CHILDREN OF THE VIETNAMESE DIASPORA: TRACING A HISTORY OF
COLONIAL VIOLENCE

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by

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I certify that I have read Children of the Vietnamese Diaspora: Tracing a History of Colonial Violence by Lily Thuy Pham, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Women and Gender Studies at San Francisco State University.

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This paper will explore a historical timeline of western colonialism and imperialism’s legacy of trauma from Vietnam to the diasporic Vietnamese American community in the United States, specifically its impact on the lives, experiences, and identity formation of postwar (1.5 and second) generation Vietnamese Americans. Following the three chapter outline, the first chapter will begin with a historical overview from the late 1800s during French colonialism in Vietnam leading up to the Vietnam War and contemporary Vietnamese American communities. The second chapter will delve deeper into intergenerational trauma and postmemory. The final chapter will tie this history in with contemporary Vietnamese Americans through a collection of oral histories. This chapter will examine how all the aforementioned can provide context for the transmission of trauma from the affected generation to the next and how it has impacted and shaped the lives of those who are generations removed from these histories. This is a somewhat personal body of work delving into the histories that have shaped the people and societies I see in the present and how we can imagine the possibilities for a Vietnamese American future that bridges intergenerational lives and experiences to bring about the chance to heal and move forward.
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Introduction

I. Background

In 1983, my father fled Vietnam on a small, dingy boat packed with dozens of other South Vietnamese refugees trying to find refuge from a country that had been torn apart by war and political turmoil. He was only able to take one of my older sisters — a toddler, at the time — and left behind my mother, my eldest sister, and my eldest brother. My brother was only a baby then, so he could not be taken on such a dangerous journey and so my eldest sister stayed behind with my mother to help take care of him. Although he had to leave his wife and two children behind, my father was able to flee with his siblings and several other family members. According to my sister that he escaped with, he was actually the one responsible for building the very boat they fled in. They were adrift out at sea for several days and fortunately, they were soon rescued by a Japanese naval ship that brought them to Japan. From Japan, they were taken to a refugee camp in the Philippines where they were eventually sponsored and brought to the United States. Several years later, my mother fled the country with my two older siblings. They, too, fled by boat, eventually making their way to a Thai refugee camp, and were safely brought to the United States where my family was reunited. They would have three US born children shortly after, one of whom is myself.

This vague telling of my familial history is all that I know of what they went through to get to where we are today. I had to piece this brief familial history together from the fragmented stories I heard from my siblings, cousins, or aunts and uncles — and
it was only told because I had asked, not because it was information that was openly shared. My birth mother passed away shortly after I turned four and my relationship with my father has always been rocky (to say the least), so I was never comfortable asking him about his life or our family’s journey from Vietnam to the United States. I also knew that it was a traumatic experience that he probably would not have spoken about even if I had asked. He was never one to openly discuss his past or what he felt in those times. To this day, I still am unable to muster up the courage to ask him about his story because of our relationship with each other and because I fear that it would resurface decades of trauma that he might have deeply buried.

My family’s experience as “boat people” – a term that may have been coined to avoid regarding them as “refugees” so the US could shirk any responsibility for them (Tsamenyi 348) – and reticence around one’s history is not unique to my family. There is a collective form of trauma inflicted by the destruction of wartime and the loss of a home and stability that resides within diasporic Vietnamese refugee communities. For Vietnamese Americans who were born after the war and in the United States, our understanding of this trauma and how it affects our lives is difficult and muddled with unclarity. My project here is to try and better understand how trauma can be transmitted intergenerationally by tracing its roots in western imperialism and colonialism and connecting it to contemporary Vietnamese American communities today with a focus on the 1.5 and second generations.
II. Terminology

a. Generations

The first generation of Vietnamese Americans (VA) are those who are the first to immigrate to the United States. For this paper, I define the first generation to only encompass those who were immigrants or refugees that lived through the war—mostly those who arrived before 2000. US-born children of the Vietnamese diaspora are considered the second generation—those who were born and raised in the United States, naturalized by birth, and acculturated through a multicultural upbringing integrating American society and Vietnamese heritage. This new generation of Vietnamese come with a long, complicated history that shape their lives and identity formation, whether or not they are consciously aware of its effects. Alongside the second generation, there is also the 1.5 generation. The 1.5 generation, as defined by Sucheng Chan, are "immigrants who come at a young age who retain their ability to speak, or not always, read and write, the ancestral language as well as Asian values and norms" (xiv). As with any other social categorizations, neither definition of 1.5 or second generation fully encompass the complexities of their experiences nor are they monolithic groups. Many experiences between the 1.5 and second generation are shared or remarkably similar, especially when taking into consideration the ages of those in the 1.5 generation when arriving in the United States. Their experiences become more closely related the younger the children are when they immigrate. They will sometimes be referred together as "postwar
generations”. These identifying terms are used generally and should not be considered to represent every individual experience.

b. Trauma

From a psychological perspective, Rousseau et al. defines trauma as “a set of extraordinarily, stressful events, directly associated with the context of war or armed conflict” as well as the lasting effects of experiencing feelings of intense fear for their safety, livelihood, and lives (43). The Vietnamese also experience a kind of transnational trauma due to migration and resettlement that engages with systems of power tied to capitalism, globalization, and western imperialism (Cvetkovich). This includes but is not limited to experiences with racism, difficulty finding employment or a transition from a profession in Vietnam to a service job in the U.S. (i.e. an accountant who becomes a nail salon technician), homemaking, culture shock and conflict, and language barriers. The impact of trauma on one’s psyche and body can affect behavior patterns, risk of mental illnesses, and ideologies and beliefs that will continue to affect the generations to come (Lev-Wiesel 76). This is what intergenerational trauma entails and will be further elaborated upon in Chapter 2.

III. Limitations

The studies I found focused mainly on an undefined “nuclear family” which prioritizes family structures with a father, mother, and children. Other forms of kinship or family structures such as extended family, chosen family, queer families, or social groups and communities are not fully addressed nor addressed at all in their studies. This paper
will also be unable to address these networks as it only reflects what was found in my research, collection of oral histories, and my own personal history. Specificity in some experiences for those who reside at different axes of oppression and marginalization such as, but not limited to, gender, sexuality, or disability may not be fully explored, but is not intentionally ignored or excluded.

Due to time constraints, research materials (oral histories collected), and my geographical location, the VA communities discussed are only in California, ranging from San Diego to Orange County to the Bay Area, so many other experiences of diasporic Vietnamese communities across the US and in US territories may not be addressed. My research lays out a general VA experience that is not meant to paint our communities as monolithic nor is it meant to encapsulate every single experience but instead hopes to provide some insight about our shared history to better understand a legacy of trauma that affects our lives today and the trajectory of our futures. Even that "shared history" may not be the same for everybody. Any generalizations made in this paper will reflect these limitations of who it addresses and discusses. There is much more to be researched from these limitations such as, for example, the experiences of refugees and immigrants who do not have that nuclear family dynamic and those who are LGBTQ that I hope to continue for future work.

IV. Outline

The first chapter provides a brief history of Vietnam starting from French colonialism leading up to the Vietnam War in order to provide context for how western
imposition in Vietnam affects VA communities today. The second chapter provides a deeper analysis into research around intergenerational trauma and unpacks how trauma affects people on both individual, familial, and community levels. To do so, I have delved into studies that focused on communities that carry histories heavy with such violences like genocide, colonialism, imperialism, slavery, and war. This includes research about Jewish, African American, and Indigenous or Native communities. The third chapter presents a small collection of oral histories from 1.5 and second generations and a brief discussion about Thi Bui’s graphic novel memoir, *The Best We Could Do*. The experiences shared in these oral histories will be used to show some narratives of shared experiences by diasporic VAs and Vietnamese history pertaining to postmemory work, silences, and intergenerational trauma.

These oral histories were gathered from three young diasporic Vietnamese Americans who shared their family histories, their understandings of Vietnamese history, and their experiences with intergenerational trauma in relation to the trauma experienced by the first generation. I asked my three participants questions such as: How much do you know of your family history and how did you learn it? What does intergenerational trauma look like to you? How has this trauma shaped your life? How has your history shaped your life’s trajectory in terms of your social, political, or religious beliefs? Aspirations? How has it impacted the way you navigate or form your other identities? These interviews were collected at the participants’ best availability, all of which coincidentally happened be their workplaces.
I asked each of them to introduce themselves because I wanted to make sure that what I share about them will be in their own voice. Their introductions and their stories are shared in the third chapter, but I will share a little bit about them and my relationship with each of them here. My first participant is Uyen Hoang, a twenty-six year old second generation Vietnamese American. I interviewed her in her office at UC Irvine where she works as a lecturer. I first met Uyen at a short weekend retreat organized by and for Vietnamese Americans in August 2016 and we have kept in contact ever since. She received her Master of Arts in Asian American Studies from UCLA in 2018 and shortly after became a lecturer for Asian American Studies at UC Irvine. My second participant is Allison Vo, a twenty-three year old 1.5 generation ‘Viet’ (self-identified) American and a friend that I have known since our time at Garden Grove High School. We recently reconnected for this project where I interviewed her in her workplace office for VietRISE, a grassroots community organization “founded in February 2018 with the goal of strengthening and supporting civic engagement and organizing efforts within the Vietnamese community in Orange County to advance the growing movement for racial, economic, gender, environmental, and social justice” (vietrise.org). Both Uyen and Allison have returned to and currently reside in Orange County, CA after completing their schooling. My last participant is Ngoc Cam Bui, a thirty year old 1.5 generation Vietnamese American. We first met in 2015 when I interned with a local Bay Area grassroots LGBTQ Asian Pacific Islander community organization, API Equality – Northern California (APIENC). At the time, she was an active volunteer with APIENC.
where we quickly connected and have stayed in contact through the years. At the time of her interview, she was still working on her MA in Social Psychology at San Francisco State University and was in Mexico for a research job, so our interview was conducted over the phone. She has since completed her degree and returned to the Bay Area.
Chapter 1: Vietnamese History to Vietnamese Today

Vietnam holds particular notoriety in United States history, not just as a country but as a land that hosted an imperial war that resulted in losses, devastation, and the (re)start of a nation that had finally been released from the strong grip of foreign powers. To Americans, this war was dubbed the “Vietnam War”, to many Vietnamese who had sided with the eventual victors, it was known as the “American War”, and to some, it may even be referred to as the “Second Indochina War”. Whatever name the war holds, Viet Thanh Nguyen argues that each one “obscures human losses, financial costs, and capital gains,” and for anybody who has lived through a war, it needs no name – a war is a war (7). During the 1960s, the war garnered mass media and public attention within the United States, sparking outrage and protests over American imperial intervention in Vietnam and the drafting of young men to place their lives on the line in a country they should never have even been in (Herring 410).

