

**Performing Family “Like a Dog Unleashed”: Looking at Filiality through the Lens of
Postmemory in Vietnamese Diasporic Fiction**

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Vietnamese refugee families are perceived through visual frames and memories, and in particular how 1.5 or second generation Vietnamese refugee narratives are frequently characterized by the presence of intergenerational conflict. I consider the ways in which two texts, lê thi diem thúy's *the gangster we are looking for* and Truong Tran's *dust and conscience*, aesthetically reconstruct the ideological family space through the lens of Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory. In *the gangster we are all looking for*, visual configurations of postmemory invite readers to look at intergenerational conflict through the affiliative histories of post-war trauma, displacement, state oppression, and filial debt. In *dust and conscience*, affiliative ways of looking redefine fraught filial interactions as performative acts rather than prescriptive ones. By presenting alternative ways of looking at families, these texts challenge normative filial structures, and instead advocate for ambivalent forms of belonging to a family or nation.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Cynthia Minh.

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Acknowledgments

In his “Me-search, Hauntings, and Critical Distance”, Vinh Nguyen posits that the intimacy between his scholarly work about Vietnamese refugee history and his personal life is but an “*extension of experience*” (471). I’d like to think that my own research about Vietnamese refugee families has always been in progress, indebted to the personal and spectral histories before me that have made the tensions of my thinking possible.

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Chapter One: Perceptions of the Vietnamese Diasporic Family

On July 22, 2015, *Toronto Life* published an article on their website about Jennifer Pan—a second generation Vietnamese refugee in Markham, Ontario found guilty of ordering the murder of her mother and the attempted murder of her father in 2010. I have distant but tangential connections to those involved in the case, and as such, the horrifying crime feels both shocking yet deeply personal. The article, titled “Jennifer Pan’s Revenge: The inside story of a golden child, the killers she hired, and the parents she wanted dead”, is written by Jennifer Pan’s high school classmate, Karen K. Ho, who effectively captures these dual feelings in her description of the ambivalent effects of intergenerational conflict in migrant families. While Ho does not pretend to fully understand Pan’s motivations, several forces pervade the narrative she writes: the pressure Pan felt to be a model citizen within a tiger-parenting household, her love for ex-boyfriend Daniel, and a “torturous relationship with her dad” that forced Pan into telling her family increasingly elaborate lies about her academic successes (Ho). These forces all culminate with Jennifer staging her own kidnapping and the attempted murder of her parents with the help of her boyfriend and two others.

These forces point to a larger filial framework through which we perceive Vietnamese refugee subjects. In the middle of the article sits two photographs: on the left, a picture of Pan’s parents Hann and Bich, elegantly dressed in front of a golf course; and on the right, a picture of Pan’s suburban home in Markham. The photos juxtapose the brutality of the crime with signifiers of domesticity: a couple posing together and an established middle class home become sites from which we reconsider the ways in which notions of filiality, family, and trauma visually interact with the pervading model of North American nuclear families.

This thesis takes an interest in visual processes as a means of exploring how complex familial intimacies perceptually reconfigure Vietnamese refugee families against normative filial structures. While Vietnamese families are frequently associated with intergenerational conflict as a measurement of failure in achieving nuclear models, a closer look at these filial conflicts highlights the need to reexamine what notions of “family” and “home” mean for the Vietnamese refugee subject. In describing the relationship between displaced people and the ability to adopt multiple perspectives, Trinh T. Minh-ha cites Edward Said who writes that, “the essential privilege of exile is to have, not just one set of eyes but half a dozen” (qtd. in Trinh 34). I am interested in these sets of eyes that see and are seen, that allow for a visual reimagining of the concepts of “home”, “family”, and “belonging” as complex feelings, not as fixed identifications.

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which Vietnamese refugee subjects are seen through the lens of postwar trauma, and how these associations lead to the characterization of Vietnamese refugee families as marked by intergenerational conflict. I use memory as a method to observe how these traumas are reinterpreted between generations. I then turn to erin Ninh’s theorization of “racial melancholia” which builds upon Eng and Han’s empirical research to consider how racial formations underlie fraught filial intimacies. This focus on family dynamics allows me to use feelings engendered by ambivalent ways of seeing memory as an alternative mode through which to analyze Vietnamese diasporic literature.

Visualizing Vietnamese Refugee Subjects as Bodies of Suffering

The horror of Jennifer Pan’s story stages the tension between what is made visible and what is obfuscated in representations of the Vietnamese refugee family. How do we interpret Pan’s daughterly struggle against the picture of family success? How do these struggles speak to

the way we visualize the Vietnamese refugee subject within competing family models? How can we reconcile the discrepancy between private filial intimacies and our externalized perception of them? In thinking about these questions, I consider the way we visualize the Vietnamese subject more broadly.

The politics of viewing the Vietnamese refugee subject recalls one specific image that jarringly returns our gaze to the atrocities of the Vietnam War: the iconic photograph of a girl being napalmed during a South Vietnamese attack. Mimi Thi Nguyen in her *Gifts of Freedom* writes, “picturing for us the spectacular disaster of freedom’s bestowal, the photograph exhibits the temporality of hauntology—*she is always dying before us*” (84-5). The photograph is a residual spectre of American history, a reminder of their failings as parental figure: in their attempts to grant freedom, we are repeatedly confronted with an image of a child’s death.

Yet Kim Phúc’s wounds also demarcate the subject from spectator. They act as a visible embodiment of the internalized psychic wounds rendered incommunicable to the spectator. Years later, it is Phúc’s survival which shapes our collective memory of the war. Nguyen writes that at a Veterans Day commemoration in 1996, Phúc appears as the face of reconciliation: her ability to forgive also sees her as the “the personification of beatific grace, whose pardon absolves an empire of the criminality of war” (86). The photograph that is recognized as an iconic emblem of the structures of war, later becomes a way to show our progression from these horrors.

The photograph of the girl exemplifies the ways in which images of the Vietnamese refugee subject exhibit the intersectional ties between filial narratives and lived experience, individual and collective trauma, disparate and shared memory, and conversations of belonging and unbelonging within a state. The capture of the camera is belated, at once freezing the

Vietnamese subject in an image of war while distancing the American spectator from its violent histories. It is clear that the consumption of the representations of Vietnamese refugees relies on economies of looking at them—not only as racialized subjects, but as subjects of suffering.

Reading Intergenerational Conflict in Vietnamese Families

The visual framing of Vietnamese refugees as bodies of suffering informs our readings of Vietnamese families in literature. While the refugee subject has become synonymous with images of war, the traumatic visual effects of postwar trauma permeate intergenerationally as a source of filial conflict within their families. erin Ninh in *Ingratitude* recognizes the prevalence of intergenerational conflict within Asian diasporic literature “to the point where such stories have become recognizable commodities, their extraordinary correspondences droning into ordinary clichés of a literary convention” (3). The almost imminent presence of intergenerational conflict within migrant writings becomes another image of the Vietnamese diasporic subject. Yen Le Espiritu recognizes that the consequences of recognizing Vietnamese refugee subjects through trauma makes “‘un-visible’ other important facets of Vietnamese personhood: their self-identity, their dreams for themselves, their hopes for their children, and their ‘ground of being’” (“Vietnamese Masculinities” 88). In a resistance against the reduction of Vietnamese diasporic narratives, she emphasizes a need to examine the way Vietnamese refugees “have created their worlds and made meaning for themselves” (Espiritu, “Vietnamese Masculinities” 88).

In her comprehensive account of the work of Vietnamese literary artists, *This is All I Choose to Tell*, Isabelle Pelaud traces the effects of post-war trauma across the spatial and temporal bounds of the Vietnamese American literary canon: “The past is... often described as haunting the lives of the narrators like ghosts, at times scary and at others comforting, driving

both emotions and actions. The simultaneous engagement with two nations... creates new notions of citizenship” (37). But Pelaud also recognizes the ways in which literature has moved from writings by first generation refugee subjects to that of the 1.5 generation (refugee subjects who migrated as children) or the second generation. While first generations are “heavily invested in home politics and marked by an intense longing for a lost past” (Pelaud, *This* 24), writers from the generations after them “articulate a new concept of home. Identity is depicted to a different degree in terms of movement, one that goes back and forth between North America and Viet Nam, either by actual travel there or by acts of memory, imagined or recollected” (Pelaud, *This* 37).

The divergence between these writers’ relationships with the past is especially germane to a discussion about intergenerational conflict. While first generation writers are distinguished by their longing, 1.5 or second generation writers depict the past through memories, both “imagined or recollected.” For these newer generations, the trauma that connects them to images of post-war suffering also prompts their visual re-imaginings of “home” and “family.” This contradictory mode of recollection forms the questions central to my thesis: how do literary representations of memory reconfigure our understanding of the intergenerational transmission of trauma? How can the reconfiguration of memory provoke new imaginations of the Vietnamese refugee subject’s relationship to filial ideologies? I look to the 1.5 generational lens of lê thi diem thúy’s *the gangster we are all looking for*, a novel that depicts a young girl’s migration to California through a narrative of her memories, and Truong Tran’s *dust and conscience*, a prose poem that represents a trip to Vietnam through the subject’s fragmented memories, to explore their treatment of family within varied articulations of memory.

I choose these texts because of their unique aesthetic representations of memory. *The gangster* is a text broken up into sections through non-linear disruptions of memory that focalize the narrator's family's fraught interactions; *dust and conscience* is a stochastic representation of a return home. Yet, instead of invoking the space of Vietnam, the text is told in fragmented images of filial tensions. lê and Tran's emphasis on visual imagery evoke more nuanced representations of intergenerational conflict; their narrators are both affected by yet distanced from their families' histories in ways that provoke reconsiderations of how displacement and post-war trauma imbue our reading of the Vietnamese diasporic family.

Postmemory and the Rhetoric of Family in Vietnamese Diaspora

Marianne Hirsch's framework on "postmemory" forms the foundation of my examination of transmission of trauma across generations of Vietnamese war refugees. Originally used to analyze families of Holocaust survivors, postmemory describes how

the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. ("Generation" 107)

Hirsch also stipulates that the term applies to generational relationships that have suffered through other violent traumas including "American slavery, the Vietnam War, the Dirty War in Argentina, [and] South African apartheid..." ("Generation" 104). Survivors of the Vietnam War faced conditions of deprivation, horrific violence, and military occupation—the memories of which have traumatic effects across generations even after migration. This is distinct from

Kathleen Brogan's "collective memory"—the cultural memorialization of an historical event (130). The 1.5 or second generational subject's access to the war is certainly informed by collective memory. Yet the phenomenon of postmemory is such that these generations not only remember sociopolitical events, their connection to this past assumes that the approximate affect of memory is itself transferable. For these generations, the traumatic events that precede them refuse to stay within the temporal bounds of the past, and instead permeate their lived experiences. Postmemory "strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression" (Hirsch "Generation" 111).

