, 2018, <https://thenib.com/refugee-to-detainee-how-the-u-s-is-deporting-those-seeking-a-safe-haven/>

does the work of redirecting our critique to the state and to reveal the power of communities coming together without flattening racialized violence as the same or to suggest an equivalence across anti-Black violence or anti-Asian violence. The everyday work of restorative care is necessary to form lasting cross-racial alliances that will maintain the traction of social movements and contribute to the ongoing work of abolition. By focusing on restoring different forms of history, both the racist history of the state and the important intimate histories of criminalized individuals and communities, we hold each other up and create new ways of existing and surviving.

## Chapter 4 | Self-Care: Legacies of Sexual Violence

I stumbled upon Amanda Ngoc Nguyen when I saw her poster featured in *We the Future*, a 2017 campaign that showcases ten young leaders from different social change movements. Collaborating with artists and educators to create artwork and social justice curriculum, *We The Future* chose Nguyen for her work as a sexual assault rights activist. A second-generation Vietnamese American woman, Nguyen authored the Sexual Assault Survivors' Rights Act, which grants sexual assault survivors more rights around their rape kits. After passing her first act, Nguyen founded Rise, an organization that aims to help everyday people accelerate social justice movements and write bills.



Figure 1. *We The Future* posters<sup>71</sup>

Much of the discussion around Nguyen's work focuses solely on how she provides sexual assault victims and survivors with the justice they need, and rightly so. Yet, what's missing in *We the Future*'s conversations around Nguyen's activism is a discussion of race, gender, and

<sup>71</sup> Image is screenshots from the *We The Future Poster Pack*, as sold on Amplifier.com. See: <https://store.amplifier.org/products/we-the-future-poster-series>

sexuality. In her *We the Future* poster, Nguyen's caption reads "We the future rise to rewrite the law" (Figure 1). This certainly refers to her social justice organization, but a central part of Nguyen's story is her experience of rape and sexual violence and her response to it. After her rape, Nguyen learned of the restrictions around rape kits and the barriers to finding justice for sexual assault survivors. She created the Sexual Assault Survivors' Rights Act, and in advocating for herself, she fought for a landmark act that would protect others. While *We the Future* states that they seek to inspire the younger generation to create their own future by featuring "young leaders from social change movements that are working to encourage people to vote, address climate change, rethink the immigration system, create opportunity in our education system, and address gun violence," they never explicitly declare that they are against sexual, racial, or gendered violence (*We the Future*). This positioning seems intentional for their K-12 audience, but the nonpartisan politics of the campaign misses a crucial part of Nguyen's story by foregoing these crucial details around her work.

To understand the significance of Nguyen's work, we must attend to the intersections of her identity and recognize that she fights for racialized, sexualized, and gendered victims of sexual violence. *We The Future* decontextualizes Nguyen as a daughter of Vietnamese refugees, but in many of her interviews, Nguyen speaks often about being a Vietnamese American woman. When asked how her upbringing and parents' history as Vietnamese refugees shape her work, Nguyen responded, "My parents instilled in me a value that freedom is not always free. That everything I was given in America as a citizen was hard fought. Also, being a woman in the community that I grew up in, in Southern California—there were a lot of roles, obligations, and stereotypes that were not empowering" (Levy). Nguyen understands the ways in which she has been brought into a longer history of war and complicated freedoms, and how she has grown up

with “roles, obligations, and stereotypes that were not empowering.” And while the campaign certainly addresses Nguyen’s advocacy for survivors of sexual violence, this history of war is an essential component of sexual violence against Asian women, as Asian women have been hypersexualized in dominant American history. Even if the way Nguyen narrates her story focuses less on intersections of race and gender, Nguyen has nonetheless been shaped by the history of U.S. imperialist violence, at least to some extent.

I start off this chapter by discussing Nguyen’s work in order to focus on what it means to be a post-war generation Vietnamese American woman. This chapter makes connections across historical and everyday violence on Vietnamese women to think about why violence against Vietnamese women in wartime is hypervisible, yet everyday sexual violence against Asian American women is invisible. In Vietnamese American history and cultural production, the discussion of sexual violence has focused on imperial, wartime violence. While this is important, it has made it harder to recognize other forms of sexual violence as violent. Two different but compounding ideologies have obscured the multiple forms of sexual violence that Vietnamese American and Asian American women face. One conflates sexual violation with western imperialism and wartime violence; the other presumes that white, economically privileged, and normatively gendered women are the only subjects for who sexual assault is a violation. Both ideologies disavow the Asian American women's subjective experiences of violence, along with their responses. In this chapter, I argue that self-care is a cultural practice that reveals what has been disavowed. As Nguyen says, “freedom is not always free,” and this chapter hopes to make visible how self-care is part of working towards a more freeing future.

I turn to “To my 21-year-old self,” a comic that I co-created with Bryan Trinh for the *#WeToo Reader*, a special issue of *The Journal of Asian American Studies* published in February

2021. In the comic, I call what happened to me rape, think about what it means to grow up as an Asian American woman, and come to articulate my own ways of speaking. When I was 21, I felt like the rape was my fault; that it was ahistorical and that I was to blame. While there are aspects of the assault that are simply incomprehensible (by which I mean there is no lens for me to better understand what happened), I find that understanding my experience across a longer history allowed me to make room to care for myself. This comic was created as a practice of self-care. Working through my experiences with sexual violence, the quieting of my voice, and the trauma that lingered after, I engaged through various practices of self-care that were necessary to my emotional wellbeing and survival.

The *#WeToo Reader*, edited by erin Khuê Ninh and Shireen Roshanravan, addresses how #MeToo has largely omitted race from conversations around sexual assault despite the movement's founding in 2006 by Tarana Burke, a Black cis woman who began #MeToo to create a community of survivors. Refusing the "bourgeois white carceral feminist politics" of the mainstreamed #MeToo, the editors insist on an intersectional understanding of #MeToo that heeds the Black feminist origins of the movement (Ninh and Roshanravan 3). The lack of discussion of race in #MeToo arises from how sexual assault tends to be framed politically as a form of violence waged against a homogenous, ahistorical, and non-intersectional category of "women" rather than framing it within a longer history of sexual violence against women of color. This omission of important intersectional history is not dissimilar to the way We The Future removes race, sex, and gender from their campaign's framing. By omitting a discussion of intersectionality from their campaigns, #MeToo and We The Future position their movements as more neutral than not, seemingly making their campaigns more accessible while ignoring complicated histories of violence against women of color. By insisting on the "syntactical

difference” to recognize intersections of racial and sexual violence, the *#WeToo Reader* describes their special issue as “theory in the flesh” to “provide language and theory for lived-experiences of sexual violence in what is usually dismissed as privileged, unafflicted model-minority life” and to insist that “Asian Americans be heard, believed, and backed up in their experiences with sexual violence” (Ninh and Roshanravan 3-4).

By contextualizing the comic within the lack of intersectional interpretation of history, I read the comic as a form of self-care that, when made visible, enters into the work of community building. Because self-care situates the self within a particular self and community, I argue that self-care is a powerful political tool for building communities of care, or what Sara Ahmed describes as the “creation of community, fragile communities, assembled out of the experiences of being shattered” (Ahmed). Performing a kind of historical retrieval to reveal shared historical experiences, self-care imagines a different kind of future and creates ways of healing that we don’t yet understand.

