Same Same but Different: The Self-Portraiture of a Vietnam War Adoptee and the Poststructural Language of Alterity

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SAME SAME BUT DIFFERENT: THE SELF-PORTRAITURE OF A VIETNAM WAR ADOPTEE AND THE POSTSTRUCTURAL LANGUAGE OF ALTERITY

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Joie Norby Lê

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Advisor: Dr. Bruce Uhrmacher
Abstract

This study examines the journey of a Vietnam War adoptee and the multitude of experiences that influenced her alterity. Through the development of a poststructuralist conceptual framework, the author reveals a philosophy of difference realized by philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jacques Derrida. Using the method of self-portraiture, the author illustrates how this philosophy of difference was shaped as a result of her experiences and how those experiences have informed her engagement or disengagement throughout her K-12 and post-secondary education, her work as a student, and her beliefs as an educator. The study focuses upon and addresses the themes of identity, adoption, family, education, racism, rejection, and their perpetuation of difference. More importantly, the work itself, written through a series of narrative vignettes, depicts the impact of the philosophy of difference in the author’s life, which contributed to her approach to the method utilized in the study as a response to her struggles with the aforementioned themes. It is as much a creative, non-fiction writing dissertation as it is a research dissertation, which lends itself to the poststructural philosophies described therein. As a whole, the work is reflective of a search for identity and the implications of being a Vietnam War adoptee who has learned the true value of alterity manifested through personal experience and actualized through the manipulation of language guided by poststructuralism.
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Preface

Difference.

The thing about difference is that it causes one to stop, to wait, and to wonder. Will it be accepted or rejected? This is how it has been my entire life, waiting for my differences to be accepted. Many times, they have been rejected. It calls to mind a thousand words about otherness that scholars used to describe the indescribable: the feeling that accompanies a sense of isolation—a quasi-academic definition of an understanding that you do not know where you belong, how you belong, and in what space you belong. It is that box on a census that is labeled as “other” because no one knows what it represents. This box is a third space (Bhabha, 1994), a hybridity of choices that does not delineate one of the other previous choices. It is a cast away option, one that disregards overt identities for ambiguity. I have been marking boxes called “other” most of the time throughout my life, sometimes with a sense of pride and sometimes with a sense of shame. I knew that I wanted to fit in and to belong in the space where a box was so well-defined there was no other option marked for “unknown.” Yet, I could never do that because I did not begin my life in a space that was defined. This occurred because of the circumstances that caused my adoption from a war-torn country, false paperwork, and the absence of identity. Since then, the only thing I have had to establish and present was myself, and sometimes—many times—people did not like who I was or what I represented. This is what difference is to me, the moment when
“other” rises to the surface, and I must stop and wait for its approval. Difference causes fear, not just by those who are accepting or rejecting it but also by those who are being defined by it. It holds me back. It holds us all back.

I started to write this dissertation over two years ago, and I struggled to exist in spaces where the boxes were clearly defined. I struggled to check off the boxes that I knew would be accepted without question. It meant that I did not give my work to an advisor for a great length of time for fear of rejection. It meant that I rewrote it three or four different ways, in three or four different voices, all the while knowing that one of those voices would be rejected. My constant fear is that it will be my voice, the one that speaks in hybrid tongues, the one that was left behind in a maternity hospital forty-two years ago. It is not radical; it is not extreme, but it is not the voice that some want to hear from me, at least not in an academic dissertation. It is a voice of the third space or even the fourth or fifth, depending on how you want to categorize it. It the voice that resides in a vast and lonely box called “other.”

Somebody asked me what my dissertation was about, and I said that there is a long and a short version of that answer. While that may be true, the reality is that it is just a dissertation about a student, struggling in education, who knows that struggle is informed by experiences she has had along the way. It is a dissertation about a teacher who sees a multitude of things about her students that people cannot see because they do not want to, because they do not have to, or because the state tells them not to. It is a dissertation about fear and its paralyzing affect on process and product. Lastly, it is dissertation about the acceptance and rejection of difference and the writer, the scholar, the student, the teacher, and ultimately, the daughter that recognizes it as such. What
follows is a disparate interpretation of an academic dissertation. It plays with substance and style as a method but also as a mode of self-reflection. It is a dissertation with an obvious eclipse: two entities overlapping giving context to one or the other as both shadow and source. The argument is whether one is better equipped to disseminate ideas than the other. I like to think they work in conjunction as part and parcel of the exercise. The work contains a series of vignettes (written in italics) that serve to respond to the structure of writing an academic dissertation. At first, they may seem out of place, as if such writing should be solely reserved for the chapters that allow for experimentation and “play” (Derrida, 1978). However, the very notion that such anomalies should only exist within the confines of a set group of chapters only reinforces the argument that a move towards a poststructural perspective in education is imperative. By setting aside creative modes of interpretation for the sake of structuralism is to give in to dominant methods that continue to oppress those seeking new avenues of representation and voice. What good is a counternarrative if it is merely relegated to the end? Should the counterpoint not exist alongside its point? What good is positionality if not to draw attention to its relevance from the onset? While these questions are rhetorical in nature, the answers most certainly guide my response, which is to demonstrate what difference looks, sounds, and feels like. Will it be accepted or rejected? That is not for me to decide. For me there is only the stop, the wait, and the wonder.
Chapter One: In Media Res

Framing

I am sitting in the black, faux-leather chair of the hotel room, trying to find comfort within its deep seat. I am not tall enough to use the desk ergonomically and the height adjustment is broken. I realize this whole set up is made for a business traveler, most likely a male of substantial girth and height I will never amount to, and I feel slightly affronted by the bias. After spending too much time calculating the extra space as a metaphor for my work—too many un-fillable moments of being uncomfortable—I find a thick, sofa pillow and sit on it, perched like the princess and the pea upon the extra cushion as if to demonstrate my worthiness. I look at the array of books I have brought along for the evening and cast aside the ones that I know will encourage my desire to sleep rather than to write. The green hue emanating from the lawyer's lamp casts a sickly glow on the articles in front of me; they are stacked neatly to the left and waiting for me to revisit their robust proclamation of having been published as I struggle to put anything worthy of examination out into the world. I decide to leave highlighting article texts for another day and choose to tackle something more complex: the selected readings of postmodernism. A first glance at the table of contents and author contributions sends shivers up my spine. Lyotard. Deleuze. Derrida. Foucault. The names reverberate like sound waves, bouncing back and forth in my memory in lost tones of frustration. I am transported back in time to my first year as a graduate student in the
department of English, Harvey's (1990) book stifling my access to understanding postmodernity as cultural change (p. 65). I am deeply reminded of my ineptitude at deciphering meaning from the density of his text, grappling with pristine pages that equally matched my newness as a scholar. Perhaps my lack of understanding was bolstered by my insecurity. Being the youngest in the creative writing master's program, I was still trying to articulate a thousand experiences in narratives of non-fiction writing, finding only tide pools of success left over from the wave of students more confident than me. My voice was always lost beneath a thick sheet of fear as if I were clamoring beneath a layer of ice to escape but could never quite breach the surface. I could breathe, but my hands pressed uselessly on the underside of freedom unable to crack through it at the age of twenty-six; I resigned myself to living in the underworld. This is how my life in education has been. Feelings of inadequacy trickle into the vestiges of my memory. Visions of long halls bordered with metal lockers surface alongside the voices of students who would not forgive me for a war I was never truly a part of and only had the circumstance of being born within. Chants of "Chinese, Japanese, dirty-knees, look-at-these" being less about anatomy than racist context on an elementary playground. Moments that flit to the top of my cognition fourteen years later while tentatively holding a book that reminds me of everything I am and everything I am not. Dissertations are not made in objectivity.

I decide to read the seminal texts first, those chapters which underscore the movement of postmodernity. Nearly fifteen years since my failure in the course on postmodern theory, I reread the work of Foucault.
Foucault’s (1984) essay on enlightenment gives a critique of Kant’s (1784) notion that enlightenment constitutes a movement from immature to mature characterized by the event by which “humanity is able to put its own reason to use without subjecting itself to authority” (Foucault, 1984, p. 38). Foucault’s argument is that this definition is situated within the context and time period with which Kant is basing his philosophy and therefore, cannot necessarily be carried forward as an overarching system of thought. Foucault considers Kant’s response to a question posed by a German periodical, “What is Enlightenment?” or “Was ist Aufklärung”, to be a bit of a lie and suggests that a new epoch or point of departure from Kantian theory of enlightenment should give way to an attitude of modernity as outlined by Baudelaire (1995). As a definition, modernity is characterized by a break with tradition or “consciousness of the discontinuity of time,” (Foucault, 1984, p. 39) in which man is called upon to produce himself in neither past or present but throughout the moments that he must consider himself “the object of complex and difficult elaboration” (Foucault, 1984, p. 41). Maturity, then, is ahistorical. We do not mature over time more so than we do within it and oftentimes, only because our attitudes allow us to do so. Foucault does not discount the movement of the Enlightenment (or Kantian theory) because it served to describe monumental change within European societies. However, he disagrees with its “mode of reflective relation to the present” (Foucault, 1984, p. 44) and suggests that universal value (such as those determined by the Enlightenment) is undermined by the events that lead us to constitute ourselves within our own limits, which is guided by personal, historical inquiry within our own present. At the same time, we must be cognizant of what might exist past those present limits. In other words, the attitude of modernity is “a philosophical life in which
the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” (Foucault, 1984, p. 50).

Foucault’s essay drifts through my mind with a glint of understanding. I realize that it has been many years since I first read his work as a student trying to reconnect synapses that lay dormant after years of coming to terms with my adoption. Back then, I was still working through modes of reconciliation and unable to focus on anything more than a lost past and an uncertain future. Now, I recognize my immature, twenty-six-year-old self, revisiting the work in the present. Time pulls forward in the lamp’s ephemeral glow, and I cling to the possibility that I am working towards the experiment of moving beyond the limits that are being imposed by a universal value in education. I move on to Lyotard (1984).

Lyotard’s explication of postmodernity outlines fourteen key areas that describe the implications of introducing narrative as a method into the sphere of information exchange. He postulates that science and technology has led to information being a commodity (p. 4) where those who have access to the rapid growth and change of technological innovation will be the ultimate proprietors of knowledge. Lyotard further extends this to a political agenda in which those who have access to information, the privileged, will be the ultimate decision-makers; in other words, those who have will thrive and those who have not will lose out. These decision-makers, however, are not necessarily confined solely to the government but any ruling class that has access to and is in control of knowledge such as “corporate leaders, high-level administrators, and the heads of major professional, labor, political and religious organizations” (Lyotard, 1984,
p. 14). Lyotard delineates between scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge, and its acceptance of its truth through legitimation. That is, scientific knowledge automatically sets itself up for legitimation through process and product whereby the questions posed are put to the test through arguments and proofs which serve to support or refute the given hypotheses. Narrative knowledge, on the other hand, relies upon the storyteller to convey truth; it becomes a legitimation by paralogy, an ongoing creation of meaning though the destabilization of an accepted mode of research or performativity (p. 61). It is the legitimation of knowledge embroiled in ambiguity because it relies on connotation rather than denotation. “It is changing the meaning of the word knowledge, while expressing how such a change can take place. It is producing not the known but the unknown” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 60).