The Vietnam War remains one of the most researched and written about wars even to this day. However, much of the literature that can be easily accessed in the United States oft portrays a story much different from the perspectives of the Vietnamese who survived through the war, possibly even differing from the perspective of other nations who may not have been involved but watched as it unfolded on their television screens and newspapers. Many US American stories and articles written about the war focused on US narratives as they sought out the tales of US American soldiers’ heroics, sacrifices, deaths, and post-traumatic stress. Documentation of this war focused on the US veterans,
both the soldiers who died and the soldiers who survived long enough to make it back home. Memorialization of the “Vietnam War” depicts the tragedy of US losses, the heroes who fought for freedom – the sons, the brothers, the fathers. Ironically, Vietnamese people were marginalized in the narratives of a war that US Americans named after their country, a country whose land and society were left razed by that very war. A quick Google search for “Vietnam War books”, as seen in the image below, will showcase a variety of books about the war; however, the most readily available searches are books written by and from the perspective of (non-Vietnamese) US American authors. Even for this project, it was difficult to find easily accessible sources within the US for Vietnamese history written by Vietnamese. This is most likely a common situation for different knowledges and topics within the US, but despite the vast amount of literature available by a diverse set of authors, researchers, and historians, the construction of the war’s narrative remains centered on a US perspective.
Another example is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. The Wall was erected in 1982 with over fifty-eight thousand inscribed names of Vietnam War soldiers who lost their lives during their service. Since its opening, visitors have left objects in tribute to the fallen soldiers which were then collected and catalogued every year by the National Park Service and stored in a national archive (Norkunas). According to the Missing Piece Project started by Dr. Kim Tran, over four hundred thousand objects have been collected from the memorial since its opening, yet, with the help of the archive staff, the Project found that only six objects were left by members of the Vietnamese refugee community. The Vietnam War Memorial is the most notable commemoration of “Vietnam” in the United States, yet only emphasizes the losses on the US side. Under the
guise of patriotism and national mourning, the Vietnamese are yet again sidelined despite the vast number of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants who now call the US their home and despite the significant number of Vietnamese deaths on the defeated side of a war that the United States supported financially and militarily. By doing so, Vietnamese Americans (VA) are pigeonholed into a perception of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners and even if they were citizens, they are “located outside the cultural and racial boundaries of the nation” in contention with a US nationalist reframing of the war (Lowe 6).

The United States propagated the idea and image of itself as intervening in Vietnam for the sake of freedom and the halt of communism before it could spread any further. As a nation known to hold incredible military and global power and as leaders of the “free world,” being on the defeated side of a war combatting communism dealt a humiliating blow to the United States. Yen Le Espiritu argues that the national narrative of the war is one that paints the war as a tragic loss for the United States of America, a narrative that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial contributes to, and emphasizes the role of soldiers as heroes and saviors when they evacuated the Vietnamese who were desperate to find refuge elsewhere (Espiritu 111). This attempt to ameliorate guilt and humiliation would continue by allowing Vietnamese refugees entry into the United States during their mass exodus from Vietnam.

For many within the second generation, the most they may know of Vietnamese history starts with the war and the perspectives of loss, trauma, and staunch anti-
communism that was passed down from their families and community (Vo 10), or maybe they know the US dominant version of a valiantly fought war for “freedom” that was ultimately in vain. In war, there really is no good or bad side, no way to make innocent the casualties of conflicts waged by competing global powers aggressively pushing for transnational political and economic control. The Vietnam War is no exception, becoming another casualty of the US’s string of wars in the Pacific, Asia, and the Middle East. Viet Thanh Nguyen argues this was the “real American War” - a century long series of devastating conflicts and skirmishes to further US dominion over the “broadly defined” Orient (7). For the VA diaspora and 1.5 and second generation VAs, the Vietnam War created a political and social quandary that left many within this community in a precarious situation regarding their place in American society. The postwar (1.5 and second) generations of VAs hold a unique, multi-historical identity that, due to the tumultuous history between the nations, encompasses two seemingly conflicting identities: Vietnamese and American. For those who are mixed race, LGBTQ, disabled, and so forth, it only gets more complicated as these facets of their identity are systemically disenfranchised and oppressed socially and institutionally.

Western imperial domination of and intervention in Vietnam can be considered the most well-known and contemporary catalyst for the Vietnamese communist party’s rise to power and the subsequent war that divided the nation’s people. How does the first generation transmit trauma across generations? How do the postwar generations “remember” and hold traumas passed along through their ancestors, and how do they
move forward? What does it mean to be Vietnamese American if one of the reasons they are "American" is because the land of their ancestry was left devastated by US political and military intervention and a history of western colonialism? How do the postwar generations form an identity for themselves in a society that once considered their people the enemy?

I. A Little History

"No theme is more consistent in Vietnamese history than the theme of resistance to foreign aggression." (Taylor xviii)

In order to better understand the complex relationship between the United States and Vietnam and to help formulate answers for the aforementioned questions, looking into Vietnam's history with foreign powers is necessary to provide contextual evidence connecting western imperial violence to contemporary VA communities. This next section provides a brief history of colonial violence in Vietnam to help to contextualize how this history has and continues to affect postwar generation VAs. This history reflects many conflicts of ideologies and practices which I argue are mirrored in Vietnamese American diasporic communities today, as well, but can be seen more so between generations as the postwar generations struggle to form an identity for themselves apart from this past. Starting from the mid- to late nineteenth century until 1975, Vietnam was an involuntary host for French, Japanese, and US occupation and two notable wars fought in resistance to their domination.
Prior to France’s uninvited arrival, China dominated Vietnam for about a thousand years. Chinese domination is not the focus of this paper, but it is important to note that much of Chinese and Confucian ideals and practices shaped Vietnam’s social and political structure that would then be disrupted by French political imposition (Bradley 94). Being dominated for ten decades built up an extreme disdain against foreign political powers and bred a strong sense of resistance against them (Tucker, Taylor xviii). Scholars date the origins of the Vietnamese state as early as 2500 B.C.E. in the Red River Delta in what is currently the northern region of Vietnam. Vietnam was a protectorate of China from 111 B.C.E until 939 B.C.E when Vietnam successfully overthrew and ousted Chinese powers. For centuries after, Vietnam was ruled by a series of different dynasties that would last until the late 19th century, after which dynasties would cease to exist as the French gained more control and power over Vietnam.

France’s first arrival to Vietnam came in the form of Catholic missionaries in 1626. They successfully converted thousands of Vietnamese to Catholicism in a nation that was predominately Confucian and Buddhist (Chan 9). This would later result in lasting tensions with Catholicism that would cause a great rift amongst the Vietnamese people. French missionaries also created a Romanized script for Vietnamese which remains in use to this day, forcefully discarding the former Chinese script that the Vietnamese had once used and then adapted for themselves. France started their campaign to colonize and create an empire in Southeast Asia in 1861 after successfully
capturing Saigon and three other provinces (Chan 13). The Vietnamese people were not so easily taken, however, and thus began Vietnamese resistance to western imperialism.

During their occupation, the French imposed strict regulations and levied heavy taxes on the Vietnamese population. Under French control, Vietnam became the third largest exporter of rice, but French authorities would not allow exporting rice within the different provinces of Vietnam which caused food shortages in those areas. Starving, laboring for France’s capital benefit, and forfeiting a large portion of their income to France’s head taxes – we can see this as one of the foundations for resentment and frustration amongst the Vietnamese people towards their colonizers. French colonists also seized and became owners of an increasing amount of land, so landownership became much more concentrated in the hands of the colonizers and a few Vietnamese landlords.

Amongst the changes, a new class of educated Vietnamese emerged who took jobs as teachers, clerks, and more for the French (Chan 15). Since their livelihood depended on French occupation, they “became collaborators of the French” (Chan 16). This emerging dichotomy between those who benefitted from colonization and those whose labor was exploited contributed to high tensions that would reach a boiling point decades later. Class stratification was nothing new in Vietnam as Confucian ideals had its own kind of social and class hierarchy that the Vietnamese adopted, but under French rule, class and wealth disparities became much more distinguished as western methods of capitalism was introduced to the nation. Through this capitalist system, the colonizers and those who collaborated with them became increasingly wealthy while the laborers were exploited
and their produced goods and labor appropriated. Strong feelings of nationalism spread amongst the people as a result and consequently, class conflict became more prominent and laid the foundation upon which the Vietnamese Communist Party would rise to power.