As my dissertation has thus far focused on different theories of care, in this final chapter, I consider what happens when care begins with the self and is later turned outwards. Sara Ahmed writes that in “queer, feminist, and anti-racist work, self-care is about the creation of community, fragile communities, assembled out of experiences of being shattered.” In response to Audre Lorde’s often quoted declaration of care, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare,” Ahmed writes:

In directing our care towards ourselves we are redirecting care away from its proper objects, we are not caring for those we are supposed to care for; we are not caring for the bodies deemed worth caring about...We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other.

I use the comic to think about the afterlife of the Vietnam War in a dialectical relation to the “political warfare” of survival. In other words, there is a struggle between present-day

imperialist forces and feminist Vietnamese American women who work toward the safety and well-being all people. Self-care becomes a tactical act in such a present-day struggle. By looking after each other, by engaging in the work of self-preservation, self-care can be a practice that allows us to deeply engage with histories of violence, imagine new futures, and radically care about those who are deemed not worth caring about. By caring for ourselves and each other, we can reassemble and reimagine new futures and ways of healing.

### **Autoethnography as Methodology**

To analyze the comic consciously and reflexively, I write this chapter autoethnographically to narrate and examine my experiences through a critical lens. As I discuss the comic, I think specifically about how it creates connections between everyday violence and longer histories of violence against Asian American women. The comic as a standalone cultural product does not fully address the ways in which my experience of rape is contextualized across my intersectional identity or social and cultural conditions. I believe it is important to think about the social and cultural context in which the comic was produced to uncover dimensions of power that shape my lived experiences and to focus on self-care as a method of historical retrieval. Autoethnography, a significant method in communications and anthropology, allows me to perform a cultural analysis of the comic and my personal experience with self-care. Communications scholars Robin Boylorn and Mark Orbe define autoethnography as “cultural analysis through personal narrative,” allowing authors to explore their intersectional identities and lived experiences in the context of social conditions and power (17). On autoethnography as a hopeful project, feminist cultural studies scholar Stacy Holman Jones writes that autoethnography “seeks a story that is hopeful, where authors ultimately write themselves as

survivors of the story they are living” (10). Cultural anthropologist Layla D. Brown Vincent similarly argues that autoethnographies allow writers to make connections to “histories that demonstrate the possibility of a better world from which we can decipher the necessary tools to construct our own freedoms” (124). By centering myself as a survivor of my story and to construct the tools necessary to my freedom, I write autoethnographically to think about self-care as a method of historical retrieval that allowed me to see myself as part of a longer history.

Importantly, autoethnography allows me to think more deeply about the epistolary form of the comic. When I was 27, I wrote this letter to my 21-year-old self, and it wasn’t until later that Bryan and I created the comic. As a graduate student in English, I was familiar with writing as a tool to reflect and reach new ways of thinking. But I didn’t realize that practicing personal writing and creatively engaging with my past experiences would lead me to a place where I felt I could merge theory and personal narrative. As an Asian American woman attempting to make a connection between the ordinary, present-day experiences of sexual assault and a distant history of geopolitical violence, I found that writing a letter to my past self allowed me to engage with trauma, both my own traumatic experiences and the trauma that circulates within families and communities. By utilizing autoethnography to think reflexively about the comic, I make connections between my experiences, social conditions, and intersections of power. These connections allow me to position myself within a long history of women of color feminists who work towards nonviolent futures and the safety of all women.

### **A Brief Genealogy of Self-Care**

This comic was created because I engaged in practices of self-care, and from that, I see self-care’s potential for reevaluating the past and making space for ways of healing. For me,

these practices ranged: I read about rape culture and learned from others' experiences through social media which led me to realize that there was something off about how others had responded. I sought guidance from doctors and therapists to find the language to understand what my body felt. I confided in family and friends who validated and nurtured me to think about what it would mean to center myself and recognize what happened to me as violence. Foucault describes the care of the self as a way of generating a specific self, as caring for the self "ensures our freedom while forcing us to take ourselves as the object of all our diligence" (45). In this way, by caring for myself and recognizing that there was something that I needed to prioritize within me to think about what sex, pregnancy, my body, and later motherhood would mean to me, I was finally able to make connections across these individual feelings that I had and what Inna Michaeli calls "a self which is grounded in particular political histories and present situations of violence and vulnerability" (53).

While self-care seems to go hand-in-hand with neoliberal systems of individual management and control, because of the lack of support in health-care systems, self-care becomes a political response from marginalized, and in particular racialized and gendered, communities to critique institutional violence. Self-care emerged in dominant consciousness in the 1970s and began as a response to healthcare, particularly in taking initiative to care for one's self to preserve and maintain levels of fitness and health, but self-care became political during the rise of women's and civil rights movements. Recognizing the patriarchal and racist institutions of health and medicine, Black feminists, women of color, and social justice activists found that self-care was "a claiming [of] autonomy over the body as a political act against institutional, technocratic, very racist, and sexist medicine" (Petrzela). In a world with racist healthcare systems and governments, self-care became a way of recognizing who gets care in

institutions and who doesn't.

The emergence of mutual aid programs from Black communities centered care as a way of resisting racist government programs that attacked racialized communities. In Alondra Nelson's book on the Black Panthers' involvement in demanding reform and radical change in the healthcare system through survival programs, Nelson describes health as a signifying lexicon:

In settings where racial oppression was more commonly advanced through social abandon (e.g., nonexistent or insufficient social welfare programs) and social control (e.g., police harassment, medical mistreatment) than through staunch Jim Crow practices, health was a site where the stakes of injustice could be exposed and a prism through which struggles for equality could be refracted. (5)

Through mutual aid, the Black Panthers organized to provide care to the Black community through issues around health and survival, such as the Breakfast Program. Focusing on the health and welfare of Black communities, the Black Panthers kept Black communities fed, sustained, alive as their existence was political in their defiance to white supremacy and violence. In a world that seeks to diminish Black lives, mutual aid became a way to work against attacks against racialized communities and sustain each other to continue to survive and resist.

I borrow from scholars Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese's critique of the neoliberal co-opting of self-care as "both a solution to and a symptom of the social deficits of late capitalism, evident, for example, in the way that remedies for hyperproductivity and the inevitable burnout that follows are commoditized in the form of specialized diets, therapies, gym memberships, and schedule management" (2). In Hobart and Kneese's special issue of *Social Text, Radical Care*, they think about how self-care blew up as a response for "coping with postelection political despair in 2016" (3). The editors think about self-care as emerging from technologies that help individuals manage their bodies to optimize themselves for maximum efficiency to the "habitual and individual level" (4). Because liberal

subjects are responsible for their mental, physical, and emotional health, practices of self-care become essential “to maintain productivity in the face of adversity and exhaustion” (4). Without addressing the ways in which these self-care practices are limited to those who can afford idealized citizenship and specialized services to the mind and body, this neoliberal model of self-care “glosses over the political, economic, and ideological structures that do the work of marginalization” (4). As historian Natalia Mehlman Petrzela describes in her research on the history of American fitness culture, wellness becomes a way for neoliberal institutions to encourage individuals to take responsibility for themselves, rather than hold larger systems accountable for creating conditions that make it impossible for marginalized communities to survive. To maintain a neoliberal model of self-care, what’s ignored are the people who make this self-care work possible: those who aren’t paid living wages to hold up structures of inequality and wealth, creating a system in which bodies are deserving of care and bodies are used to make it possible for others to engage in self-care practices.