According to Sandra So Hee Chi Kim, the phenomenological experience of "reactivating" memory from different spatiotemporal locations and "reinvesting them" with "familial forms of mediation" forms the consciousness of the diasporic subject: "The 'aesthetics' of diaspora, marked by feelings of loss and processes akin to mourning, is actually born of the dynamics of postmemory...it is not that postmemory is characterized in some essential way by diaspora. Rather, the phenomenon of diaspora emerges from the psychical and sociocultural dynamics of postmemory" (341). In other words, the very act of physical displacement already separates memories from lived experiences. Kim considers how diasporic identity arises out of social bonds that share an affective resemblance to filial relations. This feeling of family identifies the diasporic subject through the shared experience of "dwelling." She writes, "the analogy that members of the nation or race are 'like a family' works powerfully to produce not only a particular rendering of race and/or nation, but also a particular rendering of family that is based on *likeness* as a sign of inheritance" (35). Kim's conception of family through the feeling

of “likeness” prompts considerations about the ways in which filial discourses are used to shape the Vietnamese diasporic experience.

Lan Duong writes in her *Treacherous Subjects* that “the image of a cohesive family is the fundamental mechanism that powers nationalistic narratives for the Vietnamese in the homeland and diaspora” (186). In its politics of inclusion and exclusion, the rhetoric of belonging within “a family imagined as the nation, and the nation itself as a family” (Duong 4), becomes a method of “disciplining subjects who are not docile within the bounds of imagined communities” (Duong 186). Indeed, even before settling in their adopted countries, the identity of the refugee rests on the borders of inclusion and exclusion from these filial models. Viet Nguyen writes about how the refugee subject is most radically characterized by Giorgio Agamben, as outside of state recognition: “The refugee exists without rights and the protection of nation-states, in refugee camps and immigration detention centers that share a lineage with concentration and death camps” (930). Being welcomed into a country enmeshes the refugee subject within filial discourse, where they were previously cast from the nation in refugee camps. These competing images of belonging see the refugee subject continually having to renegotiate their participation in the hegemonic structures in which they are forced to dwell.

The tension within this contradictory mode of belonging is made more complex in the United States, the national site of the texts I will examine, a geopolitical space that represents both the Vietnamese refugee subjects’ cause of deterritorialization and their sanctuary. Mimi Thi Nguyen examines how filial language, trauma, and memory are systemically linked to models in which the nation state deploys filial rhetoric as a form of liberal empire. She defines the relationship between nation and refugee subject under creditor-debtor terminology, where the debtor must always display signs of gratitude for the *gift* of refuge. Here, Nguyen refers to

Derrida's notion of a gift which "incriminates an economy of exchange and obligation between giver and recipient" (7). Nguyen goes on to frame her discussion of this exchange of freedom within Foucauldian biopolitics: "the liberal government proposes to manufacture freedom, and in turn, that freedom is never anything more than a relation between governors and governed" (7). While the Vietnamese refugee gains autonomy, "the figuration of debt surfaces as those imperial remains that preclude the subject of freedom from being able to escape a colonial order of things" (M.T. Nguyen 5). To echo Viet Nguyen's instantiation of Agamben, the refugee subject's freedom remains outside of state protection; but this very freedom also serves to constitute the hegemonic structures that exclude them.

In framing the refugee subject through the language of filial debt, the U.S. pivots the optics of their involvement in the Vietnam War. Yen Lu Espiritu in her *Body Counts* recalls how "the production of the assimilated and grateful refugee—the 'good refugee'—enables a potent narrative of America(ns) rescuing and caring for Vietnam's 'runaways,' which powerfully remakes the case for the rightness of the U.S. war in Vietnam" (*Body Counts* 17). For example, the recuperation of the wounds of Kim Phúc reveals how filial discourse operates to perpetuate the the image of the Vietnamese refugee as one of suffering.

I use the overlapping frameworks of postmemory, diaspora, and filiality to think about how the Vietnamese diasporic family within a biopolitical sphere is measured against the image of the conceptual nuclear family. In her essay "Affect/ Family/ Filiality", Ninh recognizes how "affectively, bodily feeling is perceived as part of the flow of value and information mediated by market and media technologies, by state and labor infrastructure, as well as by private spaces and circuits of indebtedness that take the name of kinship" (48). The creditor-debtor exchange, for example, is a biopolitical model that Ninh argues generates the very affective power dynamics

within a migrant family structure: “read through the family’s economic aspirations or a parent’s class and national investments, Asian American intimate relations reveal themselves to be profoundly ordered by a capitalist logic and ethos, their violence arranged around the production of the disciplined and profitable docile body” (*Ingratitude* 6). In other words, the structure of the migrant family as it takes shape within the national rhetoric of indebtedness informs the affective responses within the private family interactions. The rhetoric used to discipline docile bodies within the nation is the same rhetoric that pressures the production of docile bodies within the intimate family space.

As we see with families like Jennifer Pan’s, central to a discussion about the dynamics of conflict within depicted Vietnamese diasporic families is their relationship to the model minority paradigm—an assimilationist construct which pressures migrants to attain socioeconomic prestige. Ninh writes that the “language of filiality—sacrifice, obedience, hierarchy, gratitude...” becomes internalized in the migrant subject’s predisposition, positioning the “immigrant family as that nation’s intermediary and agent” (*Ingratitude* 11). The anxiety to achieve success under the model minority paradigm acts as both a corollary and source of feelings of impotence, unbelonging after physical displacement, and the internalization of filial debt. Ninh asks, “How much more prodigious must be the undertaking to reroute a growing child’s polymorphous desires and aspirations, such that they become affixed to the constructs of economic pragmatism and social prestige?” (“Affect” 49).

Racial Melancholia and the Transmission of Trauma through Affect/Emotion

Asian American scholarship is interested in the ways in which the pursuit of model citizenship can lead to what Anne Anlin Cheng, in her *Melancholy of Race*, terms “racial

melancholia” as a means to explore “what it means for social, political, and subjective beings to *grieve*” (7; emphasis in original). Cheng uses Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” to differentiate between the grieving practices of mourning—which is “finite in character and accepts substitution” (7), and melancholia—a pathological “condition of unresolved mourning, in which the subject internalizes the lost object, rather than acknowledging the loss or breaking attachment to the object” (37). David Eng and Shinhee Han explore racial melancholia empirically in their “A Dialogue in Racial Melancholia”: “[when] not resolved and mourned in the process of assimilation... [racial melancholia] can be transferred to the second generation” (680). According to these models, the deterritorialized subject’s lost object is that self that can perfectly assimilated. The traumatic inability to do so leaves the racialized subject and their children pathologically grieving. Hirsch also identifies the risk of melancholia in postmemory’s transmission: “with such overwhelming inherited memories... dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness... [one] risk[s] having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation” (“Generation” 107).

However, this focus on the internalization of racial otherness and trauma risks prescribing the filial subject’s psychic emotions. Instead, I turn to Ninh’s model of racial melancholia in “Affect” in which she locates the interpellation of social frameworks in the transmission of affect. She writes: “affect is conceivably how filial logic comes to ‘make sense’ to its participants to begin with, how those relations are paved—i.e., how the system (any system) meets its embodied subject” (49). To reinvoké Kim’s conception of diaspora through postmemory, an affective “likeness” to family is what shapes a recognition of a shared diasporic consciousness. For the refugee subject then, constructions of filiality move from externalized systems to habituated feelings.

I extend Ninh's framework for understanding the intersections between affect, family, and filiality to a discussion about the complex transmission of trauma in postmemory. The experience of postmemory that occurs when later generations come into contact with stories, artefacts, or behaviors of their parents is undoubtedly affected by the systemic models of refugee indebtedness, the model minority paradigm, and postwar trauma. However, while filial narratives produce affects such as filial piety through feelings of inadequacy and indebtedness, Ninh later argues that these affects "can yield different, unintended action and expression" ("Affect" 51). She writes, "affects are feelings generated by a situation in which the pathways to action expression have been blocked, and which thus must remain suspended in the potential" (Ninh, "Affect" 51). In other words, while the affects of intergenerational conflict are determined by intersecting social narratives, the emotional reaction to these narratives remain disparate and varied.

I argue that it is precisely the space where affect is "suspended in the *potential*" that allows for the Vietnamese refugee family to be reconsidered. While the transmission of trauma exists intergenerationally as an affective disposition, it does not prescribe the refugee subject's reaction to these models. To parse the complex feelings within literary representations of Vietnamese diasporic families therefore requires an attention not only to the affective circuits that link filial intimacies to filial ideologies, but to the characters' responses to these affects. Ninh writes, "today's minor affect may be what has become of yesterday's emotion: dissatisfactions rerouted from their proper causes, hurts unmoored from their original source" ("Affect" 52). The feelings that make up the tense familial space is not located or fixed, but instead, become unrooted from their referents.

I use Ninh's article as a way to return to a discussion about emotion within intergenerational conflict. I do so not to offer "therapeutic expectations of healing self or family" ("Affect" 47), but as a means to explore how emotional responses to affective circuits reconceptualize the Vietnamese diasporic family outside of normative models. Sarah Ahmed in her *Cultural Politics of Emotions* argues against looking at emotions as solely from individual consciousness: "emotions are not 'in' either the individual or social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow all kinds of objects to be delineated" (10). In other words, it is through emotions that the subject is able to associate and disassociate interiorities from external affective models.

I will argue over the course of this thesis that in Vietnamese diasporic literature, the affects of overlapping filial narrative engender complex emotional responses that at once distance the refugee subject from their family while being mnemonically tied to it. Ahmed examines the relationship between memory and feeling as an associative relationship: "I can have a memory of something, and that memory might trigger a feeling. The memory can be the object of my feeling in both senses: the feeling is shaped by contact with the memory, and also involves an orientation towards what is remembered" (7). In other words, memory may trigger a feeling, but this feeling is also being attributed to the memory itself. If the subject is feeling pain or trauma about a memory, trauma is evoked every time the subject remembers, but the memory itself is also recognized as painful. Feeling is not inherent in the memory, but rather, it exists in relation to the subject or object of remembrance. The potential for emotions to change shape then forces the reconsideration of the memory as distinct from the feelings it might inspire.

Revisualizing Families through Ambivalent Feelings

In the texts I examine, postmemory reveals the 1.5 generation subject's feeling of ambivalence towards family structures that prompt visual reimaginings of filial intimacies. As such, these authors depict the experience of postmemory not only through the transmission of trauma, but also through its alleviation. In *the gangster*, this is most apparent when the narrator makes contact with "a black-and-white photograph of [her] grandparents sitting in bamboo chairs in their front courtyard..." (lê 78) that becomes the symbolic representation of Vietnam. Readers are able to interpret the narrator's reaction against her mother's reaction to a photograph. While her mother cries: "'Child' ...over and over again... talking about herself" (lê 92), thus associating the photo with her lived past, the narrator looks at the photograph, "always envision[ing] a beginning. To or toward what, I don't know, but always a beginning" (lê 78). The discrepancy between the two reactions makes visible a generational gap: on the one hand, the mother's fraught emotion alludes to the affective circuits that emerge from displacement, while on the other hand, the narrator's reaction to the photograph reveals this affective circuit as a potential for new beginnings. The affective potential then can yield possibility.

