

BECOMING VIETNAMESE AMERICAN:  
ON VIETNAMESE AMERICAN INHERITED TRAUMA AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

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Philip Nguyen

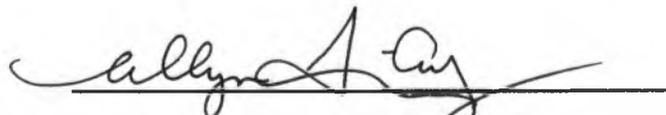
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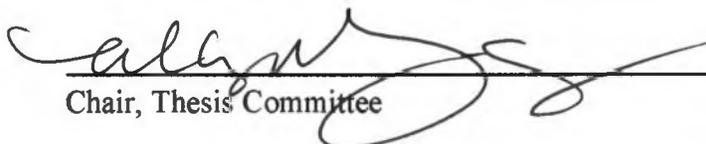
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Philip Nguyen  
San Francisco, California  
2019

The purpose of this research is to examine the relationship between transgenerational trauma and ethnic identity development for second generation Vietnamese American college students to develop a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which Vietnam War-related trauma informs the lived experiences of this population. This research is exploratory in its aim and primarily seeks to address the question of: How is inherited trauma expressed and understood in the lives of second generation Vietnamese American college students on individual, familial, and community levels? How do transgenerational transmissions of trauma, or trauma inheritance, impact the ethnic identity development of second generation Vietnamese American college students? Through a qualitative, ethnographic analysis utilizing semi-structured, in-depth interviews, this research attempts to capture and frame the narratives of second generation Vietnamese American college students and the processes that contribute to “becoming Vietnamese American” through the lens of centering transgenerational transmission of trauma.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.

  
Chair, Thesis Committee

8.16.19  
Date

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*Cám ơn Ba Mẹ đã hy sinh cả cuộc đời cho con được khỏe mạnh và thành công.*

I dedicate this to my sister, Cecilia Phuong Chi Nguyễn, and the next Vietnamese American generation – may our stories live on as our legacies.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### *I Love You are for White People*

My lived experience as an American-born child of Vietnamese refugees provides the impetus for this research, which aims to center the experiences of second generation Vietnamese American college students and their relationship to inherited trauma as it concerns their mental health and well-being through processes of uncovering, reconciling, and healing. After more than forty years following the end of the Vietnam War, as the second generation, children of refugees, confronts the process of “peeling the onion,” whereby layers of compounded trauma are uncovered, both the insidious and productive nature of this inherited trauma demand further understanding.

I remember, or rather, can imagine, the bustling streets of Saigon, Vietnam, despite never having been there. Having been born and raised in Lancaster, California, an arid desert exurb devoid of people outside of my own family who looked, spoke, or felt like me, I often sought my own refuge to this apparent difference from my peers among the library stacks, where my mother would bring me after school before she took on a job at my aunt’s nail salon. As she sought out any available texts that were either written in or translated into Vietnamese in the foreign language section, I looked for authors in the mainstream fiction and nonfiction sections who might have had some of the more common Vietnamese last names – Nguyen, Tran, Pham, to name a few. In my search I instead encountered books on Vietnam, the country, and Vietnam, the war – some from which I saw streets flooded with motorists, water buffaloes on the countryside, and

students on their way to class in their pristine *áo dài*. In others, I saw black and white pictures of decorated generals, different caliber weapons, and dates associated with the places that my parents and other members of my family had often spoken to me about in Vietnamese as their “home.” My own understanding, configuration, and imagination of this “home,” of my parents’ and ancestors’ homeland, stems from the dissonance between the stories that had been passed onto me and the histories that I had been taught or had come across in life about the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese people. In high school, as I had begun to determine, without much guidance from my family, my path towards a higher education, my parents beckoned to me to view the Vietnamese-language programming on television in the living room and drew attention to a man named Lac Su who vaguely looked like me and talked like me, in a similar kind of vernacular that came with growing up around low-income people of color communities, speaking of a memoir that he had written titled *I Love Yous are for White People*. As my parents passively listened to his narrative, in anticipation that I would later summarize his message in English for them in my own Vietnamese-English hybrid language, I became engulfed in the way that he spoke of growing up in West Los Angeles with his parents who had escaped persecution and death from the Vietnamese Communists after the end of the Vietnam War. Too familiar was how he described his tense and tumultuous relationship with his parents whom he so desperately sought love and acceptance from, yet could not completely understand in their shared poverty-stricken newfound life in the United States why love, or the phrase “I love you” was never apparent. After that program, my parents

allowed me to purchase the memoir, my first book by an Asian American, Vietnamese American, author, which shaped the trajectory of my life, as I eventually entered college declaring Asian American Studies, later picking up Ethnic Studies, as my major and lifelong field of study.

In my parents' own way of showing their love for me, they shared with me their stories and glimpses into their past – both positive and negative – with a hope that I could have more opportunities than they had – their “American Dream” for me was that no one would ever be able to seize my opportunities away from me, or that I would ever feel the need to sacrifice these opportunities, as they had theirs. As I delved deeper into understanding my own history at the University of California, Berkeley as a first-generation college student from a low-income community during my undergraduate academic career, the layers of my onion began to peel away, and in their stories that they had told me about their homeland throughout my life, the concluding thoughts or morals, which would often be the same: to study well, stay healthy, and try your best – *học giỏi, giữ sức khỏe, cố gắng* – not only reminded me of their histories and sacrifices, but also motivated my desire to succeed and potentially one day repay my debt and fulfill my duty as their child, a Vietnamese American, born in America with roots from Vietnam.

My own experience underscores both the ongoing and latent impact and affect of inherited trauma as well as the necessity to continue to peel back these layers to recognize deeply rooted structural issues as well as begin the processes of multigenerational healing and communication. Drawing from Asian American Studies

scholarship on Southeast Asian refugees, educational theory, psychological trauma theory, and Vietnamese American Studies, this research seeks to explore the impact of transgenerational transmission of trauma from refugee parents upon the ethnic, cultural, and psychosocial development of second-generation Vietnamese American college students, to suggest more nuanced analytical frameworks for understanding the differential generational impact of the Vietnam War, its related trauma, and the inheritance of this trauma. This research will also contribute to discourse mitigating the stigmatization of mental health and personal wellness present for children of refugees who often find themselves coping with traumatic remnants of their experiences during and after the Vietnam War. Both the recognition of and reconciliation of children of refugees' inherited trauma relating to a war that preceded their birth, yet is pervasive in nature as it has contextualized their lived experiences, are processes that are necessitous to understand to attest to individual, familial, and community wellness, healing, and resiliency.

## **Research Aim and Questions**

The purpose of this research is to examine the relationship between transgenerational trauma and ethnic identity development for second generation Vietnamese American college students to develop a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which Vietnam War-related traumas informs the lived experiences of this population. The primary research questions are: How is inherited trauma expressed and understood in the lives of second generation Vietnamese American college students on individual, familial, and community levels? How do transgenerational transmissions of trauma, or trauma inheritance, impact the ethnic identity development of second generation Vietnamese American college students? Secondly, this research will also seek to address the following questions: In what ways does the inclusion of Vietnamese American voices in mainstream American discourse influence Vietnamese American college students' sense of identity, their understanding of Vietnamese American experience and history, and serve to articulate proliferating silences of inherited trauma within families and communities? What are the roles of interpersonal relationships, Asian American Studies, and cultural organizations in facilitating reconciliation with transgenerational trauma and the development of ethnic identity? Through a qualitative, ethnographic analysis utilizing semi-structured, in-depth interviews, this research attempts to capture and frame the narratives of second generation Vietnamese American college students and the processes that contribute to "becoming Vietnamese American" through the lens of centering transgenerational transmission of trauma.

### **Theoretic Conceptualization and Operationalization**

Trauma itself has traditionally been understood through psychological, biological, narrative, affective, and cultural approaches in its conceptualization, theorization, and study. These approaches are framed as either individual or collective dependent on discipline — the individual framework defined by manifestations of trauma centered upon a physical wounding of an individual, and the collective framework informed by the individual framework, yet also acknowledging of how trauma transcends individuality. With respect to transmission of transgenerational trauma, Kellerman (2001) has identified four models of transmission: biological, psychodynamic, sociocultural, and family system - the former two individualized and the latter two collectivized. The study of transgenerational trauma and its transmission through psychiatric and psychological approaches have focused primarily on individualized contexts and on negative outcomes, whereas the cultural studies and social scientists have pivoted to a more non-clinical, collectivized approach to conceptualizing transgenerational trauma and its potentiality for positivity and productivity. Through an affective approach which considers the ways by which it is possible for trauma to be felt as sensations, emotions, and feelings simultaneously on both individual and collective levels transcendent of spatiotemporal boundaries, trauma can thereby be understood and studied as personal, embodied trauma and cultural, collective trauma (Kwan, 2015). I utilize several concepts to identify, interpret, and articulate certain phenomena that substantiate my research questions and analysis, particularly transgenerational trauma and ethnic identity. In my

conceptualization and adaptations of definitions of these terms, I draw from cultural studies and education scholars in my articulation.

Transgenerational trauma is defined by Abraham and Torok as the phenomenon whereby unspeakable traumas are transferred from one generation to subsequent generations (Abraham and Torok, 1994). Transgenerational trauma, as conceptualized by Kwan, encompasses latent secondary trauma, intergenerational trauma, and postmemory, in recognition of the multigenerational relationships and engagements to trauma that consider the affect of not only individualized and familial trauma but also collectivized trauma, consistent of intragenerational trauma and public feelings. Intergenerational trauma, the effect of trauma between generations, is defined by Lev-Wiesel as “symptoms and values that appeared in one generation, will affect not only the generation that was victimized but also the next one” (Lev-Wiesel, 2007). Postmemory, adapted from cultural studies, is conceptualized as the phenomenon of transgenerational transmission of trauma. Postmemory, defined by Marianne Hirsch is “the intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance, linked specifically to cultural or collective trauma” (Hirsch, 2001), whereby the children of survivors of traumatic violence experience forms of trauma that preceded their births; these fragmented remembrances are recollected or mediated through representation, projection, creation, and imagination predicated upon silence rather than vocalization.

Drawing from Braga et. al. (2012) and Menzies (2010), indicators pertinent to the interpretation of the multi-layered dimensions of transgenerational trauma expression and

transmission are occur at three different levels, the first within an individual framework and the latter two within a collective framework: individual, familial, and community.