It isn’t surprising then that self-care becomes popularized in times of crisis. In her article, “A History of Self-Care,” writer Aisha Harris traces the history of self-care through political instability and uncertainty. The collective trauma of 9/11 brought on increases in studies of PTSD, resulting in a “turning inwards in a lot of ways.” The fitness arena boomed, as “taking care of yourself, exercising, eating well, etc. is something really kind of crucial to do in a moment of great political and cultural instability” (Harris). Harris describes the rise of self-care in Black communities due to the rise of police killings of unarmed Black people as well as rise of hate crimes and toxicity during the post-2016 election. And in the midst of the pandemic in 2020, self-care again has taken the center stage in how people manage themselves in a time of crisis, whether that’s done while working from home or being at-risk as an essential worker.

Always at the intersections of different lines of oppression, self-care becomes a way to understand who gets cared for, who doesn't, and how different communities and individuals can respond and care for each other. While the invisible labor behind self-care often falls on marginalized communities and women, radical feminist activists turn the neoliberalization of self-care around, calling upon others to engage in the self-care in order to create more caring systems.

It is prudent to reattach self-care to radical origins of Black feminism because of Black feminist critiques of institutional systems of violence. The history of self-care in Black feminist activism demonstrates the significance of forming a community to make room for care. In 1977, The Combahee River Collective described the importance of personal genesis for Black feminism, or “the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women’s lives.” In their statement, the Collective describes how “Black feminists often talk about their feelings of craziness before becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule, and most importantly, feminism, the political analysis and practice that we women use to struggle against our oppression.” Through the examination of their personal experiences and recognition of how intersecting systems of oppression work against Black women, the Comabahee River Collective forms a political consciousness that is anti-racist and anti-sexist. Making connections between the personal and the political requires understanding and care of the individual, making room to care for the self in a world that seeks to marginalize, silence, and defeat.

As Audre Lorde writes in *A Burst of Light*, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (130). In 1988, at the time of writing this, Lorde had been fighting liver cancer for two and a half years. She emphasizes that she has

lived a privileged life that led to her early diagnosis, and she urges Black women to “share with one another the powers released by the breaking of silence about our bodies and our health, even though we have been schooled to be secret and stoical about pain and disease. But stoicism and silence do not serve us or our communities, only the forces of things as they are” (117). Lorde argues that Black women’s health is deserving of being narrated and fought for. It is through the documentation of the harm that is done to Black women’s bodies and focusing on the ways in which they fight and support each other that they can actively resist the forces that seek to violate Black life.

With this Black feminist history of self-care in mind, we can read practices of self-care in Vietnamese diasporic cultural production as critiquing the everyday legacies of violence and making connections to the afterlife of the Vietnam War. For much of Vietnamese women’s histories in the U.S., they have been called upon to forgive war violence and use their bodies to represent a kind of healing that disavows and erases harm; they have been called upon to care for others rather than care for themselves. By focusing on the healing, safety, and health of Vietnamese women through acts of self-care, we can think about how self-care is an important Asian American feminist act that leads to more radical politics of care in the Vietnamese diaspora.

This comic recognizes my experience of being shattered as one that must be cared for and one that is political. Drawing from Lorde’s argument that self-care is political, I argue that “political” can be understood in a number of ways: through consciousness raising, in the creation of academic work, in the conversations I had with Bryan and the editors. These interactions were all part of politicizing my self-care. As Audre Lorde, Sara Ahmed, and Inna Michaeli have written, in queer, feminist, and anti-racist work, self-care creates community and recognizes

racialized, gendered, and sexualized bodies as being worthy of care.

### **Temporalities of Violence**

When I was 21, I remember feeling like the rape happened out of nowhere. Looking back has helped me think through what could have led me to this point—to feel like I couldn't say no, or to freeze up, or to only communicate in ways that weren't legible or were too easily ignored. This isn't to absolve the rapist of blame or place fault onto myself; rather than think about binaries of blaming and faulting, the temporality of sexual violence in Asian American women's lives can complicate how we understand legacies of violence and the ways in which they're normalized and overlooked. Even though the rape felt like it came out of nowhere, it didn't. There were things that led me to understand what rape is and to recognize different ways of saying no and resisting, even in its nuances. The violence doesn't begin with the rape itself but the socialization of rape culture for Asian American women.

In erin Khuê Ninh's essay, "Without Enhancements: Sexual Violence in the Everyday Lives of Asian American Women," she argues that while Asian American studies ties sexual violence intimately with war and militarized violence, the field has not adequately addressed the issue of everyday sexual assault against women. Sexual violence is often discussed in relation to sexual slavery during World War II or pirates raping Southeast Asian refugees during the Vietnam War, rather than engaging with questions of contemporary violence. Ninh urges Asian American scholars to critically recognize sexual violence on college campuses. What startled me most about Ninh's article was how it reminded me of my friends' (who are also both Asian American women) responses to my experiences: that because it didn't match what we understood to be violence against women, and in particular, Asian American women, what

happened to me wasn't violence but a mistake of my own fault. What I knew about violence was what Ninh calls out in her essay: coming from a largely Vietnamese American community, violence, to us, was pirates raping women on refugee boats, the same boats our mothers and aunts and cousins had been on when they escaped Vietnam. This kind of trauma circulated our families, our communities, and the way our histories were narrated. In other words, histories of violence against Vietnamese women are hypervisible—yet the connections to everyday violence are not. Surely the wartime sexual violence could not be the same as what I had experienced with a “friend” in his college apartment?

Ninh writes about how sexual violence has limited allowable degrees of nuance; that is, men are entirely the perpetrators and women are entirely the victims: “To suggest otherwise is to be taken as reversing entirely the charge of blame, because there is no permissible third option” (Ninh 75). This binary, ideally meant to protect the victim, makes it difficult to think about how both men and women are socialized and gendered into rape culture. Citing Sharon Marcus' essay on the gendered grammar of violence, Ninh writes that when “victims reflect upon ways they might have averted their assault ‘had they acted differently,’ this is a retroactive ‘coping mechanism in reaction to the rape . . . and *not a testimony of the victim’s participation in gender socialization before the assault*’” (Ninh 75). Rape makes the victim a subject who has been violated at the time of the rape, yet thinking about rape as the starting point for how rape culture and sexual violence works in Asian American women's lives vacates the historical violence that precedes and, in some ways, shapes us. Rather than begin our point of analysis at the rape, what can we learn if we think about the legacies of violence in Asian American women's lives?

To give another example, when we think about Asian American racialization, the most

common mode of analysis is through the model minority myth. Created in the 1940s after Japanese American incarceration, the model minority appeared to cleanse the United States of their racist and violent history against Asian Americans. Asian American studies has repeatedly addressed how the model minority comes from a history of war, imperialism, and racialized violence, but this same critical analysis hasn't quite been given to Asian American sexual violence. How are histories of war connected to everyday sexual violence, and how does this create space for Asian American women to participate in these narratives in ways that are harmful to them? In what ways can Asian American studies address this? To consider what gendered expectations of the model minority myth does in women's lives and how methods of self-care can intervene and find ways to speak, we can complicate how we think about the temporality of rape in Asian American women's lives.