A quick glance at the clock reveals that time is running out. I have just a couple of hours before my task of shaping a conceptual framework comes to an end and all progress is suspended for the evening. It is a constant frustration for me as I bounce back and forth between my full-time job as a teacher, a mother, and a scholar, trying to find adequate time to pay equal attention to the tasks that each job is asking of me. I realize I fall short; my attention is often shifting from one to the other in a moment’s notice unless I deliberately ignore one or the other. In my day to day, nothing is ever defined. While I understand where I am headed, the directions by which I navigate are not concise. The journey to get from point A to point B has never been easy; certainly it has been mired in moments when I got lost along the way. In the end, however, those were the moments I learned the most. In response to the questions, “Who are you?” or “Where do you come from?”, I learned there was no easy answer. My seat cushion
shifts, and I feel the pressure of the pea beneath me. I turn to Deleuze (1994) as a final read for the evening.

Deleuze describes the movement away from repetition through difference. Repetition is expressed as being difference without a concept such as the duplication of items on an assembly line. This is contrasted to difference with a concept but external, where the object is representative of the concept itself without regard to space and time, also known as the Same. An example of this might be found in nature, where the cloning is still intact yet each representation is different. The object being observed is not renamed nor categorized as anything other than what it represents. A snowflake remains a snowflake even in its constant difference throughout time and space. The other type of difference is that which is represented by Idea, a “pure movement, creative of a dynamic space and time” to which it corresponds (Deleuze, 1994, p. 24). The multitude of ways in which artists render an idea might be an example of this. Cubism became an early 20th century movement to reject traditional modes of perspective; the artists most renowned for this artistic movement varied their representations of that Idea, producing subtle yet profound differences in their work that gave each artist legitimacy within that time period. Their work was dynamic, showcasing the task of orienting itself to the call but using their interpretation as individuals to respond. In application, Deleuze suggests that upon first impression difference is considered “accursed” or “the figure of evil for which there must be expiation” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 29). Certainly, history has show this to be true as in most contexts difference is met with dislike or, at the very least, suspicion, lending itself to rather negative consequences throughout time (Lyotard, 1989). Deleuze believes that it is the project of philosophy to “rescue difference from its maledictory
state” in which difference “must leave its cave and cease to be a monster” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 29). The acceptance of difference relies upon the interaction with the interlocutor (Lyotard, 1984) or the person(s) that one must engage in the discourse of difference with as being an accepted form of repetition. The advent of difference as a repetition of Idea must take into consideration the time and space within which that difference is being deployed, a negotiation largely dependent upon the dynamics of four factors: identity, analogy, opposition, and resemblance (Deleuze, 1994). Deleuze considers these elements one of the “four shackles” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 29) of mediating difference in which each corresponds to a separate construction of what can be determined. Identity is associated with “undetermined concept” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 29) or that which cannot yet be named. One might think of this as a career which has not yet been created. “Bloggers”, for example, would have been an unnamed identity twenty years ago, but today, this identity is understood to be the occupation of someone who comments, via the Internet, on a variety of topics. In relation to difference, a new term or identity for Blogger may come about within the next twenty years, but for now that identity is still an undetermined concept. This, of course, is a concrete example of identity; but the explanation can be further applied to more abstract concepts such as racism, nihilism, or extremism. The “naming” of these concepts were negotiations of difference that once were undetermined concepts. Only until they were given an identity and accepted as such by society could they no longer be “undetermined.” To name something, then, would be a determination that the something does exist. The second element, analogy, is likened to “determinable concepts” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 29) where the representation of idea is the same despite the differences. A window is the same as a
door when their likeness is representative of the same idea such as “something that can be open or shut” or “something that exists as a barrier between outside and inside.” The difference here is not in the determinable concept but in the actual element that represents that difference: door versus window. We know there is a difference between the two but they are analogous with respect to the idea. The next element, opposition, represents “determinations within concepts” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 29) or that which engenders the creation of difference with respect to a concept. The case of the dissertation is an apt example. Researchers must propose an opposing (or unprecedented) idea with respect to the originating concept and work to develop a determination of that concept with difference in mind. There is no need to “redo” what someone has already done. Instead, we are called upon to create new determinations of the same idea: the dissertation. We then extend this to difference within field concepts such as education, psychology, sociology, or mathematics. As a result, researchers are constantly generating determinations within concepts within other concepts. Lastly, resemblance, is the last element which represents the “determined object of the concept itself” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 29). Here again, the dissertation can lead by example. The determined object, the work itself, becomes the resemblance of the concept, “dissertation”, despite constant changes in topic, author, field of study, period written, and so forth. Each work resembles the end result of producing a dissertation, not necessarily with regard to constructing the Same but in composing derivatives of the Idea. Interestingly, the use of Deleuze’s shackles to demonstrate his point symbolizes the notion that in order to truly mediate or reconcile difference others feel bound to compare it to what has come before—the model of the Same. Mediators of difference are called upon to test the validity of difference with or
without a concept and decide whether or not the difference can sustain itself as an
accurate exemplar of the representation of the originating concept or more importantly,
the originating Idea. Deleuze’s argument is that this is not an easy task for others to do
because anything construed as different must further submit to the observer’s attachment
to the Same. He writes, “The greatest difference is always an opposition, but of all the
forms of opposition, which is the most perfect, the most complete, that which ‘agrees’
best?” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 30).

After reading Deleuze, I feel as though I have found the final thread the weaves
the theories of postmodernism together. It is not without a struggle and one that I
recognize as running through my entire life and in this dissertation as I seek to define a
theory that encapsulates my work as a student and teacher. I consider the work of the
postmodern theorists as a collective enunciation of what I think, who I am, how I feel
about my life, and what I have learned along the way. They have given me context
regarding the shaping of oneself throughout time, the acquisition, dissemination, and
legitimacy of knowledge, and the role of performativity enacted through difference and
repetition. I recognize that I am someone that is reflective and sensitive of
differentiation, stemming from too many moments in which I was measured and found
wanting and too many experiences that left me wondering what it would feel like to exist
without questions, without ambiguity, and without difference. The shape of this
dissertation is being molded by my past and my present; it is an account of epistemology
that has implications in my current work as a teacher, a mother, and a scholar.

I stop to consider the lamp that casts its glow on the desk, its brightness diffused
by the shade placed upon it. I am that lamp—the mode of enlightenment that can only be
considered if accepting the difference that the shade provides. My methods of instruction and research are unorthodox; I resist spaces that try to make me conform and rebel against structures that feel oppressive in their broad assumption that we all think, feel, and work the same. I launch internal insurrections in my mind, taking down windmills with the pointed edge of a lance to resurrect that which could be good, a knight-errant on an epic adventure. It is time to move beyond the structures that hold me in place, casting aside ill-worn chairs for something that suits me better. I abandon the notion of Same and embrace the idea of Difference.

The Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the confines of restrictive, standardized education and my response as a student and teacher through the use of a poststructuralist framework. It is a narrative dissertation that depicts the stories that focus on where the truth is most defined, from the margins, which shaped my methods of instruction, my belief in the importance of building student relationships, and the way in which I understand the complexity of my students’ lives as being central to their educational success. Lastly, it is a dissertation about experience (Dewey, 1997), which greatly influenced my work as a teacher and a scholar. It is a deliberate act of metonymy in which the writing itself is serving to replace a structuralist approach to repetition. It follows the method of self-portraiture, a form of inquiry which utilizes Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (1997) aims of portraiture to blend art and science through the deliberate merging of literature and ethnography (p. 5), or in this case, autoethnography (Ellis, 2004). It serves as a means to grapple with the complexity of experience using the juxtaposition of creative non-fiction and education research. In this work, it is not my
intent to capture the story of others, their experiences made active through narratives of observation. Rather, it is my purpose to turn the writing quill towards myself in an effort to represent the impact of experience and its influence on my perspective about identity formation and adoption. It is a self-study that postulates a correlation between knowing oneself and knowing others. It highlights my lifelong experiences with adoption, the search for identity, the confines of standardization in education, and ultimately, my response to these elements mirrored through poststructural tenets. In this study, the following research questions will be addressed:

- Growing up as a Vietnam War adoptee in the United States, what key school and non-school experiences have affected my thinking about identity and adoption?
- How do my life experiences fitted to poststructural narratives affect my ideas about identity and adoption?
- What are the implications of my narratives for providing a fresh understanding of identity and adoption?

**Bumper Bowling**

*I arrive at the restaurant a half hour early. I take a seat at the booth by the large windows, watching the slow pace of university students walk along the sidewalk. I observe that the restaurant doesn’t quite feel the same; the once-red vinyl upholstery has been replaced with a deep, mahogany brown, the owners remodeling the look and feel of the former college-joint with something more upscale. I can’t help but reminisce about days gone by when I moved in with my brother ten blocks down the street just after returning from living in Vietnam and not knowing what to do next with my life. That was eighteen years ago, and while the placement of the booths and tables has not changed,
over time the scene before me has, and inevitably, I along with it. Now, here I am, working through the last years of my fourth degree from the university, feeling only slightly wiser but infinitely more tired.

I am sleep deprived, a feeling I’ve grown accustomed in the past three years. I resist the urge to lay down along the long booth and take a nap although the subtle twitching in my lower right eyelid has resumed, reminding me that more sleep would most likely cure the problem. Unfortunately, that won’t happen for at least three more months when summer break comes around or I finish my dissertation. Both seem to be taking forever. In my head, I briefly hear the laughter of my companions if they were to find me asleep in the booth. I’m sure they wouldn’t blame me. We’re all in the same space, running on empty with barely enough fumes to make it around the track of dissertation success. The three of us exist in a bit of a haze, lost to our full-time work, busy personal lives, and constant struggle to check off the boxes that will send us out of the university system forever. Our monthly meetings keep us going as we work to support one another in making monthly progress towards the finish line. In some ways, it’s just an excuse to slow down the pace, forget the immediate wants of others who need us, and turn the attention towards ourselves. We are a small band of misfit toys, myself playing the role of Dolly, the rag doll abandoned by her owner and still suffering adverse psychological affects from the loss. I abandon the idea of napping.

Once my companions arrive we do our usual check-ins, which includes a brief summary of our personal lives before we refocus on dissertations. In the booth behind me I can hear the conversation of three men who are sociology doctoral students. Unlike their conversation, which also centers around dissertation phases accompanied with loud
pronouncements about being "ready to defend," our conversations are laden with
cussing, accompanied by the necessary pint or two of beer, and remain an obvious
departure from proper dissertation jargon. We ruminate over the annoying observation
that we are not creating solutions only continually magnifying the problems within the
field. Nonetheless, we remain steadfast in the hope that one of us will finally finish and
going on with their lives, which may drive the other two to follow closely behind. My role,
admittedly, is ambiguous. I offer very little in terms of advice and prefer to listen to the
voices of my companions and their concise understanding of academia, my own opinions
and thoughts on the matter only vocalized in an alternate universe where I realize I can
speak up. It is not intentional; it is something I have learned throughout my many years
of formal education. Matt hopes I’ll finally let that go. I know that old habits die hard.
It is now my turn to talk about my progress.

“It’s come to a screeching halt,” I say in between bites of my tortilla chip. “I’ve
written the first chapter three times. I can’t seem to get it to work the right way.”

“It’s critical that you keep trying,” Matt says, peering from underneath the faded
brim of his baseball cap.

“Look at me,” Eron says, “I went to work like this! Like this!”

She motions to her hot pink, thermal shirt and workout capris.

“People thought I was on one of my days off,” she says.

