“Family Ties”:

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Abstract

On April 3rd, 1975, in light of the military situation in Vietnam, President Ford formally announced the evacuation of Vietnamese orphans lamenting, “We are seeing a great human tragedy as untold numbers of Vietnamese flee the North Vietnamese onslaught. The United States has been doing and will continue to do its utmost to assist these people.”¹ This assistance came with $2 million made available to fly 2,000 South Vietnamese orphans to the United States. These airlifts came to be called “Operation Babylift.” When the babylift officially ended on May 1st, it transported 2,894 Vietnamese and Cambodian children to America to be adopted into white American homes. The process was described as a humanitarian mission despite the fact that it was under the control of the US Air Force. In my thesis, I aim to explore how Operation Babylift’s sentimental language of rescue was established, dispersed, and perpetuated within the context of American and US imagined familial relationship. I argue that through the sentimental language of Operation Babylift, American obscures the systems of military, racial, and economic oppression.

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And finally, a warm thank you to my mother and grandmother who are my inspirations.
Introduction

During a spring blizzard in late March of 1975, a woman named Shirley Peck-Barnes drove through the streets of Denver. Peck-Barnes endured the snow-ridden drive by listening to the radio, when suddenly her music was stopped by this announcement, “The news from Saigon tonight is that the city is in a state of panic as the military situation in Southeast Asia is rapidly deteriorating. American diplomatic officials are evacuating their families as the Vietcong troops race to the Capitol.”¹ What followed was an even more dramatic message. In light of the military situation, the Friends of the Children of Vietnam (FCVN), an adoption agency in Vietnam, was evacuating Vietnamese children in the Saigon orphanages. Peck-Barnes responded, “the news of Vietnamese orphans took precedence over all the social issues and tempered any ill feelings I had about the war.”² In what Peck-Barnes felt was an act of destiny, she called the FCVN agency and within a few days she found herself working in their health care facility. In the following month, Peck-Barnes would see more than 600 Vietnamese children in the Denver facility as part of Operation Babylift, an event that brought more than 2,000 Vietnamese children to the United States to be adopted into American homes.

By the time President Gerald Ford formally announced the commencement of Operation Babylift on April 3rd, 1975, US-sponsored orphanages had already saturated Vietnam such as Friends for All Children, Friends for Children of Vietnam, The Pearl S. Buck Foundation, Holt, and Catholic Relief Service.³ Together these agencies housed a little fewer than 20,000 orphans by 1975.⁴ During Operation Babylift, Vietnamese and

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² Ibid. 229
³ Ibid. 75-94
Cambodian children from these foreign-run orphanages were transported to America by military airplanes. The whole operation was under the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) but operated by the US Air Force. When the first official planeload of babies arrived safely at the Presidio base in San Francisco, The Washington Post described the place as “Orphans Land” in which the Vietnamese children were surrounded by, “a crowd of some 300 reporters, policemen, nurses, volunteers and airline officials.” The whole affair was documented by newspapers and television clips from when these kids landed in America to the homes they entered afterwards.

Despite the large media coverage, scholars of the Vietnam War rarely mention Operation Babylift, or if they do, it is merely in passing. Early scholarly literature about the war focused on Vietnam as its political and militaristic context. Howard Zinn, the prolific American historian, also omitted any mention of the Operation Babylift in his bestseller, A People’s History of the United States. Recent scholarship about the Vietnam War focuses on bringing the Vietnamese perspectives into American literature. However, such works often focus on the voices of South Vietnamese soldiers and political leaders. For works that mention Operation Babylift, it is often seen as merely consequence of the Vietnam War. Eric Jarvis sums up the popular viewpoint when he said, “[the] entire BABYLIFT experience was simply a footnote to a long, violent, and divisive war.” Such historical perspectives not only divorce Operation Babylift from the

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6 For more analysis on Vietnam as a “lost war” see James Willbanks, Abandoning Vietnam: How America left and South Vietnam lost its War (University of Kansas 2004) and Victory in Vietnam: The official history of the People’s Army of Vietnam (University of Kansas, 2002) translated by Merle Pribbenow.
military violence during the war. The fact that Operation Babylift was a military operated procedure but is depicted a humanitarian effort to save children reveals that American imperial presence in Vietnam was a combination of militarism and sentimentalism.

The use of sentimentalism to reinforced imperial domination is not specific to United States and Vietnam. Scholars had produced a large repertoire of work that center on the rhetoric of imperialism that romanticize and infantilize the oppressed population. Such domination is expressed through the portrayal of the oppressed nation as weak, effeminate, or child like. In her vast study about European colonialism in Indonesia, Ann Laura Stoler, offers a complex look in how sentiments was crucial in negotiating power in a colonial context, “sentiment and sensibilities granted the some candidates the right to be treated as European that it did not grant others.”9 Christina Klein, in her work on sentimentalism and the Cold War, suggested in constructing the United States’ identity as a global power, military dominance is exerted and expressed through the language of paternal and maternal love.10 America becomes the paternal figure that guides occupied nations exercising power as a means of “intimate” discipline.

However, the rise of transnational adoption where children are in a system of supply and demand is a new phenomenon. This system of transnational adoption separates the globe into countries that were baby producers and countries that were baby consumers for the international adoption market. Klein traces this back to American Cold War politics that based US expansion on one of integration rather than difference. Laura Briggs, scholar of US imperial studies extended Klein’s argument stating that the

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proliferation of the images that uses the mother and child as figures of rescue has been established since the days of the New Deal to promote the welfare state. The mother child image is later used by international aid agency to promote what Laura Briggs called the American "secular salvation theology." US foreign policy is driven by a sentimental debate on whether to save children that substitutes the debate of US military, political, and economic goals.11

My research builds on the works of these two scholars. Firstly, it is one of the firsts in-depth scholarly look at Operation Babylift, a narrative that has long been dominated by the memoirs of American volunteers and orphanage directors in Vietnam and journalistic accounts. Through looking at Operation Babylift, I examine how the sentimental language of rescue is established, dispersed, perpetuated in the American historical narrative about the Vietnam War. By doing so, I hope to redefine the Vietnam War as something beyond 1975, perpetuated by the language of rescue that never escaped American rhetoric. Furthermore, the study of Operation Babylift offers insight on the formation of a racial and ethnic American identity in the 1970s, either through the contention of black politics or defining the Vietnamese American identity through the sentimentalism of rescue. Lastly, by tracing the narrative of Operation Babylift, I want to demonstrate how language of rescue established during periods of military violence lays the groundwork in how we talk about transnational and transracial adoption in the present.

Historical Background:

Origin of US Military relationship with the Migration of Children

In 1943, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was created under the directive of Franklin Roosevelt for a war-torn Europe. The United States funded more than 70 percent of UNRRA activities. Under the umbrella of UNRRA, the American government was not only responsible for the mobilization of children in Europe but was also directly responsible for military movements and the mobile trail of the displaced persons. When World War II ended, leaving the United States as a superpower in the globe, Martha Branscombe summed up the importance of the image of saving children to the US imperial power when she said, "The future destiny of our children is interwoven with the fate of children everywhere. The achievement of victory has magnified our position as the greatest world power- a position that embodies vital and broad responsibilities." America's position as a global power has been sublimated into its ability to "save children" since the end of World War II. Saving children and military expansion came simultaneously. And indeed, the United States has a long history of the transportation of children in countries of military exploit. At the end of the Korean War, Americans adopted the more than 4,000 Korean children between the years of 1955-1961. Between 1961 and 1962, the year of the Cuban missile crisis, US covert actions in Cuba led to the secret transportation of some 14,000 Cuban children to the United States. Such actions go simultaneously partly because the movement of

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12 Grace Fox, “Origins of the UNRRA,” Political Science Quarterly 65, 4 (Dec 1950) 564-570
15 Jodi Kim, “An Orphan with Two Mothers: Transnational and Transracial Adoption, the Cold War, and Contemporary Asian American Cultural Politics,” American Quarterly 61, 4 (Dec 2009) 870. For more information
children and the military expansion were seen as characteristics of US role as a global power.

United States’ Paternalistic Rhetoric about Vietnam

In 1956, US backed Ngo Dinh Diem to form the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) and reject the Geneva Records of 1954 that stated Vietnam would be reunited after a national election. The US government backed this action by using a paternal imperialistic rhetoric that depicted Vietnam as a child in need of saving. Perhaps, this could be more expressively seen through John F. Kennedy’s description of the relationship between the US and Vietnam in his 1956 speech:

“Vietnam represents a test of American responsibility and determination in Asia. If we are not the parents of little Vietnam, then surely we are the godparents. We presided at its birth, we gave assistance to its life, and we have helped to shape it future. As the French influence in political, economic, and military spheres has declined in Vietnam, American influence has steadily grown. This is our offspring—we cannot abandon it, we cannot ignore its needs.”

Like a child in poverty that needs to be rescued, Vietnam is depicted as a child that needs American guidance to be a part of the envisioned “free world”- away from the dangers of communism. For the next two decades, American military intervention in Vietnam would see not only a rise in arms and weapons, with the escalation in 1965, but also the rise of the so called humanitarian aid agencies such as FCVN, FFAC, Catholic Relief Services, and Holt that would focus on children in particular. As American soldiers trotted to the jungles of Vietnam to save Vietnam from communism; American civilians were saving children from the disaster. This internalized vision of the parental imperialistic model was so prevalent in the American public that in response to Operation Babylift, a MIT

specific to Operation Peter Pan see Victor Andres Triay, *Fleeing Castro: Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children’s Program* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1998)

professor asked, "Who is the orphan? The children, or Vietnam?" In this sense, Operation Babylift is different from previous US coerced migration of children because of its dramatization in the media is coupled with an open sense of failure that failed to protect its child from communism.

Thesis Outline:

My thesis will have a wide time range from 1967, when Rosemary Taylor, a prominent figure in US-Vietnam adoption circles during the Vietnam War, first landed in Vietnam, to 2002 when Hiedi Bub, an Ameriasian adoptee return to find her birth mother in the well-known documentary *Daughter of Danang*. The wide time gap makes it possible to trace the use of Operation Babylift’s sentimentalism through different stages. To account for such time gap, my sections are broken chronologically: before, during, and after the babylift.

The first section sets in the period before the Operation Babylift and explores how the sentimental language of American memoirs repackaged violent figures into paternal figures. My second section focuses on the babylift itself. In this section, I will examine how language of rescue that is established in the first section is dispersed through the media outlet. My third section is about the aftermath of the babylift. This section investigates the ways in which the sentimental language of the babylift has been used as an instrument of oppression domestically and abroad.

My thesis does not address the question of whether adoption is right or wrong. Nor does it offered a solution for the present inequalities of transnational adoption. Such answers are beyond the scope of my research. Rather, this study focuses on how the

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sentimental nature of Operation Babylift has been used to perpetuate a white global
American dominance both in the foreign and domestic spheres. By lifting the sentimental
veil and showing how adoption narratives are violent and chaotic, I do not wish to
annihilate international adoption—are all adoptions. Rather, my goal is to show how
sentimentalized adoption narratives are based on and perpetuates systems of inequality,
especially in the case of Vietnam and America’s relationship. This is in hope that by
unveiling, we can find ways to unravel the system.
Section 1: On the Battleground

The Orphanage-Military Complex

Rosemary Taylor had no plans to be in Vietnam prior to 1966. After graduating college in Australia, Taylor went to Alaska as a teacher as part of the Alaskan Mission to help the Inuit community. During the wait for a visa for her third return, Taylor was seduced by the war in Vietnam, thinking that her help was much more needed there. Without any precise idea of how to help, she decided to join the Australian Council of Churches' team in Asia. On February 18, 1967, Rosemary Taylor arrived in Vietnam as a social worker stationed to work at an American refugee camp for Vietnamese people that was located 250 miles north of Saigon. The refugee camps had Vietnamese civilians and the hundreds of American volunteers at refugee camps. By the time Rosemary Taylor left Vietnam in 1975, she would have processed over a thousand adoptions overseas and opened four orphanages in Vietnam. After the babylift, she not only published a photography book but also wrote a memoir about her experiences in Vietnam. Rosemary Taylor was the most prominently known orphanage worker in Vietnam.

Her first work with Vietnamese orphans was under the guidance of the American Catholic Relief Service that placed her in Phu My, a catholic orphanage located in Saigon. As Taylor worked with children within the Phu My nursery unit, she found her reason to stay in Vietnam. As she stated, “by now I had clearly seen an opportunity of being useful, and realized I need look no further than Phu My.” Rosemary finally found her method of attending to the “pressing need” in Vietnam. Working with children became her moral justification to stay in Vietnam. It is what will be remembered most

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about Rosemary Taylor. When Dana Sachs interviewed Vietnamese helpers that worked
with Taylor, they described her as “kind, but profusely serious, reserved, and intimidating
in her single-minded desire to save Vietnamese children.” This could be shown
regularly in her methods in dealing with government officials and bureaucrats. At one
point she sent a letter saying she was well known in the Ministry for her “sheer
persistence” on the “worthy cause.” Taylor viewed herself as independent from the
politics of the Vietnam War with the sole aim of protecting and saving babies. Yet, as
much as Taylor and other foreign orphanage workers viewed themselves outside of the
US military politics, they were part of an institutionalized foreign aid system that
depended on the military infrastructure to function.