The next chapter of this thesis thus examines instances of transmitted memory through visual artifacts in *the gangster* to demonstrate how complex feelings of filiality engendered by postmemory enable later generations to be both affected by trauma yet be distanced from the process of its transmission and incorporation. Specifically, I use representations of the photograph in the novel to consider how postmemory exposes complex feelings of filiality. The photograph is central to Hirsch's concept of postmemory, because of its belated but evocative power. Barthes's meditations on photography and feeling in his seminal *Camera Lucida* inform how photography and trauma can be linked in this chapter. Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu's

work in *Feeling Photography* also guides me to parse ambivalent and messy feelings that provoke us to “reimagine the complex relationship between images, power, subject” (21).

The framework of visibility outlined in the first chapter informs my reading in my final chapter of Truong Tran’s *dust and conscience*, an aesthetic representation of postmemory through descriptive images. I examine images such as the “falling leaves” that Tran illustrates to create the memory of family without invoking it: “consider the path of a falling leaf the distance in between the branch and the earth the slightest breeze could alter its course now consider yourself a that falling leaf falling falling and where did you come from and where are you now” (101). Tran’s speaker’s home lacks a fixed origin; Vietnam’s physicality is so absent in his writing that “if ‘home’ is merely a word, evoked sparingly throughout the text, it is a word that does not hold meaning” (Pelaud “Difference” 722). These contradictory images portray complex feelings towards filiality that become central to discussing the ways in which postmemory can be interpreted as a conduit for trauma’s transmission as well as its alleviation.

What the experience of postmemory reveals is the speaker’s feeling of friction towards his family, represented in the prose poem through images that depart from larger genealogical frameworks. One image he conjures while in Vietnam is a memory of his mother on the phone. When she calls “to say she was too late for church and that if I was happy then she too was happy” (Tran 59), he reinterprets her mundane speech as filial affection “because translated she will always be my mother and I will always be her son” (Tran 59). Here, intergenerational tension incited by reticent speech does not produce transmissions of trauma. Instead, Tran’s speaker is able to translate this friction through his construction of family—as both caring and distant—which contributes to his understanding of their performative roles. Tran demonstrates how the family in Vietnamese diasporic literature is not solely represented by the transmission of

trauma through postmemory; instead, the performative filial structures produce a space between refugee subjects and family that alleviates the trauma.

Imagining Family as Performative Relationalities

A discussion about performative filial structures returns us to erin Ninh's attention to what affects "do" ("Affect" 47). A more nuanced examination of postmemory as affective potential asks how the concept of family can be affectively conceived as a "doing word" within Vietnamese diasporic families (Ahmed 153). This question asks for reconceptualization of the systemic models of refugee indebtedness, the model minority paradigm, and post-war trauma functions in Vietnamese diasporic families. In reference to Asian American families, Ninh writes, "The heart of the issue is not whether an Asian immigrant family currently meets the socioeconomic or professional measures of the model minority. Rather, the issue is whether it aspires to do so, whether it applies those metrics" (*Ingratitude* 9). Ninh analyzes families who internalize these models, but I use this assertion to suggest that while migrant families are affectively informed by sociopolitical discourses, the potential for emotional dissonance frees these discourses from being emotionally prescriptive. As Kim argues, the very structural mechanism of postmemory is what complicates how we identify the diasporic subject: "the idea that *one's past can be passed on to another* [focuses on not] only one's memory of one's own memories, but also one's memory of another's memories making one's subjectivity plural" (341). Trinh imagines a plural subjectivity in her *elsewhere, within here*:

Sometimes I see my country people as complete strangers. But their country is my country. In the adopted country, however, I can't go on being an exile or an immigrant either. It's not a tenable place to be. I feel at once more in it and out of it. Out of the

named exiled, migrant, hyphenated, split self. The margin of the center. The Asian in America. (34)

The filial refugee subject must be studied, to borrow a term from Édouard Glissant, *relationally*. Glissant uses this term as a means to write about the Caribbean as a space of cultural dissonance, where spatiotemporal histories continually establish and deestablish cultural identity. He invokes Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a rhizome that maintains "the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root" to explore how "each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" (Glissant 11). Vietnamese refugee generations are similarly informed by overlapping narratives that are rooted through kinship, but whose affects are already unmoored from a fixed lineage. In the next chapters I demonstrate how an analysis of visual representations of postmemory in *the gangster we are all looking for* and *dust and conscience* can lead to more relational understandings of the frictions felt within filial intimacies.

Chapter Two: Visual Configurations of Family in lê thi diem thúy's *the gangster we are all looking for*

lê thi diem thúy's *the gangster we are looking for* opens with an epigraph that reveals how "In Vietnamese, the word for water and the word for nation, a country, and a homeland are one and the same: *nu' o' c'*" (epigraph). In doing so, lê gives readers a visualization of a relational understanding of belonging: for the Vietnamese diasporic subject, the words for nation, country, and homeland are not fixed but move between each other like water. This visual is just one of many within the text. Told through the perspective of a girl who recounts her memories as a refugee subject in the 1.5 generation, the text is a non-linear retrospective—at once documenting the affect of trauma that hauntingly follows the girl from Vietnam to California while describing these experiences in visual imaginings that prompt the reader to reconsider the ways in which these memories are geographically bound. One such imagining occurs early in her resettlement, on a trip to a mountain that her sponsor family takes her and her father. lê's narrator asks to go to beach instead because her father tells her that her mother remains on a beach in Vietnam after their family is separated by escape. Her imaginative inability to understand the "difference" between the beach "here" and "in Vietnam" (lê 11), becomes a way for readers to think of how these Pacific coasts are connected through familial displacement and trauma. These kinds of visualizations promote a reading of the textual constructions of refugee family structures as mediated by scopic perceptions of filial dynamics. As a young refugee subject, lê's narrator's memories are fragmented—pieced together from her own memories of diaspora, from the transmitted memories engendered from artefacts or stories from an un-lived past, and the fraught tensions that fill her family dynamic.

In this chapter I examine the “visual figuration” of postmemory in lê’s narrator’s experience with the visual artefacts of her family’s past (Hirsch *Generation* 82). Specifically, I will examine how lê’s use of visual artefacts link traumatic familial intimacies in the novel to larger models of filial piety. I then examine the character’s feelings towards such visual artefacts to explore how postmemory can engender complex feelings of filiality. I will argue that postmemory illuminates the 1.5 or second generation subject’s position as one both affected by trauma, and yet distanced from its transmission. Ultimately, the narrator’s ambivalent and messy feelings towards these artefacts sets the path for readers to reenvision notions of “family” as relational.

Postremembering through Visuality

In *the gangster*, part novel and part memoir, lê draws from her memories of fleeing the village of Phan Thiét with her father, and of their eventual resettlement in Linda Vista with her mother and sister. The text reads like a series of visual mediations: the various apartments in which the family lives before settling in Linda Vista are marked by the distinct colours of “green” and “red” (lê 3); post-war trauma and its intergenerational transmission are aesthetically woven through the text as repeated images of “blood” and “water”; and the narrator’s relationship to notions of belonging is expressed in a metaphor about a “butterfly” trapped in a “glass disk” (lê 25). As a 1.5 generation refugee, lê’s narrator is able to infuse the intersecting frameworks of postwar trauma, filial piety, and filial conflict with visual imagination. Her diasporic experiences fragment her memories both spatially and temporally: they happen “‘suddenly,’ ‘[m]any years ago,’ and ‘somewhere far away’” simultaneously (lê 29).

The ability to narrativize history through imagination is afforded by the narrator's reticent filial dynamics. This is explicit in a scene where "Ma shaved her head in Linda Vista because she got mad at Ba for gambling away her money and getting drunk every week during *Monday Night Football*. Ba gave her a blue baseball cap to wear until her hair grew back and she wore it backward, like a real badass" (lê 91). The reader's inability to fully grasp this memory within its context mirrors the narrator's lack of access to her family conflict. Instead, the imaginative connection she makes between the visual object "baseball cap" and the concept of "badass" forms her emotional response towards strained filial dynamics. Her response is ambivalent: on the one hand she witnesses the effects of Ba's demoralization, while on the other, she distances her own emotional response from her mother's suffering. This ambivalence forms the basis of my analysis of postmemory in lê's text. While lê's configuration of postmemory through visual artefacts poignantly places the Vietnamese diasporic family in conversation with larger filial narratives, she also utilizes the tool of visual imagination to renegotiate how these filial structures are interpreted.

We see this operate most effectively in lê's narrator's relationship to various photographs in the novel. Hirsch recognizes the importance of photographs to the study of postmemory, as they "offer an access to the event itself" while they also "captur[e] something of the sequencing and the loss of sharpness and focus inherent in postmemory" ("Generation" 107-8). The "loss of sharpness" Hirsch refers to describes the temporal distance between photograph and spectator inherent in the tension between 1.5 and second generations and their inherited memories. Early in the novel, we are introduced to a photograph of the narrator with her Ba "hold[ing] hands and lean[ing] against the blue car" (lê 13). The narrator recalls the experience of taking the photograph:

We are looking at the camera, waiting for that flash that lets us know something has happened inside the body of the camera, something that makes it remember us, remember our faces, remember our clothes, remember the blurred shape of our hands captured in that second when we shivered, waiting. (lê 13)

Her visual interpretation of this memory is shaped by an understanding of the camera's mechanical process—that the photograph is itself a mechanism of displacement that at once freezes the self, yet absolves the self from this prescribed identification.

The discrepancy between spectator and photograph is only augmented in her experiences with postmemory, as demonstrated when the narrator receives a black and white photograph of her grandparents from Vietnam. Her mother's confrontation with the photograph uncovers painful memories:

When my mother, a Catholic schoolgirl from the South, decided to marry my father, a Buddhist gangster from the North, her parents disowned her. This is in the photograph, though it is not visible to the eye. If it were, it would be a deep impression across the soft dirt of my grandparents' courtyard. (lê 90)

lê describes this photograph as having material excess, a “deep impression”, not visible to the eye yet ingrained in Ma's emotional reception. David Eng describes the photograph as a space that performs the tension between visible presence within the frame and the invisible disappearances that exceed what is visible (“The Feeling” 328). This photograph of the grandparents presents a non-mimetic relationship between memory and photograph: while the photograph contains no visible sign of fraught filial intimacies, this sense of disturbance is present—made visible by the psychic wounds of their family's deterritorialization.