### **Locating the Self Within Vietnamese and Asian American History**

While the comic doesn't explicitly demarcate my experience as specifically Vietnamese or Vietnamese American, I locate my experiences as a Vietnamese American woman within Asian American history to speak within and against the hypersexualization of Asian American women. As Asian American studies scholars like Lisa Lowe and Kandice Chuh have argued,<sup>72</sup> the category of Asian American is a "concept of political unity that enables diverse Asian groups to understand our unequal circumstances and histories as being related" (Lowe 30). Locating myself within this longer history of sexualization of Asian women, I recognize the "roles, obligations, and stereotypes" that have been placed on me are grounded in imperialism and war violence. In the comic, I write that my voice "feels small, soft, and quiet," and it is through

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<sup>72</sup> See Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* (1996) and Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise* (2003).

making connections between everyday sexual violence against Asian American women and imperial violence that I understand how I am part of a racialized and gendered history, whether that begins with the Page Act of 1875, the Ladies' Agreement of 1921, the sexual slavery of Korean Women during the Korean War, or the publicized rapes and murders of refugee women by Thai pirates. Locating myself within the history of imperial wars and laws that framed girls and women who look like me as a hypersexual temptation, the comic becomes a way to speak against that history. Because though my voice may be small, soft, and quiet, its declaration of rape is firm.

When Amanda Nguyen describes how Vietnamese women face “roles, obligations, and stereotypes,” she alludes to a long history around the racialization and sexualization of Asian women.<sup>73</sup> Restrictive immigration laws around Asian American women’s citizenship reveal how Asian women were always targeted for their sexuality, reproductive capital, and perceived deviance.<sup>74</sup> But even so, there is a dual quality in the threat and submissiveness of the Asian woman, in that she is both hypersexualized and infantilized at the same time. During the incarceration of Japanese Americans in the 1940s, women were seen as more subservient and less threatening than Asian men, and therefore some were allowed to go to school because of their seemingly apolitical nature. Literary theorist Caroline Chung Simpson describes the centrality of Japanese war brides to the model minority myth, describing how “the Japanese war bride briefly, but significantly, emerged in the mid-1950s as an early form of the model minority Asian American; she was granted the privilege of American identity and even inclusion in the

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<sup>73</sup> As Mitsuye Yamada writes in *This Bridge Called My Back*, the Asian American woman is understood to be “the submissive, subservient, ready-to-please, easy-to-get-along-with Asian woman” (37).

<sup>74</sup> The Page Law of 1875, assumed all Asian women to be sexually deviant sex workers. The Ladies Agreement of 1920, U.S. law barred Japanese women from being united with their families overseas to prevent an establishment of Asian communities in the U.S.

suburban world it inhabited, but for the price of covering and erasing other racial threats and promising not to assert a political voice” (175).

This dichotomy of threat and submissiveness becomes important for thinking about American perceptions around Vietnamese women’s bodies and sexuality.<sup>75</sup> When the U.S. entered Vietnam, the Vietnamese woman played a strange role in supporting the narrative around American heroism and masculinity. Phan Thị Kim Phúc, the girl who was burned by napalm, represented the horrors of war as a hurt child, and she continued to demonstrate her thanks to the U.S. as an adult. As Mimi Thi Nguyen has discussed, Kim Phúc represents a pure figure of forgiveness and thanks that justified the war.<sup>76</sup> Yet, how does Kim Phúc exist with the Vietnamese prostitute in Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*? The me-love-you-long-time sex worker represents the hypersexualized, always sexually available Asian woman. She must take care, whether it is someone else’s feelings or sexual desires. Symbolizing possession and imperialism, the Vietnamese woman’s body becomes ambiguous in that it exists as both the forgiving child and hypersexualized woman at the same time. In this way, Vietnamese women’s bodies are relegated to victim or sex worker, but always enforcing a narrative of American victory and dominance.<sup>77</sup> She is configured accordingly to everchanging desires, allowing the U.S. to regain a sense of masculinity after losing the war while also justifying their violent involvement. To hold both of these figures in dominant American consciousness is to disavow the links between them, ignoring the longer history of violence against Asian women in the US.

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<sup>75</sup> These two roles come together in Brian De Palma’s *Casualties of War*, in which an American squad kidnap, rape, and murder Oanh, a Vietnamese woman. At the end of the film, one of the soldiers awakens from a nightmare to find himself riding a bus in San Francisco next to a Vietnamese American woman who resembles Oanh. He runs after her when she forgets a scarf on the bus, and she thanks him. The film ends as he is somewhat comforted by their interaction.

<sup>76</sup> See Mimi Thi Nguyen’s *The Gift of Freedom* (2012): Chapter 2.

<sup>77</sup> This duality is not unlike Freud’s Madonna-whore-dichotomy, in which women are seen as either saintly or licentious.

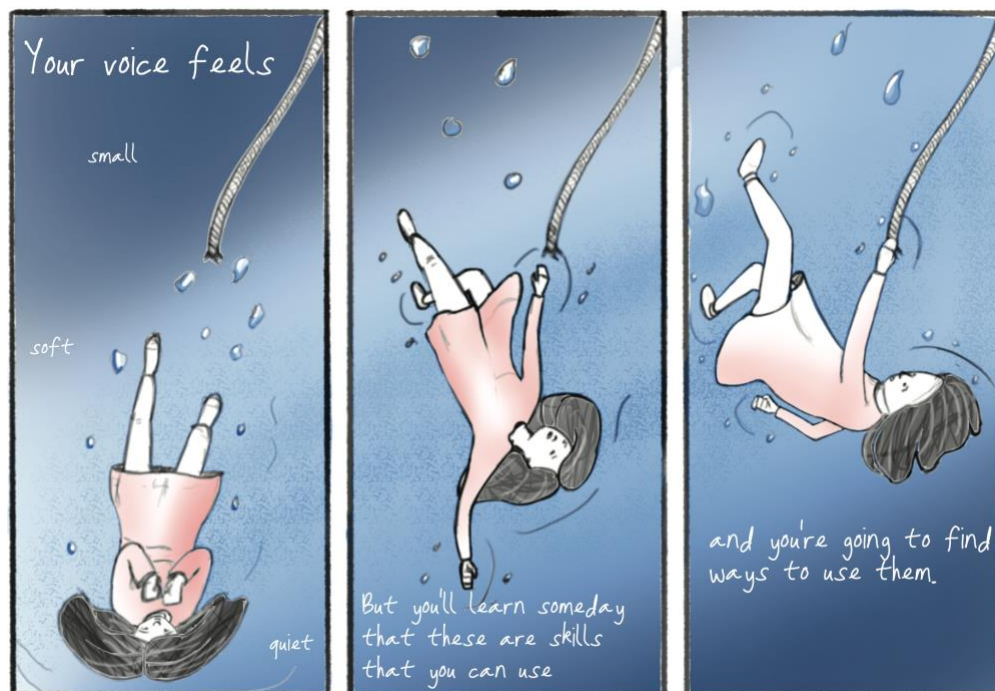


Figure 2. The weight of growing up as an Asian American woman in “To my 21-year-old self”<sup>78</sup>

Film scholar and filmmaker Celine Parreñas Shimizu has argued that “Asian women cannot be imaged outside of perverse sexuality or non-normative sexuality ascribed to racial identity. Therefore, they must use sexuality in order to create new morphologies in representation and in history” (26). In a way, the comic attempts to represent Asian women differently by openly discussing sex, pregnancy, rape, and violence, as well as the complex temporalities that accompany sexual violence. I claim the violence that happened to me in order to speak against it, and I refuse to separate my past violence from my present self. By creating the comic to acknowledge my experiences as valid and violent, I use cultural production to work against a history that constructs dehumanizing images of Vietnamese and Asian American women.