By the time Taylor had arrived in Vietnam, the United States already had a
working military system that was institutionalized through aid. The foreign orphanages
that were established in Vietnam were part of the institutionalized aid policy that was
militarized. This tradition of using aid as a military tool has been established since the
In 1956, John F. Kennedy’s speech announced that Americans must “provide military
assistance to rebuild the new Vietnamese Army” in order to rebuild America into the
American image of the “free world.” In 1961, under the guidance of Kennedy, the
Foreign Assistance Act was passed. The act created the United States Agency of
International Development (USAID) that chartered with three tasks: (1) direct dollar aid to
supply foreign exchange for the purchase of imports, (2) fund economic and social

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19 Dana Sachs, The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam (Boston: Beacon, 2010) 139
20 Taylor, 25
21 Ibid, 26
development in the form of grant or loans, (3) technical assistance provided by skilled professionals. In the early 1960’s the USAID Civil Project in Vietnam was meant as a rural development project to rebuild the destroyed countryside. This development program turned into an American base development program instead. By 1965, USAID spent ninety percent of its budget every year on military forces, civil guards, and the CIA. The situation in Vietnam demonstrates how the use of “aid” was part of a military operation. Vietnam was the perfect example in which foreign aid was militarized.

It was not coincidence that the American Catholic Relief Services, who partnered with multiple catholic orphanages in Vietnam, first established their offices in Bien Hoa and Saigon since both were strong military bases. The American Catholic Relief Services received most of its funding through USAID, the very organization that funded the CIA. In 1969, CRS budgeted for approximately for $1.5 million dollars; half was under contract with USAID. CRS was not the only intermediary between the orphanages and the military. USAID officials were also part certain civil projects in Vietnam, including environmental testing, hospitals maintenance, and the funding of orphanages. Even as foreign orphanage workers who see themselves as individuals who came to Vietnam as aid workers, they were in fact political agents that serve a military agenda. This is can be seen through Rosemary Taylor’s work with the foreign orphanages in Vietnam.

22 Louis Picard and Terry Buss, A Fragile Balance: Re-examining the history of Foreign Aid, Security, and Diplomacy (Sterling, VA: Kumarian, 2009) 96
23 Ibid., 110
26 Picard, 112
When Rosemary Taylor’s first opened To Am in Saigon, funds and materials came from such relief organizations and the Australian Regular Army. During the Vietnam War, the Australian Regular Army operated under the control of the United States’ Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). US provided all personal needs for the Australian Army including shelter, weapons, uniforms, and “sunglasses.”

When the Australian Armed Forces supplied 35 baby beds to the Taylor’s To Am, the US Navy followed by donating refrigerators and installing a drinking water system. Soldiers that are stationed in the administrative sector played an integral role in Taylor’s four nurseries and orphanages. These units regularly supplied Rosemary Taylor with food, diapers, and medication, but also brought doctors. Taylor mentioned of one young lieutenant she met during a farewell party for a friend who brought two truckloads of rice, bulgur, cornmeal, clothing, and five hundred sacks of cement for the Phu My orphanage. Taylor’s orphanages clearly depended on the military for their vast supplies and materials during the wartime.

As the war progressed, Rosemary Taylor did not only depend on the army for everyday supplies but also on the resources provided through the military buildings such as hospitals. Medical assistance for her orphanages To Am, New Haven, and Allambie came mainly from military institutions such as the 3rd Field Military Hospital (later renamed as the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital) and the Australian Army Clinic at the “Free World” Headquarters. Dr. Jon Tierney, who worked for the American 24th Evacuation Hospital, was a regular at Phu My. Every week he, along with other

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28 Taylor, 6
29 Ibid., 25
American doctors, would travel to Saigon to set up clinics at a Vietnamese hospital near Phu My. This demonstrates the extensive influence that the military had on all aspects of civilian life in Vietnam outside the combat zone and into the aid sector. It also demonstrates how the orphanages were under the umbrella of the military infrastructure.

It is through the military infrastructure built for combat that allowed the Taylor’s work in the orphanages to function. Throughout the war, Taylor established a network of provincial orphanages where she collects Vietnamese children readied for adoption. Such provincial orphanages are usually located in areas of combat. On her visit to Vinh Long, located in the Melkong Delta, a strategic area that saw intense fighting throughout the war, she called the armed guards to escort her. Most of the time she “hitchhiked military planes” to get to her destinations. There is an underlying assumption that such airports, air routes, and roads to these provincial orphanages existed prior to the US military presence. However, these transportations were made possible in the first place through a large military infrastructure project that aimed to change the landscape of Vietnam to fit military needs. When Lyndon B. Johnson escalated the war in Vietnam in 1965, there was the need to reconstruct the Vietnamese landscape to suit the tactical and operational military procedures and accommodate increasing amount of soldiers. Special concerns were directed towards the countryside, which was considered prime suspect headquarters’ locations for Vietnamese guerillas, otherwise known as Vietcong in army slang. Roads, electric plants, and irrigation systems were needed to connect the countryside with the existing cities in Vietnam. As Lt. Gen. Caroll H. Dunn stated, “the very nature of the war required a military presence everywhere, and that simply meant dotting the countryside with fire support bases, maneuver-element base camps, logistic

30 Ibid., 18
support areas, heliports, and tactical airstrips.” 31 This was certainly the case. In the following years, the US government heavily invested in the construction of the roads, buildings, and bases. Saigon, Da Nang, and Cam Ranh Bay were major logistical bases. 32 While these constructions were built for military purposes, the money was funneled through the sector of “foreign aid” controlled by none other than USAID.

The orphanages that depended on this infrastructure continued to flourish during the years 1967-1973 under the guidance of USAID. It was USAID that supplied Taylor with $100,000 in grants for Hy Vong, her fourth orphanage that was groomed to be an intensive care unit. 33 While USAID and the US embassy played a large role in the daily operations of the orphanages, the foreign orphanages were essentially allowed free autonomy as to how to run their orphanages. In fact, from the time the Rosemary Taylor left the Catholic Relief Services in 1968 to the opening of one of Rosemary Taylor’s own orphanage, Hy Vong in 1973, she acted independently as an unregistered organization in Vietnam. During those years, the autonomy of the foreign nurses and volunteers allowed them to view themselves as civilian workers rather than political and military agents. At the same time, the military aspect of the orphanages is blatantly present in the ways that Taylor used the military infrastructures.

One primary example was when Rosemary Taylor and her co-director, Wende Grant, flew to Cambodia to evacuate 60 Cambodian children in Phnom Penh, located in the Eastern provinces of Cambodia where Vietnamese guerillas established bases. When the British Embassy in Cambodia left in early 1974, Taylor deemed the orphans in

32 Ibid., 26
33 Taylor, 106
Canada House to be in danger. She contacted a USAID official in Vietnam for possible ways to evacuate Cambodian children to Vietnam under Friends For All Children (FFAC), Wende’s Grant adoption agency in Colorado. The place directed her to the US embassy. In two days, Taylor was on an Air America plane, one of the most famous USAID-funded CIA operations. Air America flew throughout South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia throughout the war. At its height, it had 6,000 employees, 30,000 flights per month, and the largest airline fleet at that time. The 40 aircrafts that were based in Vietnam flew 12,000 people monthly. When she left Canada House accompanied by the Cambodian children, the US Embassy provided a car with a radio to synchronize the arrival of the plane. She was welcomed in Saigon by welfare officials that cleared the entry visas. On the surface, the evacuation was a civil operation, but everything from the planes to the officials was part of the USAID’s military fund. The militarization of the orphanage becomes more explicit with the frequent visits of soldiers. However, the militarism is subverted by the sentimentalism that surrounds the soldier as a father figure.

Gentle Soldier, Violent Father

This image of the gentle and thoughtful soldier is one that was constantly promoted by the US government and military. The MACV required that every military unit have some sort of civic program. This was part of the American pacification process in which a war was not only waged through guns, but also through the hearts of people. In 1960, Joseph Buttinger, the founder of the International Rescue Committee, proudly

35 Taylor, 146-149
stated, “Vietnam is the first country in Asia where the West, by replacing imperialism with policies of aid, has stopped the “Russians” without firing a shot.”\(^{36}\) In the case of US military aid, war must be waged on both fronts: on the combat grounds and the hearts of the civilians. Thus, programs were made to construct the soldiers as caregivers who were kind and understanding. Not only that, the Marines Civic Action Program built 81 hospitals, 85 orphanages, and 447 schools.\(^{37}\) Furthermore, they presented the military as a caregiving unit. During this period, the MACV’s Observer and Army Reporter published works that constantly showed the soldier in rehabilitation centers comforting the sick and in orphanages playing with children. One particular story run by the MACV, wrote that marines had two sides, “the cold-blooded courage to storm in battle, then warm-hearted kindness to comfort the victims-the hungry, naked “children” caught up in conflict.”\(^{38}\) The quote uses the children as a means to promote the soldiers as kind and innocent.

The orphanages became a space where the soldier can become the caring and giving figure. In Rosemary Taylor’s memoirs, the soldier is often depicted as a kind figure who not one provides materially but also cares about the well being of the child. In her memoir, Taylor continually presented soldiers as benefactors who not only helped the orphanage materially but as genuine figures that care about the orphan kids. One prominent example is US Sergeant George Miles. Miles came regularly to Taylor’s New Haven orphanage to help rebuild the orphanage and fixed the plumbing, walls, and other broken facilities. Miles not only became a regular fixture at the orphanage but also helped

\(^{36}\) Picard , 06
\(^{38}\) “Marines Care: Civic Action program, A Study in humanitarianism,” US Department of the Navy, 1967. Douglas Pike Collection. Taken from Heather Marie Stur, Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era, 155
in the adoption operations. He also handled the complicated procedures and paperwork that allowed other soldiers to “escort” the adopted children abroad. Through Taylor’s word, Miles is not seen as an agent of violence but a dependable figure that the orphanages and the children within the orphanages can rely on. These soldiers were not only depicted as caring figures, they were literally replacement father figures through the foster care system that Taylor set up in Saigon. Military families stationed in Saigon would foster a Vietnamese child about to be adopted abroad. The depiction of the soldier as a father figure is built into Taylor’s sentimental recount of the soldiers’ relationship with the children in her orphanages:

The children were sometimes partied and pinicked by the military and many of the men displayed involvement beyond the call of duty. Some felt particularly when children were concerned, that the programs were the only way they could justify their presence in Vietnam, it was a relief for their own homesickness to entertain the orphans.

Rosemary Taylor saw the relationship between the soldiers and the orphans as one that fosters happiness for the children. The soldier is seen as a paternal figure that helps and nurtures the Vietnamese children through the war. By stating that children were the justification for the soldier’s presence in Vietnam, Taylor only echoes President Johnson’s departing words when he justified the violent bombing as necessary in order to save the lives of “innocent [Vietnamese] women and children.” The American soldier protects Vietnam by providing and caring for its children. Such justification casts an image of Vietnam as weak and always needing American military and paternal strength.

Yet, military might was not caring—it was destructive. In 1973, Cherie Clark came to Vietnam as the official coordinator for the Friends for Children of Vietnam (FCVN),

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39 Taylor 50
40 Ibid., 6
41 Lyndon B. Johnson, “Johnson’s Address to the Nation announcing Steps to limit the War and Reporting his decision not to seek reelection,” March 21, 1963, Lydon B. Johnson Library and Museum, University of Texas.
an adoption agency that raised funds for the orphanages in Vietnam. As a self claimed anti-war American citizen, Clark was especially astute about the military presence of the US. Because FCVN was Rosemary Taylor's former agency, Clark and Taylor shared similar routes and connections to the provincial orphanages. On her trip to Da Nang to collect children she recollected, “the checkpoint had become a mini-fortress, and soldiers seems to be everywhere, on tanks, in guard posts; some were still sleeping in hammocks slung in nearby streets, and even underneath military trucks...he [American soldier] waved us through and we moved along slowly as the machine guns seemed to follow our passage.” To Clark the soldiers were not only benefactors; they were also dangerous army men. On the same trip she described the soldiers’ “lined and weary faces, guns slung over their shoulders, their dark green uniforms thick with dust and caked with mud.” Her detailed description of the combatant soldier as weary and dirty presents the image of a reluctant soldier that would much rather go home. Clark often mentioned that military bases were stationed near orphanages. When Sister Angela from Da Nang wanted to transfer more children to Saigon, Clark explained the reason as “because of the heavy fighting in that area [Quang Ngai].” The phrase leads reader to believe that the result was produced by an equal war in which both the Vietnamese guerillas and US are causing relatively the same amount of destruction. For Cherie Clark, what caused these orphaned children was not the soldiers but the generic idea of “war.” War was the producer of violence, not the US military soldiers who were also weary and tired.