Several different socialist and communist parties arose in response to the deepening trench amongst different classes, French occupation, and their brief stint with Japanese occupation during World War II. They eventually merged and changed their official party names multiple times throughout the years, but today are most commonly known as “Viet Cong”. The most prominent figure of the Viet Cong was Ho Chi Minh (HCM), a communist leader who is still generally revered by mainland Vietnamese as their savior (Bradley 116) but considered corrupt and treacherous by the Vietnamese diaspora. HCM and the Viet Cong led Vietnamese forces in the first Indochina War, or French War, and eventually defeated France in the decisive battle at Dien Bien Phu, successfully ousting French occupation and seemingly gaining their independence (Bradley 117). That was not the case, however, as the United States stepped fully into the frame.

US imperialism and military might replaced French colonialism and would become one of the most devastating perpetrators of the instability within Vietnam’s political and physical infrastructure. Since this war has already been extensively researched, examined, analyzed, and written about, I will only mention some key points that are most relevant to the post-war generations. Between the years of 1964 to 1972, the
U.S. engaged in an almost non-stop bombing campaign across Southeast Asia. By the end of the bombing raids, the U.S. had dropped over a million tons of bombs in North Vietnam, 4 million tons in South Vietnam, and a combined estimated total of 2 million in Laos and Cambodia (Chan 50). Roads, bridges, military targets, railroads, power plants, and several other important structures in the nation were left destroyed. By the end of April 1975, Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, fell and the Viet Cong officially declared Vietnam's victory and independence.

After the war, due to the bombing raids and battles that took place on the ground, around 12 million South Vietnamese were displaced from their homes (Chan 55). Having lost their homes and country, multitudes of South Vietnamese began to flee the newly Communist nation, sparking an international refugee crisis. Seizing this opportunity as an attempt to save face and to maintain some image of heroism, the US military evacuated hundreds upon thousands of South Vietnamese and took them back to the United States where they would resettle (Espiritu 25). Those who could not be evacuated by the American military would find any other means to flee the country. Many attempted to cross borders into neighboring countries, but those who attempted to flee via boat (the "boat people") to cross the South China Sea were subject to "drowning, starvation, thirst, illness, storms, shipwrecks, and violent pirate attacks" if they were not rescued or if they could not successfully find land (Q. Tran 80).

Taking whatever means they could to flee Vietnam, many Vietnamese refugees and immigrants resettled in the United States and raised a new generation of VAs. The
history presented here traced a timeline of direct western imperial violence and other forms of violence and trauma caused by those powers. Although a generation removed from direct traumatization by the war, the postwar generations have acquired and retain some form of "postmemory" and intergenerational trauma passed on from the generation before (for some 1.5, they may have been directly affected). This history has shaped their lives and the way they navigate and experience the world. Marianne Hirsch describes "postmemory" as the "relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they 'remember' only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right" (16). Studies of other populations such as Black American communities, Jewish communities, and First Nations or Indigenous communities have indicated that the "effects of trauma can be transmitted from parents to their offspring" (Bombay et al. 7). These traumas can take many forms and manifest itself in the body and mind differently. Trauma and intergenerational trauma will briefly be discussed in this section, but will be further expanded upon in the next chapter. I would also argue that, in the case of the Vietnamese diaspora, those effects can be transmitted on a communal level to the next generations, as well.

II. A Little (Saigon) Debacle and Intergenerational Trauma

For example, as the documentary, Saigon U.S.A. (2004) illustrates, in 1999, a Vietnamese immigrant video storeowner displayed Vietnam's communist flag and a poster with Ho Chi Minh's face on the window of his shop. The response from the first
generation Vietnamese American community was immediate and demonstrated the conflict between ideologies and practices within different generations in the community. The immigrant first generation was outraged and around four hundred or so VAs passionately protested outside of his store. Several of the protesters got violent, going so far as attacking and threatening further attacks on Truong Van Tran, the man who put up the controversial items, for as long as he attempted to display the flag and poster. This display of anti-communist rage by the first generation had a profound effect on the postwar generations whether it was in favor of their feelings or in contradiction. Some of the first generation tried to galvanize the newer generations into becoming more involved with the community and passed along their anti-communist sentiments. In doing so, they unwittingly passed along their pain and grief – what I argue is the trauma they are transmitting. Others within the newer generations retaliated against the protests and defended Tran’s right to display the flag and poster (Vuong). The documentary showed younger VAs counterprotesting the first generation’s protests and conveyed a message imploring their community to heal from their past.

Sadly, the postwar generations’ counterprotests were also met with animosity and the presumption that the only way to maintain a cohesive Vietnamese American community was to share the sentiments of the first generation (Valverde 115). This would mean that the postwar generations would have to hold those sentiments of grief, sorrow, pain, and unwavering anti-communist ideologies despite having never directly been in contact with what the first generation experienced. In another example, in late 2007, San
Jose Councilwoman Madison Nguyen, the first VA woman elected to office in California, faced uproarious backlash from the San Jose VA community over the naming of a small Vietnamese retail area (Molina). Nguyen, along with other council members, voted to name the district “Saigon Business District” over “Little Saigon”, claiming that the former choice was more popular amongst a “silent majority of district residents”. When she was first elected to council in 2005, she was considered the “golden child” of the San Jose Vietnamese American community, but this one decision immediately turned the favor against her.

Although they cannot be said to represent the entire community, a substantial amount of community members were outraged and vehemently pushed for the district to be named “Little Saigon” to pay homage to the home they lost. Nguyen’s decision sparked angry protests and demands for Nguyen’s resignation (Molina). Their actions show a fervent maintenance of a painful past that they cannot move beyond, similar to the actions of the Vietnamese American community previously mentioned. The vocal members of this community viewed Nguyen’s actions as an affront to “Vietnamese tradition, culture and ethics” – as argued on one protester’s sign. Another claimed she “has some issue with the Vietnamese political identity” and that she had sidestepped the “democratic process and inexplicably gone against her own community” (Molina). If one was viewing this from outside of the community, such harsh criticism over a name (that still paid tribute to the fallen “Saigon”) would seem completely unnecessary or excessive. However, for the first generation VA community holding onto a trauma that was inflicted
decades ago, her decision were deemed unacceptable. Some even angrily proclaimed that she must be a Communist or have some kind of Communist ties, which is not true and could be hurtful to Nguyen considering she fled Communist Vietnam at the age of four with her family. This one act of dissent was enough to alienate her from the vocal – but not confirmed to be majority – members of the VA community.

These expectations from the surviving generation is postmemory in action and what I believe is a form of transmitting trauma and affect between generations. This situation reflects what was previously mentioned as this was one way for postwar generation Vietnamese Americans to learn a biased but impassioned version of their history and identity. This mobilization of affect to instill certain biases and ways of thinking can be especially effective on impressionable VA youth who do not have or cannot find access to their broader history (Williams 132). This goes back to the question around narrative: whose stories gets told? If the next easily attainable information comes from non-VA writers, scholars, media, and politicians, the narrative can easily be controlled. Those who hold the “power to name and to socially construct reality” can manipulate the narrative as they please as demonstrated by the way the American narrative has dominated discussion around the war (Rich n.p.). This brings up the concern about how this affects postwar generations’ psyche, social adaptation, and identity formation and performance in a nation that once regarded those who looked like them as the enemy.
Relationships with family and kinship networks also play a substantial role in postwar generations’ lives and directly affect their socialization into American society as well as mental and emotional well-being. There has not been extensive research done on the postwar generations’ response to postmemory or intergenerational trauma, but there have been a plethora of studies evaluating the mental and physical health of the first generation of immigrants (Vo 9). Trauma plays a vital role in the way one moves about their life and shapes how they navigate the world, their experiences, their perceptions of themselves and others, and their mental health. From a psychology perspective, Rousseau et al.’s defines trauma as “a set of extraordinarily, stressful events, directly associated with the context of war or armed conflict” as well as the lasting effects of experiencing feelings of intense fear for their safety, livelihood, and lives (43). The Vietnamese also experience a kind of transnational trauma due to migration and resettlement that engages with systems of power tied to capitalism, globalization, and western imperialism (Cvetkovich n.p.).

Understanding the traumas (both from their own experiences as well as what may have been transmitted from the generations before them) endured by the first generation and what routes they took to establish themselves in American society is key to understanding how those traumas permeate the lives of the generations that came after. Since there has been research done on the well-being of the immigrant generation, it is easier to examine the violences and distress inflicted upon the first generation as a result of war, political instability, diaspora, resettlement, and acculturation in a foreign land.
According to Bombay et al., "non-traumatic" stressors, "such as financial or work stressors, may be associated with negative consequences as great as those provoked by traumatic events" (8). When resettling in the United States as new immigrants with little to no English proficiency, no community or sense of belonging, and a host of extreme emotional distress and turmoil under their belt, these stressors can be a significant burden on the immigrants’ mental health, ability to socially (and economically) readjust, and the structure of their family (Muhtz 3, Timshel et al. 316, Cvetkovich n.p.). Even upon building or finding community, the first generation faced heavy obstacles in the form of xenophobia and racism (P.T. Nguyen 98).