“I don’t think that’s so bad,” I say, giving her a quick once-over from the seat
next to her.

“You’re not supposed to go to work looking like you just rolled out of bed and
brushed your hair,” she replies exasperated. “But, of course, I did and well, oh well.”
“That's right,” Matt retorts, “oh well.”

“You’re not supposed to do a lot of things in education these days,” I say, “which is my problem. Actually, it’s the whole problem. They keep trying to make everything and everyone the same, standardizing students and teachers so that we all sound, perform, and respond the same way. The whole point of my dissertation is to demonstrate that it doesn’t have to look the same way to be valid, but if I don’t do it correctly, it may never get through. Education is like bumper bowling; they keep putting up guards right and left so we stay in the lane. Any coloring outside the lines just isn’t considered acceptable. Don’t they know I am never going to be a good bowler?”

“Depends,” Matt replies, “some universities are doing a lot of experimental things. Trying to get you to stay in the lane is pretty meaningless, which is why you have to write it your way. It’s important to your work and the field. But you’re right; being in education is like bumper bowling.”

“Bumper bowling,” I say.

“Bumper bowling,” Eron agrees.

And there we have it.

The Problem

It is my sixth year of teaching secondary language arts. Sometimes, I wonder how long I will stay. I have thought many times about giving it up, stepping back into a full-time role as a mother of three and reinventing the person who once had dreams of becoming a writer. I have thought about what it means to become another teacher statistic—someone who gave up the profession within the first six years of their career, and I feel guilty for considering it at all. I wonder if anyone would ask me what the
reasons were if I left or if they would just chock it up to another educational loss because of teacher burnout, low pay, loss of autonomy, lack of support or a slew of other reasons that cause so many good teachers to leave the field (Hahs-Vaughn & Scherff, 2008). From time to time, I admit those have been my reasons. My students sometimes ask me why I wanted to become a teacher. They are surprised to hear that I never wanted to become a teacher. I never planned it that way. However, I worked with students since my own graduation from high school, first as a tutor and then a tutor program director, then, as an assistant coach and then a head coach. I spent over a decade guiding high school students in one fashion or another, trying to assist their learning in some way. After years of being urged to get my teaching certificate by the administration of the school I was coaching at, I finally gave in. I abandoned the quill and its possibilities and worked on going back to school to become a teacher—sixteen years after I graduated from high school, at thirty-four-years-old, and with one toddler and one baby in my life.

Teaching has become a mechanism of helping others and passing on knowledge. On the best days, it is a career that lifts your spirit, watching the laughter of students happy to be with you, to learn from you, who care about you, and sometimes, never want to leave you. On the worst days, it is a career that pulls your eyes toward the door, wondering what it would feel like to be free of the burden of standardized testing, data-driven evaluations, too many useless professional development meetings, or the students that make you wish you had called in sick, even if the district docked your pay. It is a tough job and one that is vastly undervalued in our society. Nevertheless, I am still here—teaching. Apparently, as my students, their parents, my colleagues, and most administrators have assessed, I am pretty good at it. Certainly, not every day. I have my
fair share of bad teacher moments. I have battled through evaluations that have ranked me below proficient in one category or another, depending on who is evaluating and what new rubric the district is using. I am certainly not the teacher that daily offers clear objectives or writes precise agendas on the whiteboard (Bingham, 2004; Tyler, 1949). Sometimes, in the spirit of Robert Burns (1785), my best laid plans often go awry. Nevertheless, it is a job I am grateful to be a part of and yes, sometimes consider leaving. As of late, I have felt more confined than ever. I drift from testing round to testing round, waiting for the hope that government reform will someday include mandatory art supplies and “common” will not truly mean the definition of students and their teachers. I struggle trying to develop work that fits the rules and conventions of an academic dissertation and feel hindered by the expectation. The standardization of education is bumper bowling. It fills gutters with barriers meant to keep us all in the same lane with a defined path that will create an accurate course to the pins. As a result, we have lost sight of the nuances that make us unique. We do not all bowl the same. Moreover, we cannot account for slight variations in the lane before us. There are divots in the wood that have been created over time or slight warping in the planks that can cause even the most accurate roll to drift from its intended course. There is no sleek and unaltered path that would allow anyone to follow the straight and narrow with unyielding accuracy. Nonetheless, the objective is still the same is it not? Shoot for the pins at the end? Try to get them down in one shot to show your advanced proficiency? I have a clear understanding of the game; it is the norms that are stifling my play. The moment too many barriers try to box me in is the moment I start to challenge the reason for the
structure. Unfortunately, this is the primary problem in education these days: too much repetition and not enough difference.

**Same Same but Different**

On a mid-morning in early September, I took to the dirt streets on my rusty bicycle. The blue paint was chipped and peeling, dropping flecks of color behind me as the chain moved forward in squeaky rotations, my foot pushing the pedals down slowly and methodically. It was my fourth week in the country, and I was just now getting used to the ebb and flow of Hanoi and the quiet isolation of the district I was living in. Its haphazard grid of streets offered no street signs to navigate by, so I used land markers instead: the pale yellow of the student housing complex, the fruit stand across the street offering oranges with peels of green and hot pink dragon fruit imported from the south. Just ten yards down from the housing gate was a set of sidewalk barbers: three or four men who daily set up temporary shops, mirrors hanging on a crumbling concrete wall, silver razors refracting the sun when quick, trimming strokes were made to the back of a customer’s neck. Large, wide bowls of water lay near their feet, faded blue and red plastic tubs containing tiny remnants of thick, coarse hair sluiced from the razor. I remember when Margo got her hair chopped off by one of the barbers. She sat still, her long, blonde braid sliding past the top of a white, plastic chair. No one had ever witnessed an American woman getting her hair cut by a sidewalk barber, so many people gathered around to witness the event. She wasn’t trying to be a spectacle; she was just being practical. It took only a few scissor strokes to turn her braid into a bob, slightly ragged at the ends with no styling necessary or even wanted. She paid the man 50,000 dông, said her thank you, and waved good-bye. That was a good day for everybody,
mostly for Margo who could now escape the stickiness of long hair in high humidity for a few dollars more than she would pay for a bus ride back home.

Near the middle of the road was a broken bridge, a few precarious timbers jutting out over a river of brown muck, a steady stream of garbage pushing its way down a slow current to an unknown destination. There was a woman at the very end of the road, before it became a T-junction where you took a right turn to bike the long journey to the Old Quarter, who sold the cheapest and best bun chả giò, her house becoming a temporary pit stop for hungry passersby. Even now I can still taste the rice noodles steeped in a light dressing, a large serving of chả giò just pulled out of the fryer and balancing on a plate in front of me. The thick rolls were filled with minced pork, clear bean threads, and were sliced in half at a diagonal. A small dish of nước mắm was provided for dipping. The whole meal cost only 3,000 đồng, a mere thirty cents in 1996.

From this woman’s home I knew that the road to the right would offer another hundred yards of dirt before coming to the busy, paved roundabout that separated my district, Bách Khoa, from the main street to city center. When I got enough nerve, I would pedal into the stream of oncoming bicyclists and cyclos, the occasional vintage motorbike weaving between them all, a heavy load of wood or baskets mounted to the small metal frame behind the seat. Like salmon moving upstream, the bicycles would continue to clip by, their speed on the paved road much quicker than mine as I tried to blend into the throng. I hoped my bicycle would make it through another day, the chain still catching on the gear’s metal teeth before slipping off like it did a dozen times before. I was skeptical.
It was not as hot as it was when I first arrived, when the humidity trapped me in my thick, cotton clothing while local women donned thin blouses of silk or rayon that were both functional and fashionable. No one told us what to properly pack for the four months that we would be students in this country. All I remember was one word: conservative. Now, in September, the temperatures were starting to drop with the monsoon season rounding out. We could wear our cotton t-shirts without much envy, but the local women still modeled their thin blouses, the small clasp of a plain, white bra just visible beyond the patterned fabric. In what would be my fifth time making the journey to the shops at the top of the Old Quarter, I pedaled laboriously through the roundabout and onto the main street, Hang Bai. By this time, street signs and traffic light were more visible. However, a few people neglected to follow these markers of sensible traffic flow and a red light merely meant glancing to the right or left before making deft moves through the intersection and past anything impeding their journey upstream. This was mostly observed from the motorbikes, many of them Russian motor-scooters salvaged and maintained from the war or newer, Italian Vespa models, which cost a pretty penny to purchase in a country still categorized as being third world twenty years ago. Back then the pace was still slow; bicycles outnumbered other modes of transportation by at least four to one. Even though my bicycle fit in, its aged frame blending in with countless other bikes, I did not. A few peripheral glances were always sent my way as I waited at the crosswalk for the light to change. My Rockport hiking boots and other American clothing markers betrayed my ability to culturally blend. I felt clumsy and large, my body frame eclipsing the slender arms of the women next to me, their white gloves extending past their elbows to protect them from the tanning rays of the sun.
The Old Quarter is divided into thirty-six streets all named for a specific craft or guild. It is located around the outskirts of Hanoi’s famous Hoàn Kiếm Lake just at the top of the northwest corner. The Old Quarter was first brought to life in the 11th century and continued to become a regular marketplace for goods and services, mostly artisan-centered, especially during the hundred years of French occupation. Despite the damages to Hanoi during the war, the Old Quarter retained its charm and original purpose, continuing to bring tourists and locals to purchase goods from one of the many vendors. My destination was Hang Gai or Silk Street, and I pedaled the bike forward around the last curve of Hoàn Kiếm, navigating one last dangerous roundabout before finding a suitable place to pull over and park my bike. There was no specific place to store my bike nor did I even have a cable or lock to secure it. I left it propped next to a tree on the sidewalk, hoping it would be there when I returned. While it was not worth much by American standards, it was a valuable method of transportation for many Vietnamese and therefore, slightly more valuable to the local population. However, since crimes of any kind were highly punishable, I took my chances with the slow pace of the day and headed out to explore.

Hang Gai is known for clothing and fashion accessories, primarily dresses, robes, áo dài, purses, scarves, and pajamas. I did not have a particular need for any of these items but to see the colorful displays of silk line the sidewalk was certainly worthwhile. I stepped into a small shop, about the size of a walk-in closet, and the smile of an early-twenties salesperson greeted me. She offered her cupped hand towards a wall of silk goods: beautiful outfits hanging down from wire hangers and stacked neatly on shelves.
packaged in sleeves of clear plastic. I picked up a Chinese silk pajama set with black pants and a red shirt. I slid the fabric through my fingers and reveled in the lightness.

“You like this one?” the salesperson said, smiling.

“Yes, it’s very beautiful,” I said, complimenting her products. “Did you make these?”

“Yes, I have many colors to choose from,” she said, fanning her arm around the small space like a game show host. She reached over to a stack of neatly packaged clothes and slid out a few other colors. There was peach, yellow, black, white and another in deep, navy blue.

“This one is pretty,” I said, holding up the hem of the blue pants.

She nodded and smiled again.

“Same same but different,” she said and held up the black and the blue pants to show where the pattern differed just slightly.

I noticed the subtle change in the thread, the light brocade pattern barely discernible in the darkness of the silk.

“Right,” I replied, “just a little.”

She smiled again and patted the stack of pajamas.

“Same same but different.”

“Right,” I said again. “Same same but different.”