It is this very sentimental language about the American soldier that erases the violence produced by US military machine. The production of orphaned and lost

42 Cheri Clark, After Sorrow, Comes Joy: One Woman’s Struggle to Bring Hope to Thousands of Children in Vietnam and India (Westminster, Colorado: Lawrence and Thomas Publishing, 2000) 83
43 Ibid., 84
Vietnamese children was not produced by the generic idea of “war” but by American violence that destroyed villages, separated families and killed parents. American fighting in Vietnam concentrated heavily on the northern provinces and central highlands. The US government set up “free fire zones,” which authorized any individual soldier to shoot without permission from the main headquarters. Thus, soldiers in the countryside were under their own volition to bomb and destroy any village deemed as “suspect.” Under the “fire free zones” lines between combat and civilian were erased. Essentially a village can be considered as a combat zone ready to be bombed without prior coordination. Villagers were technically warned from these evacuations through leaflets. Villagers that decided to stay were considered communist’s allies. Between 1965 and 1968, 300,000 Vietnamese villagers were killed in these fire free zones according to the US Senate. In 1967, Betty Lifton, an American reporter witnessed the horrors enacted. In *Children of Vietnam*, Lifton recounted the story of Hoang, a nine year old in the My Lai Massacre. Hoang said, “I looked at him [an American soldier] but do not remember if I cried or screamed. He pointed his gun at my mother. She grabbed me. He shot at us. My mother fell on me. He shot at me and hit my foot.”

US combatant practices in Vietnam destroyed and disrupted the rural life of Vietnam. Many of the villages were forced to evacuate their homes to relocate into the refugee camps that were built by the funding of USAID. Hoang lost her mother to the American soldier but was forced to relocate with her living grandmother to a nearby American refugee camp. Thus, among these refugees who flocks to the American bases were the unaccounted children who either lost their parents or were separated from them.

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It is no coincidence that Rosemary Taylor and Cherie Clarks most frequented provincial orphanages were in Da Nang, Quang Ngai, and Bien Hoa with large military bases because these were already centers that collects lost children whose families and lives were destroyed by military violence. Furthermore, the bombs dropped by the American planes in fire free zones were responsible for many of the injured children through the provinces. Lifton sarcastically commented that, “children [of Vietnam] receiving free limbs from USAID the way our children receive lollipops. A gift from the generous Americans. A souvenir of war.”

The construction of the gentle warrior as a caring replacement father erases the fact that the lost Vietnamese children were orphaned and produced by the American violence perpetuated in the countryside. This violence is extended through the sexual domination expressed by American soldiers over Vietnamese women during war.

Elton Tylenda, an army engineer who served in Vietnam in 1968, once told an interviewer that a drill instructor once told him, “a man who don’t fuck, don’t kill.” In Mark Baker’s oral history *Nam*, a veteran said, “in the ‘Nam you realized that you had the power to take a life. You had the power to rape a woman and nobody could say anything to you.” The American soldiers were fathers of the orphans who were not only produced by their violence by also through the pleasure of the flesh. In the military bases of Vietnam, the American soldiers enjoyed a thriving sexual environment provided by the local Vietnamese women. The An Khe Plaza, a village between Qui Nhon and the central highland, was the home of a booming sex trade. The 25 acres had bars, nightclubs, and

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46 Lifton 71
47 Stur 160
brothels surrounded by barbed wires and patrolled by the American military police. The GIs called it “Sin City.” In Da Nang, an area known as the Dogpatch developed near the marine base. In the Dogpatch, one could find all the necessities of the black market of drugs and prostitute ready to serve the US army.

While the military certainly did forbid prostitution by law, US officials turned a blind eye or overlooked the practice. Moreover, army doctors and nurses would often check the prostitutes’ health for any disease and sickness. Thus, there was a quiet acknowledgement and acceptance of the sex trade. When the officials cracked down in Nha Trang they found that the area had about 1,000 prostitutes that were serving the 20,000 troops stationed around the area. Some of these women were refugees who were uprooted in the fighting. The results were the thousands of Amerasian children that filled the compounds of the orphanages, refugee camps, and the houses with single Vietnamese mothers. In *Children of Vietnam*, Betty Lipton recounts the story of Tuyet, a country bumpkin who drifted into Nha Trang in search of jobs. Tuyet found a job at Jackie Bar selling drinks to US servicemen. The same servicemen became her afterhours clients. She met Freddie, an African American soldier and together they had a child who was called Black Boy because of his dark skin. However, Freddie finished his service duty, left and never came back. Tuyet continued her job as a prostitute and had a baby by another American soldier. Because narratives of the orphanages and babylift are dominated by memoirs written by figures such as Cherie Clark and Rosemary Taylor, the history of violence is often erased. Looking at a picture of a GI in Taylor’s photography book, it is difficult to conjure the “violent father” that rapes and kill when the image is of a GI

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49 Stur 162  
50 Ibid., 63  
51 Lifton 64
bending down on his knees passing a little doll to a lost looking Vietnamese child.  

The narrative not only erased violence but also obscured the Vietnamese mother figure by elevating the white nurses as loving maternal figures.

The Loving White Mother

Not only were the orphanages a space that allows the soldier to be a caring and gentle figure, but it is also the space in which white nurses are seen as the loving white mothers. The construction of the lovely white mother is dependent on their access to military services that allowed them to be viewed as professional figures able to cure sick babies not only through medicine but through love and care.

The existence of the sick Vietnamese child allows the white nurses to be idealized his figures of maternal love. In Rosemary Taylor’s *Turn My Eyes Away*, she told stories about dedicated white nurses who were committed to saving babies with severe illnesses. She presents Ilse Ewald, Christine Leivermann, Julie Chinberg, and Susan McDonald, white nurses who were working in her orphanages, as professional women by demonstrating how they were dedicated to eradicating illness from the malnourished babies. She detailed the innovation of the cure as purely a foreign effort involving French doctors at the former French colonial military hospital, Grall, and the work of Dr. Werner Dutz in the USA. Furthermore, she laments how it “took seven years to convince the Vietnamese doctors that the disease even existed.” The foreign nurses were credited for implementing the experiment and vaccinations process. Through this process they were not only portrayed as professional nurses but also dedicated figures that spent their

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53 Ibid., 34
energy caring for the sick children. The recovery of the sick child becomes a visual symbol of the foreign nurses’ care and love.

It is through the sick child that enables Rosemary Taylor to create the image of the caring foreign nurse. One primary example is a baby named, De Profundis, who was found in the streets. In her book, she wrote that: “after two months of Mcdonald’s medicine and tender loving care, with a supplementary diet of special protein formula, the change in De Profundis was dramatic. With abdomen flattened, limbs fleshed out and ulcers healed, he became a bright-eyed little boy with a great sense of fun, and less like an orphan than any other child in the nursery.”54 The medicine and the supply of a “special protein” became inflated into the notion of “tender loving care.” McDonald becomes an ideal caregiver, an image of a loving replacement mother whose care made Profundis “seem less like an orphan.” This set ups an American progress narrative where sick babies are made healthy through the dedication and care of the loving white nurses. Taylor once said that the Vietnamese children were “beautiful little children seeking attention and love and receiving neither.”55 Taylor then elevates these white nurses as ideal mother figures that shower these Vietnamese children with attention and care. The bright-eyed little boy with a great sense of fun becomes the ideal image of what a happy child and healthy child should be. This is especially highlighted in Cherie’s Clark memoir, *After Sorrow, Comes Joy*. While Clark was more lenient with the Vietnamese local staff than some nurses by befriending the Vietnamese around her, she also equates the ability to provide material goods with good parenting. At one point, while visiting a provincial orphanage, she asked, “how could any adult condemn an innocent child to live

54 Taylor 113
55 Ibid., 60
in such squalor? In Clark’s memoir, the ability to provide materials also becomes synonymous with one’s ability to be a responsible caregiver.

In the spread of pictures in her memoir, there is a picture of a small baby, Nga, in an incubator with sleepy eyes. The captions read, “Nga a really special baby who did not survive despite all the love and care she was given.” On top of this picture is an image of Tom Clark unloading a shipment of incubators from the American companies. Care and love is made possible through the presence of materials received from the American services. When a child dies in a poor orphanage in the countryside, it is considered the result of Vietnamese negligence. However, when the child dies within the foreign orphanages, it was considered as a sad loss because American care and love was given to the child. In this sense, the material access to goods is sublimated into the language of love and care.

Just as the material access dictates love, Vietnam is portrayed as a land not only devoid of medical expertise but also of sentimental love and care. In 1974, Hy Vong, one Taylor’s orphanages, housed 150 babies and the majority of the workers were actually local Vietnamese staff. Despite this, while the white nurses are named and highlighted in their moments of tender love and care, these Vietnamese workers are often nameless in Taylor’s memoir. In one picture, Susan Illse holds the baby close to her chest as her face is filled with maternal bliss. In the background a nameless Vietnamese woman stoically changes a different baby methodically. The image presents two polar images: the loving white mother and the cold Vietnamese woman void of tender feelings. Pictures with the large Vietnamese staff are often ones when they are facilitating medical checkups,

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56 Clark, 50
57 Taylor, 113
cleaning the nursery, or feeding the babies with a stoic face in the background. The children portrayed with these Vietnamese nurses are always sickly with their IV tubes and vaccinations. Thus, while a sick child is associated with an indifferent Vietnamese mother, the healthy child becomes the symbol of a loving white mother shown through the loving and tender aura and progress narrative of the photographs. The loving white mother is elevated in contrast to the Vietnamese nurses who are constantly in the background nameless and expressionless.

This is a theme that is consistent throughout Taylor’s memoir. The book is often filled with descriptions of Vietnamese orphanages that were filled with uncaring and negligent Vietnamese caregivers. Rosemary Taylor took a certain reproach towards her local staff. During the first few days of the new opening she wrote, “It was difficult, particularly in these early years, to find local staff who were willing to implement our ideas of child care. They could not easily accept that a mere orphan child deserved such consideration while their own children or siblings had even less.” 58 The Vietnamese workers are depicted as greedy workers with a lesser standard of care and love. When she visited a provincial Vietnamese-ran orphanage, located in the Mekong Delta area, she described the place as not only dirty and crowded but the caregivers as indifferent. When her team arrived at the orphanage the nurse told them that the babies that were to be adopted had passed away. When the Vietnamese sister said, “There are plenty more,” Taylor angrily vents, “this calm indifference to death was perhaps the most difficult aspect of Vietnamese attitudes to come to terms with. There was no good reason for it.” 59 Taylor infers that this attitude comes from an inherent nature of the Vietnamese women.

58 Ibid., 59
59 Ibid., 32
She continues with, “at the time Vietnam touched the conscience of the world and there was no shortage of food, clothing or shelter. With certain shining exceptions, the missing ingredient seemed to be love and care.”

By framing the Vietnamese mothers as indifferent and cold, Taylor reasoned that the many-orphaned children were abandoned because of an inherent Vietnamese quality that is cold and unfeeling. Taylor often expressed three ideas that are prevalent throughout her memoir. She insists that these children are abandoned and helpless were a not solely victims of war but because no one wanted them. When she first arrived in Phu My, she wrote, “poverty, illegitimacy, birth defects, and the fact that the children were never “wanted,” would account for most of the abandonment... abandoned by a wealthier family because of an inauspicious birthdate” She implied that these children were not “wanted” by their parents. Her reasoning puts the biological parents at fault for leaving a child just because the child was deformed and sick.

In her photo album book, *Turn My Eyes Away*, there are multiple spreads that show deformed and sick children. One particularly violent image was of a baby that had ulcers all over the body, bandaged in the head, and skin that hung tightly to the bones. The child lay with arms and legs wide apart, eyes looking directly at the reader. The caption underneath said that the child was “abandoned in a public vehicle.” Without any other caption, the viewer would assume that the Vietnamese mother abandoned this child. Unmentioned in these pages was that the child was also half-Caucasian, that the baby was not only left by a mother (who could have been dead) but also by an American father. Yet, the photograph creates an image of a cruel native mother that leaves her child

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60 Ibid., 32
61 Ibid., 15
62 Taylor and Strobridge photograph no. 63
out to die. The creation of the cold native mother directs the blame of children’s death
and production of orphans onto an inherent trait of the Vietnamese tradition that lacks
concern for the welfare of children. Such construction creates a narrative that blocks out
the violence of why these children were injured and sick in the first place.