<sup>78</sup> All images of “To my 21-year-old self” are screenshotted from the original comic. See the full comic at: <https://aaww.org/to-my-21-year-old-self/>

## **Cultural Production as Self-Care**

After the rape, I wanted to separate myself from what happened. I did not want to think about it as a part of me, so I refused to engage with it, hoping that distance from my past would eventually resolve how I felt. It was not until years later that I realized I had been violated and traumatized, and this realization was painful. But the act of creation, first in writing the letter and then in translating it into a comic, became a way of caring for myself. Cultural production became a form of self-care, and eventually, caring for others who have also been harmed by sexual violence.

When I was 21, I was raped, but I did not know it was rape at the time. I knew something bad had happened, but I blamed myself for being in that position: for not knowing how to say no even though I had not wanted to do it, for not knowing how to react in that situation other than pretending everything was okay, for not understanding that the person I thought was my friend was not my friend. After the rape, I confided in two of my closest friends; one who blamed me outright and the other who was only able to articulate that perhaps I had been “taken advantage of,” but we didn’t go so far to discuss how what had happened was a form of sexual violence. Both my friends remained friendly with the rapist, and I felt guilty for years after because I believed that it was my fault. For a long time, I buried the guilt that I felt and tried to move on from it, not realizing the ways in which I still carried trauma, shame, and confusion.

Eventually, I found myself in graduate school. After spending four years taking classes on gender and race, working in the American Ethnic Studies and English departments, and situating my academic work in Asian American studies, I began reevaluating what happened to me to acknowledge and name it as a violent act. When I decided I wanted to try and get pregnant, I found that sex was intensely traumatizing and triggering. After seeing multiple

health professionals, I was advised to see a therapist. My therapist, who specializes in Asian American identity, gender, and sexual violence, led me to call what happened to me rape.

The word rape had been in the back of my mind for a while then, but I had not been able to bring myself to call it that—for years, I had repeated phrases that exonerated the rapist and placed culpability on myself: it was not that bad, it was not so violent, and it was my fault.<sup>79</sup> I told myself that because rape is never the victim's fault, I could not see myself as a victim. My experience existed outside of the only definition of rape that I knew. But as I continued to think about questions of sexual violence, war, race, and gender in my academic work, I began questioning my personal experiences, eventually realizing that my experience was worth questioning, understanding, and healing from. And finally, when my therapist called it rape, I found the words that I had been looking for and felt something change. I felt something reorient in the way I understood myself and my past, and I realized that I was giving myself permission to mourn what happened to me and to center the horrible feelings I had been feeling all these years as something to be acknowledged. As I worked through this process, I realized that I was finally making room to care for myself.

I wrote “To my 21-year-old self” first as a letter. My therapist suggested that I write a letter to the rapist, with no intention of sending it, to help me process how I felt about what happened. But when I sat down to actually compose the letter, I realized I had nothing to say to him. It didn't give me any sense of satisfaction or closure to communicate to him how I felt or what I was thinking. Instead, I began writing a letter to myself, and from that, the epistolary form of the comic emerged. By addressing and centering myself, I recognize the nuances of my

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<sup>79</sup> Feminist writer and scholar Roxane Gay addresses the scale of sexual violence in her introduction to *Not That Bad*, a collection of essays on rape culture. Instead of thinking about all sexual violence as violent acts, there is an impulse to characterize some forms of assault and harassment as “not that bad.”

experiences to insist that I am deserving of care.

The creation of the comic became a way to insist that others with similar experiences of violence are deserving of care, too. Inspired by the *#WeToo Reader*'s call for submissions that circulated in December 2019, I worked with Bryan Trinh, my partner and illustrator, to create a visual version of a letter I wrote to myself as I worked through my sexual trauma. I turned to the genre of the comic because of the ways it would allow me to access different parts of my experience that I could not (and did not really want) to address with words. While the letter helped me articulate some things for myself, there were still some feelings that I had that I did not want to express with language. When I began working on the comic with Bryan to visualize what this meant, the process brought out new ways of articulating, approaching, excavating, and confronting these feelings that I had tried to keep separate from my present self—without realizing the ways in which my academic work could help inform and validate my experiences while providing me with a different way of healing. The process has also taught me the limitations and violence of storytelling and narrative, in that there is only so much that can be said or expressed, and that there is a certain kind of violence enacted each time I had to revisit or repurpose my memories for something legible in the form of the letter or comic. But in the hours that we spent working through the ideas, I would return to my memories and work to find words to describe how I felt. By the time we reached the final iteration of the comic, I realized the genre allowed me to center myself and my experience in a way that addressed violence without reproducing it, and present ways of healing without suggesting that I am healed.

Throughout the first page of the comic, only the rapist is speaking: first to ask me to wash up, and then to ask why I am leaving. These questions seem to be in contrast with each other, as washing up suggests that there's some understanding of "residue" or "evidence." In the second

panel, there's a common trope of the victim attempting to wash themselves, as there is often an urge for victims to wash their body of their rapist and violation. Yet, the first panel guides us to understand that this act of washing up was not my idea—it was the rapist's. He asks me to cleanse my own body, to not only wash myself physically but also remove the memory of the violence that has just been inflicted.

In the third panel, he asks “Leaving already?” as I walk out of the door. While this question could be malicious, or even taunting, it did not feel that way. To this day, I am unsure of how much he thinks of what happened or how he remembers it, but I remember feeling uneasy as I recognized then how differently we were understanding what just took place. The question “Leaving already?” made me question the discomfort and violation I felt, and it revealed how differently what was being understood on either side. Though I learn eventually that what happened was rape, it is clear that I did not understand what was happening at the time—and perhaps neither did the rapist.

When illustrating this scene, Bryan and I knew we did not want to draw anything from the bedroom itself. Instead, by highlighting the two questions that stood out in my memory, we hoped to recreate a sense of confusion and nuance, to highlight how unclear and contradictory this felt. The questions “Can you wash up” and “Leaving already?” reveal the rapist's disavowal to maintain a sense of consent, to rewrite what happened by absolving himself from blame both physically and mentally. This form of disavowal required invisibility and silence on my part so that consent could be imagined. And without a context of nuance in thinking about the relationship between perpetrator and victim, if he wasn't to blame, then who could I blame but myself?

Illustrating this interaction was an important form of self-care in that it allowed me to

return to the site of trauma without only seeing the violence that occurred. I distanced myself from this memory because I did not want to experience the violence again and again. But drawing out my experiences in this way enabled me to emphasize how consent *was* imagined and the questions that my attacker asked me revealed his apprehension with the situation as well. The comic makes the disavowal visible through formal means without recreating the violence. There is also a refusal to draw out the violence itself, or to center him: other than his disembodied voice, he is not given space in the comic. We can see me kneeling in the shower and the blank reflection of my stare as I look in the rearview mirror, unsure of how to interpret what happened. Importantly, we see the gray areas and the confusion, acknowledging nuance as an important part of sexual assault and trauma.

### **Scrolling as Self-Care: Social Media and #MeToo**

Creating the scene in which I scroll through Instagram was another particularly important form of self-care. As I processed how I felt, I was desperate to understand why I felt violated and uneasy. It was through social media that I began processing what happened to me to recognize the assault as violent. The Instagram post affirms that the ways I spoke were legitimate and real forms of communication. I found ways to validate my voice through social media, through seeking the voices of others who might be able to articulate what I felt but had not been able to understand. By locating myself among other survivors of sexual assault, I felt empowered to validate my experiences. While scrolling through social media might seem like a passive, nonpolitical practice that just happens when lounging around, it was a significant way of caring for myself because I found a community that allowed me to quietly process my experiences of sexual violence and locate myself among the broad #MeToo movement.