Poststructural Philosophy

The phrase, “Same same but different” is common to many countries within Southeast Asia. It is especially useful as an expression utilized by vendors who wish to illustrate that their merchandise is just as valuable as the original from which their
products are derived. It denotes a replication of what has come before it, a copy or image of the first but never claiming to be the first. It does not attempt to hide the difference only point out that despite what may be different, it is altogether the same. Ultimately, the idea is that what is outwardly viewed by others, subtle differences in material, structure, form, or wording, still serves to represent the original model that comes before it, a resemblance of that which is expected without the intention to replicate it exactly. This difference is only made significant by those who observe and recognize the replication and not because the replicated object makes it so. As a result, poststructural philosophy works to transfer the responsibility of understanding to those who will ultimately interpret an object as being different and suggests that understanding is borne from the observers’ cultural or societal positionality rather than by the developer of the object themselves (Barthes, 1977; Deleuze, 1994).

The origin of poststructuralist philosophy stems from a response to the structuralist movement of the 1950s. This movement sought to describe the universal order of things in which the understanding of any one concept or idea is wholly reliant upon the context of the larger structure of which they are a part (Barry, 1995). The anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963a), considered the father of structuralism, expounded upon this idea through his study of indigenous cultures in South America. As an outsider (the anthropologist or ethnologist) Strauss could observe the cultural structures in place but understanding of the bounding mores that shaped these structures was lost to the hidden rules that existed within the culture. From an anthropological viewpoint, to truly gain cultural understanding would mean the discovery of these veiled rules, which could in turn give context to the behaviors, language, and kinship systems he
observed. His work included analysis of mythology (Lévi-Strauss, 1995) and totemism (Lévi-Strauss, 1963b), an apt application for the way in which structures are framed as controlling mechanisms that dictate human and cultural behavior. He writes:

We do not know, and never shall know, anything about the first origin of beliefs and customs the roots of which plunge into a distant past; but, as far as the present is concerned, it is certain that social behavior is not produced spontaneously by each individual, under the influence of the emotions of the moment. Men do not act, as members of a group, in accordance with what each feels as an individual; each man feels as a function of the way in which he is permitted or obliged to act. (Lévi-Strauss, 1995, p. 69)

This is a telling indication of the power systems that dictate human behavior and thought. Structuralists would argue that man does not express his individuality in thought or action without considering the rules (hidden or overt) that sustain him in the first place, at least when he belongs to a set group or culture. If he were completely autonomous, he might have the privilege to work outside the binding structure, establishing his own set of rules by which he would solely adhere. However, this would be a nearly impossible reality to sustain, unless he were to isolate himself in a space without governance (a deserted island for example). Even then, he would most likely ascribe to self-conscious structures that were dictated long before he was self-marooned, and therefore, a semblance of structure would still exist; likewise, he would need to interact with the environment in which he has sequestered himself, which would have its own structural system. Consequently, he would belong to an operational system of which he has no control and as a result, he would never be completely autonomous. John Donne (1624) elaborated on this idea in his poem, “No Man is an Island,” which established that there is no existence without hierarchy; in this case, man will always belong to the system of mankind, a structuralist notion of containment.
Strauss, among other scholars, took his study to language as well and contributed to the concept of structural linguistics (Lévi-Strauss, 1963a), an operational theory in which the study of language demonstrated how meaning could be ascertained from words through patterns and functions of language. The Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1986) is predominately responsible for outlining the foundation of linguistic or literary structuralism through his belief that words are both arbitrary and relational (Barry, 1995). In Saussure’s view, to define one word means that one must examine similar but different words that have a relation to the first word in order to fully understand its meaning. He calls these “associative relations” (Saussure, 1986, Chapter 1, para. 1). In literary terms, the relationships between concepts can be considered analogies, where the aim of explaining one idea is through a comparison of another. However, from Saussure’s perspective, these relationships are often paired opposites such as male and female or night and day (Barry, 1995). To understand the meaning of one word means that one would need to recognize the absence of its opposite or at least characteristics of its opposite. This means that those pairs would necessarily need to belong to some hierarchal structure and that full understanding of that structure suggests privileging its foundation or center in some way. A key component of structuralism is that it is a method of attribution; the specific moves to general (Bhabha, 1994) in order to make sense of how one element can be attributed to another in a vast expanse of networked possibilities.

In contrast, poststructuralists work to decenter hierarchy and centralized privilege; they deconstruct truth (and likewise attribution) so that it does not exist as a nucleus of core understanding. The aim of structuralism is to define differences within structures
where the limits of one structure bind its knowledge within other structures through which they are networked. The goal of poststructuralism is to demonstrate that the limit or the outside of the structure contains the truth or real knowledge and because that limit is in constant flux, there is no absolute truth. Poststructuralism does not ignore the rules that dictate a system of structures, but it does recognize that the reality that subsumes them is never fixed; rules can change over time with alternate realities that engender modification. Poststructuralists become the vendors of difference within the same. Williams (2005) contends: “The truth of a population is where it is changing. The truth of a nation is at its borders. The truth of the mind is in its limits” (p. 2). The limit, however, is not made possible because of its association to the center; the limit has value in its own right. Poststructuralism works to move beyond established frameworks not to deny them but rather to work within them for the better (Williams, 2005).

**Postmodern vs. Poststructural**

Many of the key figures who comprise the movement of poststructuralism are likewise attached to the movement of postmodernism. Both movements are characterized by the contributions of Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault, Kristeva, and Butler (among others), depending on the disciplinary application in question and to what extent that philosopher corresponds to the movement at the time of analysis. In some respects, this might be viewed as a Venn diagram in which philosophers overlap, depending on the discipline and its relation to the study at hand (although each philosopher might disagree with belonging to any particular movement in the spirit of that theory). As noted earlier, postmodern theory is concerned with a movement beyond modernity, a late 19th and early 20th century movement that sought to reject or challenge traditional modes of painting,
architecture, literature, and music (Barry, 1995). Pioneers in the era of modernity include painters such as Matisse and Pollock; architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Rohe; writers such as T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf; and musicians such as Kravinsky and Schoenberg (Hawthorn, 2000). Their work sought to rebel against the accepted modes of their fields in terms of their aesthetic acceptance in culture and society, which elicited experimental responses in their respective fields such as Virginia Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness writing method or Jackson Pollock’s action painting method.

In contrast, poststructuralism’s roots stem from a branch of postmodern theory that uses language and signifying structures to underscore (and rebel against) accepted modes of performativity (Butler, 1990). Butler asserts that our methods of communication (gestures, language, speech acts) allow us to construct a reality or identity of ourselves that is socially constructed. This performance of identity is constituted through hegemonic ideologies and reinforced through our day-to-day lives where who we present is a series of self-derivatives bolstered by societal expectations. As a result, identities that are oppressed struggle to articulate an authenticity of subjective-self because the acting or performing an expected identity dominates and is readily more accepted in society. Butler’s work illustrates this struggle through the explication of gender norms, depicting what it means to “perform gender” (Butler, 1990, p. 278) rather than be gender-neutral. Her poststructuralist approach conveys a need to move outside the hegemonic expectation, which would allow the identity to manifest itself through its own modes of communication and not through prescribed acts of speech or language that signify a primary structure. In this vein, the use of poststructural rather than postmodern in this dissertation is critical because it deliberately uses language as an interplay between
performativity and subjectivity. I perform the act of the student (or the teacher) as is expected through explicitly coded language and writing (the writing of a graduate student or the language of a teacher). I observe most of the expected norms by organizing the dissertation in such a way so that the academy will accept its inclusion into its scholarship. I champion the role of privileged researcher, working to answer complex questions with communicable answers. However, from a poststructural point of view, none of this is really solid evidence of absolute validity because it is not for me, the researcher, to lay claim to its stability. From a poststructuralist perspective, it is the observer or reader who must recognize the work’s legitimacy and accept it for what it is: the same and the different. It is through this method that I provide both at the expense of my own subjectivity.

In “Death of the Author” Barthes (1977) states, “Writing is that neutral, composite oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body of writing” (Barthes, 1977, p. 142). The most complex piece of this work is that it utilizes autoethnographic narratives to describe a struggle to find identity. In this work, I seek to address one of the primary functions of a dissertation: the search for validity and truth with the intent to establish causation with or without correlation. However, by navigating the labyrinth of myself as author and subject, I deconstruct the form of both the formal structure and the search itself, hinging on only one given: there is no absolute truth. To establish the identity of the subject is also to deconstruct the method and potentially any outcomes. I am the author of the student work and the subject of the student work. Both exist within the body of writing which is without a concrete foundation. It does not attach itself to what has come before
it; it exists only as an instrument of possibility. Ultimately, by using poststructuralism as a framework, I follow Barthes’s method of the literary author and epitomize his death. According to Barthes, “His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them” (Barthes, 1977, p. 146).

**Implications**

The nature of this work implies a moment in which the reader, the writer, the scholar, and the teacher must recognize both the method and framework as cogs within the same wheel force. They move together in order to demonstrate a shift in understanding for intention without overtly binding that understanding into a fixed set of parameters. While the use of other philosophers’ literature is utilized to augment the author’s own philosophy of alterity, the true innovation comes in developing a piece that suggests that an *undetermined concept* is one that hinges on possibility. The paradigm only changes when others ask for it to be reexamined. It is the implication of freedom that gives this study its momentum, its purpose, and its value to the writer and to the reader as interconnected components that underpin change.

**Shifting Paradigm**

The university has changed. Just lately, the library was given an overhaul—it's interior gutted, walls removed, students left for months to find an alternative space to cram for finals, small study groups barred from hiding out in cramped rooms in the basement-level of the building. Like scattering insects, students emerged from the depths of the library, solitary crevices no longer offering sanctuary once the construction cranes rolled in to dismantle bookshelves, the archaic Dewey decimal system lost beneath the rubble to make room for something new. Orange chairs and space-age pods were
removed and taken temporarily offsite to be relics of retro-style furnishing, an apt reminder of a once-70s-looking building needing to ditch its bell-bottoms and turn the corner to the 21st century. I am surprised it was not renovated earlier. Even so, I rarely spent time in the library over the past eighteen years and only reserved a room once to conduct interviews for a research study on girls and gaming. That is all I really needed to remind myself that I work better outside of defined spaces bereft of windows and devoid of natural light. In the space of nearly twenty years, I can probably count the number of books I checked out from the library on my two hands, despite being given extended time as a graduate student, which at first made me feel as though my research was truly valuable. In the end, it just gave me more time to procrastinate. Nonetheless, like the rest of the renovations on campus, the new building is beautiful and telling, capturing the investment of alumni and personal donations in red and taupe brick walls that match the newly-envisioned school logo, glints of gilded copper refracting the sun like a shiny new penny. What once was is a better version of its previous self, the same understanding packaged in a slightly different way. Deleuze (1994) calls this difference and repetition. Creative writers, like myself, call this metaphor.