The sick babies and children in the orphanages that help construct the image of
the white loving mother were products of American violence in the war. Babies with
major defects and missing parents were often results of not only US combat and bombs,
but also of chemical warfare. In 1961, the US commenced Operation Ranch Hand, which
was part of fighting the guerilla warfare of the Vietcong. The operation would spray
herbicide in Vietnam’s provincial jungle. The early “experiments” were focused
primarily on the delta. As a result, the herbicide program spread through South Vietnam’s
battlefield. Most American bases were storage areas for Agent Orange, the most
commonly used herbicide (Da Nang, Can Tho, and Bien Hoa were major storage spaces).
By 1967, herbicide covered 1.7 million acres of Vietnam forest. By the end of the war,
the US had sprayed 19 million gallons of herbicides over 12 percent of the country’s
area.63 Orphanages that were often located near large American bases were affected by
the Agent Orange causing birth defects and malnutrition for living children. Children
born out of Agent Orange infected areas if not deformed by the chemicals would have
serious medical issues. The image of De Profundis, the sick baby that Illse nursed back to
health, is not a symbol of the white mother but the physical product of American
violence. The construction of the white loving mother is an attempt to reconstruct this
violent American presence in Vietnam into one that is loving and caring by transforming

63 J.R. McNeill, and Corinna Unger, Environment Histories of the Cold War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
2010) 234
the sick children into symbols of American love and care. The orphanage becomes the space where the story of violence and destruction of the Vietnam War can be refashioned into a story of a gentle American soldier and a loving American mother. Essentially the American presence in Vietnam not only breaks and creates the biological family through blood and flesh; it also creates an imaginary family based on the sentimental language expressed through the dominant stories of the white nurses and gentle soldiers. The orphanage children become the children of the American rescue in which heroic civilians and soldiers are seen as gentle, caring, and selfless in their pursuit to help poor, sick, and endangered babies. This idea of the “American rescue” is exemplified and spread during Operation Babylift in 1975.
Section 2: Precious Souvenirs

Days Before The Fall

The beginning of the fall of South Vietnam began on March 10th, 1975 when Ban Me Thout, located on the northern province of South Vietnam, fell to the North Vietnamese government. Merely two weeks later, the North Vietnamese army captured Da Nang, one of the biggest American military base and South Vietnamese strong hold.64 On April 3rd, President Ford formally announced the evacuation of Vietnamese orphans lamenting, "We are seeing a great human tragedy as untold numbers of Vietnamese flee the North Vietnamese onslaught. The United States has been doing and will continue to do its utmost to assist these people."65 This assistance came with $2 million made available to fly 2,000 South Vietnamese orphans to the United States. Operation Babylift officially commenced with the crash of a C5A loaded with kids from Rosemary Taylor’s orphanages. There are no exact numbers of death counts for the orphans because identification papers were blasted and burned in crash. The army’s official statement was “approximately 230” Vietnamese were on board and around 78 dead. Despite the disastrous first flight, other flights began taking off the next day. Operation Babylift ended officially on May 1st with the last flight of orphans departing on April 26th. In sum, it transported 2,894 Vietnamese and Cambodian children to America.66 It is within the chaos and swiftness of the babylift, that what I call the orphanage-military complex becomes explicit.

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66 Camp H.M. Smith, C"ommander in Chief Pacific Command History: Appendix III- Babylift 1975", Command History Branch Office of the Joint Secretary (Hawaii, 1976) viii
During his speech, President Ford calls the operation a humanitarian procedure that is an extension of the efforts made by civilians already present in Vietnam. Cherie Clark and Rosemary Taylor believed they were doing just that. Their memoirs focused on the emotional aspect of the babylift. The babylift was not a humanitarian affair as much as it was a military affair. This can be seen through the way in which the operation swiftly came under the control of USAID, the institution through which military operations funneled after the Peace Agreement of 1973. When the peace agreement was signed and military combatant troops left, USAID strengthened as a militaristic institution. Ellsworth Bunker, an American ambassador in Vietnam expressed, “the cease-fire appeared to have initiated a new war, more intense and more brutal than the last.” 67 The MACV was merely transferred and re-labeled as the “Defense Attache Office (DAO),” retaining its own Air, Naval, and Armed divisions that acted as “advisors” to Vietnamese government. 68 USAID and other “civilian” organizations such as Air America and military contractors remained in Vietnam under the guise of “aid.” It was clear the United States still held large military and civilian powers in South Vietnam, with the difference of having only South Vietnamese soldiers in combat areas. The American military machine remains intact through the system of military bases, workers, and orphanages. As the brutal war continued, the influx of orphans continued to rise. Adoption organization and authority increasingly came under the umbrella of USAID.

With this shift, USAID tightened control over the orphanages. By 1973, with the departure of some combat troops; Taylor’s relationship with USAID exerted more control

over the foreign run orphanages in Vietnam. In 1973, Taylor was almost kicked out of Vietnam when her working visa was rejected because the organization she was working with at the time, FCVN, was not registered locally. It was not until she gained support from the US Embassy and FCVN formally registered and enlisted under the American Council of Voluntary Agencies for Foreign Servicers, an organization under contract with the USAID, that she was able to remain the Vietnam.69 Taylor would break away from FCVN that very same year and formally registered her orphanages under Friends for All Children (FFAC). Cherie Clark, Taylor’s replacement as FCVN’s representative in 1973, arrived during this period of tightened control. USAID organized meetings and worked with congress to implement standard adoption procedures. It was no longer just a provider of material assistance for the orphanages but an active agent in the adoption procedures that regulates the legal and technical process. The military and the civilian force were not just blurred. It was synonymous. This militaristic aspect became increasingly explicit in the Operation Babylift.

USAID was the main institution that funded the babylift. In days preceding the babylift, USAID called a meeting of all foreign run orphanages in Vietnam. By the end of the meeting Cherie Clark sarcastically commented that the USAID official “made it clear that in the future, all our evacuation flights would be handled by USAID, and all we had to do was to get the children ready to leave.”70 On April 4th the Commander in Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC) received the first notification from the Joint Chief of Staff to evacuate orphans. The US Air force was responsible for the airlift of the orphans

70 Clark, 140
approved by USAID. According to the Command History for Operation Babylift, three major stations were used for the operation. The first was Clark Airbase in the Philippines as the main coordination center, the second was US Naval center in Guam, and the third was US airbase in Yokota Japan. The operation used the entire US military apparatus in the Pacific. When Wende Grant landed in Japan on the third orphan flight to America, the US army officers brought medics and required all sick babies to leave the plane. Wende Grant, an orphanage director, who was furious to be separated from her wards angrily wrote, “The sergeant was more polite but just as sure of his and his officers’ US army given right to examine our children on our privately chartered plane and cart them off to hospitalization in Japan. I argued bitterly that FFAC held custody of these children, that the nurses who had kept the children alive for months were on board, and that we would make the medical decisions regarding our children.” There was no mistake that the illusion that Operation Babylift was ever just a civilian operation had been extinguished. It was the army that took charge of the flights heading to America. However the swiftness in which the army took over the operation was merely an extension of the already existing ties between the orphanages and military. In her memoir, Rosemary Taylor wrote “the US military made its presence known with a detail of medical officers who boarded the plane and started examining the children.” She explained how the military wives and nurses took over during the plane ride and once they reached Japan. This is an example of how the relationship between the military and orphanage were merely amplified through the babylift. Even the name, Operation

71 Smith 5  
72 Ibid., 7  
73 Taylor 181  
74 Ibid., 180
Babylift makes it undeniable that the orphanage system was part of the US military machine. The 13th Air Force unit was the first to use the name “Operation Babylift.” When the US military forces bombed the central areas of the Binh Ding Province ten years ago, President Johnson changed the name of the Operation from “Masher” to “White Wing” in hope that the name would represent a gentler image. In the case of Operation Babylift, the name did not need to be changed to make the military seem like a benign machine. The dramatic nature and sentimental language of the babylift did not only create an image of a gentle soldier but also constructed the soldiers as saviors and figures of freedom. At the same time, Operation Babylift was a direct extension of the military violence that occurred in Vietnam—one that is ideological and stripped the Vietnamese history of freedom and independence.

**Flight to Freedom**

When President Ford first announced the commencement of Operation Babylift, he was questioned about the failure to contain communism in Vietnam despite the massive aid. Ford only replied, “I must say that I am frustrated by the action of the Congress in not responding to some of the requests both for economic and humanitarian and military assistance in South Vietnam.” From the start, Operation Babylift was entangled in the fact that America was facing a major failure in containing communism in a country that it staked as the “cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia.”

The United States military presence in Vietnam began in 1949 when President Harry S. Truman signed the Mutual Defense Assistance Act. The act allowed military and

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76 Greiner, 75
78 John F. Kennedy, “America’s Stake in Vietnam 1956”
economic aid to the French government. On August 2, 1950 The Military Assistance Advisory group (MAAG) was established in the State of Vietnam to assist the French government in training South Vietnamese soldiers. The US officially recognized the French State of Vietnam in 1950 with the firm words of Secretary of State Dean Acheson stating that the United States was, “convinced that neither national independence nor democratic evolution exists in any area dominated by Soviet imperialism.”79 From then on, American containment policies collided with Vietnamese nationalist and independence movement established by Ho Chi Minh based on the Marxist concept of liberation. The Viet Minh’s Marxist ideas of self-determination were independent of America’s capitalist ideal of democracy. As a result, Vietnam represents the possibility of the coexistence of what United States considered as mutually exclusive, communism and self-determination.

Rosemary Taylor and Cherie Clark’s memoirs about the Operation Babylift build on the fact that communism and freedom are contradictory ideas. When President Thieu ordered retreat of the Central Highlands, Clark despaired:

The war had been fought between the north and south for more than two decades; hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians on both sides died in the bitter ideological struggle. Then, with the sweep of his pen, the President [Thieu] gave it away. Had all the lost lives been given in vain? The people of Pleiku, Lontim, and the rest of the Central Highlands were given only hours to leave their homes and head for refuge in the South, are ready[ing] themselves for the communist victors.”80

Even though Clark has positioned herself as a person who dislikes war, she remained an anti-communist American. She ignored the fact the war fought over bitter ideology was not between the North and South of Vietnam, but between America and its war on communism. The question “had all the lost lives been given in vain?” begs the American

80 Clark, 12
reader to think, had we sacrifice the lives of people for a communist victory? Cheri Clark recalled the chaos that brought thousands fleeing to Saigon, "more than half a million South Vietnamese fled south into Saigon to escape the communist forces. People abandoned homes, farms, and their belongings in a headlong rush for security of the country’s capital." Clark specifically shaped the communist forces in Vietnam as a threat to security and freedom of the people. In contrast, America is depicted as the land of freedom. A safe haven away from the communist forces.

This could be seen directly in the way she described the flights of the babylift in which America is seen as the land of the free. On one of the first flights of the babylift, Clark described the image with a moving vision.

"As we headed back to the airport, we heard the roar of the plane’s engine spooling up to full power. I stopped the van and we all watched the plane lumber down the runway. It gathered speed quickly and lifted off into the night sky, bound for freedom. We were so happy that we had managed to get so many of our children to safety." In this Clark clearly saw the communist state as one that was not only dangerous, but also un-free and cruel. The image of the flight is not one that tore the children away from what they knew but rather a rescue that brought them to another world, one that is safer and freer: America. Other American memoirs about the babylift construct the same image of these flights as flights of freedom. LeAnn Thieman and Carol Dey were regular American mothers when they started working and fundraising money for FCVN in 1974. When they were asked to be escorts for a group of Vietnamese orphans in March 1975, the hesitant pair agreed. While in Vietnam, they helped Cherie Clark during the beginning of the operation. They departed on an April 6th flight, after the plane crash two days earlier. In their memoir, *This Must be My Brother*, they describe the flight back to

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81 Ibid., 113
82 Ibid., 135
America as terrifying because they were afraid of a communist attack. In the silence of
the cargo with only the engines roaring behind, Theiman prayed, “I knew that if I lived
through the next five minutes, I would make it home to Iowa. The motion of the plane
lulled the infants to near silence.”

One FCVN companion remarked on the appropriate
name of their cargo plane, Freedom Bird, as they flew back to America. The sentimental
language frames the United States as the land of safety and freedom contrasting with the
communist state of Vietnam. It is within this framework that soldiers and military agents
are seen as rescuers and saviors.

Within the narrative of Operation Babylift, American soldiers and military agents
were presented as caregivers bringing the orphans to the land of freedom. In Thieman’s
memoir, the Clark Airbase was a safe haven away from the eventual communist rule of
Vietnam, even though it was a mark of US imperialism in the Philippines after the
Spanish American War. In her journalistic work about Operation Babylift, Shirley Peck
showed pictures of soldiers helping children into military aircrafts and a particular airman
feeding an orphan on the way to the Philippines. There is a strange uneasiness as she
shows a picture of army men surrounding boxes filled with babies in an aircraft. Some
men were holding a baby and others were holding a milk bottle. The caption reads,
“Harnessed cartons became cradles--combat crews become surrogate ‘mothers.’” The
soldiers became the “surrogate mothers” who brought the babies into the land of freedom.
Through the babylift, the soldier was not only a paternal figure but also a figure of
freedom. This is seen through the ways in which the lift and soldier is depicted as
humanitarians in the newspapers articles. One example is from a New York Times piece,

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83 LeAnn Theiman, Carol Dey, This Must Be My Brother (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1995) 125
84 Peck Barnes, 151
85 Ibid., 153
Edward Lansdale, the former CIA agent, who helped establish US power in Vietnam in the first place. In the article, he urged the Americans to save orphans while noting that a “million more of them [Vietnamese refugees] are praying for a miracle to save them from communist rule” to “let us be humanitarians, truly.” The article is accompanied with Lady Liberty standing proud, her hand holding the blazing torch and face staring unwaveringly ahead. The image invokes America as a long-standing country of freedom with this symbolic image. This is supported through later works that recounted the babylift. At the end of the command army history the caption reads, “recent correspondence from the Administrator, Agency for International Development, Department of State (Daniel Parker) has recognized the vital part our military personnel played in Operation Babylift, and noted this act of compassion and humanitarian concern for orphaned children is in keeping with the finest traditions of our country.” The quote not only posits American soldiers as figures of freedom, but also suggests that freedom is an inherent quality of the American public and government. This inherent quality stems from a long established tradition that is rooted from the belief that America is a country for and by the people. Taking in “orphaned” children became an act of compassion and an exhibition for America’s natural inclination for freedom.