In order to combat xenophobia and racist stereotypes, the first generation had to play into the image of a “good refugee” community thankful for the American capitalist empire for bestowing upon them the “gift of freedom” (M.T. Nguyen 3). One of the largest Vietnamese American communities resides in Orange County located in Southern California. The formative years of this bustling immigrant community known as Little Saigon had a rough start due to the racism and xenophobia of the non-Vietnamese residents at the time. The early Vietnamese immigrants in this area who arrived shortly after the war were stereotyped as a community rife with crime, welfare abuse, and faced discrimination that would make them feel as though they needed to justify their being in

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1 Although abundant enough, these studies are limited in their research population, many of which relied heavily on an undefined “family” — presumably, the researchers based their studies on a nuclear family structure involving two parents (usually cisgender, heterosexual couples) and their children. This family structure can possibly be traced back to Vietnam’s history with Confucian and Catholicism’s imposed social structures. There are a sizable number of gaps left that could be further researched.
the US as well as the losses of so many American lives in what was once their homeland (P.T Nguyen 98) – which is ironic, considering the circumstances for Vietnamese presence in the United States in the first place. In order to do so, the Vietnamese played into the capitalist “American Dream” and reimagined themselves in the image of a “model minority”. The term “model minority” was first introduced in 1966 by American sociologist William Petersen and posited that Asian Americans were “hard-working overachievers” and could successfully thrive in American society (Petersen n.p., Kiang et al. 1366). With the support of guilt-ridden “moderate” conservatives and a reimagined social front, Little Saigon came to fruition and the community thrived (P.T. Nguyen 106, 107).

The image of a “model minority” that the burgeoning Vietnamese immigrant community adopted persisted into the next generations. As a second generation Vietnamese American, the pressure I felt from family and Vietnamese community members to succeed was palpable. The model minority myth helped create a notorious stereotype about how Asian Americans excel in academia, especially within STEM or healthcare fields. This, being a myth, is not true for everybody, but the push from immigrant generations for their progeny to succeed in their education is something that is very commonly felt within Asian American communities because many view this as a “channel of social mobility” (Min and Jang 844). There is a larger percentage of Asian Americans within the fields of STEM and healthcare than white Americans. The Vietnamese, in comparison to white Americans and other Asian ethnic groups, have a
high level of concentration in these fields at 65% (mostly men) (Min and Jang 845, 846). My family also pushed me to be in STEM or healthcare because they believed it would be the best route for me to have a stable income. I was always terrible at math but relenting to their wishes and the fear of failure set up by their high expectations and the model minority myth, I ended up in a STEM field for one semester of college. It was one of the most miserable points in my life and a major detriment to my mental health.

To me, the high expectations to succeed by my family, community, and a society who viewed me as a model minority was mentally and emotionally violent. What little I knew of my family history was about the deep sacrifices they made, which was enough for me to feel like I needed to realize their dreams of “making it” in the United States, a feeling that is shared amongst many children of refugees and immigrants (Espiritu 156).

The responsibility to be a “good refugee” falls upon the next generations’ shoulders. I believe one of the reasons why so many Vietnamese American immigrants push for their children to excel in school and their careers comes from a deeply rooted sense of survival. That generation may not see what traumatizing effects it could have on their children, but I believe their history within an unstable and constantly war-torn country has instilled in them survival skills that unfortunately do not translate in the United States or to generations not directly affected by military conflict. Growing up, my family never talked about their history in Vietnam or their migration nor did I receive education about our histories that did not come from an American perspective. Without that context, I was not able to understand why my family so aggressively pushed for me to excel in school so
it instead manifested into emotional trauma. It would not be until I got older and learned more of my critical history for me to finally understand that my family (and community) was not just pushing for the next generation to succeed but was teaching us how to survive in a racist, capitalist society.

My family’s silence regarding our history is nothing unique within our community, but what they do not realize is how it affects us as the postwar generation. Studies have shown that “silencing and denial of the traumatic events often dominate in refugee families” and affects the “well-being of children in the family” (Timshel et al. 316). In cases of these reticent immigrants, the postwar generations are left with the task of piecing together a “postmemory” through the “fractured images, stories, behaviors, and affects transmitted, sometimes indirectly and wordlessly, within the family and culture at large” (Espiritu 140). In other words, unknowingly on the first generation’s account, their silence is a form of transmitting affect and trauma to the next generations. Without a solid foundation to understand who we are as Vietnamese Americans, we face internal conflicts about our place in American society with our discombobulated history and the larger systems of domination (that pushed our families to the U.S in the first place) and continue to affect our lives as an “everyday trauma” (qtd. in Cvetkovich n.p.).

Unfortunately, with such a long history with conflict and the accompanying hesitancy or outright refusal to address it, the cycle of violence and trauma can sometimes manifest itself in interpersonal (mostly domestic) relationships through various forms of abuse that can be, but is not limited to, physical, mental, and emotional.
By exploring this avenue, we can examine and analyze how macro-level violence can become internalized and reinscribed into micro-level violence amongst individuals. Macro-level violence is “coordinated in large organizations such as states, armies, and social movements” (Collins 17). Due to western imperialism and colonialism, Vietnam was in a state of military conflict and political turmoil for a little over a century. Many Vietnamese immigrants today may have never truly known a sense of national peace in their lifetime prior to 1975, and for those who resettled in the United States, they unwittingly transferred themselves into a “trauma culture” with the everyday violences of capitalism, racism, poverty, and other forms of oppressions (Cvetkovich n.p.). For those who fall into abusive habits, when acting out their violence upon the postwar generations, they are, in a sense, taking out their unaddressed issues and transmitting their trauma by traumatizing their children. Silence, in some cases, can also be considered abuse in the form of emotional neglect.

Studies have found that “the individual’s experience of trauma before and during flight is a significant predictor for the development of family related violence” (Timshel et al. 320), but that does not mean that violence is inherent in refugee families nor does it mean that every traumatized refugee family operates through abusive dynamics. These studies are useful in understanding the roots of trauma and connecting them to macro-level violence. Espiritu pulled an excerpt from le thi diem thuy’s novel, The Gangster We Are All Looking For, that illuminates this connection.
Before I had run away for good, my father once came to pick me up at a shelter. As we sat in a conference with two counselors, he was asked if there was anything he wanted to say. He shook his head. When pressed, he looked down at his hands. He apologized for what his hands had done. The counselors understood this to mean he was taking responsibility for his drunken rages. They nodded in approval. But then he drew his palms together and apologized for all that his had not been able to do. He spread his hands wide open, and said, in Vietnamese, to anyone who could understand, there were things he had lost grasp of.

Espiritu’s analysis of this excerpt talked about how le denaturalized domestic violence and connected his behaviors as a symptom of larger societal issues that affect him as a Vietnamese immigrant man at specific intersections of race, gender, and class (Espiritu 168).

In this excerpt, le denaturalizes domestic violence among poor refugee families by showing how it is intimately linked to the violence of war, of urban neglect, and of poverty. In so doing, she disrupts the widespread construction of patriarchy as particular to Asian culture, which freezes Asian immigrant men as always-ready “subjects who perpetrate violence,” and foregrounds the need to theorize and situate all forms of male violence. Stressing the intersection of race, gender, and class, she makes clear how gender differentiation and oppression is not a universal experience.

When relocating to a country built upon the foundation of white supremacy, genocide, and slavery, this father and his family became more victims of this violent legacy of colonialism that had already affected them in their home country. Trauma from macro-levels of violence translated into micro-levels of violence from this father to his family out of what seems to be fear, guilt, and shame caused by larger systems that they could not fully understand at the time. This does not, however, absolve individuals from the consequences of their actions.
Navigating American society as the descendants of Vietnamese immigrant and refugee families is a complex task that postwar generation Vietnamese Americans experience every day whether they are conscious of it or not. Our history and relationship with the first generation can be complicated and sometimes even contentious, but many within the postwar generations are moving forward while negotiating the traumas, experiences, and desires of their predecessors with their own postmemories, aspirations, ideologies, and personal histories. In the next chapter, I look deeper into how trauma is defined, experienced, manifested, and transmitted across generations through a review of studies previously done on different communities that experience something very similar to that of the Vietnamese. I will also further explore Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” and what role it plays in our understanding of how trauma continues to affect subsequent generations long after the cause has passed.
Chapter 2: Postmemory and Trauma

With that brief history of Vietnam and examples of how it has affected the Vietnamese American (VA) diaspora in mind, I look now into the research around transmissions of trauma across generations and Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory”. In the next part, I delve a little deeper into what Hirsch has coined “postmemory” and how it plays out for the VA postwar generations as they navigate life free from the dangers of a devastating war they never had to experience yet somehow are still chained to its consequences. After of which, I talk more about trauma, explore how trauma affects the first generation, and then lead into the next chapter with a brief analysis of how that trauma affects, manifests itself, or is “transmitted” to the second generation, and also how it could build forms of resilience and different ways of healing.

I. Postmemory

Marianne Hirsch, professor in the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at Columbia University, was born in Romania after World War II and immigrated to the United States with her family when she was a teenager. She would be considered a 1.5 generation American by my definition; however, as she identifies herself as part of the second generation, I will refer to her as such if needed (Hirsch, “Surviving Images” 8). Hirsch, after reading works by many other second generation writers and visual artists, realized she needed a term to help describe the “quality of [her] own relationship to [her] parents’ daily stories of danger and surviving” World War II (Hirsh, Introduction 4). According to her website on postmemory.net, Hirsch treats the term like a work in
progress as she expands her pool of knowledge and continues to engage with the work of other writers and artists who are part of these “postgenerations” (those born after the traumatic event).

In her most recent published work on postmemory, she defines it as the “relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to the experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up”. Transfers of affect through empathy and shared experiences between the first and postgenerations deeply affect the latter. With these, in a sense, transferred memories, the postgenerations internalize them so much so that they feel almost as if they were their own. This almost manifests itself as a sense of indebtedness by the postwar generations to the first generation – feeling as though one owes their life to them simply for what they endured to raise this new generation safely. Hirsch also claims that by having such strong narratives overshadowing the lives of the postgenerations before they even develop formative memories of their own, their lives run the risk of becoming displaced and defined by fragments of inexplicable trauma that go beyond their scope of comprehension (Hirsch, Introduction 5).