Figure 3. Scrolling through social media in “To my 21-year-old self”

On the second page, I am seated on the floor, scrolling through Instagram. The Instagram post in this panel is actually inspired by a Planned Parenthood post that described different phrases that all verbalized “No.”<sup>80</sup> I created this fictional post to think about both verbal and nonverbal ways of communication: verbally, saying no can be “I don’t think it’s a good idea,” or “We shouldn’t do this.” Nonverbal forms include “freezing up,” “moving further away,” and “saying nothing at all.” These, too, are ways of speaking that aren’t heard in the narration of rapist and victim.

When the #MeToo movement began circulating widely in 2017, social media becomes

<sup>80</sup> See: Planned Parenthood, Instagram, February 22, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B84piGdHaas/>

the primary outlet for sharing stories of sexual assault and addressing the systemic and widespread rape culture, patriarchal heterosexism, and toxic masculinity that creates conditions for sexual violence. Through Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, women and men shared what happened to them—either with a simple #MeToo hashtag to reveal that they understood themselves to be part of the larger scope of the project, or with detailed stories of sexual assault. This move to highlight sexual violence empowered victims to speak out against their attackers and form communities to call attention to the patriarchal systems that normalize the violence, and a large part of these stories were addressing violence that happened in the past.

What #MeToo creates is a publicly visible temporal narrative for thinking about sexual violence. So often victims are asked why they did not report their attacker or speak out about their experience in the past, but the movement makes it clear how violence and trauma operate in insidious ways and under different experiences of time. Freud has described the temporality of trauma as defined by “latency” (Caruth 7). When someone experiences something unexpected or violent, they might appear unscathed. If someone “gets away, apparently unharmed,” everything might seem fine (7). Yet, in the following weeks, there might be a series of “grace psychical and motor symptoms” that are concealed due to shock or “whatever else happened at the time of the accident” (7) Freud describes how these “incomprehensible” feelings are revealed after the traumatic event, and that “the time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of symptoms [of trauma] is called the ‘incubation period’” (7). Trauma, in this way, is defined by how the experience is delayed. This inherent delaying of comprehension makes trauma enigmatic in the way those who experience a traumatic event don’t fully comprehend the harm that is being enacted until the “incubation period” has passed. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth notes that the latency of trauma demonstrates how the “impact of the traumatic event lies

precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (8-9).

But the possibility of confronting trauma or recognizing its belatedness lies within the temporal delay. Trauma can be experienced continually, yet it is not the same experience each time. Rather, Caruth writes that we can see trauma as the “temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment. The trauma is a repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continual leaving of its site” (10). Listening, acknowledging, and articulating trauma becomes a way to “hear in the testimony the survivor’s departure from it; the challenge of the therapeutic listening, in other words, is *how to listen to departure*” (10). Recognizing the ways in which survivors depart from trauma opens up a new possibility for thinking about healing and understanding a history that we couldn’t understand as we experienced it.

In a way, trauma forced me to think about an alternate relationship to time, and through acts of self-care, insisted that I confront my past without disavowing the violence. In the comic, when I pause on the Instagram post, that pause becomes a way of recognizing the ways I exercised my voice and agency but was still violated and harmed. This becomes a way to reframe what happened to me—that even though I got away from the incident, apparently unharmed, I had been violated. The Instagram post enables me to both revisit and leave the site of trauma, to depart from the violence in a way that opens up a new possibility for understanding what happened. In this particular case, I ask in the comic, “It was, right?” indicating that there was some part of me that remembers and knows that I protested and resisted in some way. These were forms of protest and resistance that I had communicated—it just was not legible because of its nuance in a world that frames rape around the affirmative yes or no.

It was through the Planned Parenthood post, and other feminist and sexual survivor

accounts on social media, that I was able to recognize the ways in which I had communicated refusal and understand that even though I didn't think I had the language to resist then, I did. In a world where articulation is a binary of yes and no, these forms of nuance are written off as being unclear, even though they are not. Through retrospective thinking, I recognized that these ways of speaking are valid and real. In King-kok Cheung's *Articulate Silences*, Cheung discusses how silence is a form of nuanced communication. To better understand the ways in which different people speak, particularly marginalized groups and especially women of color, Cheung argues that speaking can be in gestures, body language, or silence. These forms of communication are always ways to articulate one's self.

In the comic, we can see how the Instagram post is highlighting different forms of articulation that disrupt the yes/no binary of affirmative consent. Because Asian American women have been historically been portrayed as women who speak *for* others, to sustain a kind of narrative or to perform a role that exonerates American violence, it is important to recognize the different ways that women speak. Because even as Vietnamese American women have spoken for others, how might we think about things they might have communicated nonverbally?

### **Self-Care and Women of Color Feminism**

After learning about legacies of imperialism and sexual violence, I sought to align myself with women of color feminists to think about what ties us while recognizing my experience as a Vietnamese American woman as nuanced and distinct. It was important for me to make a connection across different histories of women of color feminism in order to understand how I fit in—and the ways I didn't. Although I don't think graduate work and research would normally be considered forms of self-care, I think they certainly can be when you are able to read about

yourself and see the feelings and emotions that you have been feeling reflected in the academic and intellectual work you are reading, allowing space for the realization that you are a part of a longer history that is worthy of being studied, articulated, and taught by other women of color who share your experiences. My understanding of women of color feminism arose from Black feminist theory, particularly in thinking about personal and day-to-day experiences as a genesis for Black feminism. The Combahee River Collective describes how coming to a political consciousness importantly involved Black feminists “becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule, and most importantly, feminism, the political analysis and practice that we women use to struggle against our oppression.” By learning about Black and women of color feminism, I changed my relationship to the past and to myself. This personal shift in thinking made my graduate program journey worthwhile for me, and perhaps better understanding myself and how I had been shaped by a longer political history was the thing I was questioning and wanted an answer to.

The comic illustrates how I came to locate myself across this longer history with the words, “I want to tell you something that might help” (5). The tone of the comic changes as I hold onto the rope: the background is a deep blue, and I’m being pulled through the water. The direction in which I’m being pulled is somewhere sideways and upwards, and as I get closer to the surface, the tone, in both voice and color, begin to change. A dewey orange hew colors the following panels as I walk myself through where I am as a graduate student.



Figure 4. Being pulled to the surface and forming communities and spaces of care in “To my 21-year-old self”

The third panel reads, “You’ll be a graduate student and you’ll find a few things that make it worthwhile.” In this panel, I’m reading *Know My Name* by Chanel Miller and sitting next to a stack of books that consider different theories within Asian American feminism, Asian American studies, and rape culture. Suggesting that these are the “things that make it worthwhile,” the panel demonstrates that part of the things that are helping me form new ways of speaking and recognize myself in the literature that I’m reading—leading me to feel incredibly happy, eventually.