Such political use of sentiments repaints figures of violence into those that are paternal. One example is the publicized flight of Ed Daly, President of World Airways. On March 29th 1975, Ed Daly came to Saigon determined to get children and women out of Vietnam. When he landed in Saigon on March 29th 1975, he offered to ferry the children at Clark’s orphanages out of Vietnam free of charge. Years later, Shirley Peck-Barnes depicted Ed Daly as a gallant man who defied US government orders to halt the

86 Smith, 30
lift in an effort to rescue children in her book, *The War Cradle*. Not only that, he was depicted as a selfless businessman who paid $70,000 out of his own pocket for the flight. However the sentimental language erases the fact that World Airways was part of the US military machine. World Airways was one of the private airlines contracted to ferry military supplies and troops into and around Southeast Asia. Daly had profited millions from the business deal. Yet, what was recounted inside the aircraft was not the story of the bombs, machines, and guns that the plane had flown a hundred times but of the intimate moment when, “Daly put his arm around the youngster [one of the FCVN’s children] and gently slid his beret onto the boy’s head.” Ed Daly, who was once responsible for the military bombs that destroyed the American landscape, is remembered through the babylift memoirs and writings as a paternal figure that transported the children to America. The contradictory nature of the lift is not lost on some military officer. As one American sergeant remarked as he escorted a Vietnamese child down the airplane ramp, “we went out to kill those [Vietnamese] people and now I’m standing here watching us bring them [children] back. It’s a strange feeling. I can tell you. I just don’t know what that was all about over there, but it sure doesn’t feel right now.” The quote about the contradictory nature of the babylift calls out to the part of the American public that felt disillusioned by the war. The violence experienced by the American people through either the television screen or battlefield is expressed through the sentimental language of the babylift. When describing the babylift, Shirley Peck-Barnes quoted Edwin Markham saying, “All that we send into the lives of others, comes back into our

87 Sachs, 28
88 Peck-Barnes, 21
89 Lacy Fosburgh, “First Orphans Arrive to begin a New Life,” *The New York Times*, 4 April 1975,
In this sense, the violence America created in Vietnam comes back in the physical body of the Vietnamese children. And just like as military agents came out of the babylift as heroes, regular Americans became part of the babylift through adoptions that allow them to process their sense of disillusionment.

**Babies Healing the Wounds of War**

Throughout the war, children played a central role in American consciousness. During Lyndon Johnson’s escalation of the war, students protest outside the white house, one of the famous chants was, “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?” In 1965, in response to US bombings in Haiphong, a twelve-year-old girl named Barbara Beidler from Vero Beach Florida published a poem called, *Afterthoughts on a Napalm-Drop on Jungle Villages near Haiphong* that ended with the following verses:

> A rag, fire black, fluttered.  
> A curl of smoke rose from a long rice stem.  
> The forest lay singed, seared.  
> A hut crumbled.  
> And all was still.  
> Listen Americans  
> Listen, clear and Long  
> The children are screaming  
> In the Jungles of Haiphong

Children became the object of American sympathy, affection, and pity. Elevating the child as the ultimate victim of American militarism during the anti-war movement molds the image of American violence through the innocent face of a baby. Violence was epitomized by the destruction of innocent children. The Vietnamese children became how Americans in the domestic sphere imagined US military violence in Vietnam. Operation babylift allowed every American to process this violence by through adopting a

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90 Shirley Peck-Barnes, 230  
91 Gettleman, *Vietnam and American: A Documented Reader*, 296  
92 Barbara Beidler, “*Afterthoughts on a Napalm-Drop on Jungle Villages near Haiphong*,” Gettleman. 300
Vietnamese child. In the context of Operation Babylift, regular Americans are able to reconcile this violence by “saving” the abandoned Vietnamese child scarred by war and adopting it into a regular American family that could heal the child with love.

When the first planeload of Vietnamese children crashed, President Ford announced the next day that “our mission of mercy will continue.”93 When the first planeload of orphans safely arrived at the Presidio Airbase, President Ford took a break from his Palm Springs vacation to pay a visit. On the front page of The New York Times, President Ford was portrayed as a protective paternal figure as he carried an infant girl outside a jumbo jet, “the president walked down a boarding ramp and to a waiting bud with the child, clad in pajamas and wrapped in a blanket to protect her from a heavy rain.”94 The famous picture of Ford holding the child close to his bosom as aid officers surrounded him, looking tenderly at the child was plastered on every news feed. In Shirley Peck-Barnes’ book, a photograph inside the waiting bus depicted Ford speaking seriously with a volunteer as he held the child close to his chest. Ford became the epitome of a caring paternal figure that not only rescued the child but also exuded a loving aura. It is within the confines of such media that the babylift creates a space where any individual American can be a rescuer and savior by being a mother and a father.

As the babylift continued, the American public viewed Operation Babylift as a rescue mission. For the next three weeks, “Operation Babylift” was plastered over newspapers across the country.” In Los Angeles, First Lady Betty Ford, during a high society luncheon with a women’s civic group, said that when she saw the “tragic plight”

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of the refugee in Vietnam and that when she saw pictures of the orphaned children, she
wanted to adopt them. FFAC’s and FCVN’s office were flooded with calls from
individual Americans asking how to adopt a child. Within hours, the Emergency
Committee to Save the Babies was established. Founded by James Tate, a Vietnam
veteran who adopted a Vietnamese child, the committee focused on raising money and
providing information about adoption procedures. The committee not only enlisted actors
such as Yul Brynner to be an honorary Chairman but also raised $27,650 and signed up
600 volunteers by April 17th, 1975. Alaskan Governor Jay Hammond campaigned for
the state to raise $130,000 to charter a World Airway aircraft to airlift children in what
the article titled as “Vietnam Rescue.” Other articles written the first week of the
babylift used similar language to describe the event frequently, including “rescue,”
“save,” “help,” and “protect.”

These individuals Americans were able to become heroic figures by becoming
great parents. As Vietnamese children arrived in the United States, their American
adopted family became saviors and heroes. Media coverage on the babylift rarely focused
on the voice of the Vietnamese children. The focus was always on the parents and
volunteers who adopted a Vietnamese child. In Thieman’s memoir, she recalled her first
landing in Lincoln, Nebraska where she was to drop off the Vietnamese children she
accompanied. The airport was filled with camera lights. The reporters surrounded her as
they asked her about her experiences in Vietnam. Thieman described the scene as hectic;
“Reporters with lights and microphones kept pushing their way into our conversation.”

95 “A.I.D. Sets Airlift of 2,000 orphans from Saigon to U.S.,” New York Times, 3 April 1975
96 “Save the Babies Group in High Gear,” Washington Post, 17 April 1975,
98 Thieman, 157
Theiman became a celebrity. She was spotlighted as the kind of American that saved children. Reporters were not only excited about the children but were very interested in the people who adopted them. Newspapers articles began detailing the lives of the parents who adopted a child from the babylifts. *The New York Times* featured several adopted parents. Tom and Terry Crawford began their adoption process from Vietnam a year before the babylift but their application was denied. In light of the military failure, they were offered a half-black Vietnamese child two weeks before the babylift through Clark’s FCVN agency.  

Jody and Richard Gatty were another couple that decided to adopt a two-year old Vietnamese son despite having their own biological child. These couples were depicted as loving and suitable parents with the article stressed that they were an average family in a suburban neighborhood. These couples were ordinary Americans whose lives were highlighted through the babylift.

When the C-5A crashed, newspapers wrote articles about the distraught parents. In another *New York Times* article, a picture showed American mother Adell Kolinsky hugging her to-be-adopted Vietnamese child close to her face with an expression of relief and open tenderness. The article portrayed it as an emotional scene, “made poignant because of earlier reports that a C-5A Galaxy carrying hundreds of other orphans had crashed outside Saigon.” After calming down, Kolinsky whispered, “We love her so. It’s so good to save one.” Kolinsky’s ability to save one Vietnamese child resolves her of the violence that was happening in Vietnam during Operation Babylift. One article

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100 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
titled “South Vietnamese Child arrives from ‘Hell’ to New Home in Maryland,” described these children as “miracle” children. American families are whisking Vietnamese children away from the “hell” that was Vietnam into the arms of their own homes. The Fischlowitzes, a couple that adopted a babylift child, proclaimed, “our feelings right now are what a miracle it is that with all the hell in Vietnam one child can get to us.” A picture of a white American couple smiling as the man holds a baby boy accompanies the article. The woman touches the boy’s head. The image portrays the Fischlowitzes as loving parents who wanted the best for the child. The loving sentiment makes the babylift not only an act of heroism but also an act of love. When the boy, Phoung, looks at the couple with a serious stare, they replied, “we hope he learns to smile more with us.” In this sense, the Fischlowitzes did not only see themselves as saviors but also as emotional healers who can make the child happy. Through the babylift, the Americans not only resolved the violence they saw in the war, but they came out as healers.

Through the babylift, children became a physical metaphor for healing the wounds of and between the United States and Vietnam. Covering the babylift, Paul Montgomery interviewed two adoptive parents, the Nakians, who said they would make sure that the underweight child got a lot of nourishment. In their interview, the Nakains said, “we must help the American public realize, what’s happened in Vietnam and help rehabilitate them. I’m urging this government to make amends for what we’ve done

104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
there.” Loving and healing the orphans became part of a political obligation. The Nakians also reported “we wanted another child and we felt very badly about the loss of life in Vietnam, so we combined the two.” Adopting a Vietnamese child was seen as method of healing Americans own discomfort of the war. Newspapers after newspapers talked about giving these children homes not only as a healing process but also a responsibility of the American people. Edwina Clohosey, a self-proclaimed anti-war student, thought that the airlift was a good thing, saying that after all the killing he didn’t see why the children should not have a home. In the same article David Rosenberg, a Manhattan lawyer, expressed that the United States had a continued responsibility to the people of South Vietnam and that airlifting children was part of that responsibility. It is clear that the emotional and sentimental language is seen as a political obligation, a part of the emotional reparation of the American damage and violence in the Vietnam War.

But healing the wounds of war was not only a phrase in public sentiment, but also a fixed political obligation made through the Paris Peace Accords of 1973. Chapter 8, Article 21, in the Paris Peace Accords states, “the United States will contribute to healing the wounds of war and to postwar reconstruction to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and throughout Indochina.” But healing the wounds of war became a matter of healing the children. At the same time it obscured the true political obligation and responsibility of the United States established in the peace talks. In the secret talks between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho the subject of American war reparations was discussed. Nixon promised around $4 billion dollars of “post-war reconstruction aid” to ravaged areas of Vietnam.

After the treaty was signed, US officials denied such promises. It was not until seven years later after the declassified letter of Nixon to DRV’s Prime Minister Pham Van Dong was released to the public that the officials began recognizing the promise. In the letter, Nixon not only promised post-war reconstruction that ranged between $3.5 billion but also other forms of aid such as food and other commodities that ranged anywhere from $1 to $1.5 billion. The wounds of the war on the Vietnam landscape remained, but physical wounds of the children were healed through the familial love provided by the adoptive families.

Such healing is represented in the pictures that filled in Taylor’s photobook. In one picture, we see a half-Vietnamese and black child who came to the Rosemary Taylor with teeth smashed, her back covered with burn scars and one fractured leg. The caption explained that when the child went to live with her family abroad, she began “healing slowly in mind and body.” Across the page is Helen, looking pristine, holding a toy horse with her small hands, her curls tied in ribbons with laced shoes. Fully clothed, the scars of war were covered as if they were never there. In another picture is Esperantha, who lay as a frail child covered by an oversized dress with eyes staring straight at the viewer. Across from the picture is another of Esperantha, fully plumped with a huge white ribbon on her head. She holds a flower with a dress that has teddy bears embroidered on it, marks of a happy childhood. It was if the clothes were her protective armor and the ribbons sheltered her head. In the case of Operation Babylift, the children’s bodies, positioned next to each other, first shown as products of violence, are packaged back as

110 Taylor and Strobridge photograph #110
bundles of joy to the American public. These babylift children became the body subjected by political meanings of healing.

The language of the rescue and healing surrounding the babylift did not go unopposed. The Hanoi government made a public declaration of condemnation in light of the babylift. Phan Van Dong, the North Vietnamese Prime Minister, called the babylift an American propaganda campaign aimed at convincing the world that many Vietnamese are anti-communist and to use “compatriots by the million as instruments in the service of the imperialist and American capitalism.”\(^ {111}\) When the airplane load of babies left Vietnam, a South Vietnamese lieutenant said, “it is nice to see you Americans taking home souvenirs of our country as you leave—china elephants and orphans.”\(^ {112}\) Such a statement eerily echoed the moment in Thieman’s memoir when she walked around Clark’s orphanage to pick a baby to adopt. She turned to Carol Dey and asked, “Carol, how will I ever choose?”\(^ {113}\) And on the plane, the child she picked had a “Reserve for Mark Thieman” on his bracelet; one can’t help but feel that she just reserved a souvenir from a trip abroad. And these living souvenirs would grow up with their history dominated by a white American narrative that tells their story in terms of rescue, love, and violence. Just as Cherie Clark’s memoir title, *After Sorrow, Comes Joy* suggests, America represents the joy in the form of a happy family. The babylift adoptees become entrenched in an American progress narrative that traces their history from one of hellish nightmare in Vietnam to a happy conclusion in the United States. They find themselves becoming

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113 Thieman, 97
sentalental representatives of the intimate and violent history and present relation between the United States and Vietnam.
Section 3: The Sentimental Ambassadors

Part 1: Amerasians battling American Racism

The Vietnam War occurred during a period of high racial tensions in the United States. The Civil Rights Movement during the 1960’s coincided with the escalation of the Vietnam War. Nikhil Sighn, black radicalism historian, summed up the connection between war and race when he said, “Insofar as the US realm of action had become the entire world, it was difficult to prevent the migration of racial meanings between the foreign and domestics spheres, either as matters of representation or as matters of politics.”114 Indeed, throughout the civil rights era, black radicals would use Vietnam as a mantle to speak about the oppression of the colored population in America. In 1967, Martin Luther King publicly denounced the war in Vietnam claiming that, “We were taking the young black men crippled by our society and sending them 800 miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southwest Georgia and East Harlem.”115 The United States government was facing the dual problem of racial strife on the domestic front and a failed war on the foreign front. The existence of the Amerasian child, especially ones fathered by black soldiers, allowed the government to reconcile the racial hostilities in the domestic sphere and the disaster of failed containment by producing a racially diverse American family through adoption.