For an oral history I collected during my research, I met with Allison Vo who shared her experiences growing up and what she knew of her family history with me. When asked how much she knew of her history, she talked about how much it is working on “figuring out what [her] history or histories are” and that she may have to contend
with the fact that her history may be one of “not knowing”. However, despite “not
knowing” her histories, she stated that “not knowing” is “something in and of itself”. She
spent her youth not wanting to ask her parents about their history because she feared
“tapping into their trauma” caused her a lot of anger and confusion about what was going
on with their new lives in the United States. The fear of causing her parents pain led to
her holding that hurt herself through a disorienting lack of knowledge regarding her
family history. Even so, she knew then that she could not hold resentment towards them
as she recognized their silence as a way of protecting themselves, somewhat reflecting
that aforementioned feeling of indebtedness because of what the first generation
sacrificed or endured to get the new generation where they are. Growing up without a
history to understand her upbringing, Vo was left to sew together what she knew in order
to build a past that has long passed.

Without a strong foundation to understand her family’s experiences or even
feelings regarding the war, loss of home, and past memories, Vo was left with a void that
she could – at the time – only speculate to fill. When I asked her about what
intergenerational trauma looked like to her, she told me of how she believes her mother
holds a sense of guilt over leaving her family behind in Vietnam when she fled. Because
her mother did not talk to her about her past, this speculation was Vo’s own postmemory
work piecing together a history of where she came from. Vo believes this guilt has been
passed on to her, a “weird guilt” that she thinks she will never be able to “fully articulate
because it’s something that [she] doesn’t really know but can feel”, some kind of
intergenerational transmission of affect through postmemory and silence. Her full story is shared in the next chapter.

Uyen Hoang also shared her own form of postmemory work piecing together her family history and understanding of the Vietnamese diasporic experiences. She told me of how she learned some of her history from her mother, not through a long conversation, but through random moments (mostly when they were washing dishes) that her mother would suddenly bring up stories from her homeland to fill the silence. Her father, on the other hand, was not as keen on sharing his history, so Hoang learned bits and pieces about both her maternal and paternal sides of the family from these spur of the moment storytellings. Hoang stated that she has never been to Vietnam, but from the stories her mother shared, she felt “in some sense that [she] know[s] it” and believes that is the “power of nostalgia.” However, Hoang was aware that the Vietnam “[her mother] knows is not the Vietnam that is there”, but even so, she still felt as though she had a “weird connection” to Vietnam.

"Those are folks that I feel like at one level I get it, but on another level, probably wouldn’t and I think that’s all a manufacturing of these feelings...”

What Hoang talks about as a manufacturing of feelings, I believe is a form of postmemory for her. Despite having never been to Vietnam, the stories of her parents’ past lives made her feel connected to the land and people in a way that did not fully make sense to her. Vo and Hoang’s experiences are nothing new to the next generations of the Vietnamese diaspora. Stories like theirs will be further explored in the next chapter.
II. Trauma and the First Generation

Trauma is a crucial component of “postmemory” and maintains a formative hold over human lives, communities, and our society in general. According to the American Psychiatric Association’s (APA) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM V), trauma is defined as something caused by “actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence”. Such a narrow definition does not encompass the entire spectrum of violences that can cause lasting damage to the human psyche and body. Stressors that are attributed to instances of consistent microaggressions and other forms of daily violences caused by racism, sexism, capitalism, and other forms of oppression can actually be traumatic experiences, as well. Rather than applying this insufficient definition alone, I also refer to Rousseau et al.’s understanding of trauma as “a set of extraordinarily, stressful events, directly associated with the context of war or armed conflict” (43) as an addition and include the lasting effects of experiencing feelings of intense or consistent fear for one’s (and loved ones’) safety, livelihood, and lives.

For the purpose of this text, I define “intergenerational” as the top-down relationship and transmission of affects between the first generation Vietnamese Americans (the parents) and the postwar generation Vietnamese Americans (the “children”). Although there is a heavy focus on trauma due to wartime conflicts, I also examine the violences and distress inflicted upon the first generation as a result of resettlement and acculturation in a foreign land and the daily stressors thereafter. Although situations like those mentioned are not considered to be “traumatic”, they are
associated with negative consequences “as great as those provoked by traumatic events (Bombay et al. 8). When resettling in the United States as former refugees and new immigrants with little or no English proficiency, these stressors can be a significant burden on the immigrant’s mental health and ability to readjust. With that in mind, coupled with the trauma inflicted and endured during wartime and diaspora, it can impact the way they treat or raise their children. First understanding how trauma affects the first generation is crucial to understanding how that very trauma can be transmitted to and manifested for the generations after.

Research into the adjustment of refugees of war into western countries showed me that the length of residency in a new country affected the participants mental health (T. V. Tran et al. 91), but research in these areas tended to be spread out and somewhat inconclusive. T. V. Tran et al. found that in one study, “feelings of alienation increased with the length of residence” whereas a different study pointed to higher levels of acculturation leading to “lower levels of psychological distress or depression (86). In another study, during the initial stages of migration into a new country, the first priority of the family or individual is to survive and seek the means to satisfy their basic needs to do so. This “period of overcompensation” is the time in which roles taken on by refugees become “instrumental” in order to seek basic survival needs and can cause friction in the family structure as “affective” roles become sidelined to survival (Szulki 3). The tension caused by this readjustment to a new society can be a cause for problems and confusion for the familiar family structure before migration. Other studies found that in the presence
of those who displayed depressive or PTSD symptoms, their symptoms became increasingly worse through the span of a 3-year period (Silove and Ekblad 401).

After about a decade or so of resettlement, many Southeast Asian refugees in countries such as the United States, Australia, and other western countries showed vast improvements in their mental health and symptoms (Silove and Ekblad, 402, T. V. Tran et al. 90, Silove et al. 468). This, however, does not account for those who had displayed symptoms of PTSD and depression prior to migration away from their homeland. These studies do, however, acknowledge the cultural stigma regarding mental health and illness and thereby may have affected their studies. It is common within Vietnamese communities to remain silent about their mental and emotional well-being due to heavy stigma and disregard for mental health. This was the problem that Vo faced when she chose to avoid any topic related to her family’s past and an issue Hoang also had with her family when it came to talking about mental health. This silence could be considered a form of protection both for the first generation and for postwar generations as the former refrains from re-experiencing painful memories and the latter is kept from knowing the tribulations their family lived through for their generation to be where they are. Unfortunately, as mentioned earlier in Vo’s feelings of passed on guilt, silence can be a way to also transmit unexplainable affect to the next generation as they navigate their community’s history while lacking a foundation for their own.

It was noted in Silove et al.’s research that refugee communities, such as diasporic Vietnamese Americans, tended to avoid utilizing mental health services and rather
somatized their psychological distress (468). This practice transforms into that mentioned type of “silence” that Le Espiritu describes as “a language of family” that can “protect and cherish and/or deny and control”. I connect this to the published research as first generation Vietnamese Americans protect themselves from exposing mental health issues as well as preventing any further probing into their experiences that could resurface painful, unwanted memories. It is possible that just by thinking back upon painful experiences and speaking of them, they could worsen their mental and emotional condition (Snodgrass et al. 570). This type of silence as well as somatization could have a heavy impact on the lives of their offspring in several different ways as showcased by research on epigenetics.

There were some disparities in the data that could be accounted for due to the variable exposure to direct violence or persecution across the Vietnamese population (Silove et al. 468). This research also talked about “protective factors” that could help fight against higher levels of mental illness and found that those who were “married, educated, employed, and healthy” were guarded well enough from higher levels of depression (T. V. Tran et al. 92). However, Vietnamese refugees and their history of collective trauma still opens up a large possibility and vulnerability to “individual and community dysfunction” (Bombay et al. 23), that which can be transmitted to postgenerations.

I researched into the field of epigenetics to better understand the effects of trauma upon the parent’s genetic makeup and how that trauma could be passed along to their
offspring, especially when stress has become somatic. Epigenetic mechanism is defined as “long-term DNA modifications that do not affect the sequence but do modulate gene regulation and expression”. Studies have shown that epigenetic modifications could be responsible for the way genes are shaped by their environment, or in other words, the way certain factors and circumstances (in this case, traumatic events like war) revolving around an individual’s experiences can affect how their physiology reacts and adapts (Ramo-Femandez et al. 703). Parental PTSD and mental illness can become a risk factor for their offspring on an epigenetic level. The exposure levels of trauma paternally and maternally have an effect on future mental health implications for their offspring (Ramo-Femandez et al. 713, Sangalang et al. 179). Epigenetic modifications can occur in a germline cell, the sperm or the egg, which becomes stable in the next generation if fecundation occurs. According to Ramo-Femandez et al., if the parents undergo tremendous amounts of stress or anxiety that alters the genetic makeup of their germline cells, trauma can literally be transmitted to their offspring through their genes, predisposing the second generation to mental health afflictions similar to that of the parents (711, 712). However, this has yet to be definitively proven, but what I found has provided information to give some leeway to these possibilities.