The narrator however, sees the photograph beyond its emotional impact and speculates about its function: “This looks like a photograph my grandparents had taken late in life, for their children” (lê 78). When her mother places this photograph in their family’s attic as a means to move them in (lê 199), the narrator “[doesn’t] really know what she is talking about but [says] ‘O.K.’ anyway” (lê 199). The intergenerational dissonance displayed here illuminates the way acts of looking inform the experience of postmemory. For Ma, the photograph of her parents becomes a confluence of physical displacements from her parents and from Vietnam. In contrast, the narrator’s reaction to the photograph materializes the physical and temporal distance she feels from her birthplace. If the photograph becomes a talisman for “home”, her conception of home is already unstable, existing in her imaginary.

Longing for The Gangster

lê’s narrator’s relationship to the visual artefacts she encounters reveal her construction of family “as not a biological unit, but a complicated process of looking, facilitated through the reflective viscosity that the photographic image provides” (Gsoels-Lorensen 4). Of course, understanding filial relationships through viscosity calls to mind Barthes’s “Winter Garden Photograph”—a relic of the author’s deceased mother in her childhood. Barthes recognizes in the photograph “the truth of the image, the reality of its origin...” (77), and melancholically mourns for the image of his mother: “For what I have lost is not a Figure (the Mother), but a being; and not a being but a *quality* (a soul): not the indispensable, but the irreplaceable” (75). Barthes distinguishes the *being* he mourns for from both the idealized image of Mother and the present body he encounters in life; this subject of mourning, rather, exists within the photograph.

the gangster re-performs this tension in the narrator's relationship with her father. The figure she longs for exists in a photograph in which his "arms are crossed in front of him" (lê 103); he exists in the stories she hears of when "he was a skinny kid in the South Vietnamese army. He was a heroin addict. He was a gangster. He sold American cigarettes on the black market. He cruised girls. He ran away from home" (lê 103). These postmemories of her father help compose her vivid imaginings:

From what I'd hear, I pictured my father wearing a fedora because gangsters wore fedoras; my father pointing a gun toward dark fields because it wasn't clear to me whom he would be shooting; my father disappearing down an alley, escaping his own father, like me fast and light on his feet; my father slumped in the corner of a windowless room, strung out, in a cold sweat as I found him one day. (lê 103)

In the narrator's imagination, visual embellishments that picture Ba in a fedora further remove her from her parents' memories. Her emotional connection to her father as a "gangster" does not exist as an idealized Father figure, nor a father that exists in any external reality; instead, he exists almost as an aesthetic desire.

After the family receives the photograph of her grandparents, Ma and Ba begin fighting about their different feelings about their past: "Ma kept crying anyway and told him not to touch her with his gangster hands. Ba clenched his hands into tight fists and punched the walls. "What hands?! What hands?!" he yelled. "Let me see the gangster! Let me see his hands!" I see his hands punch hands punch hands punch blood" (lê 92). The "gangster hands" that the narrator witnesses embody a real physical violence that distinctively diverges from the figure of her postmemorial imaginings. The image of her father in her postmemories remains "a projection of a bravado, an attitude of rebellion, the notion of a figure who can hold it all together" (Hidle).

Yet, the incongruity between these two visual depictions of the narrator's father evinces the struggles of the disenfranchised male refugee, who after displacement, faces governmental and societal neglect.

Sandra So Hee Chi Kim posits that “postmemory is at once haunted by the collective and yet undeniably individual and private. It is often characterized by a haunting and a longing for something that has been irrevocably lost (if not ‘forbidden’)” (345). The experience of postmemory transmits the feeling of loss through generations outside of conscious experiences. The feeling of irrevocable loss parallels the unconscious loss that Freud argues is prevalent in melancholic subjects: “one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost” (245). These unconscious pathways prevent feelings of loss from being properly grieved.

The object of lê's narrator's melancholia is personified in the loss of her older brother, who drowns in Vietnam and becomes a haunting spectre throughout the text. One night while walking home, she describes his haunting presence: “What happened next was just a feeling. like heat or hunger or dizziness or loneliness or longing. My brother making no sounds and casting no shadow, was walking behind me” (74). lê's use of visuality to describe feeling helps illustrate her narrator's inability to mourn her brother. When she's older, “[she returns] after twenty years still expecting [her] brother to step out of the sea” (lê 154).

However, just as the pictures of Ba as a young man relocate her father's demoralized present in the larger social context of poverty, her brother's death provokes visual imaginings that also promote a relational understanding between collective and personal trauma. The ‘absent presence’ of the narrator's brother revisualizes her relationship with water, linking the personal loss of her brother to the loss of countless bodies in the water as they fled Vietnam. In a

postmemory about her own family's escape, lê's narrator recounts the experiences of her father looking for her mother whom they would eventually leave behind:

In a panic, he returned to the boat hoping she would have found her own way there, only to realize, as it pulled away from the shore, that my mother's must have been among the many voices, each calling for help as he passed by in the water. Years later, even after our family reunited, my father would remember those voices as a seawall between Vietnam and America or as a kind of floating net, each voice linked to the next by a knot of grief. (105)

By linking memories of her brother with her father's memories of the war, lê offers an "embodied knowledge" of the subaltern histories of war and its generational impacts: "this embodied knowledge is propelled by an affective chain—compelled by vexed feelings of kinship" (Eng "The Feeling" 337).

Embodying Memory, not Trauma

lê demonstrates how an embodied knowledge of trauma reconfigures the subject's relationship to her filial histories. When we reach the chapter titled "the gangster we are all looking for," the boundaries between the narrator's memories and those of her parents seem to overlap as the narrator recounts her mother's stories of her relationship with her father. For lê's narrator, stories her mother would tell her about the "foods she'd eat...dances she'd dance...[while] drunk on her youth and the possibilities of love" inform the visualization of her memories of her parents (80). She recounts, "My first memory of my father's face is framed by the coiling barbed wire of a military camp in South Vietnam. My mother's voice crosses through the wire. She is whispering his name and with this utterance, caressing him. Over and over, she

calls him to her, ‘Anh Minh, Anh Minh’” (lê 82). Her memories are imbued with the emotional tenor of her parents’ love story but also capture the feeling of her father’s absence while being stationed away from the family in the South Vietnamese Army.

lê introduces the stories of Ma and Ba as “indirect” memories of her narrator to demonstrate how memories can be intergenerationally transmitted through feelings of trauma (Gsoels-Lorenson 9). She imagines her mother thinking of a girl in Vietnam who was killed during a napalm bombing: her “body glow[ing], like a lantern” (lê 86). She pictures her father ignoring the phone as it rings, afraid “it was someone calling from Vietnam” (lê 137). Kyo Maclear in her *Beclouded Visions* describes trauma as “the open gash in the past that resists being healed or harmonized in the present. It is the prophecy of memories and truths yet to be symbolically, socially, or politically achieved” (Maclear 11). lê’s narrator’s ability to inhabit her parents’ memories reminds readers of the lingering effects of post-war trauma that remain unresolved.

Yet, the experience of postmemory also enables her to inherit the memories of her mother who, as a young woman, “wonder[s] what the forests were like [in Vietnam] before the American planes had come, flying low, raining something onto the trees that left them bare and dying. She remembered her father had once described to her the smiling broadness of leaves, jungles thick in the tangle of rich soil” (lê 81). Postmemory shifts lê’s narrator’s perspective both spatially and temporally, transforming her relationship with these traumas; lê’s narrator uses visualizations generated by postmemory to imagine a time away from the trauma of war.

As Marianne Hirsch suggests: “Trauma both solidifies and blurs generational difference” (*Generation* 82). In *the gangster*, lê exposes the tension of this contradiction by probing the lineage of trauma’s transmission. We see an example of trauma blurring generational difference

when the narrator fears she might learn her father's troubled behaviour through osmosis: "I grew up studying my father so closely as to suggest I was certain I saw my future in him..." (lê 116). In another passage, she wonders if their similarities are genetically attributed: "When I was angry my mother would say I had his poisonous temper. When I was good, she would laugh and say I had his charm...As though floating just beneath my own gaze was the reflection of my father, hundreds of dark miles away" (lê 104). Her construction of family incorporates a recognition of herself as a visual object; her memories and feelings are seen in relation to her father.

However, trauma can also solidify generational difference, as demonstrated in her interaction with photographs. Her relationship to postmemorial artefacts are still "at a generational remove" (Hirsch "Generation" 106). One family anecdote she inherits asks what it means if one's second toe is "longer than the others" (lê 83). While her father claims it is a "A sure sign of aristocracy" (lê 83), her grandmother tells her mother "It means...your mother will die before your father," (lê 84). lê juxtaposes one historical narrative with another to expose the limitations of memory. In doing so, she conceptualizes a non-mimetic relationship between postmemorial artefacts and the emotional responses they illicit. Her narrator's conception of family history is composed of affiliative emotional responses. By incorporating her parents' memories into her own, lê's narrator "retains the object-oriented character and temporal mark of memory, but from the standpoint of another person's consciousness. The effort to recall, then, is *creative*; it is a practice of citation, mediation, and... imagination" (Kim 342).

In lê's novel, the act of recollection through imagination can reconceptualize the effects of trauma within the family space. In the chapter "nu'o'c", the narrative merges with Ba's consciousness as the narrator traces her father's melancholia through fraught filial relationships.

His inability to answer the phone is attributed to his strained relationship with his father. As he lets the phone ring,

He imagined the moment as if it was happening. His father and one of those booths at the post office across the street from the market. There were two phones in the booth, both on the same extension, and the old man was clasping one while his sister was holding the other. It would be just his luck to pick up the phone and hear his sister say, “Listen. Father is here with me. He wants to say some words to you.” Then his father, a man with whom he hadn’t spoken for twenty years, would hold the phone against his ear in silence as if preparing to speak into a tape recorder. My father’s throat goes dry as he imagines his father licking his lips and then swallowing before the old man finally speaks, letting out in just one breath all the heat and the dust of that place; the hawkers at the market; the meager shade in the narrow alleys winding toward his childhood home; the Buddhist monks in their robes, crossing the temple courtyard; the seashells piled high as hills; all this would come coursing through the wires and it would enter his body like a riot of blood. (lê 137-8)

Here, trauma is traced through a palimpsest of postmemory, where visual figurations overlap one another through generations. Ba’s imagined phone-call with his estranged father reads as a convergence of his sensorial experiences of home: the tension between the two men is intimately captured in the visual image of his father “licking his lips and then swallowing”, while his father’s breath evokes more relational visual images of his childhood. The images that make up Ba’s melancholic stasis present memory as a geopolitical space, where local memories of Vietnam become diasporically displaced. lê’s inclusion of this imagined phone-call within the perspective of her narrator reconceptualizes the geographical bounds of memory. Her narrator

recognizes the image of Ba “looking sad and broken” (lê 117), not just as a conduit for trauma’s transmission, but as part as part of a larger system of institutional oppression; she recognizes that his inability to speak is informed by a long lineage of difficult family dynamics.