Early on, foreign orphanages focused specifically on the plight of Amerasian children. Within the narrative of these memoirs and newspapers, the Amerasian child became a marker of American transcendence of race and national borders, making racial

diversity and tolerance as an inherent “American trait.” This is acutely seen in Clark’s own adoption history. Already a mother of four children, she decided to adopt three Amerasian children all of whom were black. Clark pays special attention to black Amerasian children. In her first trip to the provincial orphanages in Diem Phuc, she wrote, “I was drawn to two black Amerasian children lying in a corner crib. I reached into the crib and examined them before picking one up. She was too weak to hold her head up and she rested quietly against my shoulder. Her curly hair and huge eyes reminded me of Jenny.” Clark provokes a maternal connection to the unknown Amerasian baby. The black child is seen as weak, unprotected and malnourished. Clark is shown as a dependable anchor that supported the child who rested her head on Clark’s shoulder. Within a few lines, the politics of race became an issue instantly solved through the relationship between mother and child. Clark becomes the mother that loves children despite of race. The emphasis of Clark’s maternal love and the race of the black Amerasian child is an example how familial ties are used as a way to combat racism. Their existence in the American narrative highlight white Americans as tolerant, loving, and accepting of diversity. Such features appeared in newspapers articles that covered the Babylift where there was no mentions of the race of the parents who was adopting these kids because it is implicit that the adopted parents are white. This could be seen through the images of adoptee parents in newspapers. The New York Times posted a picture of a white women hugging newly arrived Vietnamese son. She had tears in her eyes. The repetitive images of ordinary white Americans accepting mixed black Vietnamese

116 Clark, 86
children into their arms aimed to reiterate the point that racism was not pervasive in the American public.

This construction of the tolerant American was produced during a period when racial equality was being fought beyond just legal realms but also through the everyday battle of public integration. President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964 barring racial discrimination in voting and also called for the racial integration in all public institution and federal programs. However, racial integration became a violent experience in and of itself. The following years experience what political scientist, Joseph Luders called "the vehemence of the southern backlash." This vehemence spirit was represented by the figure of George Wallace, Alabama's 45th governor. Throughout his political career, George Wallace used racist rhetoric to gain support of what he considered the victimize citizens of the civil right movement. When the University of Alabama was called to register two black students, Wallace stood in front of the school building denouncing the integration. He quoted it off as a violation of state rights. Such opposition against integration was not only prevalent in the south, but also in northern cities where school busing became a controversial issue. This racial tension was reflected in the babylift. In fact, just a few days after the babylift, an informal congress meeting in Washington faced backlash as a black from a protesting crowd shouts, "do you think they'll [half black, half Vietnamese] be allowed in the South Boston

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Despite the success in passing the Civil Rights Act, America was still facing a segregated society.

The narratives of the babylift written by volunteers and adopted mothers transformed the realities of race in the US by building the image of America as a transracial family that transcends the racial issues in America. Already a mother of four children, Cherie Clark decided to adopt three Amerasian children all of whom were black. At the end of her memoir, Clark included a picture of her family that included her four white children, three black Amerasians, and one Vietnamese child. It is a happy picture of Clark family smiling with their kids decked out in overalls and long sleeved shirts. The three Amerasian children and Vietnamese children became a marker for difference, their skin color visibly different and their dark hair contrasting with the blond haired children. The happy image provokes a sense of acceptance. More importantly it portrays a happy racially diverse American family, perfectly integrated. It offers a resolution to the public discontent standing at the disaster of a struggle racial integration in the public sphere. Adopted Vietnamese Amerasian become markers for a racially diverse family that not only transcended race but borders. Their mixed blood and “birthland” became crucial to the construction of a diverse American family while still keeping the image of tolerant America as white. The fact that vast amounts of black Amerasians were going to white homes did not go unopposed. Black adoption agencies charged that international agencies such as FCVN, FFAC, and Holt were bypassing qualified black families for the adoption of Vietnamese children fathered by black Americans. They considered the vast adoption of black Vietnamese children into white homes.

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122 “Washington Meeting on Children’s Airlift is Jarred by Charges of Racism and Elitism,” The New York Times, 8 April 1974, 14
homes outrageous because they believed that “these children can best survive racism in America and achieve a healthy identity through adopting by black families.”

Yet, the vast amounts of black Amerasian children were product of American racial inequality abroad. In 1967, only 29 percent of blacks could be drafted while 63 percent of whites were eligible. Yet despite this difference, 63 percent of eligible blacks were conscripted compared to the 31 percent of eligible whites. The vast amount of black orphans in Vietnam was blamed partially by the disparity of death counts between black and white soldiers. Another African American soldier said, “there are more black than white mixed kids over there because it was easier for a white GI to get military permission to marry his girlfriend and easier for him to bring his child home.” The adoption of black Vietnamese children into white families is an example of the structural racial inequality that plagued the Vietnam War itself. The connection between the inequalities faced on the battlefield and at home has been part of the political rhetoric in the 1960s. In fact, George Wallace condemned the civil rights movement by linking it with communism stating before the Senate Commerce Committee his hatred for people, “fawning and pawing over such people as Martin Luther King and his pro Communist friends and associate.” Wallace continued to campaign the civil rights movement as the “hotbed of communism.” One member of the Black Panther Party, a radical black organization in the 1960s, linked the struggle of the Vietnamese people with black people

125 Stur, 180
126 Carter, 157
127 Ibid., 160
in Oakland through their “desire to run their own communities.” In period in which the United States federal government was aiming to advertise a racially diverse country internationally, the shared language between communism and racial equality was unacceptable.

The Operation Babylift narrative aimed to unravel such rhetoric by presenting Vietnam as inherently racist. When Clark adopted a Vietnamese child named Cam Van (who she later renamed Joanna), she said that Cam Van was having a hard time getting adopted because she had physical disabilities. Furthermore one of the reasons for her abandonment was that she was half-black. Clark casted the dark skin as an undesirable trait for the Vietnamese population. Abandonment of an Amerasian child became a signal not only of culturally racist Vietnam but also one that was unloving and cold hearted to leave a child because of his skin color. This could also be seen in Betty Lipton’s memoir when she recounted the story of Black Boy, an Amerasian growing up with his mother. Because of this, she stated that Black Boy was more fortunate than other Amerasians who were abandoned at birth because of the shame they carried. She went on to include that, “fifty percent of those children were black.” The Vietnamese mother’s abandonment of the Amerasian child is connected to a hierarchy of skin color: lighter was better. This image of a racist Vietnamese tradition is amplified through the newspapers outlet during the babylift.

Holt International, an established international adoption agency in America, said that their main priority became evacuating Amerasian children out of Vietnam because

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129 Clark, 26
130 Lipton, 67
children of mixed race where stigmatized by other Vietnamese. In one *New York Times* article, the newspapers called the racial discrimination as a traditional prejudice, quoting Sister Cabina of the Go Vap orphanage that, “people here [in Vietnam] believe that when skins get mixed it sets off some instability. They are ashamed of Negro Children and in some orphanages keep them apart.” In “Orphans of Vietnam: One Last Agonizing Issue,” Fox Butterfield described the miserable life of the Amerasians as urchins that “haunt the streets of Danang” where being a child of mixed blood is shameful. Sandra Fox, an adoptive parent said that, “We just don’t think the mixed race babies are going to be culturally accepted in Vietnam. We’re simply afraid they’re going to die.” Mixed blood children became a marker for Vietnamese intolerance for racial diversity. This was painted with the rumors that circulate in Saigon during the last days of American military occupation that Vietcongs were going to burn and kill Amerasian kids. The assumption of cultural racism was coupled with the political threat of communism. Both Clark and Taylor stressed this point in their memoirs. Rosemary Taylor wrote that getting kids out was not just an escape from poverty but a matter of survival, hinting that their life will be in danger under a communist regime. One April 9, 1975, the Communist Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam declared during a meeting in Geneva that they would raise kids fathered by Americans without any hatred and groom them to be “real Vietnamese who will contribute to national reconciliation,” as a way to pressure the

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US to stop the babylift. The announcement did not stop the babylift and newspapers continued to build an image of a Vietnam that was communist and racist.

When the babylift is recounted through American mediums, America’s own history of racial violence and inequality continually remains obscured while elevating racial inequalities existing in Vietnam. This could be seen through Robert McKelvey’s *The Dust of Life: America’s Abandoned Children in Vietnam* which detailed the life of several Vietnamese Amerasians who stayed in Vietnam after the war. Calling these Amerasians as abandoned “American” children that grew up in the land of their “father’s enemies,” he outlined the discrimination they faced in Vietnam through their poverty stricken state, outcast status, and inadequate means of education. In one of his interviews with Amerasian adults in Vietnam, Oanh stands out as a mixed black-Vietnamese adult. Oanh is described as a child abandoned by both her Vietnamese mother and American father. Her poverty is stressed with continuous mentions of the racial discrimination that she endured through teasing and bullying. McKelvey stressed, “Vicious teasing was a common experience of Ameriasians. It appears to have had a quality much different from that of the teasing which is a common feature of schoolyards, and it frequently led to Amerasians quitting school.”

The description of the vicious Vietnamese schoolyard recovered the American problem of school integration between black and white children. In the end, McKelvey’s book argued for the free entrance of grown Vietnamese Amerasians into United States not because of the poverty that plagued them but because of Vietnam’s discriminatory and racist attitudes towards those of mixed blood. America became the land of a racially tolerant society in contrast with the intolerant Vietnam.

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This image of the racially tolerant America breaks down as the adoptees grow up and detail how their own lives were pulled apart by the racial discrimination in America. The racial violence that displaced these adult adoptees is spoken through their identity crisis. Jennifer Noone, a 28-year-old Vietnamese adoptee, grew up on Long Island, in her words, “it was not the most accepting of places.”\textsuperscript{138} She experienced teasing and bullying. She expressed a period where there were times that she was afraid to go out at night alone. In this situation, growing up in an all-white neighborhood, her skin color became a target for racial bigotry. Even though she grew up culturally white, rejecting everything about her heritage until she reached college, she was targeted as an Asian. During a broadcast panel of Vietnamese adoptees, Cahn Oxelson, who is half Vietnamese and African American who was adopted into a white family, stated that some of his parent’s friends who have served in Vietnam looked at him differently once they realized that he was part Vietnamese. Oxelson started his introduction by saying:

\begin{quote}
I had a hard time figuring [out] who I was and where I belong in this world. And becoming a competitive swimmer really solved that for me, at least at the time. I identify as an athlete. I didn’t have to choose between being Vietnamese, Black, or white. I can just concentrate on being a competitive swimmer.\textsuperscript{139}
\end{quote}

Firstly, Oxelson’s statement operates on the line of intense racial consciousness. The racial difference between his adoptive parents and his own biracial genealogy caused confusion and angst. Racial difference between him and his adopted family is the physical sign of the racial displacement. Such displacement is expressed through the language of selfhood that is racialized because his entrance to the American family was

\textsuperscript{139} Cahn Oxelson, CSP\textregistered\ American Adoptee Experience (2003)
based on his racial, ethnic, and historical background. As he said, swimming allowed him to not have to pick between being Vietnamese, black, or white. The questions of ‘who am I’ or ‘where I belong’ are indications of an active internal reconciliation of his past, his present, and his future. Tia Keevil, another mixed Vietnamese and Black adoptee, expressed the same issues of when she expressed, “I am constantly clarifying my history. New York is okay, because people are used to it but it definitely put a third little triangle on my identity-of who I am.” 140 In this, we see the constant clarification of her history as intricately connected to her sense of self. Her identity as a bi-racial child, as an adoptee, as an African American, and as a Vietnamese are constantly being negotiated in ways that both allows her to move within different racial enclaves but also limits her participation in them. As she said, “it was always a sense of never fitting in.” 141 This includes never fitting in within the Vietnamese community who she felt shunned her because of her dominant African American looks. However this could be seen as a reflection of the racial rhetoric in the 1960s and 1970s that centered on a dominant black and white paradigm. In face of such paradigm, finding a Vietnamese identity within the American racial consciousness goes beyond just constructing race, but reconstructing history. This could be seen when Vietnamese Americans tried to reconstruct their own version of Operation Babylift in an attempt to build a Vietnamese American narrative. Yet, they find themselves adapting a narrative that is created by the white American volunteers during the war.