Alongside possible epigenetic transmissions of trauma, it is also believed that parental early adversity can become cause for abuse and maltreatment of their children (Ramo-Femandez et al. 710, Vaage et al. 1), another way in which trauma is transmitted intergenerationally. According to Sangalang et al., parenting and family dynamics are the
“primary psychosocial mechanisms that transmit trauma across generations within families” (179). Abusive behaviors and child maltreatment are a form of intergenerational trauma that can re-cycle itself unless properly addressed and treated. Family related violence in refugee families has been studied and found to be associated with parental trauma that occurred during wartime, flight, living in refugee camps, and subsequent mental health issues such as PTSD or depression (Timshel et al. 320). Causes of trauma during wartime could be situations such as torture, imprisonment, re-education camps, witnessing death of others or loved ones, separation from family, destruction of property and land, sexual violence and so forth. Parents who had been subject to physical discipline during their childhood are more susceptible to experiencing trauma and are at an increased risk of violent behavior towards their offspring (Timshel et al. 326).

According to Pan et al., immigrant and refugee families are at an increased risk for domestic violence due to their exposure to the initial trauma that caused them to leave their homeland, their migration history, and the readjustment to a new land with foreign customs, values, and norms (36).

The heightened risks for domestic violence may also be due to a coping mechanism during a period of “decompensation or crisis”. In this stage of the migration process, roles in the family are split between “instrumental and affective”. The male figure assumes the role of the instrumental, similar to that of the traditional patriarch, where he is in charge of providing for the family and ensuring a secure future whereas the female figure takes on the role of the affective where she maintains what Sluzki refers to
as a “sustained connection with the previous environment” (4), taking on a more traditional caretaking role and mourning what has been lost. Sluzki posits that rigidly maintaining these roles could cause major strife in the relationship as one, usually the affective, becomes isolated, less autonomous, less accustomed to the new environment, and potentially dependent on or disengaged from the instrumental figure. Increased levels of tension under layers of stressors and a history of traumatic violence could result in vulnerability to domestic abuse. Disruptions in the familiar familial structure could affect children’s development and social adjustment (Xu 61).

The traumas that the first generation hold can affect the way they interact or treat the next generation whether it be their own family or other members of the community as touched upon in chapter one with what happened with the counterprotests at the video store. Understanding the ways trauma can affect the first generation in all its multiplicities can help us better understand how it can affect the generations that come thereafter.

III. Intergenerational Trauma and the Postwar Generations

Studies on intergenerational trauma conducted in Black, Indigenous/First Nations, and Jewish communities that have been affected by largescale traumatic events such as slavery, genocide, or the Holocaust have provided considerable evidence indicating that the effects of trauma can be transmitted to the next generations through “socioeconomic disadvantages (e.g., living conditions) and parental styles that might be secondary to traumatic events” (Bombay et al. 6, 7). Researchers concluded that there were
transmissions of trauma that had lasting effects on the subsequent generations after the initial damage was caused (Lev-Wiesel 77, Bombay et al. 28), but the results vary as some studies found there to be no significant difference on how parental mental health and PTSD symptomology affected their children adversely (Muhtz et al. 370). This could be the result of participants being unwilling or reluctant to speak on certain topics.

Many of the authors in these works also spoke of the roles of “resilience” and other protective factors that could help prevent the intergenerational transmission of trauma and thus ending up with these kinds of results. Studies of resilience in some Vietnamese American communities showcase strong community bonds through presumed past or present collective experiences of adversity, migration, and oppression. For example, the Vietnamese American community in New Orleans were the quickest to take action and rebuild their community after the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina. Scholars who researched this community found that strong community bonds and social networks alongside religious leadership and other grassroots organizing played a crucial role in the quickness of their actions. The conclusion was that the Vietnamese had adapted to repetitive traumatic events and that the potential loss of their community was more than enough to rally them into action (Xu 61). Strong community bonds that could translate into strong familial bonds can act as a protective factor and risk mitigator for transmission of trauma.

Although circumstances like this reduce the risk factors and vulnerability to repeated trauma, I wonder if this serves as another form of “silence” that leaves important
issues unaddressed. The assumption that resilient community and social bonds could help members cope may overlook deeply rooted traumas within the individuals and the community as a whole if traumas and potential mental illnesses are left unaddressed. On the other end of community bonds strengthening familial bonds, it could potentially be a risk factor within the family unit if silence is prevalent and issues remain unaddressed. Households with traumatized parents are still potentially detrimental to children's psychological and emotional development (Daud et al. 7).

The studies I found were all seemingly similar. Much of the published scholarship I found of the first generation or the groups directly exposed to traumatic events focused on the mental health aspects of traumatization. Many researchers looked deeply into post-traumatic stress disorder as indicators of psychopathology and predictors of other mental health issues such as depression or anxiety. Each of these studies expressed some type of limitations such as a small sample size or cultural differences. Many of the studies I found did speak extensively on the possible adverse effects of parental psychopathology on the children's social, cognitive, and behavioral development; however, none of that research delved into the outcomes of 1.5 or second generation traumatization or how the second generation navigates such traumatization. With my collection of oral histories and Vietnamese American literature, in the next chapter, I explore the effects of these themes and transmissions on the postwar generations as they navigate their lives as diasporic Vietnamese Americans trying to make sense of how they came to be where they are today and where they see themselves and their communities in the future.
Chapter 3: A Collection of Experiences

This chapter shares the histories I collected during my research for this project. Each section is split among the participants along the themes of postmemory and silence and intergenerational trauma; however, these themes are not mutually exclusive and often overlap throughout their narratives. Each story was willingly and openly shared by the participants. Italics in the oral histories are used to indicate my voice. To give more insight into who each participant is and to avoid dictating who they are in this project, I asked them all to introduce themselves.

I. Introductions

a. January 10, 2019

My name is Uyen Hoang. I go by either pronunciation, Vietnamese or more American, I guess. I am twenty-six years old, I am a cisgender female most of the times, sometimes gender is a little complicated. I identify as queer, I was the first born in America of my whole extended family...I think in the most general sense I am a second gen [sic] because my parents were born in Vietnam, but if we’re looking at different spheres, I’m also the first gen in education. There’s different first experiences that I am in my family, but I guess with the more common knowledge, I’m second generation.

b. January 12, 2019
My name is Allison Vo. I am twenty-three years old. I graduated from UC San Diego with degrees in Ethnic Studies and Sociology, social inequality. I identify as a Viet American femme of color. Viet American is not hyphenated because I don’t believe that we’re an adjective to the American identity, but I also want to claim American-ness because of all the struggles that my parents have undergone to be able to claim this citizenship and also all that comes with it in order to survive here.

*February 10, 2019*

My name is Ngoc Cam Bui. I go by they/them pronouns. I’d say I’m a 1.5, maybe 1.75 generation Vietnamese American. I am currently completing a Master’s degree in Social Psychology. I grew up mostly in California, specifically in San Jose. My family moved around and we ended up in San Jose for the longest. I’m twenty-nine turning thirty in two months. I identify as queer bisexual, that’s an important distinction for me for historical reasons. Right now, I am gender chaotic.

**II. Postmemory**

Each participant shared what they knew of their family history with me and I found that for each one I heard, they shared the same matter of piecing together parts of their family history through stories randomly told from their parents themselves or through other members of their family. The stories shared with them were sporadic and random, usually never in any situation where their parents would have a conversation describing
their past lives. Postmemory work can be found amongst the histories shared with me as each participant expressed their confusion and frustration trying to navigate their lives with parts of their history missing or scattered amongst an amalgamation of random stories. For each person, it seemed as though they had to contend and settle with the fact that there will always be parts of their history, their family history, and their parents' lives that they will never know.

   a. Uyen Hoang

   It's interesting because it's a lot of my mom talking, not so much my dad. So I also learned my dad's side through my mom...It's interesting to see the array of memories and stories that come out from literally any day, any other kind of just... there's no sit down and let's talk about it, you know?

   When she shared those memories, how do you think that's affected you?

   In some sense I've never been to Vietnam but in some sense, I feel like I know it. And I think that's kind of the power of nostalgia because I don't know it. I definitely know different aspects of globalization and modernization. The Vietnam that she knows is not the Vietnam that is there. It's in the sense that I still have some sort of weird connection, like those are folks that I feel like at one level, I get it, but another level probably wouldn't. I think that's all a manufacturing of these feelings.

   I think the first time my mom, the first story that they told me when I was little about when they first met, she would say that "oh yeah, your dad was
working at your aunt’s butcher shop and then I came in to buy meat and he saw me and he was like ‘oh my gosh she’s so beautiful’ and just gave me all of his dirty clothes like ‘can you wash this for me’ and she was like ‘What? Okay yeah...’”. So, I mean that was a very humorous kind of memory, but I told everyone that my parents met by laundry? (laughs) And everyone was like “what?” and I was like in second grade at this time. They were like “I don’t get it”, I was like “it makes sense to me!”

Kind of unraveling and finding out that he was there at his aunt’s shop because he was thrown out of jail because he was running away, so his aunt had provided him refuge and employment. At that time, my mom became the caretaker because my grandpa went to a reeducation camp, so my grandma had to go to the markets and sell and all that stuff. She was taking care of feeding for the whole house. Everything could be peeled back a little more and I think the piece meal-ness of being told in different vignettes that don’t make sense, I think that’s the challenge for diasporic people. At the same time, trying to make sense of things can be enlightening and can be really soothing, but at the same time it’s just there, you know?

There are so many different ways to read these memories. I can try to read my mom’s trauma like “Oh she’s so traumatized! She said this time when her brother beat her and whatever...” And like really think about that but at the same time, when I cling onto those memories, I also limit her from growing. Like this idea of
living in the past and not seeing as she’s grown, right? So, I think there’s a lot of interesting impact on maybe her and me, maybe it’s an unloading and I can move on or maybe it’s an unloading and here it is, it is what it is. It’s interesting. I think about memories a lot and I also like to think about feelings a lot. I feel like I know a narrative that maybe my sisters don’t know either and I feel like they also have insight that I don’t know. So, maybe one day, I don’t know if ever, because we’re a little wild with each other... We can sit down and figure out what’s what in history, but I don’t know! I think it’s okay not to know that.