Individual indicators of transgenerational trauma include: (1) lack of a sense of belonging, identification, or affiliation with a specific family, community, or culture; (2) limited or no information regarding one's ancestry regarding language, customs, and religiosity; and (3) feelings of somatization, depression, general anxiety, or insomnia.

Familial indicators include: (1) chronic or episodic family violence inclusive of physical, sexual, emotional, and/or verbal abuse; (2) lack of emotional bonding between parents, siblings, and extended family members; and (3) denial of cultural heritage by older family members.

Community indicators include: (1) lack of cultural opportunities inclusive of transmission of language skills, history, traditional values, and religiosity; (2) instances of politically charged intra-ethnic violence; (3) proliferation of Vietnam War-related public memorials and commemorative practices.

I conceptualize and define ethnic identity here as identification or feeling of membership with a historical, political, cultural, and social category discursively constructed in reference to one's sense of belonging to an ethnic group that constitutes one's thinking, perceptions, feelings, and behavior, for example, one's sense of self "as a member of an ethnic group" (Phinney, 1993). Ethnic identity centers itself around "questions of becoming rather than being not: what 'who we are' or 'where we came from' so much as what we might become, how we have been represented, and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves" (Hall, 1996), and reaffirms the necessity of

considering the processes that comprise the development of ethnic identity. This is articulated through changes of consciousness, self-recognition, and ongoing processes of identification and self-identification. Phinney describes this process as “the way in which individuals come to understand the implications of their ethnicity and make decisions about its role in their lives” and progress through what Erikson and Marcia have defined as identity statuses based upon ranges of levels of identity exploration and commitment that.

The variation in these developmental sequences comprise four identity statuses: (1) diffused, where individuals have neither explored nor committed to an identity; (2) foreclosed, where individuals have committed to an identity without much exploration; (3) moratorium, where individuals have explored and identity but not committing to it, and (4) achieved, where individuals have both explored and committed to an identity, which is important to one’s perception of self (Yip, 2014; Marcia, 1993). Indicators of ethnic identity and its developmental processes include the self-identification of ethnicity, sense of belonging to one’s own ethnic group, positive and negative attitudes toward one’s ethnic group, and ethnic involvement characterized by social participation and cultural practices, inclusive of language, religious affiliation and practice, participation in structured ethnic social groups, political ideology and activity, area of residence, and sociality (Phinney, 1993). The narrative analysis interpretive of these indicators would denote the relationship between the facilitative nature of transgenerational trauma and how it shapes the development of ethnic identity on multiple levels, as well as allow for

the consideration of availability and access to courses in Ethnic Studies, Asian American Studies, and cultural organizations through these processes.

### **Project Significance**

Nearly fifty years after the Fall of Saigon, marking the “end” of the Vietnam War in 1975, there has been a resurgence in mainstream discourse of an American preoccupation with the events leading up to, of, and in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. This resurgence has occurred concurrently with the efforts of Vietnamese American cultural producers to assert their retellings, from their own perspectives, as descendants of that war. The dialectical relationship and cultural productions that emerge from these entities grappling with the narration and re-narration of this highly contested history frames the ways in which the historical memory of the Vietnam War is remembered and sustained through time and space.

In contrast to the mainstream discourse regarding the war that has oft been dominated by the perspectives of American military personnel or first generation Vietnamese refugees and immigrants, Vietnamese Americans in the 1.5 and second generation, whose experiences are indubitably contextualized by these popularized war narratives as people of color in the United States, continue to negotiate their positionality between this dialectic, and continue to reconcile with the gaps and discrepancies between their individual family histories of the Vietnam War and the mainstream popular discourse of the Vietnam War. The remnants and residual effects of the Vietnam War

pervade the seemingly banal quotidian lives of multigenerational Vietnamese families in a variety of ways that are framed by a collective cultural agreement of the first generation to suppress and repress life-threatening or traumatic memories of the past that are related to instances war, genocide, reeducation camps, life under a repressive regime, migration, and exile. The weight and responsibility of and to these memories are thereby passed on to the second generation to reconcile with this contested past, and inform the ways in which perception of self is shaped and ethnic identity develops.

Considering these discrepancies in the historical memory narrated by the mainstream discourse in the United States, the Vietnamese American community, and the omission of the second generation's narratives and relationships to the Vietnam War, as my own ethnic identity development and understanding of self as a second generation Vietnamese American serve as the impetus for this project. I am motivated by my own personal experience as a son to Vietnamese refugee parents who fled their homeland for fear of death to struggle for survival in the United States and brother to a younger sister who has the shared experience with me of being a first-generation college student from a low-income family. Having been born and raised in Lancaster, California, I have come to understand myself and the world around me through tumultuous relationships between myself and my negotiation of ethnic identity, sense of belonging to an ethnic community, and representations of my community in both academic and mainstream discourses, and this research gives voice to that experience and those similar. As discussions of personal wellness, mental health, and trauma have been stigmatized for my community, it

becomes necessary for research and discourse to advocate for those who must confront the ghosts and hauntings of the past in order to heal for future generations.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

*“All wars are fought twice – the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory”*  
-Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*

Drawing from Asian American Studies scholarship on Vietnamese refugees and theoretical approaches trauma and the transgenerational trauma transmission, this research builds upon current scholarship and seeks to explore the impact of transgenerational transmission of trauma on the ethnic identity development of second generation Vietnamese American college students. The thematic domains that inform and situate this research are: collectivized trauma, Vietnamese American students in education, and refugee transgenerational transmission of trauma.

### *Collectivized Trauma*

Theoretical approaches to trauma research within the realms of genetics, psychology, literature, cultural studies, and sociology can be conceptualized as either individualized or collectivized. Outside of the biological and psychological sciences, particularly within the social sciences and humanities, and especially within Ethnic Studies, approaches to the phenomenological nature of trauma primarily have concerned not only the affect of the original wounding that inflicts trauma upon the individual, but how trauma is collectively ineffably felt in sociocultural contexts. The scope of this study and its approach acknowledges the inextricable linkage between individual and collective trauma, but in its exploration of the relationship between transgenerational trauma transmission and ethnic identity development informed by dimensions of the individual,

family, and community, focuses on collective trauma frameworks. Collective trauma frameworks transcend beyond familiar trauma discourse regarding significant traumatic events centered upon individualized biological and psychological approaches with respect to somatization and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the first generation of those who experienced trauma.

With respect to collectivized trauma frameworks (Alexander 2004, Caruth 1996), collective trauma, also known as historical trauma, cultural trauma, is approached differentially dependent on the sociocultural context of the national trauma that is determinant of the historical memory of the group, the shared memory that is essentialized and representative of a particular group. Cvetkovich asserts that studies on trauma have been inadequate in addressing collectivized trauma across different cultures, departing from “trauma to public feelings...to explore the affective legacy of racialized histories of genocide, slavery, and colonization, and migration” which “allows for languages of affect to be generated organically from within particular histories and discourages the imposition of categories developed in other contexts” (Cvetkovich, 2007). Trauma and its affect are thereby not only felt broadly by specific groups in particular ways unique to the source of original wounding as well as the group, but should also be differentiated considering these genealogies of varying oppressive racialized histories (Troeng, 2011). Kellerman (2001) Alexander (2004) speaks to the transformation of individual trauma in becoming collective trauma “when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible

marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander, 2004). Breslau (2002), in line with Alexander, primarily considers the cultural representation of the traumatic experience and how it comes to define the collective identity of a group, whereby “trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity” (Alexander, 2004; Breslau, 2002; Kellerman, 2001). Within the mainstream discourse, this conceptualization of cultural trauma is evidenced by the Jewish community and the events of the Holocaust, taught as an integral part of World War II in the traditional Western education system that posits that the shared source of trauma is seminal in shaping the discursive Jewish identity. Alexander and cultural theorists that identify this example as the primary moniker of cultural trauma fail to recognize how collective cultural trauma is racialized and transnational, which becomes more salient in considerations of how collective trauma manifests for minoritized people of color.

Manifestations of collective trauma that consider these racialized and transnational factors within broader social contexts that, in addition to representation, concern resolution and reconciliation of trauma is exemplified by African Americans, Native Americans, and Japanese Americans (Broussard, 2013; Eyerman, 2004; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Denham, 2008; Nagata et al., 2003). Broussard and Eyerman center the latent traumatic remnants of the experiences of African Americans through the dehumanizing institution of slavery in its formation of African American collective

identity. Using slavery as the focal point of reference to the traumatic event, through the course of approximately four hundred years of psychological detriment upon the Black psyche, African American approaches of collective trauma become more about collective memory rather than lived experience and suggest means of establishing both responsibility to the original source of trauma, i.e., slavery, as well as reconciliation and negotiation of this trauma (Broussard 2013; Eyerman, 2004). Within a Native American Indian context, historical trauma as a modality of collective trauma stems from a “soul wounding” that afflicts indigenous communities that have, over multiple generations on multiple levels, survived systematic and institutionalized displacement and genocide (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Denham, 2008; Duran et al., 2008). Duran departs from western comprehensions of trauma in his discussion of the phenomenological “soul wound” as this theory incorporates concepts of historical and intergenerational trauma, which are passed from parents to offspring and recommends three levels of intervention in the process of healing the soul wound: working individually with clients who experience problematic manifestations of trauma; targeting the larger community that the client is a part of in outreach, advocacy, and healing services; and “healing the land,” centered on understandings of mind-body-spirit as interconnected with all people, animate beings, inanimate entities, and Mother Earth (Duran et al., 2008). The Native American community recognizes the oppressive nature of this historical trauma and the ways in which it manifests as alcohol and substance abuse, as well as both domestic and public violence as individuals cope with this trauma as a community; much of the literature

provides recommendations for counseling services and stress the connectivity between individuals and families that share this historical trauma. Similarly, for the Japanese American community, Nagata et al. (2003) explore the ubiquity of Japanese internment and Executive Order 9066 in the United States in a multigenerational context that examines the racial socialization and influence of ethnicity on communicative patterns regarding this intergenerational trauma. This literature on the different sociocultural contexts of collective trauma provide necessary insight into the collectivization of trauma and how it shapes memory, identity, and contemporary experience for the subsequent generations of survivors, but is inadequate in understanding refugee trauma predicated upon war, genocide, reeducation camps, exile, and peril relating to the Vietnam War.