140 Tia Keevil, CSPAN American Adoptee Experience (2003)
141 Ibid.
Part 2: Reconciling the Past

Since the babylift, multiple documentaries have been made about Operation Babylift featuring the adoptee’s voices. The most well-known include: *Operation Babylift: Lost Children of Vietnam* (2010), *Daughter of Danang* (2002), and *Precious Cargo* (2001). Each documentary tries to reconstruct the Vietnam War by making the adoptee’s story into a universal Vietnamese American experience and a way of reconciling the violent past of the Vietnamese American experience. The babylift became the dramatized version in which displaced Vietnamese were adjusted into the American environment. However, as Vietnamese Americans tried to reconstruct their own history through these narratives, their stories strongly reverberate memoirs written by figures such as Rosemary Taylor and Cherie Clark. Thus, ultimately, through the babylift narratives, we see a reconciliation process that is still strictly Americanized.

In 2003, the American Natural History Museum in New York opened an exhibit named “Vietnam: A Journey in Mind, Body, and Spirit.” As part of the exhibit, Operation Babylift was revisited through a televised event called the “American Adoptee Experience.” In this program, Vietnamese adoptees of the Operation Babylift talked about their experiences growing up in America and their trips back to Vietnam. The broadcast placed Operation Babylift directly in the center of Vietnamese American relationship. Dao Spencer who was part of the American Children Task Force, responsible for assembling facilities for the babylift arrival, introduced the event, “Today, in this month of April, reminded most Vietnamese Americans of another journey—their own: unanticipated, dramatic, and full of hardships that took place 28 years ago.
Operation Babylift could qualify as the beginning of that journey." The "dramatic" and difficult journey refers to the massive amount of Vietnamese refugees that left South Vietnam seeking refuge in the United States. In this quote, Dao Spencer positioned the refugee and the particular orphaned adoptee narratives as the central narrative for Vietnamese living in America by placing Operation Babylift as the beginning of the Vietnamese journey into the American continent. The airlift of Vietnamese children into America has always been connected with the mass migration. When the babylift first commenced, Major General Edward Lansdale, Vietnam veteran in the CIA, had praised Operation Babylift and pleaded for the same generosity be extended to the Vietnamese refugee, proclaiming that the refugee problem "will require transport and temporary care for the refugees" The quote not only infantilizes the Vietnamese refugees as a population that needs to be rescued and saved like babies, but it also reflects the traumatic historical moment in which Vietnamese Americans entered the American conscious. It suggests that like the babylift children, whose history is always entangled in a disastrous American war, Vietnamese Americans' identity will always be connected to the Vietnam War. This is apparent when one babylift adoptee, Kelly Brownlee, recounted her first time in an American classroom. The children asked her where she was from and she replied "Vietnam." She recalled how the rest of the children went, "ooh, the war." The way in which the babylift children are physical links to the memory of the Vietnam War conditioned Operation Babylift to be the universal Vietnamese American narrative because it defined the community as a population crippled and shadowed by war.

143 Edward Lansdale, “Give me your tired, your poor…”, New York Times, April 15, 1975
144 Operation Babylift: The Lost Children
When asked by Kristin Sa, one of the interviewers for an Vietnamese broadcasting channel, VHN-TV, why Nguyen stated it started with a “thirst” for her own culture and history. The adoptees’ stories are stories that “so many others can relate to, whether they’re adoptees, Vietnamese, and immigrants even. There were so many universal themes and messages.” Creating film was a matter of reclaiming a culture and history. By presenting the adoptee experience within the Vietnam War context, she is attempting to reconstruct and make sense of a historical moment that shaped her own family history. In this attempt, the adoptees were a medium for her to reconstruct a historical moment. Operation Babylift becomes a useful medium not only because it defined the Vietnamese population in American through the Vietnam War, but also because its focus on kids and children allowed Vietnamese Americans to reimagine themselves. Karin Dubinsky, in her vast study about the transnational and transracial adoption, said, “children carry enormous cultural weight on their shoulders.” Scholars have always studied children as a form of social reproduction, especially in histories of colonization in which children are also reproductions of power. In the realm adoption, especially narratives about babies, this social reproduction is constructed through the assumption that babies offer a social black slate. Babies become objects that are socially malleable bundled into the physical form of an innocent face, untainted by the indoctrination of adulthood. Yet, it is this assumption of “social blankness” that makes them easy objects of indoctrination (into a culture, institution, system, etc.) and perfect representation figures to inject meanings into. Dubinsky was right when she said, “no one

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146 Ibid.
nation or political ideology has a monopoly on imagining itself through children.” In the case of Operation Babylift, these children stands as symbolic children, inescapable of their ties to the Vietnam War through their flesh and blood, but also blank canvases where Vietnamese Americans can paint their own stories on. It is through this concept that Nguyen can easily reimagined her own family history reflected through the adopted child, even though her family does not resemble the “adopted family” that the adoptees grew up with. Throughout the film, Nguyen uses a great deal of her own voiceovers in segment composed of pictures of the babylift children and the Vietnamese landscape. Such moments revealed the compliant nature of stories about children when Nguyen interject her own voice into their stories. Operation Babylift is a perfect universalizing story because it helps defined the Vietnamese community through a traumatic experience while leaving room for the community to reconstruct its own history through the children.

However, this reconstruction of the Vietnamese American narrative is one that is strictly Americanized by the way white nurses continued to be authority figures on the babylift history. While Tammy Nguyen’s documentary featured mostly adoptees and American orphanage volunteer staff: Cherie Clark, LeAnn Thieman, Susan McDonald and Betty Tisdale. Throughout her work they recounted the babylift as a matter of survival. While Nguyen interviewed the adoptees about their experiences growing up, these white female volunteers continued to dominate and define the story of the past. Thus, while her work tries to construct a Vietnamese American narrative, it becomes a recollection of an Americanized memory of Operation Babylift and the Vietnam War. When Dao Spencer introduced a panel of Vietnamese adoptees, she conceded that there

148 Ibid., 12
were children that were not orphans but were entrusted to orphanage workers “in hope of that they (Vietnamese children) will be taken to a safe haven.” This echoed the construction of the America as a land of freedom and security.

The adoption of the white narrative in these documentaries Americanized the reconciliation process because it reaffirmed the babylift as part of a rescue tale. This could be seen through the story of Bert Ballad, an Operation Babylift adoptee from An Lac orphanage. The orphanage was ran by Madam Ngai and supported financially by Betty Tisdale in the United States. The evacuation of the Vietnamese children of An Lac orphanage has been made into a Hollywood film, *The Children of An Lac* (1980). The film centered on Betty Tisdale’s character as one that safely brought Vietnamese children back to the United States through multiple obstacles. Bert Ballard grew up in Denver, Colorado with a white family. Twenty-five years after the babylift, Bert was reunited with Betty Tisdale in the Colorado airport. They were in the local news where Tisdale said that she tried to keep in touch with adoptees and reconnect with the ones she could. Tisdale claimed, “Finding them again was so rewarding for me because I knew what I did was right. For a while, I wasn’t sure if I did the right thing, taking these babies away from their country. It was sort of ingrained in me. Did I do the right thing? But every time I see someone like Bert who writes poetry, who has a lovely wife, and loving parents, I knew I did the right thing.” For her, seeing the grownup adoptee was a closure, a way to reconcile her memories of the Vietnam War that reaffirms her actions in moving children out of Vietnam. This propagates the message that life in America is better because it means security of healthy life, a happy family, and material access.

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This message is not just an Americanized message, but has permeated the Vietnamese American community. Tammy Lee’s documentary won awards at the Asian American Film Festival, DC APA Film Festival, Vietnamese International Film Festival, Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival, and the Chicago Asian American Showcase. Not only that, she went on to appear in multiple broadcasting station such as VHN-TV, a station geared specifically towards the Vietnamese American community produced by the Vietnamese American community. The general acceptance of the Americanized message of rescue by the Vietnamese community reflects how such language of rescue has been internalized within the community. This could be seen through recent film works of Vietnamese Americans directors that positioned American as a favorable destination in contrast to Vietnam. One particular well-known film was the critically praised Journey to the Fall (2006) that detailed a journey of a Vietnamese man, Long, who escaped the communist reeducation camps in Vietnam to reunite with his happy family who escaped to America. The language of rescue becomes a doctrine that is internalized. This could be explicitly seen when adoptees return to Vietnam in search for self.

Part 3: Return to the Motherland

On May 1, 2002, the film Precious Cargo was broadcast on the PBS. The film followed twelve Babylift adoptees as they journeyed to Vietnam sponsored by the Holt Agency on what was called the Motherland Tour. The film frames the trip experience as a rediscovery of history and self for the adoptees. On the eve of the trip, Jodi Lee White stated, “[t]his trip is to find out about Vietnam and what happened there. But I think it

152 Ham Tran, Journey to the Fall (2006)
should be as well, about finding your own self.”153 Return trips often are motivated by goals of selfhood. In “Going home, Adoption, loss of bearings, and the Mythology of Roots,” Barbara Yngvesson states that, “roots trips reveal the precariousness of ‘I am.’”154 Throughout the film, adoptees associate the essence of who they are with the sites and places they visit. Todd Anderson, a babylift adoptee, became emotional when he visited the Sacred Heart Orphanage in Danang and nuns remembered him explaining that it helped validate his existence.155 In other words, the orphanage acts as a historical space in a complex formation of self.

The sentimental language of love and care that Taylor and Clark built around these orphanages became the language that the adoptees expressed their sense of self. This could be seen when Liz Sowles followed the adoption group to an orphanage, Sowles reported, “So I am going to see where I was left, and then from there was off to America.”156 Sowles see the orphanage not only as site of identity, but also a site of abandonment, where a native Vietnamese mother left her off. Saul Cornwall was another adoptee that went on the Motherland Tour. After the trip he describe the impoverish existence of the Vietnamese people. He said openly how the poverty of Vietnam makes him appreciate that he was relinquished for adoption, thinking, “this could be us [the adoptees].”157 The implicit meaning of Cornwall’s words is that he felt lucky to be adopted. Cornwall constructed his sense of self through the “fortunate” fate of being adopted. This expressed a moment of final colonization in which these adoptees, who

153 Gardner Documentary Group, Precious Cargo (2001)
155 Precious Cargo (2001)
156 Ibid.
157 Ibid.
were trying to find agency by returning to Vietnam, find themselves internalizing the
language of rescue.

In Julia Poupart’s study about internalized oppression among Indian Americans,
she wrote colonized groups “learned and internalized the discursive practices of the
West—the very codes that created, reflected, and reproduced [their] oppression.”158 The
babylift adoptees face similar sense of oppression by internalizing the language of rescue
as their own. As one adoptee said an interview, “not many people know what it is like to
be put in an alien environment and taking it as your own.”159 By internalizing the
language of rescue, they viewed themselves as objects of rescue. This strips them of their
own agency and infantilizes them as people always in need of love, care and rescue. This
could be explicitly seen through the sentimental atmosphere of Precious Cargo that
induces emotional turmoil within the adoptees. When the adoptees were at the orphanage
lounge being shown photos of other Vietnamese orphans, Liz Sowles cried out “I'm very
lucky where I live, I have great people who love me and I love them dearly.”160 The
crying scene evokes a desire within the audience to soothe and calm her as if she was a
child throwing an emotional spell. Through this self-infantilization, many documentaries
featuring the babylift adoptees voices often posit them at an eternal infantile stage as “lost
children,” “daughters,” and “precious.” The fact that Sowles feelings were instigated by
pictures of current orphans in the Vietnamese care centers demonstrate how such
language can be used as continuation of oppression as these kids become new objects of
rescue to her. She takes up the mantle as the heroine desiring to spread her good fortune

158 Lisa M. Poupart, “The Familiar Face of Genocide: Internalized oppression among American Indians,” Hypatia 18,2
(Spring 2003) 87
159 Operation Babylift Lost Children (2010)
160 Precious Cargo (2001)
of being loved and cherished to others. It is this internalized language of rescue that makes reconciliation of the violent past a constant struggle for the adoptees.

During the trip, three adoptees were brought to the Vietnam War Remnant Museum. This could be seen discreetly when the three adoptees visited the Vietnam War Remnant Museum. This museum was built in 1975, as the War Crimes Museum, for the purpose of displaying American and South Vietnam’s cruelty during the war. The museum changed its name in 1993 in preparation for the renewed open economic relationship with the United States. In the museum the adoptees were confronted with the violent aspect of the Vietnam War through the pictures of American soldiers killing and destroying Vietnamese villages. Vietnamese museum workers asked them about what they thought about the lift and the war in general. The room was filled with silence and the adoptees looking uncomfortable as they searched for an answer. Yet this moment of frank discussion and actual reconciliation was overshadowed when the museum workers brought in remnants of the crashed plane of the first airlift. Their eyes were filled with tears as they recounted how it could be them reiterating their “luck” to arrive in American safely. Even in the face of their very militant past not only through the American violent pictures but also the fact that the plane remnants were part of military cargo, their reactions remained focus on the emotional aspect of the story and internally they expressed a silent thank you to the white volunteers that brought them to America.