Filial Feelings in Friction

By presenting the experience of postmemory as palimpsest, lê depicts the complex emotional layers of the postmemorial subject—at once burdened by the trauma of war and displacement, while able to separate their emotional responses from their constructions of family. This ambivalence enacts the tension that contributes both to the transmission and alleviation of intergenerational trauma. By interweaving relational visual imaginings into the memories and postmemories the daughter experiences, lê connects the intersectional frameworks of postwar trauma, filial piety and displacement, but makes clear how these frameworks can engender multiple emotional responses. As Ahmed argues, the same affective potential from which shared feelings are generated can also cause emotional conflict: “feelings not only *heighten tension*, they are also *in tension*. Emotions in their very intensity involve miscommunication, such that even when we feel we have the same feeling, we don’t necessarily have the same relationship to that feelings” (10). The passages of transmission in postmemory are also met with miscommunication. Like the captured photographic record, the 1.5 and second generation refugee subject’s response to experiences of postmemory is temporally belated. Their access to the histories that make up their filial dynamics are frozen, yet framed. Reticence within the family dynamics becomes a gap that offers an imaginative distance from prescribed histories.

The memories across generations in *the gangster* become an archive of conflicting feelings that organize the experience of postmemory. Images of intergenerational conflict that

feature father and daughter “pass[ing] the silence back and forth, like a smoke” coexist with imaginings of the two “escaping together again” (lê 107; 119). For the narrator then, creating the space for embodied representations of her parents’ memories means continually renegotiating her parents’ traumatic experiences against her personal traumas. Her fragmented (post)memories read like a performance of these tensions. Examining the photographic writing of Jeffery Wolin’s *Written in Memory*, Hirsch writes that “[t]he challenge for the postmemorial artist is precisely to allow the spectator to enter the image, to imagine the disaster ‘in one’s own body,’ yet to evade the transposition that erases distance, creating too available, too direct an access to their particular past” (*Generation 98*). *the gangster* can also be interpreted as a text that demands “reading as well as looking” (Hirsch *Generation 97*). Through the narrative’s descriptive metaphors, readers are invited to visualize the ekphrastic complexities of this family dynamic, but are restricted access into linear filial histories so as to resist tidy emotional conclusions.

The friction between embodied and disembodied knowledge practices is the experience of postmemory itself: while the transmission of trauma becomes a source of intergenerational conflict, the distance afforded by its “post” arrival facilitates the narrator’s diverse emotional responses:

To protect myself I tried to forget everything: that first night at the refugee camp in Singapore; those early morning walks after we arrived in America; the sound of his voice asking a question no one could answer; the shapes his fists left along a wall; the bruises that blossomed on the people around him; the smell of fruit he brought home from the gardens he tended; the way the air seemed charged with memories of blood; the nets we fell through faster, year after year, dreaming of land. (lê 117-8)

The tension read in this passage exemplifies the ways in which postmemory can produce fraught constructions of family. The list of memories the narrator chooses to “forget” include both “the smell of fruit” and the “bruises that blossomed on the people around him”. Her dichotomous postmemorial encounters with her father produce a complex image of him that she feels concurrently influenced by and detached from.

It is this tension, however, that I argue presents a construction of family as mediated by alternative acts of looking. To reinvolve a fight between Ma and Ba mentioned earlier in this essay that results in Ma’s shaved head, I want to attend to the way she looks at her mother—the “badass” in a baseball cap:

Without any hair and looking like a man, my mother is still my mother, though sometimes I can’t see her even when I look and look and look so long all the colors of the world begin to swim and bob around me...I will know her by her hands and by her walk, at once slow and urgent, the walk of a woman going to market with her goods bound securely to her side. (lê 96)

While reticence within the family space creates an irreparable gap that prevents the narrator from understanding her parents’ disagreement, it is this gap that incites new filial bonds. The narrator’s exposure to different postmemorial images of her mother de-essentializes the act of recognition: her mother’s identity does not rely on her hair, or any facial features. Rather, le’s narrator recognizes her mother by her walk: “slow and urgent”. The simultaneity of these opposing movements is itself an image of friction that forms the basis of her spectatorship. As Hirsch writes, “The productive look for heteropathic identification can see beyond ‘the given to be seen,’ it can displace the incorporative, ingestive look of self-sameness and the familiar object it sees in favour of ‘an appetite for alterity that enables an act of recognition across difference’”

(*Generation* 86). lê's narrator continues, "if I never see her again, I will know my mother by the smell of the sea salt and the prints of my own bare feet crossing sand, running to and away from, to and away from, family" (96). In this passage feelings of kinship between mother and daughter exist outside of shared genetics; they exist within the experiences of displacement and resettlement.

To interpret the filial space as a photographic site of contradictions creates a feeling of friction—one that simultaneously reminds the narrator of her trauma while recognizing how postmemorial constructions of family "function as screens that absorb the shock, filter and diffuse the impact of trauma, diminish harm" (Hirsch "Generation" 126). For lê's narrator, this ability to see differently enables her to displace her own desires from their referents. She no longer views her father as her figure of longing; as she states, "When I grow up I am going to be the gangster we are all looking for" (lê 93).

Affiliative Kinship

In transposing her narrator's psychological desires from character to character, lê conceptualizes a family away from any sense of *origin*; instead, her fictional family exists *in relation* to competing filial structures both within the family space and beyond. The geographical scope of her displaced feelings towards postmemory positions these feelings both within individual consciousness and within a collective consciousness, an "affiliative space of remembrance" that crosses transnational bounds (Hirsch *Generation* 93).

lê's narrator is able to locate her father's trauma within the larger network of post-war trauma, cycles of indebtedness towards his adoptive nation, state oppression, and feelings of impotence:

Between us now there hangs the familiar smoke of small rooms crowded with people larger than their situation. People who, feeling they have no recourse to change the circumstances of their lives, fold down, crumble into their own shadows. This is what I saw my father do. He made himself small, so that in the world there was little left of him, even while within me his hunger grew. It became expansive. Billowing like an abandoned parachute searching the sky for the man who has fallen. (122)

Ba's demoralization intersects with the struggles of other Vietnamese refugees who are positioned as grateful bodies, struggling to assimilate and achieve success in a country heavily involved with their deterritorialization. It permeates the crowded room he and his daughter share with four other refugee men when they first get sponsored—within the labour of performing maintenance work around his sponsor's properties, and within the task of "painting the white walls whiter" (lê 9). Embodied practices of remembering create "new and unexpected set of emotional analogies, visual images, and historical correspondences" which allow the narrator to understand her family through relational lenses that alleviate trauma. (Eng "The Feeling" 344).

For the narrator, the alleviation of trauma is mediated by the recognition of kinship relations outside of genealogical understandings. Just like mother and daughter, she recognizes that "Ba and I were connected to the four uncles, not by blood but by water" (lê 3). What connects her to these different lives is not only the shared experience of escaping the war, but an ability to uncover "affective correspondences" between disparate histories along the Pacific coast (Eng "The Feeling" 343). These affective correspondences exist in small acts of looking. At one point in the novel, the narrator shatters the picture frame that houses a photograph of her sponsor Mel and his mother. When she sees the picture, she is reminded of another photograph: "Like my Ba and me, Mel and his mother stood in a snowy place, leaning against a blue car" (lê 33). The

repeated image of the “blue car” makes visible the affective friction that both unite and separate these vastly different families.

Through a series of refractive visual images, *lê* documents the constraints that engender intergenerational conflict within the Vietnamese refugee family but also transform the family space from within its contradictions. *lê*'s narrator imagines herself flying through the different spaces of her memory:

I fly over the streets and the stations that we passed through. I fly over the coastline of our town in Vietnam. I see the boat pulling away from the shore. The town doesn't vanish behind us; it merely recedes. I see us standing at the small fountain in that park in downtown San Diego. We are waiting among the sleeping homeless for the Federal Building to open so we can apply for our “papers.” My father wets his hands in the fountain and rubs the sleep out of my eyes. I fly along Orange Street, cut over to the University and circle the air above the Mexican Bakery. I fly over the four blossoming lemon trees my father planted in the backyard of a house in La Jolla. I fly over Westinghouse Street and see the pink condominiums with their fenced-in swimming pools built after they kicked us out of our house and tore our block down. The smell of eucalyptus draws me toward a canyon. As I alight on the soft dirt of the canyon, I catch my father dancing. (123)

For the narrator, memories and postmemories are not demarcated by linear histories; instead, she is able to move between these spaces fluidly. She flies over her many coloured houses while her father dances—movements that challenge the risk of stagnancy in trauma's intergenerational transmission and contest the essentialized, idealized notions of “nation, country and homeland” (epigraph).

Chapter Three: Visualizing Family as Performative in Truong Tran's *dust and conscience*

Introduction

I want to consider three overlapping memories that end lê thi diem thúy's *the gangster we're all looking for* as a way of moving between the previous chapter and this one. While walking on the beach, lê's narrator recalls:

My father remembers stroking my mother's face.

My mother remembers wearing my father's coat.

I remember taking off my sandals and digging my heels into the wet sand.

As my parents stood on the beach leaning into each other I ran, like a dog unleashed, toward the lights. (158)

In this passage, lê writes her narrator's experience of postmemory through visualizations of familial intimacies. While the narrator links her parents' histories to the fragmented experiences they share together, her own memories involve the the sensorial experience of running from her parents on a beach. This intergenerational interaction captures the ways in which Vietnamese diasporic literature can complicate and even transform narratives that describe the refugee family. The image of a "dog unleashed" performs the filial tension felt within the 1.5 generational subject—at once bound to a family space and able to move towards and away from its prescribed structures.

The image of "dog unleashed" can similarly convey the fraught identification with family felt by the speaker in Truong Tran's *dust and conscience*—a semi-autobiographical collection of prose poems documenting a trip to Vietnam through disjointed imagery. In this chapter, I use the visual frameworks explored in my last chapter as a way to interpret Tran's

language as images in order to explore the function of viewing the family structure as a site of intersecting feelings. I examine the ways in which the speaker's complex emotional responses to these postmemories contribute to his understanding of filiality. I argue that Tran's depiction of filiality as performative reconceptualizes what it means for the 1.5 and post-generational subject to belong within a family, home, and nation.

Memory as Fragmented Form

I look at *dust and conscience* as a companion to *the gangster*: both lê and Tran employ visual imagery to position the 1.5 generational subject as one "running to and from family" (lê 96). While lê constructs the family space through the complex images of migration, Tran articulates his fraught filial memories within the diverging images conjured in a *return* to Vietnam. Tran's non-mimetic imagery examines the relationship between diaspora, post-war trauma, memory, and family, presenting the memories of his speaker as aesthetic refractions of a continually displaced consciousness. However, while lê's visualizations of memory and postmemory add an affective depth to her narrative of refugee families, Tran's imagery altogether challenges narrative structures.