### *Refugee Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma*

Given understandings of individualized and collectivized trauma and their respective inadequacies in conceptualizing the extent of both Vietnam War-related trauma for the first generation and the ways in which it is transmitted to the subsequent generations, it becomes necessitous to understand transgenerational trauma and how it is transmitted. Adapting Kellerman's model of transmission, Kwan defines transgenerational trauma as encompassing of secondary trauma, intergenerational trauma, and postmemory, and utilizes the root "trans" to capture trauma "across multiple generations and considers not only familial trauma but also intragenerational trauma and public feelings" as an affect that "evokes feelings, sensations, and emotions" (Kwan 2015). The literature regarding war-related traumas in the first generation of refugees

fails to effectively account for how trauma experienced by parents in the first generation is transmitted to and permeates the experiences of the subsequent generations. This is particularly true for second-generation Vietnamese American students, whose ethnic and cultural identities are framed by the Vietnam War and its legacies.

While Hsu et al. (2004), Han (2006), and Lin et al. (2009) establish that war-related traumas that Southeast Asian refugees have suffered have been documented for the first generation, little is known about the transgenerational transmission of trauma, particularly with respect to the experiences of the children of refugees and their relationship to unresolved, inherited, war-related trauma, as well as the impact that this trauma has upon their mental health and well-being.. The effect of this transgenerational trauma is often exhibited within the mundane domains of their lives through violent outbursts of rage by parents, silence and ambivalence surrounding familial histories, and a dissociation with one's ethnic background and heritage. Han (2006) provides an assessment of the generational transmission of trauma among Southeast Asian college students through an empirical examination of the correlation between parental trauma and the depression of late adolescent Southeast Asian Americans. Han's analysis concludes that for Southeast Asian American families, parents who are traumatized have a reduced capacity to develop secure attachment with their children, impeding upon their sense of coherence. Thus, children of these traumatized parents with a decreased sense of coherence are more likely to develop signs of depression, supporting the phenomenological nature of intergenerational transmission of trauma similar to that of

Holocaust survivors, and other survivors of traumatic violence, and its effect upon the second generation - essentially, that traumatic events that occur in one generation will have a significant residual impact upon the subsequent generation(s). Han underscores the significance of facilitating familial communication through a discussion of how parent-child attachment plays a significant role in overcoming the impacts of parental trauma, as though it does not directly impede the child's sense of coherence, traumatized parents may face obstacles developing attachments with their children as a result of their reduced capacity due to unresolved trauma and reluctance to engage in conversation about traumatic events with their children. Han directs future research to "examine the relationships with the actual trauma experienced by the parents," and contends that although war-related traumas that Southeast Asian refugees have suffered have been documented for the first generation, little is known about the transgenerational transmission of trauma, the experiences of the second generation and their relationship to unresolved war-related trauma, and its how it manifests in everyday life.

It becomes critical to recognize the multigenerational nature of the Southeast Asian American family and how trauma experienced by parents in the first generation permeates the second generation. This notion is particularly true for second-generation Vietnamese American students, whose ethnic and cultural identities are framed by the Vietnam War and its legacies even though traumatic events of that war preceded their births; it still haunts their experiences in ineffable ways. The present literature regarding second generation Vietnamese American students is limited in its framing of Vietnamese

Americans solely as the children of immigrants, largely omitting the ubiquitous presence of war-related traumas that facilitate interpersonal relationships between students, their families, and their communities, which in turn shape their ethnic identity development and acculturation (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Thai, 1999; Bankston and Zhou, 1997).

### *Vietnamese American Students in Education*

Little attention has been paid to the educational experiences of children raised by refugee parents, who had suffered and continue to suffer from traumatic original sources of wounding. As a generation whose parents share and carry with them the experience of war, displacement, and diaspora, remnant unaddressed trauma within the atmosphere of one's home should be considered as the second generation navigates systems of education where socialization and racialization occurs. Much of the literature on AAPI's in education has been predicated upon the aggregate experiences of AAPIs (Museus et. al., 2013; Yang, 2013). There is a dearth of scholarship that addresses the experiences of Southeast Asian American student populations in the second generation, particularly the children of refugees, whose histories and experiences are not only strikingly different from other AAPI subgroups but also their refugee parents. This disparity has led scholars to recommended an increasing need to examine the experiences of the children of refugees and the multigenerational nature of the Southeast Asian American population in the United States. Ngo and Lee (2007) delineate notions of homogeneity, such as the implications of the model minority stereotype, for Southeast Asian American

(Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Mien, and Hmong) students in education and highlight the seminal roles of family and culture that account for the relative success and high achievement of Vietnamese American students. Ngo and Lee note the centrality of education that is predicated upon an adherence to cultural values espoused by parents to their children, whereby success is predicated upon “the values that refugees brought with them from Vietnam and instill in their children” (Ngo and Lee, 2007). However, Ngo and Lee suggest the significance of denoting evidence of struggle for Vietnamese American students and their families amidst this relative success. The collective nature of education as a vehicle for social and economic mobility that incites high educational expectations and pressure by refugee parents unto their children in Southeast Asian American refugee families is useful in understanding the relationship between the second generation Vietnamese American college student and their family (Museus 2013; Museus et al. 2016). Although the present literature has examined Vietnamese American intergenerational tension, which stems from cultural dissonance, its significance in subverting traditional familial and gender roles, and research on the significance of transgenerational war-related trauma in shaping the individual experiences of Vietnamese American college students in the second generation is minimal (Hsu et al. 2004; Han and Lee 2011).

Hsu et al. contextually consider cultural factors of Southeast Asian American refugees and their families to discuss post-migration challenges relating to relocation, readjustment, and acculturation in the country of resettlement, such as socioeconomic and

environmental stressors, health care consequences, and racial discrimination. The effects of war-related trauma for the refugees, such as depression, irritability, hypervigilance, nightmares, and spontaneous emergences of violence, impact not only the individual's ability to function within the traditional Southeast Asian family structure, but also shaped the development and familial roles of their children, suggesting a need for future research to examine parent-child relationships in families (Han, 2006; Han and Lee, 2011; Museus, 2013). Culturally, as family structures are the primary social unity and source of identity for youth, language and cultural barriers that parents face inhibit their communication with their children and contribute to generational distancing and conflict, as "refugee adolescents tend to feel that their culture is that of their ancestors and not their own, the greatest difficulty in the formation of racial identity in refugee adolescents is not the struggle about belonging to two cultures, but rather the feeling of not belonging to any culture" (Hsu et al, 2004). As there is minimal research that has focused on the mental health needs of Southeast Asian American populations, despite documentation that has necessitates this need, Hsu et. al. also contends that there needs to be research that discusses resilience factors of this population that protects against mental health issues. It also becomes necessary to understand that although war-induced trauma and stressors related to migration and readjustment to a foreign country characterize the experiences of most Southeast Asian American refugee populations, it is imperative to avoid overgeneralization and understand cultural differences among Southeast Asian American subgroups surrounding mental health stigma, perception of traumatic

experiences, the adaptation process of refugee groups, and resiliency facilitated through family and community within the interstice between home and school for the children of refugees.

For second generation Vietnamese Americans, even though traumatic events of the Vietnam War preceded their births these events still haunt their experiences in inarticulable ways as what Avery Gordon refers to as ghosts, which “makes itself known to us through haunting and pulls us affectively into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience as a recognition... a special way of knowing what has happened or is happening” (Gordon, 2008). For the Vietnamese American subject, this haunting and ghosts are both recognized and realized in the diaspora within structures of feelings at the intersection of trauma and memory that stem from that eponymous war; oftentimes, as these hauntings are marked by the absent presence of ghosts that resist speech and relish in silence, the significance of transgenerational storytelling becomes vital – as Viet Thanh Nguyen in *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* reminds us that “ghosts are both inhuman and human and their appearance tells us that we are, too. To understand our fate and theirs, we must do more than tell ghost stories. We must also tell the war stories that made ghosts and made us ghosts, the war stories that brought us here” (Nguyen, V. T., 2016). As bearers of their histories and the histories of their ancestors, it becomes imperative that the second generation, haunted by these ghosts of their descendants’ past, breathes life into their stories, interwoven with strategies for survival,

success, and refugee resilience, to break cycles of inherited trauma and generate their own legacies of transgenerational healing.

### *Conclusion*

For the second, or “postwar” generation, the children of refugees and survivors of the source of the original traumatic wounding, the fleeting nature of these ghosts from the past are felt and made visible in their absent presence amplified by epistemological silence and violence that make the tasks of remembering, memorializing, and storytelling difficult for the survivors of the Vietnam War and their offspring. Other Vietnamese American scholars have recently called to the forefront the oft-forgotten memories of the first generation of refugees, survivors of war, many of whom fought alongside the United States and came to the United States from the Republic of South Vietnam having been granted what Mimi Nguyen coins the “gift of freedom,” indubitably tying their indebted fate and future to broader contexts of US militarism and imperialism in exchange for gratitude, patriotism, and loyalty to the adoptive nation-state, what Phuong Tran Nguyen calls a “refugee nationalism” representative of the convoluted and conflicting position of the Vietnamese refugee subject within the thread of American history (Nguyen, M. T., 2012; Nguyen, P. T., 2017). For the first generation, even decades after the war, the haunting ghost and absent presence of what was and what could have been for South Vietnam with respect to the United States’ imperialistic military involvement “triggers thorny and tangled memories that need to be freed from their twisted roots,” preventing

the unheard and silenced stories of the second generation from being told, as the first generation's history continues to struggle to be understood (Bui, 2018). Yen Le Espiritu applies Hirsch's "postmemory" as an analytic framework to explore the ways that the post-1975 generation of the Vietnam War, those born and/or raised in the United States after the official end of the war, navigate their contentious, convoluted, and often confusing, relationships with that war (Espiritu, 2014). Espiritu acknowledges the ways that the practices of this postwar generation reconstruct narratives of the Vietnam War and elucidate silences that are ever-present in their refugee families, amidst their parents' reluctance to share their experiences. Albeit this acknowledgement affirms the lingering impact of war upon the future generations of Vietnamese Americans as it shapes their motivations to succeed either and both academically and economically in the United States, it does not necessarily recognize the ways in which this war-related transgenerational trauma informs what Gordon may call a "complex personhood" as ethnic identity is developed and shaped across spatiotemporal boundaries, similar to the way in which ghosts of the past make their absence present in their haunting. Through adopting a cultural studies framework to understanding the phenomenological nature in trauma inheritance and the discovery of self, these multigenerational communities may begin to open communicative avenues of recognition, understanding, and healing of, from, and with these traumas on individual, family, community, and policy levels. This research aims to build upon this literature on the transgenerational transmission of trauma with respect to understanding the educational experiences of children of refugees and

notions of ethnic identity development whereby the postwar and subsequent generations experience processes of “becoming Vietnamese American.”