In 2002, *Daughter of Danang* came out as a critically acclaimed documentary that follows the journey of Heidi Bub, a babylift Vietnamese adoptee, in her reunion of her birthmother Mai Thi Kim. In 1997, Bub traveled to Vietnam, after a few correspondences with her biological mother through short phone calls. In many ways, *Daughter of Danang* 161

161 Ibid.
served as a counter example to *Precious Cargo* because it disrupts the loving rescue narrative. The reemergence of the birth mother disrupts the narrative by presented a loving Vietnamese mother. Mai Thi Kim appeared on the set with the words of giving up her child. Unlike many adoption narratives of the babylift, *Daughter of Danang* is one where the birth mother is given a voice. In the beginning of the documentary, Mai Thi Kim is depicted as a loving mother who gave up her child due to fears for her safety as a mixed Amerasian child. Kim described the day she gave up her child as heartbreaking saying, “I take her to the orphanage but couldn’t bear to go inside... it was like giving a piece of myself.” Mai Thi Kim’s reemergence in the adoption narrative breaks down the image of the cold Vietnamese mother constructed in the memoirs of Rosemary Taylor and Cherie Clark. During Kim’s narration, we see a white orphanage worker telling a crying Vietnamese woman who was holding a child that “I’ll take care of him, I’ll give him a good home.” A clip of an aggressive white social worker followed this scene where she talking to a Vietnamese mother asking, “can I take him? Can I take him to the United States? You think about it because he saw me take other boy and other boy is very happy.” In this scene, the depiction of the social workers and nurses as white loving maternal figures breaks apart as the viewers see the forceful and violent nature of the orphanage adoption process.

Just as the image of the loving nurse breaks apart, Heidi’s story also goes against the norm of the loving American family that overcomes racism. Heidi grew up in Pulaski, Tennessee, with her adoptive mother, Ann Neville, who wanted to hide her Vietnamese origin. Heidi said, “She [Ann] did everything she could to make me as American as

163 Ibid.
possible.\textsuperscript{164} American was a racialized matter to Heidi and her family. Brenda Lewis, Heidi’s friend said, “When she was growing up and till now, I see her as a white American because there was not much oriental in her.”\textsuperscript{165} Heidi tried to hide her Vietnamese identity even as she grew older in fear of the KKK that existed in her hometown. The racism that was obscured through the adoption of Heidi as an Amerasian child is now explicitly depicted. Furthermore, Ann Neville, was described as a disciplinarian with a distaste for open affection and a penchant for violence. Heidi confessed, “She was a single parent. She did everything she...you know I had everything growing up. I just didn’t have a very loving parent.”\textsuperscript{166} Heidi diverged from the regular adoption narrative in which adoptive parents are depicted as loving and accepting. Ann Neville is an example of when the American mainstream representation of love and war does not reconcile into the caring white figure. Heidi’s childhood breaks the conventional American progress historical narrative. It is this inability to reconcile her past and her present that sends Heidi in search for her birthmother. She claimed the process will be so healing and it would “make all the bad feelings go away.” The last half of the documentary focused on the intensity of the reunion.

The first scene of reunification for Heidi and Kim was emotional and intense as Bub’s mother grabbed onto her long lost daughter with tears in her eyes. Bub expressed her admiration for the Vietnamese tight-knit family in which love is uttered openly. The climax of the reunification comes in an emotional scene, when Bub walked out the room, when her Vietnamese family asked openly (through a translator, Bub could not speak Vietnamese) for Bub to provide a monthly stipend to support her biological mother. In

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
Bub’s mind, her emotional reunion with her mother is now tainted by the connection of money and material means. Her biological brother commented, “this was how things are done in Vietnam.”\textsuperscript{167} This implies that the concept of communal income is intrinsically within the Vietnamese culture. It indicates that this tradition is something that is born from a natural quality of the Vietnamese people in which money and familial obligation is uniquely tied. Such collision of sentiment is interpreted as merely a “cultural” difference and Heidi is seen as an ugly American while Kim is portrayed as an aggressive mother. The producers, Dolgin and Franco, state:

It is our understanding that Heidi's family's request for financial support was not out of the ordinary. Experts in Vietnamese culture agree that traditionally the member of the family that lives abroad constitutes the lifeline for the rest of the family. And the request for help is considered quite normal. For many returning Vietnamese, the ability (emotionally and materially) to help is regarded as an opportunity to contribute to their family's well being.\textsuperscript{168}

Firstly, the member that is considered the savior of the family is the one that is abroad. Therefore, it does not so much express the workings of family politics in Vietnam as it does the interaction between families that are separated. Tran Tuong Nhu, Bub’s Vietnamese liason, said, “[t]he person overseas is the person who is going to save the family...having been through all these wars and desperation, Vietnamese are very upfront, especially about money.”\textsuperscript{169} What the audience sees in Bub’s situation, is not merely some tradition that grows from an isolated natural outcome, but rather the consequences of a war that left the Vietnamese land economy in shambles. In “An Orphan with Two Mothers,” Jodi Kim argues that Daughter from Danang reveals a

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
“clash of uneven geopolitical hierarchies, economies, and power.” She argues that Mai’s relationship with her daughter is based on the ideological and material conditions that were set long before the reunion. This could be seen in the relationship Kim had with Heidi’s American father. During the war, to support her family, Kim worked as a laundress at the Navy Hospital and then moved to the cafeteria. Heidi’s father, who she called “Sky,” gave her a house, money and clothing for her children to go to school. The material inequality is another violence caused by the war through ruining the Vietnamese rural landscape and killing a generation of Vietnamese men. It is because of this the very material inequality that she gave up Heidi in the first place in search for clothing, schooling, and material means. When Heidi said that she was “101% Americanized,” she also adopted the American luxury to express the reunion as purely sentimental. Bub’s financial security as an American allows her to focus on the relationship between herself and her Vietnamese family as one that is strictly sentimental. It resembles Taylor and Clark’s positions during the war in which their financial security afforded by the military assistance allowed them to write and view the babylift as a purely humanitarian effort. Such dynamics are afforded through the difference of economic power made through the political turmoil of the war. Just as Sky was seen as the savior to Kim’s financial troubles, Heidi is seen as the savior to her family’s current troubles. The need for financial security did not disappear when the war was over. It is another method in which United States still held economic prowess over the ravaged Vietnamese landscape and economy. It sublimated the economic and global imperialism of the United States into the relationships between families who stayed in Vietnam and

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170 Kim, 11
171 Sachs, 3
those who are abroad. More importantly, it is an example in which the Vietnam War still exists not through guns and weapons but through the body of Heidi Bub and her relationship with the people around her. At the same time, framing the relationship of the war merely as a familial story disconnects it from the larger framework in which it was American violence that caused the separation of the Vietnamese family and formed an imaginary family in the first place through adoption.
Conclusion

But Operation Babylift and the adoptees are not just political tools that serve to reconcile and reconstruct the past, the babylift was used as a way to renarrate the relationship between the United States and Vietnam in the present. On July 12, 1995, President Bill Clinton formally announced the renewed diplomatic relationship with Vietnam. One of the earliest people to travel back to Vietnam under the newly open relations were the Vietnamese adoptees. During this period, adoptees act as individual diplomatic agents in the new relationship United States began to build with Vietnam as economic and foreign investors. As early as 1997, adoptees revisits to Vietnam were televised. On July 31, 1997 a television show called “48 Hours” documented a group of adoptees’ journey to Vietnam. Global Spectrum flyer, a travel agency, sent flyers to adoptees as an advertisement for their “Revisit Vietnam Tour.” Joshua Woerthwein who went to Vietnam under the 1997 tour wrote a long article that was published by Adopt Vietnam, an organization and website that provides information about the history of Vietnamese adoption in America. At the end of his article, he wrote that the trip has resolved and answered a lot of questions, “for me, this was the end of the beginning of a new chapter in my life.” This sentiment reflected the desires of the American government who wanted to reopen relationships and begin a new chapter. In 2000, Bill Clinton visited Vietnam National University. There he expressed the following words:

Today, the United States and Vietnam open a new chapter in our relationship, at a time when people all across the world trade more, travel more, know more about and talk more with each other than ever before. Even as people take pride in their national independence, we know we are becoming more and more interdependent. The movement of people, money and ideas across borders, frankly, breeds suspicion among many good

173 Joshua Woerthwein, “A Search for the Past”
people in every country. They are worried about globalization because of its unsettling and unpredictable consequences.\textsuperscript{174}

Clinton’s vision of the global world included a free trade agreement with Vietnam. In 2001, the Vietnam-US Bilateral Trade agreement was signed. Under the Bilateral Trade agreement, Vietnam has agreed to open service industries like telecommunications, finance, banking, construction, and tourism to US investors. Furthermore, US imports in Vietnam have reduced tariff rates for industrial and agricultural products.\textsuperscript{175} This was not a situation that was particular to Vietnam. In the 1990s, Clinton offered a vision of globalized world by promoting free trade agreements around the world. His presidency was marked by the increasing efforts to form trade agreements that would lower tariffs and encouraged the movement of goods. In 1992, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) passed as economic agreement between Canada, US, and Mexico. Under NAFTA, tariffs on agricultural goods and other products were abolished. The establishment of free trade areas called for an open border for the free movement of goods.\textsuperscript{176} Clinton attempt to emulate such agreements in other countries. In 1995, he urged congress to ratify the World Trade Organization (WTO) as the international institution that targeted at “helping” developing nation. Rather, WTO has become an international institution promoting the free trade doctrine.\textsuperscript{177} Under such economic agreement, US multination companies are able to break economic borders and established business abroad. In 2009, United States private companies contributed $9.8 billion to

\textsuperscript{176} John Wiseman, Stephen MacBride, \textit{Globalisation and its Discontents} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan) 144
\textsuperscript{177} Eric Sheppard, “Constructing Free trade: From Manchester boosterism to global management,” \textit{Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers} 30,2 (July 2005) 151
Vietnam in direct foreign investment. Airlines remained one of the biggest industries to invest in Vietnam, as a shadow of the strong Airforce that was present during the Vietnam War. Under the Bilateral Air Transport Agreement in 2008, there is an open market for cargo transportation. Furthermore, US airlines have direct third-party agreements with Vietnamese airlines that allow direct flights between Ho Chi Minh City and San Francisco. In this new economic relationship, the US remains the one with power as investors, suppliers, and capital.

The adoptees existence allows the United States to imagine its economic relationship with Vietnam in a globalized world into a familial relationship based on emotional ties. During Clinton’s speech at Vietnam National Univeristy, he expressed the deep regret that one of the biggest casualties of the war was the family who were separated. He quote:

> The desire to be reunited with a lost family member is something we all understand. It touches the hearts of Americans to know that every Sunday in Vietnam one of your most-watched television shows features families seeking viewers’ help in finding loved ones they lost in the war so long ago now. In this quote, Clinton created an emotional connection between the United States and America through the language of kinship. He positioned the separation of families as a shared emotional pain between the US and Vietnam referring to the separation of American soldiers from their Vietnamese daughters and the separation of American adoptees from their Vietnamese family. Adoptee’s return tours were often named precluding to Vietnam as a home such as “Operation Babylift-Homeward Bound.”

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Adoptee and Amerasian takes this emotional connection to a new level by reimagining the US and Vietnam relationship into one of a global family. In 2003, Lana Noone, an American woman who adopted a babylift child, published “Global Mom.” In the book she described families that adopted a babylift child as a pioneer of the “global family.” In what she called “fulfilling the dream of Martin Luther King’s “world house,” Noone created a vision of the American family as one that transcends borders. The creation of a multiracial and multinational family became another marker for how the globalized world. As the United States aimed to integrate Vietnam into the capitalized global world, adoptees were the tools to integrate Vietnam into America’s global family.

However, these adoptees were not only familial links between Vietnam and America as they toured Vietnam, they were also agents of capitalism. They acted as perfect capital tourist visiting national museums, parks, and restaurants. In 1997, Joshua Woerthwein’s article not only detailed his arrival at different orphanages but they also detailed the hotels, restaurants, and tourist locations in Vietnam. These adoptees were not only ambassadors, but also they were tourists that motivated the economy and garnered interests. During the trip to Vietnam, Joshua went to different cities each with a different tour guide. Within the emotional pieces in his article, Joshua would unconsciously advertise certain agencies. For example, after a visit to a maternity hospital in Vietnam, Joshua wrote, “After lunch, our Mekong tour guide (from the Cuulong Tourist Agency in Vinh Long) pointed the boat in the direction of a brick-making factory...I took a dip in

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182 Ibid., 6
183 Ibid.
the Mekong River (that was an experience) and then we all had a pleasant dinner.”

These travel agencies are capitalizing on the emotional aspect of the babylift to bolster interest in the economically driven relationship. These adoptees are not only acting as sentimental agents, but also the first inflow of American money into the Vietnam’s economy as capital agents. Despite the economic-driven agenda, their trip is highlighted as an emotional trip back to the homeland, rediscovering Vietnam and all its beauties that include visiting all the famous landscapes and historical sites. The way in which the economic relationship between American and Vietnam is subverted through the sentimentalism of the adoptees’ return trips laid the foundation in which present transnational adoption between the United States are spoken through the media on a purely sentimental level. Such language has been normalized in the American narrative on transnational adoption. Thus, when Angelina Jolie adopted a Vietnamese boy in 2007, the press questioned her ability to a good mother rather than questioning the international politics that made such adoption possible.

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