Rejecting rigid form, conventional grammar, capitalized letters or punctuation, his text reads as psychic ruptures that he describes as "antipoems" (Tran 62). Tran's aesthetic subversions demonstrate how "formal disruptions... [can] become strategies of resistance to norms" (Miki 117), but also demonstrate the ways in which memory can be visually interpreted as linguistic eruptions. A poem that ruminates on the relationship between "chairs" and tables", for example, is followed abruptly with a poem that examines "language manipulated" (Tran 43-

4). In a stochastic representation of consciousness, Tran both redefines his speaker's relationship to a fixed past, and disrupts linear understandings of Vietnamese refugee historiography.

For the Vietnamese refugee subject, the lingering effects of postwar trauma serve as a reminder of the coexistence of past and present. The history of trauma, as Cathy Caruth describes, is “referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs” and can be “grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (187). It is through the lens of the hauntingly inaccessible past that Tran locates his speaker's journey. He explores a Vietnamese refugee identity as neither bound to nor divorced from the historical narratives that characterize the Vietnamese refugee experience. His speaker muses, “every life is a book the story scripted long before the first breath is taken that every book is a journey of learning and unlearning with each turn of the page that every journey is a language shrouded in silence” (Tran 80). The 1.5 generational subject's story is spectrally indebted to the overlapping histories of colonialism, war, and competing national ideologies. Yet reticent dynamics within intimate filial spaces also contribute to a new language born out of the silence experienced in families. Like many 1.5 and second generation refugee subjects, Tran's story exists as both “a segment of the one that began a long time ago” and “a story that is elliptical in style, filled with gaps of memory, knowledge, and certainty. And small glimpses of clarity” (V. Nguyen 471).

Tran embraces this contradiction; in its non-linear confusion, *dust and conscience* leaps between temporal bounds, instead presenting his speaker's personal history through images that privilege messy, unresolved feelings. His speaker's scattered thoughts reveal his spatiotemporal remove from the past and from Vietnam. As Tran's poetic consciousness shifts both spatially and temporally, Tran presents a kind of longing for home that moves away from any fixed location.

I consider an aesthetic representation of a return “home” in order to discuss the postmemorial subject’s construction of family. First, I will explore what the concept of a “return” means in a text where Vietnam is so spatially absent. I then locate his return in instances of postmemory: at a generational remove, the lenses of loss and nostalgia visually reconfigure home and family through ambivalent feelings. I argue that feelings of ambivalence engendered by postmemory prompt relational understandings of family and home. Through affiliative ways of seeing, Tran’s speaker is able to recognize family through its performative roles. By aesthetically representing family through its performative tensions, Tran redefines filial structures as well as his own identity within the family and nation state.

Returning to Elsewhere

The very act of returning takes on new meaning for the diasporic subject, whom Trinh T. Minh-ha describes as the “travelling self” (27). According to Trinh, “every voyage can be said to involve a re-siting of boundaries... between home and abroad, native culture and adopted cultures, or creatively speaking, between a here, a there and an elsewhere” (27). It is only fitting then, that Tran introduces his text with hesitation about where to begin. He writes, “inception incipience debut dawn where would I begin if not at home” (10). Here, the association between home and beginning acknowledges the married concepts of “home” and “origin”. Yet Tran places different iterations of beginning—inception, incipience, debut, dawn—next to each other to convey the simultaneous sameness and difference that both bind and separate these synonyms. His formal choice already prompts readers to visually apprehend the word beginning through the lens of Derridean *différance*—a term that both recognizes the traces of a word’s usage while

continually deferring to its multiple meanings. In other words, to apprehend the sentence's meaning, readers must consider these words in relation to one another.

In the same way, home is for the speaker a “word that does not hold meaning” (Pelaud “Difference” 722) yet one that invokes multiples significations. Tran envisions what home means for a refugee father figure in an imaginative postmemory of his refugee past:

to preserve the bitterness he scattered his children in four directions sat back in his chair and proceeded to grow old he waited until the time was right he paid them a visit when they went to kiss their father he licked their skin he found the bitterness still clinging to his tongue he tells his children I want to go home (11).

For the father, home is the taste of bitterness engendered from histories of his displacement that he finds present in his children. For the speaker, home is a word at once rooted in Vietnam, but transported through the intergenerational transmission of loss and trauma. The concept of “returning home” is reinterpreted to incorporate the competing filial histories of displacement and refuge.

Tran makes clear from the outset that his search for lost origins begins at a place of difference. His memories of his journey home do not actually take place in a defined physical location, but exist as competing visual images conjured while travelling: a relationship with a man he meets in Vietnam, language, writing, and his changing environmental surrounding. These images weave non-mimetic connections between family but are also tenuous; Tran recognizes that the relationship between object and meaning relies on the both the teller and perceiver's positionality. He visually grafts the experience of storytelling onto a crossroads between “the line which connects the perception to the perceived” and “the line of needs and necessities” where “at the crossing are the causalities fragments to stories some still struggling to

find the beginnings” (Tran 12). Indeed, Tran’s return to “home” does not end in reunion but with the recognition of how home is a site with multiple intersecting entryways and exits. The speaker’s idea of home lies outside of heteronormative structures; its multiple significations acknowledge the roots of his histories while revisualizing what it means to be rooted. Tran envisions a “falling leaf falling falling and where did you come from and where are you now” (34)—an image that recalls the genealogical model of the “tree” while moving away from its branches.

Rather than through normative structures, Tran defines family through the complex feelings engendered by filial relationships within multiple home spaces. For the speaker, home does not represent a fixed location, or an idealized image; home is located in his ambivalent feelings. Trinh ruminates on this ambivalence: “when I’m asked where home is for me, I am struck by how far away it is, and yet, home is nowhere else but right here, at the edge of this body of mine. Their land in my land, their country is my country” (12). For the refugee subject, the reorienting spaces of “home” also revisualize citizenship as a mobile identification. Through its unconventional illustrations of memory and postmemory, *dust and conscience* aesthetically performs the tensions that organize the 1.5 or second generations refugee subject’s identity.

Postmemory: Arriving at a Context

The speaker’s return to Vietnam is shrouded in a sense of familial obligation. Speaking of his father, he says: “that in his death we have returned to wade along these flooded streets to eat of the fruits our tongues have forgotten making good on the promise made between father and a son the beginnings to an end without singularity in such a time in such a place i think of it as arriving at a context” (Tran 14). As the children journey back to Vietnam excavating experiences

their “tongues have forgotten”, the beginning of this journey is marked as one of postremembering—to “arrive at a context” of unlived experiences. The speaker’s understanding of family is not predicated by a shared feeling engendered by his inherited memories, but precisely the inability to mimic the feelings the previous generation experience. For the speaker, the experience of postmemory offers something else: context.

Similar to lê, whose narrator’s memories begin to incorporate the perspective of her parents, Tran introduces the memories of his parents through an embodied knowledge. He writes of a figure we can only assume is his mother: “hers is a story of conflicting hair disowning her in one culture or another the story of skin thickened by sun and neglect years upon years hers is the story of possession” (Tran 13). In these postmemories, Tran’s speaker’s parents are even further removed from their filial identities than lê’s “Ma” and “Ba”. As the possessive pronouns “his” and “hers”, their ambiguous identities act as stand-ins for other Vietnamese refugee stories. Yet the speaker’s affective connection to these memories also adjoin Vietnamese bodies within the affect of familial discourse. Through these embodied practices of remembering, Tran is able to recognize an unspoken kinship that bonds subjects who experience the trauma of displacement.

This recognition allows Tran’s speaker to identify the feeling of trauma in another image of his mother: “she sits in her new car and she listens to the cd she is reminded of home she is overwhelmed with sadness she is parked in her garage she is reminded of home” (17). His image of his mother can be associated with the narrative of other first generation refugees forced to reconcile competing idealizations of home, where deterritorialization is understood as a source of melancholic mourning. However, Tran’s speaker is able to locate his mother’s melancholia within a larger context that extends beyond the feeling of perpetual displacement after post-war

trauma. Her memories recall the sacrifices she made to fulfill her daughterly and wifely duties before leaving Vietnam:

to appease her mother she married a soldier a man twice her age but a man just the same to provide no less than what is necessary she would expect no more than the occasional visit while on leave away from the war a cordial smile a distant conversation the promise of returning whenever necessary with no love involved no bonds to break only the barest necessity of what is needed the comfort of knowing her mother was appeased and of her own daughter and what is expected to appease a mother in her old age no more no less than what is necessary (Tran 56)

During the war, Tran's mother repeatedly performs only "what is necessary" in the economies of her filial structure. Yet these obligations become more than she bargained for as her family changes shape after the war. For Tran's speaker, this postmemory becomes a way for him to examine the movement of filial obligation through generations as points of relation to one another.

The ability to conjure his mother's memories in these affectively charged images also affords the speaker a distance from trauma that enables its alleviation. Unlike his mother, who sits in a car, unable to mourn her past, the past emerges as fragmented images for the speaker. On his trip to Vietnam, he hears "music in the background" as "prewar french" (Tran 23); he walks the streets imagining a figure of nostalgia "beside [him] walking step for step" playing "a game of badminton to settle the score" (Tran 18). He says to this figure: "then and only then would we part you to explore your place of birth and i to find a tranquil then and only then would i arrive at your mourning" (Tran 18). The speaker's memories and postmemories fill his

consciousness with random images that allow him to affectively imagine outside of his lived experience and grants him the mobility from his past to “mourn”.

In *dust and conscience*, the postmemorial subject’s relationship to trauma relies on ways of “seeing” postmemory. Tran’s speaker describes a mechanism of remembering that involves the archival process of filing recipes:

of the things i know however significant minor i file them away to keep them with me
always recipes in a tin box hidden behind compartments comprising the heart come some
of these recipes i return to often while other i file for just the sake of keeping how the
technique of holding chopsticks defines one’s place in the world or the image of my
father’s combing my mother’s hair what i do not know i leave to the imagination one day
i too will find myself as my father or my mother my hair being combed that hands of my
lover searching for grays to uproot and discard as for the unimaginable the recipe reads as
follows *that which is beyond my imagination i will take comfort in not knowing* (49;
emphasis in original)

It is his ability to store the *visual* fragments of his parents’ experiences that enables him to recognize the broader narratives of postwar trauma, resettlement, and competing narratives of filial debt which shape his life, but it is the feeling of “comfort in not knowing” that redefines his emotional reactions to these overlapping histories.