Over the years I have witnessed these renovations on campus with indifference; although, with so many years personally invested in the university, I imagine my own name could be carved in one of the many appointed bricks, a deeply etched permanence sandblasted on a rough surface and mounted in just the right location to denote my contribution. I will probably have to settle for a shelf in a storeroom where bound theses go to die. Nevertheless, I am not immune to understanding the way in which the university has evolved and as an extension, myself along with it. I was there when the
dormitories were first updated and the English department was shuffled across campus. I was a work-study student then and just trying to find my way back into education, a final push to finish what I had started six years early at a different university just thirty-five miles up the highway. I was starting over again, tentatively engaging in the literature of the early romantics after a hiatus of time that took me on a personal, extended, and troubled journey to other countries, through the doors of several higher education institutions, and in a constant quest to truly understand epistemology from a personal and theoretical standpoint. Knowledge, I learned, is illusory; its impermanence is reflected in ever-changing system of beliefs, perspectives, time, history, and subjectivity. I was no more in control of owning knowledge than I was in choosing what they serve in the university cafeteria. I was only a participant, engaging with materials as they were presented, picking and choosing their significance to my understanding, realizing that a good part of that store of knowledge I would never have access to in my lifetime, especially as I looked for the information about what I sought the most: biological family. The twelve years of formal, academic study that gave me nearly four degrees and a body of knowledge useful in the development of conference papers is supplementary information to the education I received wandering the littered streets of post-war Vietnam, dropping in and out of multiple university systems, working as a cocktail waitress at a college bar, or donning combat boots and fatigues at Ft. Knox in the middle of July, trying to figure out who I was and where I came from. Those experiences, coupled with the bundled works of the literature canon or pedagogical scholars and critics with whom I have aligned with as an educator, allow me to glimpse intellection as a never-ending, unfixed exercise that is contingent upon investment in its possibilities.
There is always a new surface to be mapped out, renovations made to foundations that have stood firmly on the ground for decades. It is the reconstruction of Dewey (2012) in dialogues of education reform, the development of a new subdivision of Critical Race Theory (Bernal, 2002; "Critical race theory and the next 20 years," 2015; Yosso, 2002) as new identities emerge and solidify, asking for a rightful place in scholarship. It is a method of expansion and innovation as the realization that concrete walls that comprised the brutalist architecture (Lewis, 2014) in the time of the Cold War must go by the wayside, hope of something better refracted in a wall of windows, birch tables replacing industrial laminate immune to decades of student use or impending nuclear war, whichever came first. It is the new library, the law school, the performing arts center, the logo. It is the repetition of possibility enacted through difference. It is the same same but different.
Chapter Two: Crossing T’s and Dotting I’s

Role as a Researcher

To define my role as a researcher means that I must ascribe to the labels that have defined me, portions of identity that have been impacted by the circumstances of my adoption to the United States, the environments I have grown up within, and issues I have had to contend with: a white family, a state which is predominately Latino, a life of being Asian American, a first generation adoptee of Vietnam. These cultural mismatches have given me breadth of experience but also limitation of self, where I have felt confined to roles that only boxed me in to one set group or another as I tried to make sense of the known and unknown elements in my life. Really, it is the amalgamation of these identities that becomes critical to my work as a researcher, an apex of understanding that stems from a mishmash of experiences both positive and negative. I have moved forward seeking knowledge from traditional education and have, for the most part, successfully proven my ability to be a high-achieving student throughout my life, most likely as a result of my adoptive family’s belief in the value of education. Nonetheless, I have also struggled, searching for the answers to the knowledge I cannot find: circumstances of my conception, reasons for abandonment, biological understanding in the form of family. I have revisited this theme many times in my life, tracing dirt roads of love and loss in my imagination which sadly only exist as metaphor.
As a response to my inability to grasp that knowledge, I started to voice my frustration on paper, writing enough fiction and non-fiction to take me through my creative writing master’s degree, which is clearly a part of my work in this dissertation. I cannot avoid spinning the truth in narratives that give me a voice that I have lost time and time again, sometimes by my choice and sometimes by others insistence that “fitting in” means suppression of self. In the end, I became a teacher with a voice that in its traditional form demands that it be heard. It is in this role that I pass on information and experience with the hope that students will allow the two elements to become a part of their own quest for knowledge. However, as a student I still feel the ill-effects of standardized education, asking me to curtail creativity for the sake of norms that have been prescribed by Eurocentric history. I am still that student, struggling on the margins of education without a voice to fully participate in academia as who I am rather than what traditional education wants me to be. In truth, this is how I access my role as a teacher, through a clear-cut understanding that my students are struggling, like me, trying to check off a multitude of boxes that catalogue them into prescribed ideas of success. I am boxed in either way, situated in spaces marked “student” and “teacher”, a side by side relationship in which one informs the other. As a researcher, I am capturing those moments. They are depictions of past and present experience that play out in a narrative Viewmaster, which portray the sequences of my life as a student, an adoptee of the Vietnam War, and a teacher. These illustrations will then be carried forward in which I will seek to understand and address my students’ moments in the present and the way in which, as a teacher, I can interrupt systems that continue to suppress their voices. In the
end, I will report what I see: the student and the teacher, both me and not me. It is a paradoxical relationship that reinforces systems of dominance while asking for a change to the status quo. It is complicated and rightly so. As a whole, my role as a researcher is bolstered by the diversity of who I am, where I have lived, and what I have experienced along the way. These moments have given me the ability to see beyond my role as a researcher with the intent to turn self-reflection into active praxis.

There are no beginnings and no endings. Only haphazard middles that fill up spaces of ether time has not yet claimed. Just another war story—fragmented and broken like the filament of a burnt out bulb. There is the sound of plastic flip-flops, slapping against the cement in loose cadence, following me like meaningless reverb and the high lilt of a vendor’s voice chasing me down dirt alleyways even as I turn the corner to another time, another country. I am neither here nor there but perpetually stranded in the discomfort of mystery and loss. Gratitude shakes me awake, and I turn my attention towards the present to look earnestly upon what life has given me. A family. A home. Education. Culture—not country. No matter which way I turn, it’s always the roots I trace, like the fingers of the Mekong Delta reaching out towards the expanse of the South China Sea to feel its wider embrace, fingertips dipping themselves in the cool water, the mix of rich, muddy silt blending with the open salt water beyond. It is here that I reflect upon the endlessness of possibility, tracing fine streams up through littered streets, past rice paddies nearly ready for harvest, and beside dense jungle, hoping to find a way back.
in time when the echo of small feet running swiftly away from a maternity hospital in Thu Đức faded away, like my voice, when I realized she was gone.

I stopped using my voice sometime in my first few months of life, a method of conservation that probably allowed me to survive. I learned early on that the use of my voice to communicate my most basic needs, hunger or affection, would go mostly unanswered till one of the few caregivers could assist, at least with the former, a bottle propped up beside my head to sustain me with the few nutrients watered-down formula could provide. There I must have lay, swaddled and searching for a smooth breast that would never come but at least being fed in the informal nature of a rubber nipple. It has the makings of a tragic story: orphan of war, abandoned at the maternity hospital, dying slowly from starvation in an orphanage to wait amongst hundreds of other children for a family that would raise me as their own. It was tragic, but it is not, now. It is not tragic because I am here, writing it all down—the protagonist of my own story. Therefore, perhaps it was only the beginning that was tragic and the rest is just inspiration—for a student like me, for a teacher like me, or in this case, for a dissertation—part research, part study, part life.

In John Greene’s (2012) The Fault in Our Stars a poignant lines states: “Writing does not resurrect. It buries” (Greene, 2012, p. 266). Indeed, there were times when the words I wrote were meant to hide the memories of things too painful for me to say aloud—that life was not all that easy for me even though I knew that my middle class upbringing in America was a blessing. I was luckier than many adoptees that made it out of the war, some whose tales of tragedy lived on even after their planes landed far from
the war zone that was once the country we lived in. In their stories, one antagonist was
merely replaced by another in such a way that conflict was inescapable, abuses and
injustice littering their lives in families who should have never adopted children. I grieve
for their tragedy and must lay it alongside my own experiences, trying to justify my own
feelings of loss, frustration, and grief and even write about it here as something worthy of
attention and not just another meaningless tale of woe. In the end, we are all just
survivors, making it through day to day with challenges that steer our course in any one
direction. We are the epic heroes of our own journeys, writing off landlocked years as
those in which our foolish choices are mostly to blame for our lack of moving forward.
Sometimes, we are our own worst enemies. “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings” (Shakespeare, 1991, p. 7) John Greene borrows
a semblance of this Shakespearian line as the title for his novel as translation for what it
is that we can control and what is controlling us. In his novel, characters question the
universe as the guiding force behind what they cannot control: cancer and inevitably,
death. “We live in a universe devoted to the creation, and eradication, of awareness”
(Greene, 2012, p. 266). His characters contemplate the meaning of life as being a method
of consciousness in which we are either aware or not aware—living or dead. However, it
is more complicated than that because consciousness does not necessarily beget
awareness. It is our awareness of living that gives us the understanding of how the
universe is manipulating our lives. The stars gave me a chance to live; the choices I
made gave me a chance to survive.
My life, again, is not a tragedy; however, I am aware of tragic moments that shaped me, for better or for worse, into who I am today. During a conversation with my professor, we discussed what it means to expose the details of personal experience for the sake of research and whether it is difficult to divulge the innermost sanctum of one’s life. I return to Greene’s assertion that writing buries rather than resurrects. Writing is a method, a means to suppress meaningful events in prose that can be revealed only to those who are willing to read it and more importantly, grapple with its understanding, making meaning out of the author’s purpose. There is fear, of course, that the reader will not get it, parallels to wider themes about education lost in some anecdote you thought made sense. There is fear that divulging too much becomes an exercise in narcissism or the arrogance of self-study, which might have become more useful in another forum, perhaps in a self-help book about adoption. In the conversation we had, I said that I did not care. I did not care whether sharing some of my most tragic experiences might cause me psychological harm as I seek to resurrect that which is already buried in prose. The truth is that I do care, a great deal, which is precisely why it is critical to share those experiences. Without the narrative there is no understanding, no awareness. Without awareness, we cannot be conscious of the struggles of others, the challenges that our students face and who might find themselves reflected in one of many narratives I choose to present, in which we can be called upon to act or to change in the face of that awareness. If we did not seek understanding, the fault, then, would lie in us. Nonetheless, I am just a sample, n, a small slice of experience. The hope is that my little n will represent a bigger N in the grand scope of education. I am a teacher whose life
experiences shaped her practice. I am a student, straddling the margins of education with one foot in and one foot out, heard but not seen. I am a writer, willing to unearth long-lost narratives for the sake of the universe that may control the stars but not the awareness of those who live within it.

**Self-Portraiture as Method**

The use of portraiture as a research method has emerged since Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (1983) work, *The Good High School*. In this research, she worked to describe the character and culture that made six schools on the East coast reputed for standards of excellence through a series of narrative vignettes. Her effort was met with great success and in the process, she established a form of research inquiry which deliberately blended the arts and science as a mechanism of conveying the “complexity and aesthetic of human experience” (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 4). She recognizes that this was not an invention by which she can take sole credit. Rather, its influence derived from philosophers and novelists centuries earlier that wished to weave their work together in order to represent a much broader spectrum of human experience. The result was an integration of fiction and social science, allowing the reader to engage in the experience of the whole. Lawrence-Lightfoot’s methodological impetus emerged from a resistance to the dominant canons, the fixations of social science, and its tendency to focus on the negative rather than the positive aspects of research (p. 8). She utilized portraiture to “resist the tradition-laden effort to document failure” (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9) and sought to address the causes and effects that would lead to describing the success of the subject at hand. This is an important aspect that Lawrence-Lightfoot describes about
portraiture; portraiture seeks to “capture the origins and expressions of goodness,” (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9) and can work to document the subject’s definition of that goodness. This is achieved through the “painting” of the subject through narratives that utilize metaphor, symbolism, and through a voice that can communicate with a broader audience, one that extends beyond the academy and can speak in a language that is not coded or exclusive (p. 10). The narrative-style of portraiture is a key aspect of its use as a research method. Namely, it allows the researcher to tell stories through which themes can be derived and connected to a much wider audience, or one that extends beyond the subject of study. Further, it brings forth an aesthetic challenge to traditional modalities, breathing life into its expression so that it reflects the method of a novelist, one in which any reader can experience familiarity with the text.