The next panel has me in front of the Samuel E. Kelly Ethnic Cultural Center (ECC), a place that is designated to support students of color on the University of Washington campus, a home for organizations and events that are run by students who work towards social justice and building community. As I wave to a few friends, there is a sense of community being formed that is lacking in the previous page. After the rape, I reached out to my friends in search of reassurance, but they lacked the language to understand. In my conversation with the first friend,

I allow her to lead the conversation. She somehow acknowledges and minimizes the violence all at once. With the second friend, I am completely silent as she orients blame towards me and directs her sympathy elsewhere. While I don't fault them for their responses, I was still hurt. Their words felt sharp. In the way that I had thought the rapist was my friend, I felt doubly betrayed after my friends responded with dismissal and blame. But in the future, I found not only the language to understand what happened through women of color feminism, but also through the communities that I formed on campus. Through my inspiration and support from women of color graduate students and faculty, whom I often met with at the ECC, I found validation and community that was crucial to this stage of healing. On a large university campus that often felt cold and unwelcoming, the ECC welcomed me. It was a place I felt safe and protected.

In the last orange-hued panel, I emphasize teaching as a form of validation and self-care. On the board, as I stand in front of a classroom of students, the agenda reads: "Writing complex claims. Consent and popular culture. Group work." On the side reads: "You'll form your voice as an instructor and learn that you love teaching." As readers, we can see that teaching becomes a form of articulating a voice as well. In the panel, I am standing, face forward, and for the first time in the comic, I'm looking straight out—this positioning of me at the front of the room demonstrates some kind of command of the space. The shadows of the students, with one of them raising a hand, grants me control over the classroom, and we can assume that the class' focus on consent and popular culture is a decision I'm making as an instructor as well. The voice that I'm forming becomes my own, allowing me to not only explore the experiences that I've struggled through, but to work with students to reach new conclusions as well. The combination of these experiences as a student and a teacher helped me form a community of my

own.

As part of the post-war generation, I do not hold direct memories of war or wartime sexual violence. Yet with every popular culture reference to a battered Vietnamese woman in wartime or hearing about pirates raping women on refugee boats, I feel deep pain and terror at the thought of sexual violence. I felt a connection without understanding what that connection meant; I couldn't understand what it meant to be part of the post-war generation or what my connection was to war and violence. Seo-young Chu, in her discussion of postmemory *han*, asks why it is that Korean American women might feel a unique pang of pain when reading about sexual violence against Korean women during World War II.<sup>81</sup> Chu describes *han* as a “specifically Korean American type of postmemory” that raises questions for why post-generations might feel such anguish by the violence inflicted on earlier generations: “What does it mean for a second-generation Korean American to feel personally degraded by the soldiers who raped thousands of comfort women during WWII? Why should their dehumanization affect her so viscerally?” (97-8). Chu's important questions require a historical awareness of placing one's self within a history, but this history isn't always easily accessible or known. To feel a personal connection that Chu describes, one has to *learn* about that history. For me, the learning happened through the study of Black and women of color feminism. Granting myself dedicated time to work through these histories and ideas, self-care gave me the historical knowledge I needed to feel visible, not only to others but to myself.

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<sup>81</sup> Chu draws upon Marianne Hirsch's *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1997), in which Hirsch raises postmemory to describe the feeling of being spatially and temporally “exiled from the very experiences that haunt them—exiled by their belatedness, by the fact that the tragedy preceded their birth” (Chu 2).

## Conclusion

“To my 21-year-old self” ends by asking what it means to heal, to sometimes find myself where I began, and to do the work of beginning again. On the last page, I walk through a labyrinth with no set path and end. It is unclear whether the sun is setting or rising as the orange sky and blue water meet, but the cyclical imagery reflects the last things I tell myself: that healing is not linear and may look differently as I begin again and again. The comic ends open-endedly to resist the desire to see myself as healed; instead, I want to recognize myself as always in a process of healing. As I walk through the labyrinth, this might involve obstacles and dead ends. I might be tempted to say things I don’t want to say or be something I don’t want to be, but I can begin again and work towards a more freeing future. Resisting a linear understanding of healing and closure, I heal at my own pace, and continue to search for different ways of surviving.



Figure 5. Walking through a labyrinth in “To my 21-year-old self”

Engaging with these practices of self-care to learn more about myself and to place myself across a longer history has helped me better articulate who I am, who I want to be, and what I

want my future to look like. In this way, the comic has become a form of what Toni Morrison calls literary archaeology: “on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply” (92). The bits and pieces of memory I have and continue to recollect allow me to imagine a world in which I am not hindered by my experience of sexual assault. Rather, I excavate what remains to validate the pain and trauma that I’ve experienced, while slowly trying to reach out to others to form these communities of care and to work towards futures without sexual violence.

It seems appropriate that this last chapter is thinking about care as a method of engagement as well as historical retrieval. In each of the preceding chapters, I have looked at how care is turned outwards—care becomes both a method of historical retrieval and of creating community. This chapter does much of the same, yet I focus intentionally on self-care as a political act that starts with caring for the self and then moves towards thinking about what it means to be a self that is grounded in “particular political histories and present situations of violence and vulnerability” (Michaeli 53). Rather than see one’s experiences with violence as anachronistic, or the past as complete and distant, self-care is a way of pushing us to imagine worlds where we can attend to violence and trauma together.

Lastly, I want to return to what it means to articulate a voice that is “soft, small, and quiet.” While oftentimes sexual assault survivors speak up to call out their attacker, the comic does not do this. I recognize the strength it takes to name the perpetrator and in no way want to diminish the significance and impact of doing so. But I do not do this in the comic. Part of me has no desire to; the other part of me wonders if it is because I do not want to deal with that consequence, or that I am not ready to raise my voice—I am not so sure. To me, the comic feels like a soft but powerful way for to contribute to the discourse around rape culture, and this

chapter is an extension of that, too. When I sent our comic proposal to erin and Shireen, the proposal was my attempt to reach a larger community that could help me better understand what happened and situate myself alongside Asian American feminists. And it was in the process of creation that I affirmed myself as real and worth listening to.

## Conclusion | Care in Digital Spaces

Because everyone knows yellow pain, pressed into American letters, turns  
to gold.  
Our sorrow Midas-touched. Napalm with a rainbow afterglow.  
I'm trying to be real but it costs too much.  
They say the Earth spins and that's why we fall but everyone knows it's the  
music.  
It's been proven difficult to dance to machine gun fire.  
Still, my people made a rhythm this way. A way.

Ocean Vuong, "Not Even This," April 2020

My god am I grateful for Vietnamese American poets like @ocean\_vuong. I couldn't describe the  
bleeding my soul has felt in these past few weeks reading every single day in the news that  
someone with skin like mine has been stabbed, spit on, and punched just for existing. A dam in my  
eyes opened when I read this and thank you, Ocean, for it. You reached across the pages and  
touched my soul with these words.

Amanda Ngoc Nguyen, Instagram, April 7, 2020

In April 2020, in the middle of the pandemic, Ocean Vuong published "Not Even This," a poem that addresses war, queerness, violence, and what it means to be enough. Approaching closure as a rhythm and a way, rather than an end, Vuong writes about "yellow pain, pressed into American letters." Yellow pain, or pain felt by Asians, turns into gold when pressed, invoking memorializations of violence through war monuments that glorify white American soldiers and ignore Asian lives. As Vuong describes violence as "Napalm with a rainbow afterglow," creating imagery of war with a glow that radiates post-event, he illustrates how violence gets disavowed in America: it is glorified and rewritten as it happens and as it is remembered. The poem seems to ask what it means for Asian Americans to make a life or to seek closure in the wake of violence. While Vuong doesn't provide a clear answer, he writes that "my people made a rhythm this way," dancing to "machine gun fire." Making something—a rhythm, a way—to the beat of violence evokes the sense that Asian Americans have learned to celebrate life without erasing complex histories of war, dancing to it instead.