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

*“To understand how my father became the way he was, I had to learn what happened to him as a little boy. It took a long time to learn the right questions to ask.”*

*-Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do**

#### **Research Methods**

In order to address the research questions, this project utilized multiple research methods, both qualitative and quantitative. Between April and August 2019, virtual interviews were conducted with 8 second generation Vietnamese American students who had attended or graduated from four-year institutions of higher education in Northern California. These interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire. After all interviews were completed, qualitative ethnographic analysis to utilize detailed narrative information to explore the complexities of a topic or concept, or “the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell, 2009). An ethnographic approach for this project was appropriate as I was able to both immerse myself in the culture of the participants during interviews, which were conducted more so as conversations, as they provided vibrant detail in their narratives. This approach allowed for a rich understanding of participants’ struggles, motivations, and emergent themes. Education scholars have used qualitative methods to better understand and unpack the complex and multifaceted experiences of Southeast Asian American college students as it relates to their cultural heritage and ethnicity to uncover parental influence in educational trajectories and suggest recommendations to higher education practitioners and policies that impact students’ lived experiences (Museus et al., 2016).

Qualitative methods are ideal in effectively framing this inquiry in providing descriptive insight into the processes of ethnic identity development as it is informed through engagements with the transgenerational transmission of trauma. Qualitative methods are also effective in answering “how,” “what,” and “why” questions that ground the inquiries of this research project. In order to generate “data in the form of words, descriptions, and images,” which provide non-positivist, subjective understandings of meaning (McDougal, 2014). I adopt McDougal’s definition of ethnography, “the careful study of a culture through qualitative interviews, observations, and analysis of cultural documents” (McDougal, 2014). To understand what Avery Gordon terms as a haunting, “in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with or when their oppressive nature is continuously denied (Gordon, 2011, 2008), an ethnographic approach is most appropriate in uncovering how these hauntings are ineffable yet seemingly omnipresent. An inductive, ethnographic approach offers both flexibility in interpretation and insight into the significance of this data to people’s lives, a limitation of positivist, quantitative approaches to methodology, and centers “how the members of a culture define their own reality” — in this case, second generation Vietnamese American college students and the realities of negotiating their ethnic identities.

### **Site and Participants**

Data reported in the 2010 U.S. Census, which showed the growth of Asian Americans as one of the most rapidly expanding ethnic groups in the United States, as well as contributing to the largest share of recent immigrants calculated the population of Vietnamese in the United States to be approximately 1.5 to 2 million, many of whom arrived in the United States as refugees after the Fall of Saigon in 1975 or are descendants of these refugees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Of this population, approximately 600,000 reside in California. In Northern California, comprised of Alameda County, Contra Costa County, Santa Clara County, and San Francisco County, the approximate Vietnamese population is 200,000, or one-third (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Lack of disaggregated data limits the calculation of the number of students of Vietnamese descent at public, four-year institutions of higher education in Northern California, who may also not have been born and/or raised in Northern California.

This research was approved by the IRB of San Francisco State University prior to the advertisement and recruitment of participants. Purposeful snowball sampling was employed to recruit potential participants; according to Berg, these sampling strategies were appropriate for locating and recruiting participants from marginalized communities who may have otherwise been difficult to recruit, as well as being selective with participants predicated on this study's criterion for the scope of this research (Berg, 2001). The sample population for this research is comprised of Vietnamese American college students and recent graduates in the second generation, i.e., who are children of

Vietnamese parents who fled Vietnam as refugees as a result of the Vietnam War, who are currently attending or have attended public universities in Northern California, the birthplace of Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies, in the United States.

To gather participants for this research I utilize my personal, social, and academic networks, particularly from involvement in collegiate cultural organizations, such as the Union of Vietnamese Student Associations (UVSA), and Asian American Studies classes. To avoid broad generalizations in the findings and to focus on the depth of each participants' narrative, a small sample size is appropriate for this comparative analysis. The study sample size was 8, which included 6 females and 2 males. Table 1 shows the participants' demographics – pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of the participants. 5 participants were attending four-year institutions of higher education in Northern California at the time of the interview, 3 participants were college graduates, and 2 were continuing their education and in the process of earning advanced degrees. All participants were at least 18 years or older. 5 of the 8 participants described themselves as coming from low-income communities, and 4 of these participants are first-generation college students, or the first in their families to attend college.

**TABLE 1. Participant Demographic Information**

<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education Level</b>	<b>Major(s)</b>
Trang		26 College Graduate	Asian American Studies
Yen		20 Undergraduate Student	Data Science
Xuan		27 PhD Student	Public Health
Ngoc		19 Undergraduate Student	Communications
Tricia		26 Master's Degree	Educational Counseling
Vinh		22 Undergraduate Student	Communications
Kevin		21 Undergraduate Student	Biology
Anthony		25 Undergraduate Student	Engineering

Although qualitative methods are appropriate for the purposes of this study, there are challenges and limitations to this approach. The potentiality and possibility of the researcher's observer's bias is more significant in qualitative research than quantitative research, as the data collected through less-structured methods is rich in detail and description and subject to the researcher's positionality and interpretation — this is true for both data collection and analysis. Carlson notes that “variations in research design, protocol, and paradigm” may inadvertently result in problems that negatively impact the trustworthiness and reliability of qualitative research, as “interpretative recommendations rather than systemic requirements” are purported and may not fully account for the dynamic and sometimes unpredictable nature of ethnographic field research (Carlson, 2010). To assess questions of reliability and validity, and to mitigate the disadvantages to this approach, I will engage in reflexivity and cognizance of the positionality of the researcher in relation to the participants and community and in follow-up discussions and interviews with participants for clarification and accuracy.

Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to tailor interview questions to address the research questions while still providing opportunities for the researcher to “explore and discover new and unexpected sources of information,” which would be appropriate in unveiling the subjectivities and sensibilities of participants within an open-ended, conversational context (Merriam, 2015). This approach to my data collection is also informed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s decolonizing methodology which prompts me to actively engage in a reflexivity of my ethics, methods, and theories toward the goals of decolonization and healing that subverts the conventional oppressive role of the researcher in marginalized communities (Smith, 2013). These interviews were conducted either in-person, or virtually via Zoom, face-to-face, and range from approximately one to two hours, which provided ample time for participants to reflect and recollect upon their experiences in answering interview questions, as well as the conversational nature of the interview. The interview schedule includes introductory questions about personal background to build rapport and establish familiarity, followed by questions about familial histories and relationships, epistemologies of the Vietnam War, educational experiences, engagement with ethnic community, and ethnic identity. Following the obtainment of the informed written consent form provided for the participants, the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to allow for their usage as a tool for triangulation, verification, and continuation of analysis to code emergent themes.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data obtained and audio recorded from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed using computer-generated software, then reviewed and corrected for accuracy. After the data was transcribed, NVIVO was employed to identify emergent themes related to the inheritance of trauma, the significance of education, and Vietnamese American identity. Throughout the data collection process, observatory notes and analytic memos were written, and analysis was conducted simultaneously with the data collection process. The use of NVIVO also allowed for triangulation between and across interview transcripts, memos, textural-structural description, and notes to uncover and verify emergent themes.

### **Researcher Positionality**

My own positionality as a researcher stems from my lived experience navigating the interstices and discretions between my family's narratives and narratives about the vagrancies and vicissitudes of Vietnamese refugees who sought to reap the rewards of the elusive "American Dream," which has served as my motivation for the pursuit of higher education in Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies. I consider myself to be an insider to the communities which I study, of which I have a shared background and shared experiences; however, I am conscious of my position within an insider/outsider binary and recognize that potential differences in gender, class, age, and occupation facilitate the dynamic relationships between me and my participants. These differences urge a recognition of "the multilayered, shifting, and competing similarities and

difference between native or insider researchers and their communities — a process that is shaped by simultaneous, ongoing negotiations” (Vo, 2000).

My research questions are grounded in my own experiences that I wanted to systematically explore through this project; I fit the criteria for the people who would be my participants. My educational experience has provided me with the tools and knowledge to articulate what I have come to understand as a hybrid Vietnamese American identity and subjectivity as well as the pervasive and ubiquitous nature of transgenerational trauma. This transgenerational trauma is etched on the palimpsests of my history and expressed in the legacies and memories of the American War in Vietnam that find their place in the contemporaneous spatiotemporal realm — the ghosts of a homeland that was once home to my parents and ancestors continue to haunt in their refusal to be forgotten. From my own experience, the transmission of this transgenerational trauma has oftentimes manifested through random outbursts of emotional and physical violence, continual evocation of nostalgia, a reluctance to recount the past, the proliferation of family secrets, and the pervasiveness of ambiguous silence that poignantly permeate the ordinary and mundanity of everyday life.

For my Vietnamese refugee parents, the war had been carried across the Pacific Ocean with them, bringing along these inadvertent ghosts whose affective absent presence was felt and known, yet whose stories were unspeakable. Through the course of my training in Comparative Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies, my experiences engaged in social justice work rooted in the empowerment of 2nd and 3rd generation

Southeast Asian American student communities, and through critical self-reflection of my own lived experiences, these ghosts I had experienced were not uncommon in other Southeast Asian American youth. For these Vietnamese American youth in the second generation whose own curiosities about the war and their ancestral histories could not be satisfied by either their families or their education, signs of these ghosts ran rampant in their lives in ways that they could understand but not completely articulate. These vignettes of a forsaken past, ghosts and silences that I and other Vietnamese American college students had been all too familiar with, and by which we had come to understand our Vietnamese American identities, told stories of their own. It is these stories that lay the foundation for this research and speak to its significance and potential to elucidate the ways in which the process of becoming Vietnamese American for these children of refugees may be inextricably linked to inherited trauma.

#### CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

*“Every story ends with a lesson: everyone has choices taken away from them. Despair is pushed into our lives. We can only control how we recover.”*

*-Aimee Phan, *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong**

In *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* by Aimee Phan, the novel’s namesake, Cherry, uncovers her complex and convoluted transnational diasporic second generation Vietnamese American identity. To contextualize the epithet for this chapter, she reflects on the words of her Grandaunt, who “likes to tell stories,” yet “Her subject taboo is clear: nothing about the war and its aftermath,” (Phan, 2012, p. 12) and the way in which she often invoked morals from the *Tale of Kiều*, in the stories that she told. *The Tale of Kiều* is often understood as a timeless synecdoche to the psyche of the Vietnamese people, passed on through generations to imbue values surrounding morality, perseverance, fate, choice, and resilience. Cherry’s Truong’s narrative is reminiscent of the participants in this project – although stories about the Vietnam War and its aftermath were seldom explicitly shared, lessons are learned from the scarce glimpses of history, tradition, and culture that the first generation bestows upon the second. From the data collection process, participants spoke to these ubiquitous themes of Vietnamese culture as they narrated their experiences in the second generation. Based on the interviews, three salient themes emerged from general findings after coding: (1) Stories and silences undergirded the “inheritance” of trauma; (2) Processes of “becoming” Vietnamese American often occurred in ambivalence and uncertainty in diaspora; and (3) Recalling, remembering, and reconfiguring when and where the past becomes relevant for the present become

recipes for resilience. On the individual, familial, and communal levels, these themes were found to be prevalent to participants' experiences through processes of ethnic, cultural, and psychosocial identity development.

For each of these three themes, there were two subthemes that emerged. For the first theme, the salience of stories and silence as inheritance, subthemes are: family histories and family secrets; the second, the recognition of a Vietnamese American identity against the grain of conventional understandings of the Vietnam War and its aftermath: guilt and education; and the third, how resilience is recalled, remembered, and reconfigured between past and present: health and postmemory.

### **Stories and Silences as Inheritance of Trauma: *Những Lời Khuyên***

The complexity of trauma and inherited trauma is yet to be explored in-depth for the second generation, and existing research on trauma has primarily centered on the experiences of the first generation, their experience with war and its aftermath, and indicators of PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder. For this study, it became important to distinguish the second generation as the children of these refugees and their upbringing to attempt to unveil the insidious ways in which the process of trauma inheritance occurs, or how trauma is passed from generation to generation, and how it is embedded in the lived experience of members of the second generation.

*Family Histories: Câu Chuyện*

When participants were asked about their parents' level of education, what they do for a living, or what they knew about their parents' migration histories, I was often met first with a silent gaze indicative of a process of recollection. *Những lời khuyên*, or life lessons which are passed on as advice, lectures, and reprimand, which were used to convey an urgent need to "err on the side of caution," held both a retelling of history that invoked a sense of sacrifice and longing. As the participants carefully recalled vignettes of stories that had become ubiquitous throughout their upbringing and childhood, not only were family histories gradually pieced together, but also family secrets that prompted participants to try and "read between the lines" of the stories passed onto them by their parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, which drew attention from the stories which were told, and untold, to the inference of familial and cultural values, and traditions that had been carried overseas from the homeland.

For most participants, asking about family histories was taboo and met with disinterest and refrain. Xuan, a 26-year-old female PhD student in Public Health, graduate of UC Berkeley (UCB), whose parents were both high school teachers that had to "start over when they left" Vietnam shared her parents' stories of migration, separation, and acclimation that she begrudgingly pieced together over the course of her childhood, since she recalled only hearing of these stories when she misbehaved:

I think my parents, I mean, I don't think it ever came up in like a good situation. It was usually like a, 'oh, you're being so bad or naughty, so here's the story about why or how...what I gave up to have you be in the United States.' And I remember that happened in high school, especially - like, a lot of times. And then

when I applied to college, that was also the story they told to motivate me – I heard it multiple times...I think I was always curious, but I didn't feel like they wanted to talk about it. (Xuan)

For the refugees who made the passage overseas, their experiences with the war that not only displaced them, but also placed their children in the context of diaspora, was wrought with emotion and trauma that was only necessary to talk about as reminders of sacrifice when it was convenient to the maintenance of what they saw as their children's personal growth and familial decorum. For Xuan, although she had actively sought out these histories and was empathetic to the trauma that was laden in these stories, she was discouraged from seeking out answers, leaving gaps in her own family history as she went on to college away from her parents and home. This fractured narrative structure in the (re)telling of family history is not uncommon – Anthony, a senior undergraduate student in engineering at San Francisco State University (SFSU) described how he learned of his family history and parents' migration:

My dad's story, he never really told it to us in like one sitting, just like piecemeal by piecemeal of his, things he remembered. And one story he always brought up was he remembered they were in a cargo plane – that's how they left Vietnam. There were so many people standing up, packed like sardines, and he remembers falling asleep standing up. So for his story, I just remember piecemeal here and there. My mom's story, I think it was a similar project to Professor [Nguyen]'s back in high school, where she sat down and talked about her stories. (Anthony).

The arduous journeys that the first generation experienced were and are traumatic, and still continue to impact the lives of this generation, but also the next, as the second generation is left with the tragic stories that are only told as tales of sacrifice. These sacrifices that echo in family histories are told to simultaneously keep children beholden

to their parents' and motivate them to be successful for their future, leaving gaps of knowledge along the way. Some family histories were only shared across generations when the second generation needed to complete academic assignments in school, underscoring the common theme of the significance of education.

For some of the first generation, the lingering pain from the traumas of the past may be temporarily endured to impart valuable life lessons for the second generation – who, in their act of “reading between the lines” of their parents’ stories, internalize patterns of trauma, as well as the ways of coping with trauma. Yen, a 19-year-old female second-year student at UCB studying data science recalls one of her mother’s “go-to life lessons”:

I feel like my mom always says the quote, you know, like the grass is greener on the other side, just because I was pretty spoiled growing up I think. And I like always complained about everything. But she told me about like how the communists would take your house and stuff. She would tell me like, ‘oh, she remembered the last day right before they took it,’ or she would tell me ‘oh, my grandpa would tell me stories about how he was in prison,’ and stuff like that.  
(Yen)

These family history life lessons ingrained in the second generation a sense of gratitude for both the lives that they felt were privileged to have in the United States, granted the opportunity for an American dream, while instilling rich cultural and ethnic history that oftentimes is not represented in mainstream or dominant narratives of these traumatic events. Yen highlights how these life lessons served as a constant, intermittent, almost random, reminders of the past and nature of the refugee figure, whose motivation was to survive:

And then my dad, I remember his story the most just 'cause he was a boat refugee, so it really stuck with me. Growing up, he never really told me the details I guess 'cause he's scared or he just didn't want to like, traumatize me I guess when I was little – like [he thought] I wouldn't understand at that age, but we actually had a talk, I think my freshman year of college. I remember I came home and I was studying for finals, and then I was really stressed, but like I don't know, out of nowhere my dad just like opened up to me and he told me his boat refugee story. And so he would tell me about there were sharks and everything and how they didn't have water and people were always thirsty...so you would like do crazy things. So I feel like whenever I complain about something, they'd be like 'well, I had it so much worse in the past and you should be grateful and things like that. I feel like everyone in my family tells me that all the time. Like my grandma, ever since I was little, she would tell me to eat every single grain of rice, to not waste any food. (Yen)

For Yen's father, he was conscious of the potential of (re)traumatizing Yen in her formative years as a child, and it was not until Yen demonstrated signs of stress studying for finals that her father began to share "his boat refugee story." In sharing this story, one of survival and sacrifice, he conveys an understanding of the imminent duress that Yen faces and draws parallels to a time period in his life when a similar dire duress was imminent. The story of and sentiment behind Yen's grandmother's constant reminders to "eat every single grain of rice, to not waste any food," was also shared across other participants' narratives. When probed about what they felt like their elders had passed onto them during interviews, participants mentioned similar stories, tying this notion of not wasting food to a mutual intergenerational understanding that survival at any cost and by any means necessary had always been the first priority. Rather than focusing on strategies to thrive, many of the first generation would recount the ways that they needed to survive – strategies that become present in the second generation through the telling of family histories. It is through these family histories, told through lectures, advice, and

reminders – *những lời khuyên* – that the second generation is able to connect their Vietnamese cultural roots to their understanding, development, and configuration of their distinct Vietnamese American identity.

*Family Secrets: Chuyện Bí Mật*

Within fragmented (re)tellings of family histories exist silences – present absences, ghosts and gaps in narratives that make themselves known through awkward pauses, rapid changes in topics, and flashbacks. For the second generation who may not necessarily understand completely why these gaps exist or feel afraid for sake of triggering traumatic memories in their parents, family secrets may be insidiously impacting their interpersonal relationships and understanding of self. Implicit is the shame associated with the survival strategies necessary for the first generation's journey overseas, whether that be via plane, boat, or from refugee camp to refugee camp, and their processes of acclimation and acculturation. For Trang, a 26-year-old female graduate from UC Davis who studied Asian American Studies, family secrets revealed themselves in unspoken ways in the form of complicated relationships between families and family members who experienced separation during the Vietnam War that continued to impact the family structure in the diaspora:

So I have half siblings that are a lot older than me...there's four of them. There's a couple of others but they passed before I was around, before I came into life. I have four older half siblings that are old enough to be my parents, to sort of put it into perspective...we don't have a very good relationship. We have a very strange relationship, and we're not close at all. I grew up with my older brother and the youngest older sister for the first nine years of my life, and then my two elder sisters didn't come to America until, I think it was fifth or sixth grade, with

their families...I'm really close with my parents. I think a part of it has to do with the fact that – I think my dad felt like he missed out on a lot of his, of my siblings, like [their] lives growing up because when they were growing up that was when the war was happening. (Trang)

Interpersonal relationships and the individual's sense of family become afflicted by familial tensions that have roots in the Vietnam War and its aftermath, when many families became separated from each other, and whose existence and stories were seldom brought up within the context of the diasporic family. Within my own family, I had not known my own mother was adopted until I was in middle school, when her biological family rekindled their connections with her and sought her out, and when I realized that the entire maternal side of my family that I had grown up with up until that point had no biological ties to me.