Translating in Silence

Embodied practices of remembering enable the speaker to describe his own identity as fragmented images. He writes of his relationship with his Catholic upbringing: “of this need to equate image to meaning on my twenty seventh birthday she gave me a cross a detailed image

devoid of metaphors a man in pain his arms and feet nailed to beams a scaled model to be worn in faith around one's neck because i am that was all she would say" (Tran 53). Tran's speaker sees the cross on the rosary as "devoid" of Christian iconography. In detaching sign from signification, Tran deconstructs the "need to equate image to meaning". Instead, when the reader sees the phrase "I am", reminiscent of God's own declaration in Exodus, it is interpreted as a performative image, one that actually detaches the speaker's identity from any essential meaning. If *the gangster we are all looking for* imagines the photographic space as the tension between visible and invisible (Eng "The Feeling" 328), the poems of *dust and conscience* present identity through the complex viscosity of language, wavering between what can be seen and what is concealed.

The oscillation between language and silence performs the tension within the speaker's filial interactions. We see effects of reticence in family in a conversation he has with his mother about falling in love in Vietnam: "I spoke of falling in love with the country and the people and of one particular man you would like him I told her he's quiet gentle and is a writer like myself" (Tran 54). His mother responds by saying "she was late for church" (Tran 54). This exchange evinces a dialogical disconnect between mother and son. In introducing a queer relationship within a heteronormative family space, he is met with more images to interpret. The religious talismans littered in this text illustrate the relationship between mother and son as one that contains filial misunderstanding. While the figure of his mother is frequently associated with the Church, his disassociation with these items only highlight the fraughtness of his relationship with his mother, and the fraughtness of his own identification.

For the speaker, reticent filial dynamics also conceal the darkest traumas within his family. In convoluted prose he describes a postmemory, an “accident”, involving his father’s past that refuses to be clarified in speech:

ours is a tonal language fifteen years a thousand miles countless attempts at telling this story how the meaning changes from father to son to sister to stranger for the record it was an accident that i am clear on a loaded gun a run away boy the need to uphold traditions in culture a camera at the funeral for where did i fit into claim such a story it was my eye that saw my hand that focused my camera that shot a phone call from your sister and what she said i still remember if you see him tell him to come home it was an accident the police say i was we want him to come home perhaps it is best that i leave it at this a futile attempt at telling the story returning to against and again like our names layered with reasons our is a language imbedded in tones (Tran 55)

The true happenings of this incident remain buried between the different memories that move from “father to son to sister to stranger”; the failure to communicate leaves an open wound that refuses to heal and risks becoming inherited trauma. Yet within the failure to articulate emerges a tonal language through which the speaker gains an alternative understanding of his family. These constructions of family do not fit normative models of filial relationships. Instead, they exist within the ambivalent feelings induced by fractured images of family.

The speaker’s way of looking at his family interactions project onto his descriptions of his lost lover. To him he writes,

i’ve located you to a letter in the alphabet do no think it is wrong of me it is by no means a reduction of your being this is done only so that i may address you free of the inhibitions found in a name they are temporarily submerged if not discarded let’s say that

you are k and i am t removed from our context t met k in a country v t fell in love with
both k and v the sum of which is a language unrequited (Tran 16)

The decision to conceal k's identity positions his identity as an image of a letter—the image of “language unrequited”. As Tran writes, he does so not to reduce k's “being” but to emancipate his being from essentialized characterization. In introducing a form of “language manipulated” Tran introduces a way of speaking that resists ideological thinking (44). Yet, this visualization also comes to embody the deep misunderstanding within their relationship. He describes k as “an enigma of a person” (Tran 44).

In these fraught interactions within familial and sexual intimacies, Tran reveals how in writing the other, one is confronted with constructions of the self: “the other as perceived in language or the loss of other as place stranger country beloved the other when deciphered is but the self intently saying in loving you i lose myself” (84). In other words, the very language that describes the loss of lover or of home evacuates identity in a recursive desire for the Other. By playing with language conventions then, Tran contends with the self as other through the multiple positionalities of refugee, son, and lover. He merges competing images of memory and postmemory to “find distance in the proximity of a step between the i and the self” (Tran 51).

For Tran's speaker, memory is as much constituted through lived experience as it is by the imaginative capabilities of recollection. This creative aspect of memory reconceptualizes history—not as a causal chain of events but a series of (un)fulfilled potentials: “each decision not arrived holds a reality of its own” (Tran 19). In one poem, the speaker looks at a photograph on television of a Vietnamese man pointing a gun at the temple of another man. This image prompts visualizations about an alternate family life without the effects of war:

my father as the scholar instead of the soldier teaching his way towards an early retirement my mother says i would have been married in Saigon settled with two children as for that man in the picture holding the gun where would he be now as it is decisions arrived at somewhere in southern California he owns a restaurant i've written a poem (Tran 20)

This potential reality exists alongside another potential for k and t: “perhaps in another time our story would be different there would be no leaving and thus no returning you would be the teacher in a northern village and i the fisherman we would live quietly in the background singing of cicadas the whispering of cracks of our lives” (Tran 26).

The insertion of these somewhat utopic possibilities places the speaker's oppressed circumstances within the context of post-war trauma. These unlived possibilities remain suspended in a time in which Vietnamese bodies are not historically associated with suffering. However, the speaker's ability to wonder—his ability to form imaginative connections between disparate images of his postmemory—also contributes to trauma's alleviation. He pairs his longing for these alternate realities with more pragmatic thoughts: “or it will always be this way be it here or there yesterday or tomorrow us or them it will always be this way you or i” (Tran 40). While he recognizes the haunting presence of war, this recognition is also accompanied by a sense of apathy towards achieving happy endings. Isabelle Pelaud recognizes that these complex constructions of family, love, and home arise from a place of conflict: “For the narrator, return is only possible through the recollection of such ruptures, ruptures made of unruly words and thoughts: rupture from a place, rupture with a lover, rupture with the dead” (“Differences” 725). These ruptures connote the inability to repair or to heal; instead is through ruptures that the speaker conveys the need to construct new ways of articulating through language.

Looking Beside

The affective connection between the speaker and the man on television exemplifies how affiliative ways of looking can produce relational understandings of identity, family, sexuality, and environment. Images like the “frog” and “scorpion” weave an unconventional fable about the lost lovers k and t (Tran 26). The image of persimmons, a popular fruit native to parts of Asia, haunts a dream sequence in which he is driving and hits a woman with a “face like my mother’s but distinctly not my mother” (Tran 37), and seeps into the next several passages that describe his interaction with the fruit as a child. Rather than acting as symbols of a fixed meaning, these images repeat sporadically throughout the text to form new significations with the disparate memories of family and home. When he comes across a sandcrab in Vietnam he asks, “what is it about you that allows you to survive this scorching heat and unrelenting environment to which the crab answered my skin and my legs for its pays to have thick skin if you can even call it that and you know what else when running sideways i surprise the likes of people like you” (Tran 33). The sandcrab personifies the resilience that brings to mind the refugee narrative; the deviant act of “running sideways” threatens normative understandings of walking as linear and progressive.

In creating these non-mimetic associations, Tran represents the feeling of postmemory as a confluence of palimpsestic images that connect history with imagination, allowing him to understand personal history through the meta lens of a writer. One passage reads,

in his memoir the young man wrote chapter after chapter without the use of punctuation his images bled from one the other his words were nomadic monks roaming the page having exhausted the stories of his young life the man decided he had arrived at an

ending he wrote one last line nonchalantly he ended on a period when he woke the next morning he found the white pages void of print (Tran 79)

Tran describes his text as nomadic, and in doing so, presents diasporic consciousness as one that remains continually mobile. The intersecting narratives that connect post-war trauma, filial piety, reticent filial dynamics and cultural convergences do not end the postmemorial subject's narrative, so to speak, but rather, forms new beginnings. Tran geographically maps these historical connections, through generations of past lives that have crossed the Pacific Ocean—personified in one passage in the image of the “lady of the lake” (15). Tran writes,

with your ebony smile in a past life you lived as mother and I your son wandering from market to market town to town with the weight of dragon fruits on our shoulder you and I my lady of the lake we are not so different beyond this threshold of distance and time that an orange is orange from where I come from this my lady of the lake is but a minor discrepancy for beyond any threshold is the promise of home (15)

By introducing a relational way to visualize historical influence, Tran exposes “the unraveling link between present and past that defines indexicality as no more than performative” (Hirsch “Generation” 125).

Tran's conception of home then is not a return to an origin, but rather, determined by subversive identifications. Gopinath explores the notion of “home [as] a vexed location where queer subjects whose very desires and subjectivities are formed by its logic simultaneously labor to transform it” (5). Tran's speaker visualizes home as simultaneously informed by the memories and postmemories of his family's past and his queer identification that destabilizes the process of memory's transmission through the family space.

This friction separates his experiences from the generation before him. When burying his father, he places his father underneath the tree—a genealogical symbol that returns his father to a place of familial belonging: “when looking for my father’s grave site we asked that it be beneath a tree in a lifetime of seeking refuge from country and language and life itself he would have wanted it this way” (Tran 75). In contrast, Tran’s speaker refuses to perform actions that would involve any fixed categorization of home. He attributes his own hesitation to correspond across the Pacific to his resistance against spatial borders: “it is not that i am forgetful or lazy i have written letters to each and every one of you but i choose not to send them for such an act mean that the existence of home would then be confined to one another” (Tran 21). Here, the transmission of trauma is at both present and absent in the postmemorial subject’s conception of home. While the act of continued reticence within filial dynamics remains traumatically ambivalent, the emotion that affectively links this action to trauma is replaced by a transformative conception of home. In *dust and conscience*, constructions of home are visually configured through the complexities of performed actions within the family space.

Performing Family Structures

Tran’s speaker navigates through fraught filial dynamics by adopting a more relational understanding of speech within a family that does not fit normative models. In one scene, Tran reimagines the plot of introducing his lover to his parents under the traditionally minded Vietnamese refugee family lens:

iii want to take you home to my family and their judgments be it good or bad the traditions of dinner a table full of strangers awkward painful family as defined by my mother’s darting eyes i want to assure you with calming whispers i think she likes you it

is a gradual process she's not much for words like all words meaningless without the context (30)

Tran implicitly critiques the American family dinner table by layering these filial interactions with "awkward pain". Even imagined in his mind, introducing his lover cannot run smoothly; the very specific histories that separate homosexual lovers from their heteronormative families render much of his exchanges with his parents indecipherable. However, these instances are not characterized by their traumatic and difficult experiences. Instead, Tran's speaker displays an ability to translate his mother's muted gestures to reassure his partner. Tran is able to read his mother's responses between the silence. He recalls a phone conversation, "My mother called back ten minutes later to say that she was too late for church and that if I was happy then she too was happy because translated she is will always be my mother and I am will always be her son" (Tran 59). While mother and son will never reach affective agreement, Tran demonstrates that filial structures can exist beyond normative understandings of family. As a postmemorial subject, Tran affirms his relationship with his mother not through sweet exchanges or glimpses of filial bonding, but through the ability to interpret difficult exchanges as corollaries of the larger narratives of resettlement and intergenerational cultural clashes.