The choice to utilize portraiture as a method has undertaken much deliberation. While ethnography can demonstrate a much similar purpose and product, it is the truly the ability to “paint the picture” for the audience that draws me to portraiture as method. The details, descriptions, imagery, voice, and attitudes can provide much richer context to the experiences that I wish to highlight. One of the key features of portraiture is that the portraitist is strategic in conveying the emphasis of the work and creative in the rhythm of the narrative. Moreover, “what gets left out is often as important as what gets included” (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 12). It is the task of the portraitist to highlight the tone and tempo of the stories being depicted; gaps will occur naturally and are used as a mechanism by which the reader is called upon to fill. This only becomes speculation, or inference on the part of the reader, but by intentionally doing so, the relationship between
reader and writer is reinforced. As a creative writer of both fiction and non-fiction, I have experimented with the way in which I can pull along readers with description, action, or metaphor. I am mindful of the moments that I do not wish to be explicit, hoping the reader can find their own interpretations of the text without giving too much away. This may be counterintuitive to writing a dissertation, in which the purpose is to explicitly state what has happened and why. However, we can return, again, to Lyotard (1984) as a counterargument; his belief is that the narrative strengthens an argument through its constant desire to be reexamined, especially over time, a goal of philosophers and novelists alike. One of the most telling characteristics of the portraitists versus the ethnographer is that of the goal of telling the story. “Ethnographers listen to a story while portraitists listen for a story” (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 13). As I have started to write pieces of the narratives included in this dissertation, I have not sought to develop any coherent or concrete chronology. Experiences relayed are reflective of moments of both past and present, the constant negotiation of who I was, who I was looking for, and who I want to be. In using myself as the sample for my work I have entered in a new realm of portraiture, the self-portrait. Is is the telling of my own stories through subjective and objective analysis through which I hope to illustrate the aesthetic and importance of human experience. Most importantly, as Lawrence-Lightfoot denotes, the context is monumentally important (p. 11). The portraitist provides the context through which the narratives should be examined. To abandon the context of being a Vietnam War adoptee would dismiss a crucial portion of my identity and the implication of its impact on my experience. The context of my personal history matters. Finally, the portraits provided,
especially with respect to being a researcher, means that each narrative must be negotiated as an ongoing part of reconciliation between process and final product (p. 34). The portraitist must inherently be part of the method in order to capture the subject. In this case, the portraitist is the subject, giving the researcher heightened privilege. The challenge, then, is to unearth what I do not already know, looking for themes that emerge and self-coding narratives without being in the way of my own process. In the end, it will be necessary for me not just to use my voice but to listen for my story and in the end, find the goodness that only the subject can provide.

**Data Collection**

*Before daylight slips under the crack in the door, before I hear the neighbor’s engine gunning to life in the quiet of the early morning, I rise. My feet are always too cold, and I point and flex them to move the blood towards the toes. I find my way through the darkness to grab my robe, stepping gingerly over the sleeping dog, and past a snoring spouse. I make my way downstairs, turning off hall lights left on to keep childhood fears at bay and find my laptop waiting on the desk. This is the time I write, when life is suspended in the chilliness of the early hours and no one is up but me. This is when I capture memories of past and present, pushing them through space and time without the urgency of work, children, and pets to claim my attention. I use my computer to hold the stories of a lost mother, an abandoned daughter, an angry teenager, a frustrated educator. I have been doing this since I realized words would come swifter through keystrokes published on a green screen, when my father brought back the latest iteration of Digital’s computers, and I learned how to hook up a telephone modem by*
listening to its lonesome pings. I was only five or six then. Ever since, the stories I write have been saved, now suspended in a cloud that is as ephemeral as it seems. If only it knew the secrets it held, words hovering in its virtual fog and no longer spinning through disks made obsolete. I write of experiences made possible because of my adoption from Vietnam, my life depicted wandering beside irrigation ditches in New Mexico, through school doors made for my freedom and my captivity, traveling through foreign countries meant to show me the way home. I write of being lost and found, baggage still clinging to me like a lock without a key. I tell stories of students, stranded in a system perpetuating their failures rather than their success, and the plight of teachers too worn and weary to keep fighting. I write the stories of my life, forty-two years of moving through the process of reconciliation if only to pass it on to my children. I write for them, so they know who I might have been, who I am, who I have taught them to be, and why.

Why Me.

I haven’t written in awhile. Most of my well-intentioned musings are stored in opaque jars on a shelf called, “I’ll get to it someday.” Occasionally, I’ll get one down, turning the dusty jar with tired hands, opening the lid and examining the contents as if it were a spice I could still use for cooking. Some have expired. Even if I were to extract the contents, the meaning is long gone, trapped within the recesses of my memory—forever. It is complicated being a writer. My thoughts start to build into entire essays when all I want to do is put down the right sentence before the turn of phrase eludes me. I miss the words. Spun just right, I am a weaver of silk that can touch the senses with delicate thread and soft colors. You will remember me in the lasting impression of
lightness and texture you cannot explain. It is a gift and one that I am grateful for, if only
for a place to rest my tumbled thoughts, the pillow that cradles my head crisp and white
underneath the boldness of black Arial font. I recently decided to open a jar, shaking
lose the fragments of another time, working to piece them together in the present.

This one is called, “Why me.” It is not a question. It is an understanding of how I
was allowed to live rather than the alternative. What that means is only speculation but
with a deep certainty that while some of us got that chance, others still had to die. Not
everyone could survive, history tells us that. Why not me. It is not a question. It is a
lesson in providence, if you believe in that sort of thing. I do. But sometimes I forget,
until it lays a soft hand on my shoulder, and I have to look back. I am an orphan of war.
That is not a question. It is an answer. I used to ask other questions but they only echoed
quietly off of high canyon walls, resounding uselessly, unanswered and unattended. Then
I started to listen—to the stories of history and the multitude of voices that rose above the
slow hum of my soul, allowing me some peace. Not quiet. Nowadays, I do not need to
know the whole story. Part of it is fiction anyway. The truth is told in the small hands
that are placed in mine until they learn to let go, becoming a part of time and change.
They tell me my story and I tell them theirs. I give them history. They can’t write it down
just yet but that’s ok. I have been storing jars. I teach them about respect, compassion,
the importance of “give” and the limitations of “take.” They see the world through
wondrous brown eyes and ask a never-ending stream of questions, their miniature souls
buzzing alongside mine. It is that simple. That is providence. They don’t care about
Vietnam. They care about their mother. Why. Me.
Data Analysis

Analysis of data is largely based upon categorizing patterns or themes emerging from the narratives, predominately through discovery, an inductive process (Creswell, 2013; Schutt, 2012). Most of the narratives included have not been generated with the end in mind. Rather, the end (as well as the framework) is shaped by the stories themselves. By reading the narratives in isolation and annotating each for themes or contextual relationships, I can place them strategically and move them within the dissertation to reinforce the argument. This is by far the most complicated exercise because it employs the use of reason as a researcher versus my sentimentality as a writer. I have cut entire blocks of narrative out of the work in order to best meet the needs of the academic goal and therefore, sacrifice what I might consider “creative writing” for the sake of “academic writing.” Second, the biggest threat to the data being valid is, as Lyotard (1984) denotes, the legitimation of narrative and its associated paralogy (p. 61), which means careful consideration of the myriad of “Subjective I’s” (Peshkin, 1988) present in the work as well as in researcher analysis. By and large, the data being produced (narratives) is often an extension of previous analysis, whereupon reflecting and annotating one narrative has led to the creation of another associative or relevant writing. Therefore, the data analysis process throughout this entire dissertation is ongoing; each chapter or portion becomes a series of texts based upon contiguity (Maxwell, 2013). Likewise, the process of deconstruction is another essential element of data analysis. Here, coding becomes a method of organizing data in such a way that breaking it up (not putting narratives altogether) lends itself to the theoretical concept at
work: poststructuralism. Maxwell considers this a theoretical category of the coding process, where data is placed in “a more general or abstract framework” (Maxwell, 2013, Chapter 5, Section 6, para. 15). Ultimately, continual re-reading of the narratives and ongoing negotiation of their placement within the whole text is critical to developing emic and etic understanding of the data as both subject and researcher.

**Considerations**

**Ethical Consideration**

The primary consideration for the protection of others in my research is to understand that personal narratives may also implicate others within my experiences. While I may not name anyone overtly, a narrative in which I refer to a student, colleague or workplace, even generally, means that I must take their feelings into account and recognize that they may or may not feel comfortable being part of the sharing process. As a result, the best practice for preserving the rights and feelings of others in my personal narratives would be to gain permission from those who may be part of those specific experiences to order to utilize them in the study. Additionally, for anyone that could be recognized in a narrative, allowing him or her to read the piece or the analysis beforehand could ensure his or her comfort level with its inclusion in the research.

**Bias**

The natural bias existent in this research would most likely come from the subjective nature of the personal narrative. As both researcher and subject, barriers in fully recognizing the issues that are relevant and meaningful in the study or avoiding a topic altogether could prevent the researcher from accurately depicting an objective
analysis. Censoring the work or selections would also create bias where I might pick and choose which selections would lead to my theories or assumptions rather than evaluate the elements for underlying themes or ideas that I may have not initially recognized. Overall, biased reporting may be the most common obstacle to overcome, eliciting the need for a strong committee to help guide the research towards a more objective result and the need for the writer to be open to the myriad of discoveries that might unfold throughout the narration rather than be married to any one or more foundational hypotheses.

Assumptions

The primary suppositions that are revealed in this type of qualitative research would be an intersection of ontological and axiological assumptions (Maxwell, 2013). For ontological, the realities or “truths” that are disclosed may only be applicable to the researcher or writer and therefore, would not be a truly applicable reality for anyone outside the phenomena being examined. From an axiological perspective, the beliefs of the researcher are exposed due the personal nature of self-portraiture. The investment is not just in the study but also in oneself, giving the values of the researcher heightened privilege. Less significantly may be methodological assumption, given the importance of the experiences of the researcher over time. Self-portraiture as a qualitative method discloses the importance of the researcher to take moments to recognize where assumptions and meaning are being shaped more by the researcher than by the narratives influencing the research.
Limitations

Self-portraiture as method has many limitations, especially in its literary style and form of reporting. However, there can be meaningful conclusions to be drawn by utilizing this research design to reveal broader themes about a population or what issues can be addressed with respect to identity, adoption, and education. What is most important to study is the way in which life experience and history has informed the way I have navigated the complexities of the American educational system and as a result, diverged from the norm as a response through poststructural philosophy. Even so, the approach of the study imposes restrictions in reporting, primarily through researcher bias. Credibility, however, while oftentimes an issue that portraitists face, should not be an issue in this study. The personal reflections are extensions of the subject’s experiences and therefore not being told as a “second-hand story” rather than a first person perspective.