For Xuan, who had the desire to know her family history, her parents' deflection also unintentionally made known to her certain family secrets that shaped her familial relationships:

I just felt like they just wanted to tell me and not have me ask questions because I've definitely, like, I've tried to bring it up like random or like, not when they're like yelling at me, but they just don't want to talk about it. I mean they told me it was a traumatic experience for them, so I imagine it was hard. So I didn't feel like I could ask if I wanted to know and I was curious, but I just...no one in my family is really willing to talk about it. And if I bring it up, then my dad would just be like, 'oh, you shouldn't know about that because what if you actually bring it up to my uncle?' And then he'd have flashbacks and stuff. So I think they tried to avoid it. (Xuan)

Questions of "what," "how," "why," "when," and "where," with respect to participants' family histories are oft-left vague and unanswered, prompting more questions into how family secrets are hauntings that seem to be redacted from these stories. The first

generation becomes dismissive of their children's inquisitions and sometimes feign ignorance in an attempt to "save face," or shield their reputation from gossip occurring within the extended family and broader community. For this sample of second-generation Vietnamese American students, inherited trauma, albeit affectively felt and unspoken at times, maintains itself through the (re)telling of stories, silence, of secrets, can be attributable to the Vietnam War and its aftermath.

### **"Vietnamese American" Identity Against the Grain**

For the second generation of Vietnamese Americans, the postwar generation that did not live through the eponymous war of their ethnic identity, the clash and tension between individual understandings of personal/familial/communal knowledge and mainstream/dominant portrayals of histories surrounding the Vietnam War and its aftermath becomes a point of contestation. At this intersection, considering lived experience between the loci of the home and school, where the liminal experience of simultaneously being insider and outsider are present, we can begin to peel back the layers of Vietnamese American identity and the nuanced processes of "becoming Vietnamese American." This notion of becoming in its liminality is held against the grain of mainstream knowledge, representation, and depiction of Vietnamese people, which is predicated upon American militaristic conquest and imperialism in Southeast Asia for the latter half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When probed with questions of what it means to be or understand a distinguished Vietnamese American identity, emergent themes interwoven

between past and present, linked the first and second generations, and spoke to this development of identity were guilt and education.

### *Guilt*

For narratives of the Vietnam War, the feeling of guilt, particularly survivor's guilt, is oft-spoken of with respect to the narratives of Vietnam combat veterans and their struggles with PTSD following the "end" of the Vietnam War on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1975 (Hendin, 1991, Glover, 1984). For these veterans and their offspring, similar to the refugees who fought alongside them and their offspring, remnants of the Vietnam War make themselves known through generations of war stories, which often include the widespread deaths of comrades and loved ones. Stories of the American GI have proliferated the representation of the Vietnam War and Vietnam itself throughout the mainstream discourse within the United States; however, for the South Vietnamese refugees and their offspring who now live life in diaspora, who also feel a sense of guilt for leaving loved ones behind in their search for a better life, their experiences are widely unheard and unknown outside of the locus of family. Anthony, whose family members had served in the Army of the Republic Vietnam's military during the Vietnam War, and who had attended a military school for several years before returning home to attend community college and transfer to SFSU, shares his experience with what he understands as guilt that stems from his father's migration:

I think, compared to most families, I don't...I get this vibe from my dad where he almost feels like his suffering, all this, was not as bad as most people. So he almost feels like invalidated, almost guilty. Almost like survivor's guilt. Almost – because his dad, my grandpa, was a colonel in the South Vietnamese Army. He

how she only recently laid claim to her Vietnamese American identity upon joining her school's Vietnamese Student Association (VSA):

I was too young to appreciate those stories because to me it just sounded like she was lecturing me and being mean, but now that I'm older, I'm like, she was telling me so much about her own history and I didn't even bother to take it in. I feel guilty. [...] When I was younger and doing Viet school stuff, I felt really connected to [my ethnic community] because every holiday I would be part of the Tết Festival for the school...but once I got into middle school, high school, I wasn't involved with my ethnic community at all. I stopped going to that – but now that I'm in college, and I'm still pretty new to VSA, but I'd like to think that I'm getting more involved...I have not had not had time to reflect on my college experience and how much more connected I feel to the Vietnamese American community...I feel myself being like a lot more comfortable being Vietnamese American because I spent so long being kind of ashamed of being Vietnamese American. (Ngoc)

Ngoc's story exemplifies the role that ethnic community present in Northern California and in its institutions of higher education play in facilitating the growth and development of a Vietnamese American identity amongst peers. Indeed, it is precisely within places such as school where Vietnamese American youth have felt ostracized or misrepresented that they have been able to understand and (re)claim their ethnic identity. For Kevin, a 21-year-old queer male from San Jose studying biology at UCB as an undergraduate senior, Vietnamese American identity had been part of his family lineage, as his parents had been one of the first members of VSA at his high school, and since then had been heavily involved in the broader San Jose Vietnamese American community. Kevin, when asked about the significance of student organizing in ethnic community at UCB, spoke to how the people he met and befriended became part of his support group:

It's my support group, my family, my friends...it used to be like most of what I did. Beyond friends, too, I really recognized the power and clout that being in these organizations had – we had access to tables on campus, spaces to hang out and study. I can't imagine being a student without being in a student organization and organizing. I don't know what else I would do with my time. Now, reflecting on the past three and a half years at UCB, I've seen VSA ebb and flow between being so down to feel civically and community engaged to becoming more social because so many people come in and out and the values change so much...I felt like I was impacting a lot of students by educating them, by giving them a space to connect with people from potentially similar backgrounds while also uplifting each other by helping each other find resources and build community, for example navigating through the bureaucracy of UCB and the professional world. I learned a lot of professional skills from VSA, like cleaning up my resume and working with spreadsheets, those were some of the things I learned...I feel really privileged in having access to this education...I see the power in education and how many doors it can open. (Kevin)

This transformative process of developing an ethnic self-consciousness resonates with other participants who had varying degrees of involvement in their school VSAs and the wider Vietnamese American ethnic community, allowing them to connect with and find mentorship in peers and role models that would connect them to both personal and professional resources for growth and development ethnically and for their career aspirations. Being involved in ethnic student organizations and broader Vietnamese American community also served the purpose of bridging the intergenerational gap between the second and first generation, as Yen, Ngoc, Trang, and Kevin, who had all been part of a VSA, shared that they found avenues to “speak more Viet than they ever did in high school,” which eased communicative tension with their primarily Vietnamese-speaking families. Besides from student organizations within institutions of higher education, questions during the interview were also asked about the role of Ethnic Studies

and Asian American Studies courses to the development of identity. For Trang, Anthony, Kevin, and Tricia, who had taken these courses, they shared that taking Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies courses helped them unravel conventional understandings of who they were as descendants of Vietnamese refugees and the result of American imperialism, as well as gave opportunities for them to interact more deeply with their parents as part of class assignments they needed to complete. For Trang, who majored in Asian American Studies at UC Davis, she shares her experience with finding an understanding of her Vietnamese American identity through these courses:

It wasn't until I think college, but I started taking Asian American studies classes and kind of started identifying as Vietnamese American. I think the reason for that is due to the fact that like growing up in San Jose, you have a large Vietnamese population, and my parents had always made me speak in Vietnamese at home. They always told me like, 'Remember your Vietnamese,' and it just kinda really instilled that into my identity. I didn't even realize that identifying as Vietnamese American was an option until I started taking classes...being from San Jose, I was one of those kids that kind of just took being Vietnamese or Vietnamese or Asian American for granted. It was something that I was always surrounded by. I would say that I was pretty great or pretty lucky to not have to deal with a lot of racism or like being bullied for being a person of color, y'know? So I didn't really think anything of it. When my friends told me to take Asian American Studies classes, I was like, 'Why? Why do I need to learn about being Asian American? I live it,' and the only reason why I got into Asian American Studies was because I was about to get kicked out of school. It was winter quarter of my sophomore year in college and I just lost my dad the summer before I started my second year. Being a first-generation college student, there wasn't a lot of guidance – I didn't know that I could take the quarter off or defer my year, but at the same time there was a sense of pride where I believed I could do it right, so I didn't take the quarter off and ended up failing one of my [biology] classes...Asian American Studies was supposed to just be a stepping stone for me [to improve my grade point average], but I took my first Asian American Studies class and I absolutely fell in love with it...it was eye opening to see how different Asian Americans experience life as Asian Americans, and it also helped me realize some of the things that were toxic about being Vietnamese...it helps me better understand why some people in my family operated in the way that they did. (Trang)

For Trang, Asian American studies helped her better understand the Asian American community, her family, herself, and her identity as a Vietnamese American. This sentiment is prevalent in participants who had the opportunity to take Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies classes. Tricia, who minored in Asian American Studies and who is in graduate school for a Master's degree in the field of education while working within a 4-year institution of higher education, mentions that "one thing that I miss in terms of culture was the ethnic community. At UCB, I was really involved in different organizations like the Southeast Asian Student Coalition and in different API organizations and the consistency of seeing each other often and being able to speak about our experiences, in club meeting and also Asian American Studies classes." As a generation who had grown up hearing about stories of war, violent and oppressive reeducation camps, treacherous journeys of displacement, and difficult processes of racialization in diaspora, both feelings of guilt and the pursuit of education open up new opportunities for more nuanced, complex, multi-layered understandings of what it means to become Vietnamese American against the grain of US empire.

### **Recipes for Resilience: Recalling, Remembering, and (Re)configuring Past and Present**

Insofar as trauma can be inherited by the second generation, so can resiliency in the way that one's past, interwoven throughout one's own family history, is recalled, remembered, and reconfigured. Speaking to not only the sacrifice and resiliency of their

parents, from the interviews emerged themes of health, a seminal theme in the recollection of the past in the present, and postmemory, whereby past is acknowledged and the process of healing begins in the reconfiguration of the present for the future. In this discussion of health and postmemory, I pivot to the experiences and perspectives of the second generation's relationships with their parents and caretakers, and the way in which conventional understandings of health become inverted, as well as how we may consider mental health, a taboo and underaddressed topic afflicting Vietnamese American community members, and an emergent theme that participants mentioned as essential to processes transgenerational healing.