In other words, Tran revisualizes the family structure through its performative roles. I use the term performative to refer to its theoretical usages in performance theater as well as in speech act theory (Austin) and in deconstruction (Derrida). The convergence of these usages is emphasized most poignantly in the chapter "ruptures", when the speaker's own retelling of his journey is abruptly halted: "pardon the interruption but there is a scorpion a woman a frog and a ghost all wanting to come in they insist on entering into the book" (Tran 63). The figures of mother and father "enter" the poem as speakers in the text in a reimagination of filial structures

as a theatrical production. His mother is the consummate actor: “playing the part of my mother though not my mother nonetheless to authenticate her role she has dyed her teeth peppered her hair she has but one line of dialogue to deliver on cue she she clears her throat she says enough she exits the page” (Tran 68), and stages the disconnect between son and mother. On the other hand, his father returns as a ghost, disarmed by the ability to escape the hardships of his lived experience: “the ghost of my father dressed in a Hawaiian patterned short sleeved shirt bermuda shorts a straw brimmed hat i’m leaving he says but before i go i leave you with a bit of advice don’t lose it in translation well i’m off he says i’ve got weeds to pull in those clouds” (Tran 69). Here, Tran displays sense of affective closeness to the ghost of his father who in death appears before him in relaxed attire. When removed from the cultural context of oppression, his father performs the labour practice of gardening, yet his death also allows Tran’s speaker to distinguish these performed actions between life and death. In life, the labour of gardening intersects with state oppression and neglect, the model minority paradigm, and feelings of perpetual filial debt. Yet in death, the act of gardening, while still reminding the reader of these overlapping histories, takes on another signification: the emotional response towards gardening here returns the act of “weeding” to its intended deployment. While his relationship with his mother remains opaque, his ability to imagine the alternative, veiled identities of both of his parents reveals how the fraught interactions that make up his filial constructions are performative.

I want to consider the metafictional interruption of his own conscious memory as an aesthetic representation of the act of postremembering. More specifically, these interruptions enact the ways in which postmemory can be a form of self-critique that can aid the alleviation of trauma. By destabilizing the voice of his narrative, Tran rejects essentializing any conclusions from his words. Animals such as frog and sandcrab that previously symbolized the state of his

own conscious desires return in “rupture” to challenge his writerly authority. The sandcrab, once described as thick skinned, now describes the language used in poem he is situated in as “awkward and crude...he’s not used to being stared at with such disdain the climate is too cold for even his thick skin he says you’re a writer so write something beautiful something fluid” (Tran 65). The frog, “speaking in his own defense” questions the speaker’s knowledge: “for the record i did not write these poems what do i know of love and of tragedy what do i know of poetry” (Tran 70). Tran dislodges his speaker from the very metaphors used to define his experience, and questions the validity of prose itself. The most scathing of critiques comes from his characterized lost lover: “enter k holding my words what you’ve written I cannot accept the truth as you have it is a figment a fragment at best what i consider to be true you fail to mention he returns the words he leaves the book” (Tran 71). Indeed, by incorporating the perspectives of others, Tran reveals his own performative role as writer, and the potential effects that can be generated from his own fragmented perspective.

It is through this ability to critique himself that enables him to disassociate from the feeling of desire itself. Instead, notions of belonging and acquiring a life without refugee trauma can only be imagined through performance. In one scene, Tran’s speaker recalls playing a round of “nonsensical questions” that sees him envisioning himself in a life different from his own:

the other night i sat in a bar with three other people i’ll call them carlito anna
bartholemeu for no other reason than that of music he way these names fall from my
tongue we were play this game nonsensical in the moment profound in life we asked a
question we each gave an answer if you could be a character in a sitcom who would it be
note for this question you must choose a character of the opposite gender if this question
you can relive a single moment when would it be note for this question you can relive it

only altering the past is not an option if you could live in any period what time for this question and this question only you must change your race your gender is optional if the world would end this time tomorrow what would you do today now note the answer to the last question we'll use as a starting point to begin the next round of nonsensical questions (67)

This game becomes a microcosmic representation of the postmemorial subject's relationship to their histories. While Tran's speaker is bound to the histories that inform his identification, he is also able to perform identities outside of lived experience. He writes later: "four answers to a nonsensical question from four different characters I would pray I would fuck I would write a poem then fuck I would fuck I would fuck then pray then write that fucking poem" (Tran 82). Tran's speaker is not emotionally prescribed to any identity. Instead, the "what if" questions that concern the notion of identity is understood through the performative acts associated with the queer, writer, and Catholic labels he ambivalently rests between.

This practice of dissociating emotion from action also extends to his understanding of family. In a recollection about his mother buying persimmons from a farmer, he remembers the farmer commenting on how persimmons were only eaten by horses and asks if his mother owned one: "my mother just smiled that familiar smile the once that conveyed she didn't speak english the same smile that told me she had just told him to fuck off she took the bag in one hand my wrist in the other we walked that path along the highway between us not a single word" (Tran 39). Without a single word, Tran is already able to decipher that "the smile...is a deceptive creature a creature born of necessity" (36). Watching his mother perform the action of a model minority does not transmit the melancholic desire to belong; rather her smile becomes a form of Homi Bhabha's *mimicry*—a term that recognizes a menacing agency within the marginalized

subject's performed resemblance to the dominant regime. Bhabha writes, "mimicry is like camouflage, not harmonization or repression of difference but a form of resemblance that differs/defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically" (131). While the smile presents itself as a smile, Tran reflects how her smile is "almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha 126), or rather "almost the same but not white" (Bhabha 130). The distance afforded by postmemorial viewing practices allows Tran's speaker to find kinship within the interpreted affects of his family's performative choices.

Performative Identity

In recognizing alternative forms of kinship through performativity, Tran seeks an identity that is informed but not determined by genealogical models. From one of his beginnings, he tells his audience that he does not seek to protest the ideological narratives that bind the Vietnamese refugee story: "if only i were a dissident poet...my name its meaning would i then care to know" (Tran 7). He does not want to erase or heal the trauma of his past through resistance, nor does he want to anchor or "make concrete the elusive nature of one's identity" (Tran 27). Instead, his prose poem only illuminates the affective complexities of trauma's dissemination through a relational understanding of his fragmented history: "for translated i am considered not whole of fragments and shards translated i am the shadow of" (Tran 78). By depicting his journey through a series of these relations, Tran reveals how "travelling can thus turn out to be a process whereby the self loses its fixed boundaries—a disturbing yet potentially empowering practice of difference" (Trinh 41).

Tran's speaker identifies himself in difference from the ideological narratives that shape perceptions of the Vietnamese refugee subject. He refuses to be a stagnant image to consume:

i'm not the face that looks into the camera saying yes this is my story see the scars the thickened skin i've lived a hard life i've survived you with the camera tell it to the world no that is not me i am the one off centered to the left or right and always out of focus for the sake of drama i am sometime referred to as the forgotten one but you see that is not true i choose to sit in the corners of room you will not see my eyes most likely they are buried in a bowl of noodles i will smile occasionally but purely out of courtesy you probably smiled first and my stories i have none worth telling but even if i did for what it's worth i wouldn't tell you (Tran 35)

Instead, he exists between the performative choices engendered by his emotional response to his postmemories. He “smiles” and this act recalls his mother’s affective deception—an aesthetic excess both incomprehensible and undisciplinable.

As readers we are also at the behest of what Tran’s speaker chooses to reveal and disclose. Tran intentionally divides writer from reader: “the only true audience is the one not listening to know that i write despite of you the more i write the less you know to know that you i define as the reader this is all you need to know this is all i choose to tell” (83). As Vinh Nguyen asserts, “The story...[is] not meant for outsiders; words, in the end, fail to capture the reality of trauma and the textures of experience” (474). In its inaccessibility, Tran redirects Vietnamese narratives towards the refugee subject’s own world making.

We see a glimpse of his world in the final chapter which houses as many endings as it does beginnings. In one of these endings, Tran’s speaker adopts multiple subjectivities: “i am the father i am the son i am the lover i am” (77). Once again, Tran rewrites God’s affirmation “I am”, to illuminate the intersectional differences between the performative roles he occupies. For Tran, identification practices are not determined by the language used to contain subjectivity, but

by the ability to use language as a means to “*throw yourself out of yourself*” (28). The ability to “throw yourself out of yourself” speaks to Stuart Hall’s idea of “identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (222).

Tran ends by writing, “there is absolutely nothing poetic here to see nothing lyrical to hear go home to your families tell then you saw nothing forget what you thought you may have felt or touched language serves no purpose then that of meaning” (85). While his speaker establishes his capabilities as translator within his family, Tran does not act as one for the reader. Instead, readers too are asked to recognize the fragments of his performative identities not as a cohesive subjectivity but as relational interconnections between family, memory and imagination. And when we reach any conclusions, we are told to interpret them as new beginnings.

Conclusion

Through an examination of visual artefacts and postmemory in *the gangster* and *dust and conscience*, we gain a deeper appreciation of how lê and Tran re-envision the ways in which postmemorial subjects interpret the family against larger filial frameworks. While lê’s narrator encounters feelings of kinship while locating her family’s trauma in frameworks of oppression and displacement, Tran’s speaker identifies feelings of kinship in the ability to translate reticence and strategically performs identities beyond prescribed models.

These disparate yet connected responses to postmemory demonstrate how overlapping histories and trauma create the potential for shared affects from which the 1.5 or second generation Vietnamese refugee subject emotionally interprets and performs. As Eng suggests,

“affect becomes the privileged vehicle through which unacknowledged correspondences between words and things, between linguistic signifiers and visual perceptions, are brought together or forced apart” (*The Feeling of Kinship* 92).

The works explored in this thesis reveal that these emotional responses are not uniform; narratives still inform the postmemorial subject’s actions, and trauma cannot be healed or erased. Instead, these texts provoke a reading of the complexities of Vietnamese refugee life without any tidy conclusions. Trinh writes,

Travelers’ tales do not only bring the over-there home, and the over-here abroad. They do not only bring the far away within reach, but also contribute, as discussed to challenging the home and abroad / dwelling and traveling dichotomy within specific actualities, at best, they speak to the problem of the impossibility of packaging a culture, or of defining an authentic cultural identity. (40)

The complex ways in which narratives of the Vietnamese refugee family relationally interact with a story like Jennifer Pan’s and texts like *the gangster*, and *dust and conscience* urge us to reconsider the reading of families through a postmemorial lens. While postmemory describes the intergenerational transmission of trauma, the ambivalent affect engendered by its experience “actually reinforce the living connection between past and present, between the generation of witnesses and survivors and the generation after” (Hirsch “Generation” 125). Post-memorial artefacts reinforce the living connections between different forms of family and citizenship.

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