So, the memories you know, sounds like there are substantial gaps in between. How did you, if you have, filled those gaps?

Well, I can thank academia for that (laughs) because I think that was kind of the privilege of being an [Asian American Studies] minor, was that “I have to interview you for my class! This is for an assignment, parents!” So, it’s like, “if you want me to have a good grade I need to talk to you, I need to get these stories.” And one time I think my mom was very tickled by the fact that I had to interview my dad, that I had to document I was collecting histories. You know, one thing that she got really excited for – she doesn’t approve of the field and she doesn’t understand it, still to this day – but the idea that there was this pressure, this sense of authority and prestige with the university therefore an assignment, something that’s done for it, would... That’s kind of the key that lets her open up in a nicer way as opposed to like through a lecture or maybe through her yelling at
me (laughs) or maybe through some other kinds of means! This is a more like an
‘oh this is information that’s going to a credible resource aka and a university and
you know, grades, there’s a lot of stake in my story!’ I feel like she does fill in the
gaps in the strangest ways and it’s not pressured by anything, like the pressure to
perform or make sense of anything, like her just being there… The gaps get filled
in by a pressure and sometimes, there’s a gap that I didn’t know happened.

There was this one time I remember, oh gosh, I remember it so vividly
because it was around the time my mom found out what email was and she said
she was getting better at it. She would just send me pictures that she was looking
at, you know, old pictures of us, of her, us, family, whatever. She really liked
pictures and I think is valuable, thinking about refugee communities. One day she
just sent a picture of her – young, beautiful, and that’s it! Nothing! I think she did
send it with a subject line or something but it was kind of just like, this was a
woman, the woman in the picture is someone I will never know. I will never get
to know her and there’s just that… you’ll never know! The fact is that some
people might be like ‘oh my god, now I need to know!’ but I think for me, I was
like I need to sit with the fact that there is something I don’t have access to,
something that she can only give and there’s misconceptions and generalizations
that I make. So, she just sent this really casual picture but it was so striking that in
the picture, she was just looking straight at whoever the viewer would be. It was
kind of just unsettling like collapse of time. I was like “Okay! I don’t know what
the purpose was for this picture and there it was!” (laughs) I think it fills in the
gap pretty well, in a weird way.

b. Allison Vo

What I know is very fragmented, very indicative of the 1.5 generation
experience or younger Viets who are now living outside of Vietnam. For me,
what I do know is that my mother’s side is ethnically Chinese, and I only very
recently found out last year from, I guess I call them aunts but they’re not really
aunts, you know how that works? You call them Co [honorific for older adult
woman] out of respect as honorifics? They were resettled in Denmark, but we
were able to meet through a funeral, which was really nice because there’s like
death and love that comes out of it, too, and what it means for like refugee-ness
and social networks. Through conversations with them, they were telling me a lot
more about my family history than I was ever able to receive from my mom on
her side. I found out that that my grandfather migrated from China to Vietnam –
South Vietnam – because he was fleeing political persecution. He was actually
very politically active in China and because of his views against the government,
he ended up in Vietnam. I was like ‘what the fuck!’ This is where I come from,
my ancestry!

My father’s side, it’s weird because sometimes when we talk about oral
history or how we transmit from one family member to another, sometimes it
feels like a fairytale and sometimes I have to doubt whether or not this is true, to what extent it is true? He'll claim Khmer heritage, and I only found out very recently that my father's family lives in Soc Trang and a lot of folks who live in Soc Trang which is the countryside of Vietnam, are Khmer. So, they actually immigrated from Cambodia into this area. They're very poor, they live in the countryside, so there may be some truth to what he was saying, and he does speak Khmer, as well. I also learned that my grandfather on my dad's side, he actually was a soldier. He was the only one to survive in his battalion which was really remarkable because then I was like “Oh shoot, how did I end up here? How did we end up here in the US?” when, from the very beginning, we were not positioned to live this long, I feel. We were only positioned to be ready for death. I think it's really interesting to hear about these histories and how it's essentially almost always connected to war or politics or persecution and trauma.

*Can you tell me more about the 1.5 generation and how that fits into your life and your experiences?*

I've really been dictated by living in the space of in between. We're not quite first gen, we're not quite second gen. Kind of just learning how to straddle this in between. A lot of that is trying to figure out what my history or histories are. I think for me, I'm finally at a point where I realize my history will always be one of not knowing but knowing that that not knowing is also something in and of itself. Really just trying to figure out what does it mean then, to try and
conceptualize this de-territorialized form of belonging – not either here, not either there – because I don’t think I could ever actually imagine myself going back to Vietnam. Is that what reparations look like? Being able to be financially stable and also emotionally and politically in a space where I’m allowed to go back to this “homeland”.

In terms of your family history, have you ever been able to learn anything from them about that history?

Yeah, so it comes casually and suddenly and unexpectedly. Sometimes my dad will talk about growing up very poor, “only had a pair of pants to go to school and I would walk ten kilometers just to get there and I couldn’t afford books... I remember during the war, it’s not like we really had anything before, but during the war we had nothing.” Yeah, I recall what I used to think were very sad stories, but he would just talk about it so casually that I was just like “How is it so casual to you?” I think that that casualty of it is also the casualty of war. I think to use humor is really a way to protect himself from what had happened. Then with my mom, I don’t think I’ve ever heard my mom mention anything about the war or her travels, other than being violently seasick when she was trying to go from Vietnam to Malaysia. I think that was really it, the extent to which I really learned anything from her. My dad has talked about how when we were in the camp when I was an infant, his best friend, who is Khmer, would actually take whatever
portion he had to give it to my mom so that she would have enough breastmilk to feed me.

So, there are a lot of silences within your own family history, how would you say you filled those silences? Where have you found history that has kind of helped you fill in those silences?

I think this is going to be a lifelong ongoing thing. A lot of this interestingly has come from higher education and the academy and I think there's something to be said about that like definitely how refugee knowledge and knowledge production about refugees has been and continues to be produced through a very systematized institution rather than just trusting refugee knowledge from refugees as a source of knowledge.

c. **Ngoc Cam Bui**

The history of my family on both sides is very much shaped by the Vietnam War. Both of my parents were born during the war, either '68 or, I want to say, '66. My dad actually was the last child in his family and both of his parents died shortly after he was born. My mom is the seventh child out of about thirteen. She's actually the first child between her mom and her dad. Half of her family is stepbrothers and sisters who raised her when she was born. It's difficult to ask my mom about what our family was like either before or during the war. She used to love talking about it with her aunts and uncles, or I guess her brothers and sisters,
and other people her age. Most of what I know from them is overheard from her conversations with others and not shared with me, specifically. There's always been a pervasive sense of secrets to protect your kids when it came to my family. I feel like it really came to a lot of Vietnamese people who weren't able to process their traumas. So, the secrets became like a protective factor for them and for their children. I do know that my mom's father eventually died in the Fall of Saigon.

He was either a soldier or an officer who tried to return to Saigon to get some paperwork or do something to prevent incriminating himself because he knew it was coming, but he was caught in the bombing. The story is that when he was caught in the bombing, he stripped off all of his clothing because he was still wearing the uniform and he knew what would happen afterwards. They took him in, they didn't shoot him right away. He was treated but he died anyways. My mom and dad grew up in separate villages but met together in [indistinguishable Vietnamese name].

You mentioned earlier how it's hard for you to ask your mom about the past. How else did you pick up these stories about your family or about the Vietnamese experience with migration?

The sharing of stories has always been important to me for this. A lot of the sharing I heard were things that weren't meant to be heard, things that were shared in private. Private processing, I guess is the right word. That kind of sharing wasn't always the best way to learn. It led to a lot of confusion and
moments I needed clarification, and moments where it really affected me deep down, almost traumatized—secondary trauma. When I got older, I was able to find spaces where 1.5 and second generation Vietnamese diasporic or people of the Southeast Asian diaspora are able to process it and decompress it. It means so much to me and they have helped me with this understanding my history, understanding where I am in history, so much more than overhearing private processes.

III. Silences and Intergenerational Trauma

What they know of their histories is limited by the amount of knowledge they can receive from their parents, family, or community. There were many gaps in the stories they shared and many mentions of silences or “secrets” amongst them. As mentioned in previous chapters, silence can be a form of transmitting trauma but also can be a way to protect oneself from reliving traumas or to keep those pains away from those they care about. As we can see from these stories, however, the silences left more to be desired for the postwar generations. For this next section, I asked my participants what intergenerational trauma looks like to them and how they see it has affected their lives.

a. Uyen Hoang

This idea, this kind of sense of legacies of colonialism, these legacies of viewing ourselves as not worthy of being listened to, studied, thought of—even by ourselves. This kind of self-deprecating like we’re not worth of this, putting other people above us. In some sense it could be like ‘oh, you’re so caring’ and
putting other people in front of you... Well, maybe for me, how it looks like it for me is that there's always something to deal with self-worth at the end of the day. This idea, this legacy of not being able to articulate our needs because our needs aren't important.

So, I think that's a little bit of intergenerational trauma for me, it's just silences because we're not talking about it! For me, that manifests a lot of... I mean, with my mom – I'm a huge mama's girl – but also I have mommy issues so it's really confusing for me. (laughs) The sense of just being... not knowing how to reconcile with the silences and then have the silences become so deafeningly loud, you know? There are things, particularly around being someone who presents as femme most of the time, this idea where my mom... well, for the longest time she called me a slut, as a child, too! I was like "Oh, is it not normal for like a third grader to be called this?" This was my normal, but I didn't realize it wasn't people's normal, but it was my normal.