### *Health*

Growing up with my Vietnamese refugee parents in my home, I remember that when we would encounter a struggle or obstacle, I would be reminded to "*ráng chịu*," or "try your best to endure," with the implication that our situation would soon be better. The latter phrase often came accompanied with an imposition of nonchalance, that our family had already endured the worst, that things could only get better; the former an afterthought following a flurry of other reminders, including "*ráng học giỏi*," or "try your best to learn well in school." After I left Lancaster, California to pursue my undergraduate degree at UCB, each phone call home as my parents' own personal translator/interpreter ended with the reminder to: "*ráng giữ gìn sức khỏe*," literally translated as "try your best to keep your self healthy." Health arises as a theme that

participants spoke about which both connected them to their past and families, as well as motivated them to reflect and reconsider the possibilities for their life in college.

Xuan, who described her family as “pretty well off” shared her experience growing up with her parents’ hoarding and their health, which shaped her trajectory as a PhD student whose research concerns “the intersection between cancer and modifiable risk factors such as diet, sleep, etc – considering minority populations, specifically Asian populations.” When asked about whether she felt her parents’ experience with the Vietnam War and its aftermath have affected them, and what she felt might be significant obstacles that her family faced in the United States, spoke to the sense of urgency and preparedness for disaster or emergency that her mother had, even as she was fighting her battle with cancer:

When I was younger, it seemed normal, because they [her parents] always told me like, ‘we should always have emergency things ready – just in case.’ When my mom had cancer, she had two tumors: one in her brain and one in her stomach. I think that was really difficult, ‘cause I think, I mean, I know part of it, she was like, ‘oh, I don’t want to leave my family,’ but I think she was also thinking about ‘what’s going to happen with the [family dental] office? Who’s going to clean the house?’ Those kinds of things, which I found really interesting, but kind of annoying at the same time, because I would want to tell her, ‘Oh my God, take care of yourself first.’ (Xuan)

Although she shared with me that her parents also often reminded her of the importance of health for her future, her frustration for the irony that her mother was not prioritizing her health becomes significant to understanding how second generation Vietnamese Americans recognize and the behavioral patterns and trauma that their parents carry. This recognition that occurs at the nexus of health, and furthermore mental health, for both

first and second generation is not uncommon for the way that children of refugees reconfigure their relationships and filial duty to not only their parents, but to Vietnamese traditional customs and traditions, steeped in patriarchy and laden with the influences of both French colonialism and American imperialism. Tricia, who mentioned that her father was a non-traditional “stay-at-home dad” due to his health issues when she was asked about whether she felt the Vietnam War and its aftermath continued to impact her and her family’s lives:

As he started to get older, and especially because of his Parkinson’s, he would start to talk more about that [the Vietnam War] and his story...I think with my dad, with his health conditions and his traumatic experiences and having PTSD and things like that, it still impacts us because it still impacts him too to this day. But I feel like also, in a lot of ways, I was able to gain a different perspective in terms of having more opportunities here – I feel like it’s kind of a balancing act. Because of his health problems he tells more stories of what it was like then and I’m able to hear stories about how he really sacrificed everything to come to a land of more opportunities, and I see how that becomes rooted in my sense of self and motivates me in my professional endeavors, so that I can take care of him and my family. (Tricia)

Both physical and mental health between generations, provided the opportunity for transgenerational dialogue and communication, can thereby not only be seen as obstacles or difficulties that inhibit, but also as circumstances that lay the foundation for a brighter future on individual, familial, and community levels. At the crux of fostering spaces for healing inherited trauma are open channels of communication about difficult, tense, and awkward topics between generations, as health within the Vietnamese American community is not only referential to one’s own individual health, but the health of the family and community, and a collective sense of resiliency.

### *Postmemory*

The fashioning of postmemory as a way in which to reclaim and reconstruct one's past as a part of one's present and future becomes a medium by which a Vietnamese American identity, in acknowledgement of an inherited trauma, yet centered around resilience, emerges. In reflection of the interview process, the recollection of family histories and stories, and the reclamation of a Vietnamese American identity rooted in both the diasporic experience as well as one that is racialized within the United States, participants acknowledged that this perplexing process allowed them to see resilience in their parents' stories and their own.

Regarding this (re)fashioned relationship with the previous generation, participants also mentioned their shared sense of spirituality with their families as a medium by which culture, customs, traditions, and values were passed on to them. For participants who were from Catholic families, they described involvement in *Thiếu Nhi Thánh Thể*, or the Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Movement, where they often met other children of refugees in the second generation that shared similar experiences; for participants who were from Buddhist families, they described the Buddhist practice of having a "*bàn thờ*," or altar, in their homes and attending "*cúng giỗ*," or ancestors' death anniversaries with their families. Both in the home and within the community, a common sense of spirituality, as well as organized religiosity, were significant in the (re)construction of Vietnamese cultural traditions in diaspora, and illustrate the

contentious relationship for the second generation, born in the United States, with their ancestral homeland of Vietnam.

When asked about whether they had ever been to Vietnam, participants responded and also asked me the question of whether I had been back to Vietnam, or if I had ever “*về*,” the Vietnamese word for “go home.” For the second generation, notions of home are (re)configured in memory – descriptions and stories shared within the realm of the home conflict with mainstream depictions and portrayals of militarized landscapes, and the process of discerning “home” for them and their parents demonstrates the transnational connection of this diasporic population to an ancestral homeland. For Yen, who had never left the United States, her country of birth, she recounts:

I actually always asked my family to go growing up. They don't really travel a lot just 'cause they're always so busy...I really want to go and meet my family and things like that. My parents, they do want me to go back, but they said it's not a good time and that we don't really have the money to go right now. They said that if they want to go, they would want to be able to help their family back there – to them, it's not really a vacation.” (Yen)

Motivations of the second generation to (re)construct their identity through postmemory – the feeling of Vietnamese-ness, and by extension Vietnamese Americanness, seems incomplete without ever having seen their ancestral homeland of Vietnam. Especially in the diasporic Vietnamese community, nostalgia and the perpetual mourning of a lost country and homeland are exhibited in the flags that wave alongside American flags in Vietnamese American ethnic enclaves – Little Saigons. For participants who grew up in these Little Saigons, either in Northern California or Southern California, the memorialization and erection of monuments to “*không bao giờ*

*quên*,” or “never, throughout time, forget” is omnipresent. Ngoc, who grew up near San Jose’s Little Saigon, shares: “I don’t know how to define being Vietnamese American. Being able to speak my language is a huge thing with me, so is spending time with my family – that makes me feel Vietnamese American.” For Kevin who also grew up near San Jose’s Little Saigon, a distinctly Vietnamese American identity was encouraged by his parents, although he would tell his parents that he was simply Vietnamese:

They would say no, you’re not Vietnamese, you’re Vietnamese American. We’re Vietnamese American. They really affirmed the identity all the time, and they would talk about how we’re not Vietnamese, we’re Vietnamese American. And even though I heard their refugee story and history so often, I never really asked them about their feelings of diaspora, of feeling in-between. (Kevin)

Processes of racialization as a minoritized group in the United States affects the (re)construction and (re)figuration of the Vietnamese American identity – it is not any singular or monolithic particular thing, feeling, or description, but tied to a shared identity, incomplete memory, and collective remembrance. The retention of language, conversational bits and pieces, a sense of shared spirituality, and artifacts of the past – photographs, letters, and documents – that have withstood the test of time were acknowledged across all participants as indicators of a past that they are inherently connected to and which shape how they understand themselves as resilient and as Vietnamese Americans.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

*“Our people, our history, our struggle is more than a war, more than a fall, more than a favorite dish, more than one monolithic political opinion, more than one dialect, one gender, one nation, one flag. Respect and love to the diaspora – as imperfect as I am, I am one of you and I am yours”*

*-Bao Phi, Sông I Sing*

This project does not seek to define a singular Vietnamese American identity. This project is a testimony that our stories, histories, and experiences still require so much more telling, and that we cannot tell our stories alone. Understanding the ways in which these children of refugees inherit their parents’ psychological woundings that spurn from a culturally significant historical event which has framed the identities and experiences of an entire ethnic group, namely Vietnamese Americans, who continue to live with the scars of memory of the Vietnam War, provides insight into what it means to “become Vietnamese American.” The participants in this project spoke vulnerably and candidly to their experiences and what they knew about their families’ and communities’ experiences, granting insight into processes of becoming Vietnamese American through the lens of inherited trauma. Revisiting the primary research questions of: How is inherited trauma expressed and understood in the lives of second generation Vietnamese American college students on individual, familial, and community levels? How do transgenerational transmissions of trauma, or trauma inheritance, impact the ethnic identity development of second generation Vietnamese American college students?; and secondary questions of: In what ways does the inclusion of Vietnamese American voices in mainstream American discourse influence Vietnamese American college students’

sense of identity, their understanding of Vietnamese American experience and history, and serve to articulate proliferating silences of inherited trauma within families and communities? What are the roles of interpersonal relationships, Asian American Studies, and cultural organizations in facilitating reconciliation with transgenerational trauma and the development of ethnic identity? The findings of this project uncover three facets of this process: (1) Stories and (silences) that took on the form of lectures, advice, and reprimand, shared as family histories and secrets, undergirded the “inheritance” of trauma; (2) Vietnamese American identity and processes of becoming often occurs at the contested intersection between individual understanding of personal/familial/communal knowledge and mainstream/dominant portrayals of histories surrounding the Vietnam War and its aftermath, where guilt and education elicited convoluted meaning and feeling in diaspora; (3) The (re)collection, (re)membrance, and (re)configuration through the preservation of mind-body-spirit and palimpsests of the past that are uncovered within the presence denote that not only trauma is inherited, but also resilience.

The purpose of this project was to explore the experience of the second generation Vietnamese American college student through an ethnographic approach that utilized semi-structured interviews to inductively analyze significant thematic elements that frame these liminal experiences of becoming and begin processes of transgenerational healing to disrupt cycles of inherited trauma on individual, interpersonal, and community levels.

The scope of this work is limited due to availability of resources and time. Insofar as the stories of the second generation of Vietnamese Americans still struggle to be told and heard, the third generation of descendants of refugees is now coming of age, caught in between worlds and histories whose truths are blurred. For Vietnamese American communities not only across the United States outside of Northern California in the diaspora, who may not as readily have access to as robust of a surrounding Vietnamese American community, or Vietnamese Student Associations, or Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies courses at their universities, there is urgency and necessity for work that addresses these inhibitive issues and difficult questions. The context of the Vietnam War, also, is not only solely impactful for Vietnamese refugees, but also for generations of Southeast Asian Americans in the diaspora whose families fled as refugees from the Khmer Rouge and genocide, the Secret War, and other collectivized traumatic incidences rooted in American militaristic imperialism and exceptionalism. Work that critically interrogates these legacies continues to be necessary so long as we continue to remember and (re)construct postmemory as the post, and post-post war generations.