This poem was called to my attention by Amanda Ngoc Nguyen. Posting Vuong's poem to her Instagram, Nguyen wrote that she was grateful for Vietnamese American poets like Ocean,

whose poem made her weep. In the midst of rising anti-Asian hate crimes during the pandemic, Vuong's poem reached out to Nguyen and helped her "describe the bleeding" in her soul from reading about violence against people with skin like hers, "stabbed, spit on, and punched just for existing." In these digital spaces, especially through social media, care becomes possible across different spaces and times, as it allows these two Vietnamese Americans, distinct in their disciplines and work, to connect. When Nguyen reposted Vuong's poem, something resonated between them, and their digital interaction made its way to me.

Throughout graduate school, I savored these moments when I saw the people I was reading about care for each other. I saw Thi Bui and Teresa Siagatonu repost each other on Twitter, I listened to Viet Nguyen on Kimberlé Crenshaw's podcast, and I emailed Trinh Mai once I finished my first chapter. I was so excited to attend the #WeToo panel during the virtual Association of Asian American Studies (AAAS) 2021 conference, to see those rectangles thoughtfully listen to each other as I followed along the lively conversation in the chat box. These meaningful interactions in digital spaces, especially in the age of social distancing, reminded me that nothing happens in a vacuum. Cultural production creates much-needed community in violent and lonely times, which this dissertation partially argues can feel like all the time.

As I reach the close of this project, I write in the midst of rising violence against Asian American communities, particularly against Asian American women. When I first learned about the mass shooting in Atlanta in March 2021, I was unsure of how to react. I had been inundated with videos of violence across the Bay Area against Asian elders. I felt sad and exhausted. But slowly, Asian American scholars and writers, particularly Asian American women, began writing, whether it was on Instagram, through comics, in op-eds, via interviews, or on Twitter.

AAAS President Jennifer Ho demanded that people not look away, as this violence is not one-off but part of a longer history of sexualized violence against Asian women.<sup>82</sup> Filmmaker and film scholar Celine Parreñas Shimizu traces the arrival of Asian American women as a genital event, in that Asian women have always been dehumanized as vessels of excessive sexuality.<sup>83</sup> Writer R.O. Kwon reflects on how she and her mother worried for each other silently before trying to reassure each other, because neither had wanted to burden the other with additional pain.<sup>84</sup> Artist and activist Chanel Miller describes the brutality at which we assign urgency to processing, particularly as the media demands that Asian women speak to their experiences to teach others about racialized violence and misogyny.<sup>85</sup> I read their work hungrily, seeking some way to process the deep feeling of dread and sadness that I felt upon learning that six of the people killed were Asian women. It was through the words of hurt, angry, and brilliant Asian American women,<sup>86</sup> quickly written and distributed online, that I was somewhat comforted and felt the nudge to continue resisting the white supremacist violence that created these conditions for Asian women to be slain but have the tragedy be framed as apolitical—not a hate crime. Together, these women rose up to collectively mourn ongoing violence and demand nonviolent futures. They refused the glowing amnesia of the dominant American narrative. Rather than allowing Asian American violence to be framed around violence—imperial war violence or domestic racialized violence—they focus on how people make a way out of pain. They showed me how yellow pain can turn into *our* gold. We create that beauty for ourselves, we find a way

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<sup>82</sup> Jennifer Ho, “To be an Asian woman in America” (CNN: 17 March 2021).

<sup>83</sup> Celine Parreñas Shimizu, “The history of fetishizing Asian women” (*Vox*, 19 March 2021).

<sup>84</sup> R.O. Kwon, “A Letter to My Fellow Asian Women Whose Hearts Are Still Breaking” (Vanity Fair: 19 March 2021).

<sup>85</sup> Chanel Miller (Instagram: 18 March 2021).

<sup>86</sup> See also: Linh Thủy Nguyễn, “Asian Americans' economic inequality is violence, too”; Rachel Yim Schlotfeldt, “A History of Hypersexuality: Racial Feeling and the Invisibility of Asian Women”; Celeste Ng, “Keeping Love Close”; A Naomi Paik, “On Collective Grief and Lines of Solidarity”

to live that honors those who have passed, we organize through social media, and we care for ourselves so we can care for each other.

Outside of this dissertation, the digital world has been an important way for me to feel connected to not only academic and intellectual spaces, but my family, too. Throughout the pandemic, I have been part of texting threads with my extended family. We send each other pictures of our little families, our dinners, videos of laughing, opening gifts, taking walks, precious first steps (or crawls). This isn't to romanticize technology, as I am deeply aware of the violence technology enacts on marginalized communities.<sup>87</sup> But I am fascinated by how care always seems to find a way.

Care reverberates. These digital interactions are both ephemeral and permanent, public and private, all at once. Social media and technology make it possible for us to reach out to each other digitally and immediately, bending time and making physical distance irrelevant. I've argued in this project that care is a method of historical retrieval; perhaps care in digital spaces makes it more possible for us to reach out and retrieve each other, to form community and disrupt liberal time. There is much to explore about the ways care circulates and how it enables interactions that would never be made possible otherwise. Digital spaces have the potential to create care in ways we don't know yet, but I know one thing is sure: it is through these interactions and processes of care that I feel a little more full. And that fullness is everything in a world that reminds us that all we have is each other.

Finally, I began this dissertation thinking about my mom's stories, and now I want to end thinking about myself as a new mother. Often, we see mothers as caregivers. Mothers give care,

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<sup>87</sup> In the Bay Area, the place I call home, technology is so often described as violent for marginalized communities, and I've seen that first-hand with my mom and aunts all working in the same tech factories for years, and particularly in the way the pandemic has categorized them as essential workers without protections.

and children receive. But as I've discussed in this project, care happens across genders and generations in unexpected ways. And I've learned this in the way my son has cared for me in the moments I needed care the most.

During labor and delivery, I experienced a spectrum of emotions that ranged from bliss to fear. Labor was unexpectedly turbulent; I lost consciousness and almost a liter of blood. Bryan, who held my hand throughout it, now hesitates when we discuss the possibility of more children. Perhaps one is enough: one pregnancy, one labor, one child, one violent act. I'm not sure, as I'm still meditating and learning about the new contours of my body.

In the immediate weeks after giving birth, I was in intense pain as my body slowly recovered. Yet, even throughout those uncomfortable and sleepless nights, I still felt compelled to make time to work: to teach my class, to write my dissertation, to tend to the house, even though Bryan and my mom did everything they could so that I wouldn't have to. These things seemed necessary to feel like myself again, to be productive in some way that made me feel like me. But Luca forced me to rest. He demanded that I nurse him, yes, but he also demanded that I stop what I was doing because he wanted me to care for him. Eventually, I realized that he was asking me to keep time with him: to adhere to his schedule, to rest when he wanted to rest, and to pick him up so he wouldn't feel alone. This whole time, I thought I was holding him, but I realize now that he was holding me, too.

Luca is my first child, so I wouldn't really know this: but I suspect having a new baby during a pandemic might not be so different than having a baby in normal time, at least in the sense that time bends and moves differently and being at home is the thing and all that happens is indelibly marked.<sup>88</sup> Slowly, I've embraced this new way of being and this new sense of time that

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<sup>88</sup> Thank you, Candice Rai, for sharing this perspective on motherhood and temporality with me.

we share. Each day, I learn more about my son and myself, and a bit more about care, too. And for that, I'm so thankful.

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