Intended Outcomes

Like most research studies, this project is just the beginning. Given the free form nature of using self-portraiture, I expect that several tangents may arise that did not target the initial objectives outlined in my research questions. The evaluation of the research is based upon realities that are constructed and shaped by individual experiences. Those experiences become the foundation with which to interpret and analyze much vaster concepts in learning theory and how lived experience informs our ways of knowing and ultimately how we navigate our present experience, especially with respect to identity formation. Through this study, I hope to establish a relationship between story and
experience with focus on constructions of identity, the effect of adoption, and its implication in shaping who I am as a student and teacher.
Chapter Three: Mind the Gap

Moving Towards Beyond

In the distance I hear the call and response of students in drill practice, the call from the cadre leader echoing between brick buildings as his small drill team unit responds to the commands with abrupt changes of rifle positioning. Slaps of rigid palms against the rifle stocks sound off in unison. Measured steps are discernible as the formation changes direction, their pace quickening beneath the rays of the hot sun. I lean over the side of a newly-painted rail, glancing back into my dormitory room, its newness still reminiscent of the previous year’s renovations and smelling of industrial cleaner commonplace in military installations. It is coming to the end of RAT (Recruit-at-Training) week, and we have been dismissed for the next two hours to get our belongings sorted out. My belongings are already stowed. Red, white, and black clothing is folded neatly and square in the designated drawers. T-shirts, folded into 6-inch-widths, occupy the space next to shorts, also not to exceed a width of six-inches when properly folded. Socks are paired and lay just to the left, three inches from my underwear and bras, also folded, the standard width measured with a dollar bill.

Taking a break from the order of things, I take some time to enjoy the view of the expanse of green lawn, a half-acre of grass mowed neatly and trimmed perfectly at the edges of the concrete. I imagine the landscaping is meticulously cared for, the blades of the mower set to the right level in order to achieve the near-perfect carpet of grass.
edging up to and alongside the sidewalks of the dormitory buildings. Walking on the
grass, of course, is forbidden. Walking to and from buildings is a regulated activity on
each sidewalk; corners are turned with the correct turn of face and arms and legs move
in the appropriate stride. Even in our informal shorts and t-shirts, we adhere to the
strictness of the military institute, its standard operating procedures a requirement for all
activities governed by the school. It is not something I am unfamiliar with, having just
spent six weeks of the summer in Army ROTC basic camp long after Bill Murray filmed
“Stripes” on the Kentucky base and farcical “Yes Sir’s” became as famous in Ft. Knox
as its store of gold. I have learned how to fold and organize my gear; keeping my bed
tucked tight, hospital corners perfect and pleated in 45-degree angles. I need few
reminders on what it means to follow commands and have already memorized most of the
cadet handbook, much to the joy of my cadre leader, a sixteen-year-old high school junior
with a mop of hair not commonplace in the military. He has enjoyed running his small
squad of eight and despite being three years younger, he still has more rank than me.
Originally from California, he started attending the military academy when he was just a
freshman in high school; he has three years on me. Nonetheless, he is quick to realize
that age and rank are not synonymous and knows that those of us who just returned from
basic training have a semblance of knowledge about life in the military. Besides, he
knows I can recite the nomenclature of an M-16 by heart, something he has asked of me
in front of a host of higher-ranking leaders to make himself look good. I like him
immediately.
In this new space, I feel as far away from home as I did in Ft. Knox. I am surrounded by walls that shelter the school from public view, its routines hidden and obstructed by the length of green lawn that divides the city from the school. I think about where I started college, its lawns a welcome invitation for students to walk upon, mingle with one another, and where Frisbees were tossed to and fro even late into the fall. The campus lawns became constant nesting grounds for students engaged in their studies, where fine blades of grass tickled bare skin and students’ fingers absently pulled up handfuls while listening to their companions. The lawn was a place to escape the rigidity of brick buildings, a space of freedom and play that allowed students to stand at ease from the structure of the classroom. At the military institute, standing at ease is only allowed upon command. I take in the lawn one last time and return to my room.

Five minutes later a college-sophomore cadre leader arrives on the second floor. We hurry to our posts beside our bed, stand at modified attention, and wait for his arrival. When he arrives he stands formally in the open doorway; he asks me and my roommate if we have our room ready to go. We nod affirmatively.

“We have two hours of mandatory study starting at fifteen hundred,” he says.

“Sir,” I say, “We have not started classes.”

“I know,” he says, “just study the handbook until the time is up. When school starts, you will most likely have other work to do. But, you will need to stay in your room for the next two hours.”

“We cannot go outside the room at all?” I ask.

“No, cadet,” he replies, “you are to stay in the room for the entire study hall.”
I look past his shoulder and take a glimpse outside, the lawn stretching out in a field of vivid green. I have the urge to slide past his slim frame, making my way down the metal staircase to the perfectly-manicured lawn. I picture myself sliding out of standard-issue tennis shoes and socks to feel the rigid blades of grass prick the soles of my feet as I walk in lazy patterns on the lawn. I resist the urge to sprint out the door, abandoning standards of conformity for the sake of freewill. He nods a gesture of dismissal and makes his way to the next room. The door remains open and I stare out from inside the room, the doorframe serving to shape the limits of my life in this new school.

“What’s wrong,” my roommate asks as she makes her way to her desk for her handbook.

I shrug and grab my handbook to study, despite having memorized most of its contents already. I hoist myself up onto the bed, careful no to wrinkle the taut, wool blanket. I can see the lawn. It beckons me. I consider the future. I look around the clean, sterile space of my dorm room. I let go. A decision is made; I will start packing my things tomorrow and prepare for departure. I stand at ease, for the first time in a long while, upon my own command.

Where the Sidewalk Ends

In 1971, Shel Silverstein compiled his first collection of poems in Where the Sidewalk Ends. The cover’s illustration wraps around the binding, showcasing a background that depicts a congested city full of high-rise buildings. In the foreground are two children and a dog. The two children are leaning up and over the end of the sidewalk, its asphalt cracking underneath their weight and about to give way. The dog,
just behind them, is scrambling up, hanging precariously over the edge after a slip and trying to re-establish its footing. There is a wooden sign behind them proclaiming, “EDGE KEEP OFF!”, its pointy end driven through the sidewalk to indicate the growing thinness of the advancing edge. The boy in front, looking down over the end of the sidewalk, has wide eyes; his fingers grip the edge as flakes of dirt fall to an endless space below. The girl behind is frowning and worried. Nonetheless, they have ignored the warning sign and have ventured as far out onto the fragile ledge as possible with the intent to explore the limitless space beyond.

In the poem of the same title, Silverstein describes the boundaries of a space that is defined by the cityscape, where “asphalt flowers grow” (Silverstein, 2004, p. 64) and juxtaposes that against the place beyond, where “the moon-bird rests from its flight // To cool in the peppermint wind” (Silverstein, 2004, p. 64). He utilizes children as a catalyst to move towards the exploration of this space, their understanding of dark, polluted streets left behind in favor of grass that “grows soft and white” and a sun that “burns crimson gold” (Silverstein, 2004, p. 64). The use of imagery to capture the vast differences between the two spaces incites in the reader the understanding that while the open space beyond the city is sought by the children, it cannot be accessed without the danger of moving past the “chalk-white arrows” that they have routinely been following, where their steps are “measured and slow” (Silverstein, 2004, p. 64) until they make their way to the place where the sidewalk ends. Analysis of the poem and its illustration indicates a moment of shifting paradigms where the children are abandoning the structures at force in their everyday existence and taking a leap of faith towards the
exploration of something more. As a whole, Silverstein has captured the joy of possibility and the freedom that openness can provide in a sixteen-line poem that showcases what is and what could be.

Five years before the publication of Silverstein’s book of poetry, Jacques Derrida gave a lecture to John Hopkins University in a conference entitled “The Language of Criticism and the Science of Man” (Macksey & Donato, 2007). This conference, aimed at the discourse of structuralism and its cross-disciplinary problems (p. 22), brought together notable French thinkers to lecture upon the issue during the four-day conference. Derrida’s piece, “La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discourse de sciences humaines” was then published in his book, Writing and Difference, in 1967 and later translated and published in English as “Structure, Sign and Play” (Derrida, 1978). Derrida’s work sought to describe the complexity of structures and their binding forces, indicating that in order to acknowledge a sense of structure one would necessarily have to privilege a foundation that has an overt center or fixed origin (p. 278), which because of its basis of organization and the need to establish the foundation, it limits the notion of “play” (Derrida, 1978, p. 279) or without a centralized reference. This, in turn, created problems for discussing and critiquing the social sciences adequately because it would mean that only one locus of epistemology would therefore, exist. As a result, Derrida postulated a relocation of center, as it were, through an “event” or “rupture” in which a surrogate is borne that does not attach itself to anything that has pre-existed it, transcending the center by becoming a replication based upon its difference (p. 280). However, this free agent cannot merely exist in a sphere of discourse without having something to refer to, a
structuralist notion known as the “signified” (Saussure, 1986). The signified is reflected in a signifier or “sign” as Derrida refers to it, which is a signifier different from its signified (Derrida, 1978, p. 281). The sign is independently understood but within the context of the signified.

If we return to Silverstein’s illustration, we understand the theoretical structure at work in the picture. The center of understanding is located in the city and in its sidewalks. The children have moved slowly within its limits and are searching for an alternate space, a place of freedom and possibility where nothing is fixed. They are looking for Derrida’s *play*, a poststructuralist notion that suggests that where the sidewalk ends is a universe of radical uncertainty (Barry, 1995; Williams, 2005). They have seen the sign. The sign warns them to stay close to the signified and not move past its edge. They do so anyway. They peer down and out into an abyss of nothingness, an apt metaphor for what exists beyond the structure. The foundation upon which they are situated is starting to crack, a small fissure giving way under the pressure of unexamined weight. They may fall, at any moment, into that open space. Nonetheless, they are there, navigating the absence of form and universal truth. It is scary and enlightening all at once. This is where education needs to go—past the “chalk-white arrows” and towards a “crimson sun” (Silverstein, 2004, p. 64). The overt structures that sustain education need to be opposed in light of the multiplicity of signs informed by the experiences of those who will lend their voices to its discourse: the students. Universal truth in education, especially with regard to standardizing students, curriculum, and instruction, needs to be rejected in favor of a growing epistemology based not upon what *is* but what *could be.*
Lastly, the notion of *play* should be viewed as an act of liberation for those whose otherness leave them on the margins of a structure that privileges a foundation and its center of which they are not a part. In the following, I will address the importance of these components through a review of the literature, which includes attention to the impact of standardization in education, the politics of identity that can inform marginalization, and the analysis of an ever-changing field of knowledge contingent upon an individual’s opportunity to achieve enlightenment. In the end, I will describe a gap that exists in the literature that emphasizes the need to focus on student experience being paramount to accommodating for difference in an effort to move beyond the sidewalk and give rise to educational free *play*.

**Marginalized Spaces**

*In the long halls of the high school, students linger under stairwells, tuck into oddly shaped corners of the building, and seek refuge amongst the dust that the nighttime cleaning crew forgets. They’re used to those spaces: places they can render themselves obscure and out of sight. They are not alone, however; they have friends. They gather together like small mushrooms on wooden benches and talk about their outside interests and movies they plan to see. They love music, using their large headphones as extra buffer from the noise outside, their stereo accessories mimicking the 1958 Koss SP-3s of long ago, branded with a new name like “Skullcandy” or “Beats by Dr. Dre.” Kids shuffle down halls with hoodies so large they can hide their androgyny although some have already made the transformation: girls to guys, guys to girls, and a few in between. Cloaks of invisibility unavailable to them, they find the closest thing when they step into*
the classroom: a desk in the back of the room. They hope that their teacher will not see them. But, I do. I also see the students that got lost in translation some five years ago when they crossed international borders and made their way to the United States. I see the students whose tongues have been tied over words that are only second string in their lives, where pages blur in the slow pace of read-translate-read-translate and the clock keeps ticking and fifty more bubbles need filling. They, too, look for the desks in the back of the room. The chasm grows.