Through this process, as someone who could have been a participant in this project myself, I came to realize and affirm my role as a researcher and scholar, as well as an activist and community advocate. Insofar as my participants mentioned how, following each interview, a cathartic sense of therapeutic relief, I began to see the possibility for what this type of work could mean for not only the Vietnamese American community, but also for other marginalized, racialized groups in the United States who

must endure similar cycles of inherited trauma that shape themselves, their families, and their communities. As students, scholars, educators, administrators, and people who have the tools necessary to “dismantle the master’s house,” it must be our duty and responsibility to see ourselves, our families, and our communities as not simply victims of our collective fate, but as people whose voices demand to be heard.

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**APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW RECRUITMENT EMAIL**

Dear Vietnamese American Community Member,

My name is Philip Nguyen and I am currently a graduate student in the Asian American Studies Master's Program at San Francisco State University. I am conducting thesis research on Vietnamese American ethnic identity and the impact of transgenerational trauma, memory, and history. I am recruiting voluntary participants to be interviewed as a part of this research, which aims to shed light on the ways in which transgenerational trauma impacts the ethnic identity development of second generation Vietnamese American college students. All participants will be anonymous and have pseudonyms assigned to them. The interview will take approximately one to two hours.

If you or anyone you know would be interested in participating, individuals who wish to participate in this study must:

- 1) be born to parents who are refugees of the Vietnam War
- 2) self-identify as Vietnamese American
- 3) attend or have attended a public, four-year institution of higher education in Northern California (UC Berkeley, SFSU, SJSU) in the United States

If you do not qualify for or wish to volunteer for this study, I would greatly appreciate it if you could suggest other eligible participants who may be interested in participating and/or share my information with your networks.

Thank you for your time, and if you are interested and eligible to participate in this study, or have any questions, comments, or concerns, please feel free to email me at [aphilipnguyen@gmail.com](mailto:aphilipnguyen@gmail.com).

Best,

Philip Nguyen  
M.A. Student, Asian American Studies  
San Francisco State University

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

**San Francisco State University**  
**Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study**  
*Becoming Vietnamese American: On Inherited Trauma Transmission and Ethnic Identity*

### **A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

The purpose of this research study is to learn more about how the ethnic identity of Vietnamese American college students is informed by the transgenerational transmission of trauma. The researcher, Philip Nguyen, is a graduate student at San Francisco State University conducting thesis research for a master's degree in Asian American Studies. You are being asked to participate in this study because:

1. You identify as Vietnamese American
2. You were born to parents who are refugees of the Vietnam War
3. You currently attend or have attended a public, four-year institution of higher education in Northern California in the United States
4. You are 18 years or older

### **B. PROCEDURES**

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- You will be interviewed for approximately 1-2 hours.
- The interview will take place at a date, time, and location such as an office or a conference room that is most convenient for you. The interview will not take place in your home.
- The researcher may contact you later to clarify your interview answers via email.
- The interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in reporting your statements. You may receive a copy of the transcript by which you may choose to make any changes and return it to the researcher for edits.
- Total time commitment will be 120 minutes.

### **C. RISKS**

There is a risk of loss of privacy. However, no names or identities will be used in any published reports of the research. There is also a risk of discomfort or anxiety due to the nature of interview questions regarding your relationship to others or your work. You may answer only those questions you choose to answer and can stop participation in the research at any time.

### **D. CONFIDENTIALITY**

The research data will be kept in a secure location and only the researcher will have access to the data. At the conclusion of the study, all identifying information will be removed and the data will be kept in a locked cabinet or office. Participants may receive a copy of the interview transcript through which she may choose to make any changes and return to the researcher for edits. Audio-recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study. Data will be retained for a minimum of 3 years per CSU policy. Following this study, the transcript and notes of this interview will be retained indefinitely and only be used in the future for research purposes consistent with the original purpose of the research stated in this consent.

### **E. DIRECT BENEFITS**

There will be no direct benefits to the participant.

San Francisco State University  
 Institutional Review Board  
 Approval Date 2/16/2019  
 Expiration Date 2/14/2020  
 Protocol No. X18-119  
 (415) 338-1093

*Becoming Vietnamese American: On Inherited Trauma Transmission and Ethnic Identity*  
Philip Nguyen

**F. COSTS**

There will be no costs to the participant.

**G. COMPENSATION**

There will be no compensation for participating in this research.

**H. ALTERNATIVES**

The alternative is not to participate in the research.

**I. QUESTIONS**

You have spoken with Philip Nguyen about this study and have had your questions answered. If you have any further questions about the study, you may contact the researcher by email at [aphilipnguyen@gmail.com](mailto:aphilipnguyen@gmail.com) or you may contact the researcher's advisor, Professor Allyson Tintiangco-Cubales at [aticu@sfsu.edu](mailto:aticu@sfsu.edu)

Questions about your rights as a study participant, or comments or complaints about the study, may also be addressed to the Human and Animal Protections at (415) 338-1093 or [protocol@sfsu.edu](mailto:protocol@sfsu.edu).

**J. CONSENT**

You have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline to participate in this research study, or to withdraw your participation at any point, without penalty. Your decision whether or not to participate in this research study will have no influence on your present or future status at San Francisco State University.**

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Research Participant

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher

San Francisco State University  
Institutional Review Board  
Approval Date 2/15/2019  
Expiration Date 2/14/2020  
Protocol No. X18-119  
(415) 338-1093

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

### INTRODUCTION (FAMILY/HISTORY/COMMUNITY)

- Could you begin by telling me about yourself and how you self-identify your race and ethnicity?
- Where do/did you go to school? What do you do now? What is your occupation?
- When and where were you born? Is the place that you were born the same place where you grew up? Where do you live now?
- Could you tell me about your family? What is your relationship with your parents? What do your parents do for a living? What other jobs have they had before? What is their level of education attained?
- Do you have any siblings? If so, what is your relationship with them? Where do they live and what do they do now?

### HISTORY

- Could you tell me what you know or remember about you and your family's history, particularly how they ended up in the United States?
- What do you know about your parents' journey to the United States? About the Vietnam War? How did you find out? How old were you when you found out?
- Is this history important to you? When you learned about this history, were you interested in learning more about it? Why or why not?
- Do your parents ever explicitly talk to you about the Vietnam War or their journey from Vietnam to places of refuge explicitly? What about implicitly? What do they say about the Vietnam War and their flight as refugees, if at all?
  - Oftentimes, Vietnamese people who have experienced the Vietnam War and its aftermath seldom talk about their experiences and keep their pasts silenced. Do you feel like this is true for your family? In what ways? Do you feel that it's painful for them to recount these stories? How do you know?
  - If no, why do you think that they might not talk about it?
- How do you think your parents' experienced with the Vietnam War and its aftermath have affected them? This could range from the day-to-day, mundane aspects of life, to things like work, home ownership, employment, their relationships with others, etc.
- What do you feel are the most difficult things you/your family encountered or struggled with growing up?
  - Consider: language barrier, culture shock, resource access, health care, employment, finances, housing, transportation, school, food, friends, and support

### IDENTITY

- Do you think that your knowledge of your family's history inform the person that you have become today? Do you think that the feelings that stem from this understanding of your history inform the person that you have become today?

- What does it mean to you to be Vietnamese American? How have you come to understand this identity for yourself?
  - Consider: cultural characteristics, how you have come to understand what this identity means (development of self-identity), whether you speak a language other than English at home, whether you would consider yourself religious, whether you and/or your family practice certain traditions
- Are you involved in your ethnic community? If so, how?
  - Think about: your family and friends, community organizations, youth groups, student organizations
- What kind of thoughts come to mind when you think about the Vietnam War
- What kind of thoughts come to mind when you think of the aftermath of the Vietnam War, inclusive of the experiences of refugees and immigrants who fled Vietnam?
- Have you ever felt uncomfortable or experienced any kinds of fears associated with images of the Vietnam War and its aftermath? Do you feel that it accurately represents and is aligned with your own knowledge of the Vietnam War and its aftermath?
- How do you think the Vietnam War has affected you? How has it, if at all, affected your perception of yourself and your identity?
- What are your aspirations? How do you feel your ethnic identity has shaped these aspirations and who you are?
- What else have I not asked you about your experience that you would like to share? Is there anything else that you would like to add or talk about?

## APPENDIX D: IRB APPROVAL



OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND SPONSORED PROGRAMS  
HUMAN AND ANIMAL PROTECTIONS

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Administration 471  
1600 Holloway Avenue  
San Francisco, CA 94132

Tel: 415/338-1093  
Fax: 415/338-2493  
E-mail: [protocol@sfsu.edu](mailto:protocol@sfsu.edu)  
Web: <http://research.sfsu.edu/protocol>

Date: February 15, 2019

To: Philip Nguyen

Re: Becoming Vietnamese American: On Inherited Trauma Transmission and Ethnic Identity

The Institutional Review Board Chair at San Francisco State University has reviewed and approved the use of human subjects in the above protocol. You may proceed with your research as described in your protocol and as modified in any subsequent correspondence.

**Protocol Number:** X18-119 This number should be used on all correspondence.

**Approval Date:** February 15, 2019 Expedited Review

**Expiration Date:** This approval expires on February 14, 2020

If the project is to be continued, it must be renewed by the expiration date. Please allow at least six weeks for processing of a renewal application. **Data cannot be used in the research if collected after the expiration date, before the protocol has been renewed.**

**Completion:** Upon completion of the project, a Study Completion Form must be submitted to the IRB.

**Adverse Event Reporting:** All unanticipated or serious adverse events must be reported to the IRB within ten working days.

**Modifications:** Prior IRB approval is required before implementing any changes in any of the approved documents. **Data cannot be used if collected before any changes in the research are approved.**

**Recordkeeping:** You must retain all signed consent forms for at least 3 years after all research activity is completed.

**Questions:** Please contact ORSP - Human and Animal Protections and the Institutional Review Board at (415) 338-1093, or at [protocol@sfsu.edu](mailto:protocol@sfsu.edu)

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board