There's also pain that she went through as a daughter-in-law that she wouldn't talk about until it bubbled up and it was like oh my god, this is really wild and this is a lot of abuse to take in. But that abuse she would take in from her mother-in-law would manifest in a way that it was like being more strict around us, dictating how we looked, what we did. You know, trying to really hone in on really crafting us to fit that narrative. It got even more complicated because she was like "I'm doing this because I never want anyone to abuse you like I've been abused!" But
in the sense that she abused me. (laughs) It’s like this weird cyclical abuse. It has “good intentions” but this idea that we’re not talking about the core, the root problem. So that’s what intergenerational trauma looks like to me in my life, that we’re not talking to each other.

It’s this persistence of silence that gets so deafening, we can’t help but hear it. Then when you hear it, you don’t know what, because it’s nothing! You don’t know what’s being said and you really don’t know how to act. It manifests in different ways – not being able to say anything, turning to self-harm, turning to a lot of negative thoughts and continuing that cycle. Trauma is something that always is just... there. I think that kind of says “Hey, so that nice thing you think? Don’t think that.” I feel like for me, my trauma is heightened awareness of other people’s perceptions, but those people don’t exist or those people aren’t there. The hurt can be traced back to colonialism, however you want to frame it. Like, how do you heal something that... you didn’t hurt yourself? How do you end something that always continues?

b. Allison Vo

I think for me, intergenerational trauma for Viet folks looks differently depending on the person and the family, if there even is a family. For me specifically, intergenerational trauma that I’ve been able to observe through my parents, for my mother, she holds a lot of secrets. I think there is something about
secrets though, that is a way to protect yourself, a way to protect and preserve what you think needs to be preserved or protected. Sorry, that’s very cryptic! What’s really interesting is that for my mom, I don’t know to what extent she feels like she owes to her family back in Vietnam. My mom’s not the type of person to send money back home unless it’s very urgent. It’s counter to a lot of narratives that I’ve been able to hear from other folks. I think that’s kind of like bad ass in her own way. How does she re-appropriate this idea of what is supposed to be intergenerational trauma and kind of just reject it altogether or is that a form of trauma in and of itself, like not wanting to deal with what is back home. I know that she loves her family, even though she doesn’t talk about love openly. Maybe she feels a lot of guilt for leaving and without explicitly saying so, I feel like a lot of that guilt has been transmitted to me, as well.

I think intergenerational trauma, also for me, comes with a lot of unspoken apologies. Apologies in the sense that my parents worked so hard so that they could provide for us. My mom on the other hand is not so openly apologetic, she doesn’t send home money. In terms of me and how I experienced trauma, I think the trauma itself is not knowing and not being able to fully have a conversation with my parents about the war. The trauma is really not knowing where I can reconcile with this identity and I’m in a constant state of negotiation with these histories that I learned in school versus the very oral, very literal histories that I learned from my parents. One time my professor told me that your parents are
your living ancestors and I was fucked up! Because I was like “Oh my god, they’re my living ancestors! Why am I not excavating as much knowledge from them as I can?”

But I think it’s unfair to do so and I thought about it in a different way, and I was like, “I am my own living ancestor. What’s going to happen when I’m gone?” What does this trauma look like? Is it going to continue to be trauma or do I want to imagine myself and whatever I leave behind, something that is going to be distant from the war, but also acknowledging it at the same time? Maybe this whole open reflection is trauma in its own, but who knows? I don’t think there’s a really concrete way for me to define what intergenerational trauma is for me. I think it’s just very much in my being, in the body that I have now as well as the bodies that my parents have, and whatever that legacy is going to look like when they’re gone.

I think when I was younger, I struggled with the silences a lot, but there was always a part of me that understood that the silences stood for something. There’s like a deep meaning in what the silence is. I think when I was younger, that could have been what propelled my understanding of trauma before I could name it as trauma. I think for me now, more so, silence is just like an outcome of trauma, in the sense that… (long pause) how ironic is it that I’m being silent right now? (laughs). I don’t know! An outcome of trauma.
c. Ngoc Cam Bui

I see it very much impacting my personality and viewpoints in life. When I was growing up, I felt this general sense of hopelessness, especially seeing when people recall the war and feeling so helpless during it. As they’re doing this, the people I overheard these stories from are still deep in trauma. They haven’t been able to process it really and they’re still very much affected by it. You can see it in their lives, you can see it in the sense of helplessness they had at the same time that they were trying to survive. For me, when I was growing up, I really thought that life was meaningless. I didn’t expect to live past forty. I’m thirty now. The older I get, the more I see it as a possibility. When I was a child, I’d just seen so many people either hearing about them overdosing or seeing life past forty seem just so completely miserable.

At the time, not having known how close the war was, you know, time perspective when you’re a child is not so good... So, I guess I connected the depression I saw in older people with age rather than having gone through a very traumatic war. It almost seemed inevitable for me. It hasn’t turned out so bad, this sense that like... who cares, we’re going to die anyways.

For me, intergenerational trauma looks like a form of both empathy that’s gone too far sometimes, empathy that really picks up on this trauma, and for children, sometimes it looks like feeling their parents’ pain but not knowing where it comes from. It’s confusing. Being raised with the coping mechanisms
that the parents had with this trauma and having these coping mechanisms but not knowing the source. The coping mechanisms sometimes reverberate down to children as abuse, either neglect, very physical or emotional abuse, sexual abuse, too. It’s all really coping mechanisms that make sense to the traumatized people. I mean, objectively it doesn’t make sense but to them this is... These coping mechanisms that came from this trauma, it makes social sense to them, to the actors, because they’re kind of stuck in a loop sometimes. Unhealed trauma just passes down to one another, even if we don’t admit it.

*What kind of expectations did your parents put on you, say in terms of, what they want you do career-wise, academically, if they put any on you?*

My parents were never good about explaining expectations, or maybe they were and I didn’t hear it. To me, it seems more like the focus on it was what I was doing wrong versus what I could be doing right or how I could be doing right. I get it. My parents were young when they had me and they were figuring things out on their own, too. They really didn’t know how to do it. My mom, as hard as she tried and as much as she took care of us, she has a lot of hang ups on not knowing what to do, not knowing the right things. When that’s challenged, she reacts very negatively.

*IV. The Best We Could Do*

Although their experiences do not encompass every diasporic Vietnamese American’s experience, there are many commonalities amongst them to indicate how
traumas inflicted from generations ago still have an effect on the newer generations of Vietnamese in America today. Thi Bui, a second generation Vietnamese American author, detailed illustrated similar thoughts and sentiments in her graphic novel memoir, *The Best We Could Do*. The memoir consists of what she knows of her family history going back to her grandfather’s time during the revolution against France to her family’s migration from Vietnam to the US, to her childhood and adulthood as a Vietnamese American. Her descriptions of her childhood reflect the same feelings my participants shared around silences that hung over them throughout their lives, creating shadows that left unasked questions unanswered.
And though my parents took us far away from the site of their grief...

...certain shadows stretched far, casting a gray stillness over our childhood...
...hinting at a darkness we did not understand

but could always feel
In the two above images, Bui illustrates sentiments very similarly to those of my three participants regarding silences in the form of "shadows" that hung over all of their childhoods. Although their parents took them "far away from the site of their grief", the postwar generations knew to some extent that that very "site of grief" was something that they all, both first and postwar generations, held some part of. These two pages perfectly demonstrate what Uyen mentioned as "this persistence of silence that gets so deafening, we can't help but hear it" and what Cam remarked as a form of empathy in children that "looks like feeling their parents' pain but not knowing where it comes from." Despite escaping a land that holds their painful histories, the first generation can never truly run from the consequences of such devastation. No matter their intention, that darkness brought upon them also cast shadows upon the following generations, and unfortunately, the tools to illuminate this dark past became locked behind unspoken words and unasked questions.

Although possibly meant to protect, either themselves or their children, these silences became sites of grief and confusion for the postwar generations as they are left to navigate generations of trauma that they do not have the means to fully understand. The silences became a space for postmemory work for the newer generations as they fit together the pieces of information they were able to gather or glean that, not only was confusing and frustrating, but also in some ways ironically became a means for them to better understand their family and community's history with not only pain, but resilience.
I could never undo.
But when I look at my son, now ten years old, I don't see war and loss or even Travis and me.
I see a new life, bound with mine quite by coincidence, and I think maybe he can be free.
Despite this legacy of trauma, the newer generations are figuring out ways to navigate their lives while holding space for this contentious history that they may never truly know. Bui, by sharing her memories and vulnerabilities to the public through this profound work around her and her family’s lives, she helped connect the experiences and sentiments that many postwar diasporic Vietnamese Americans likely feel. This memoir was probably a step in her own healing process as shown in the last few pages where she realizes that despite her anxieties, the generations that come after her can live a freer life.

For those I interviewed, they shared that their healing processes or their paths to better understanding themselves, their history, and their place in life came from the help of community building whether that community came from academic spaces or spaces put together by other Vietnamese Americans who were just as confused and in need of support as they were. No matter what traumas we carry, whether our own or those that were passed on to us, pathways for resilience and healing will always be formed. Through exploring the larger histories outside of myself, through the sharing of stories and connecting through experience, I feel that this project has been a step towards healing for myself, as well. My only hope is that this project, if read by any other diasporic Vietnamese Americans or children of refugees or immigrants of any background, will help lessen any feelings of confusion or isolation through this sharing of history, knowledge, and narratives.
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