The Narrative of Us and Them

The story of a nation is one of immense interest and importance within education. Stories such as these are often characterized by themes of hardship, instability, danger, dissension, and emancipation. Much of the time, the establishment of a strong and stable nation is plagued with an uncertain past; it comes as a result of a population whose we majority is looking to establish power and dominance apart from an oppressor—as an entity that will constitute itself in its own right. It must do so by instituting its own systems of power and dominance at the expense of others, switching roles from oppressed to oppressor in order to secure the benefit of that independence. The nation stories that are told worldwide are often coupled with the unrest of war and strife, demonstrating that in order to secure complete autonomy from an oppressor, great sacrifices must be made on the part of the population as a whole. If this majority group is successful in the establishment of a sovereign nation, they will enjoy a privileged position and will be able to dictate the norms and rules by which they are then governed. More often than not, this will come at the expense of other groups’ privilege, diminishing their
capacity to have a voice in the shaping of the nation. The framing of America as its own entity apart from England is an apt example of this nation story and its long-lasting effects; while it certainly favored a majority population with the privilege, the power, and the freedom it hoped to ascertain, it did so at the expense of other populations who still struggle, to this day, from their exclusion. As a result, the telling of the American story is one in which the narrator enjoys a controlled position. The narrator can tell the story because they know the story—it has come to them through access to the original writers or storytellers as either written or oral histories of the past. However, to tell the story, especially from the perspective of one who enjoys the privileges of the majority, means that when the story is re-told, the voice of the other can often become lost either intentionally or unintentionally. The story of America is re-told in our classrooms every day. As teachers, we daily reenact the sentiments of the privileged through our curriculum, our methods of instruction, and our testing mechanisms. We sustain the master narrative in the mundane and specific tasks we ask our students to perform with little attention paid to how some of these tasks continue to minimize the presence of some of our students. Lyotard (1989) discusses this concept in “Universal History and Cultural Differences” in which he tries to approach the topic through the lens of modernity. He suggests that an attitude of modernity would prescribe a rewrite or renewal of universal history which could lend itself to a more inclusive history of humanity. However, some of the great problems in the scope of universal story-telling is that the pronoun, “we,” as in “we the people,” most certainly does not mean “we” as one might think of it as all-encompassing. Universal history, according to Lyotard, has proven that the “we” always
excludes a “them.” As a result, when we uphold the master narrative within our classrooms, we are given the authority to sustain that we at the expense of the them. Lyotard writes, “Narrative is authority itself. It authorizes an unbreakable we, outside of which there can only be they” (Lyotard, 1989). The they are the students whose voices were left out of the privileged history and as a result, find themselves on the outskirts of a narrative that delegitimizes their own contribution. Our nation story, the story of America, is fundamentally exclusionary. Today, while some of us work to bolster the voices of the they and diminish the effects of the master narrative (through an attitude of postmodernity), it is not without recognizing that the perspective of cultural difference (Bhabha, 1994; Lyotard, 1989) that sustains it cannot be easily undone. “Narrative and the cultural politics of difference become the closed circle of interpretation. The Other loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse” (Bhabha, 1994). While we desire to minimize these cultural divides within our classrooms, little can be done if the nation story is still being told as the singular voice or without being reflective of whose voice has lost its power. Bhabha discusses this idea in length through his emphasis on cultural difference.

“The concept of cultural difference focuses on the problem of the ambivalence of cultural authority: the attempt to dominate in the name of a cultural supremacy which is itself produced only in the moment of differentiation” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 50-51). Because our nation story was shaped by cultural supremacy, those who exist within that moment of differentiation can do little to re-write or re-tell the story to their benefit. As a result, that chasm, which is often attributed in education to an achievement or equity gap, is truly a
signification of our nation’s incapacity to release that cultural authority and discard the process and practice of furthering cultural difference. To that end, many of our students, used to being absent in the space of education, find alternate spaces to dwell where the signifier no longer exists as the master storyteller whose only resolve is to narrate the lives of the signified.

**Selling Philosophy**

_The market is open early. We make our way to the main entrance, one of four, and prepare ourselves for what lay on the other side. As we step through the open doorway, the light is instantly diffused; solitary bulbs are strung up every few feet and run the length of the long corridors which mark four exterior halls. Each hall, in turn, leads to the market interior; a bustle of activity where goods for sale are stacked sky-high by vendors trying to outbid one another. We follow the string of electric cables, our eyes adjusting to the dimness of the market as we take in the multiple tables of embroidered cotton, walls of silk áo dàis, displays of lacquerware bowls, and jewelry boxes depicting traditional scenes of Vietnamese culture: the boy on the back of the water buffalo, three women playing traditional instruments, the one pillar pagoda rising up from the lake that surrounds it. I pick up a large serving platter; the black, glossy finish is juxtaposed against shades of brown which compose the images that emerge from the surface. Like most of the goods for sale, the work is made by hand; hours are spent capturing elements of Vietnamese life in embroidery thread on a tablecloth or in slivers of fine wood sealed with thick layers of polyurethane on a serving tray. I turn the piece over to look for a price. A small white sticker with a number two that looks like a cursive Q is followed by_
zero. Twenty dollars. No longer are the amounts written in Vietnamese đồng; years of market capitalism has taken hold of the tourist industry, and nowadays, the U.S. dollar is the most common form of currency exchange. The prices have gone up, too. Fifteen years prior, I would have been able to purchase the same platter for a mere five dollars, and if I were adept at haggling, perhaps could take it home for three. At the end of the day, two. Still, twenty dollars is a remarkable deal for handmade artwork, despite being mass produced at whose cost I don’t wish to consider. In the United States, the mark up would be much greater, and it is far easier to disregard the source of the product’s labor when displayed on a glass shelf next to like-items in an upscale imports store. Even so, I know there’s still room to bargain. After all, the same platter is displayed on a table a couple of vendors down. Whoever negotiates the best price gets the sale. In Vietnam, putting extra food on the table means capitalizing on the weariness of shoppers too tired to bargain or those who don’t know any better. But most of the vendors’ days are spent with tourists that squabble over a few dollars until the vendor gives in, upon which the tourist, feeling pleased with their adroit negotiations, makes their way out of the market and back to their five-star hotel. There is an inherent Marxist structure existent in local markets and Bến Thành is no exception.

Once we have walked along three exterior halls, we decide to make the leap into entering the belly of the whale: the interior market. As we enter, the market becomes a maze of vendors. Stalls upon stalls with goods stacked twelve-feet-high line tightly-crammed aisles. The market doesn’t just cater to tourists but locals as well. Bright blue, red, and yellow washing bins and cheap housewares are sold alongside thin, cotton
shirts, screen-prints of the Asian version of Tin-Tin carrying the Vietnamese flag, or other Vietnamese-themed shirts available to tourists for three-to-five-dollars a piece. Anything that someone might need can be purchased within the confines of the market, but navigating its interior can become claustrophobic as walls of cotton and silk threaten to topple down upon anyone not careful. Oftentimes, sliding through a row sideways is the only way to go. The strong odor of raw fish and Asian spices accompanies our journey through the stalls. At one end of the interior is an open food market which sells a variety of meat, vegetables, fruits, spices, and other uncommon U.S. food items such as snails and eels, the latter writhing about in wash tubs placed on the ground. As Ho Chi Minh City has grown and expanded, so has its famous market. The hustle and bustle of commerce is constant, with shops staying open late into the evening hours for any tourists wanting to gather last-minute souvenirs that they can purchase much cheaper than they can at the airport. Being in the market is a grind; it is a steady flow of customers moving in and out of its aisles, halls, and doors. Nonetheless, it’s a must-do when visiting Ho Chi Minh City, and since it’s our last day in the country and our final chance to pick up a couple of souvenirs, it’s worth the trip.

As we round the corner, we come upon a stall selling bags, in particular large and small backpacks in assorted Gore-Tex fabric and colors. The embroidered label shows the distinct rainbow arch of “The North Face.”

“They sell North Face?” my companion asks.

I shrug. “Sort of.”
“Sort of? These are nice backpacks. They’re not really North Face?” she asks, examining the quality by tracing her finger along the seam of a small daypack.

“Well, the factory could be here or they might be slight rejects from the factory. Or, they’re just a reproduction of the North Face brand.” I say, eyeing a turquoise messenger bag that would fit my laptop nicely.

“They don’t look any different,” she says and tries on the pack she’s holding, sliding it on to her slim frame. “I like this one,” she says and turns to the side to see the fit.

“That one is nice,” I say agreeing with her choice. “How much is it?”

She slides the pack from her right arm and swings it around to look for a price.

“Looks like twenty-five dollars,” she says. “Twenty-five?! That’s cheap!”

I shrug again. “You could probably get it for twenty or even fifteen if you negotiate.” I point to the stall behind me and to the right. “They have some, too.”

She swings her head around and peers down the aisle.

“I can’t believe they have these here,” she says. “They’re really cool-looking. I could buy one for my brother. He would never know it’s a knock off.”

“It might not be,” I say, “that’s the point.”

“What do you mean?” she asks, pointing to a black overnight pack that she wants the vendor to get down from the wall. “How do you know for certain?”

“Ultimately, there is no difference. There’s just the perception of difference based upon a price tag that gives one more value than the other. Of course, the materials might be slightly different but even then you could debate the value of the materials in terms of
their worth. Do you think your brother will know this may not be a North Face bag? It says ‘North Face’ doesn’t it?”

“My brother wouldn’t care anyway,” she states and tries on the larger pack.

“Exactly,” I say and nod approvingly at her choice. “He doesn’t care because he doesn’t need or want to care about those differences. He comes from a position that is fine with either and approves of both. It’s like the women who buy Marc Jacobs handbags on the streets of New York. Some women may buy them to highlight the difference while others are satisfied that there is no difference and buy them anyway. Beauty, after all, is in the eye of the beholder.”

“Most of the time you can tell those are different,” she says and starts unzipping pockets to check the zippers.

“Can you? Of course, that’s also the point. They’re not trying to be made of the same material or structure. There will be differences. But the replication is ultimately the same. It’s a purse. It looks like a purse, and it is a purse but not the same understanding of the original purse. It’s like Plato’s ‘Allegory of the Cave.’ The original is casting the shadow but some people can only see the shadow in the position that they’re in. For the time being, the shadow does not diminish the object for what it is or at least what they understand it to be.”

“Isn’t the original better, though?” she inquires, putting her two backpacks side by side to make a choice.

“Perhaps,” I state, throwing the turquoise messenger over my shoulder to try it out. “But who gave the original its value to begin with? Who signified that the original
purse was the object worthy of study rather than the shadow? Who controls the source or original which casts the shadow? The same understanding was developed by seeing the shadow, so there is no difference in meaning. Is the understanding more important or the object?”

“For some, it’s definitely the object.” She puts the small pack on again and tugs at the straps. “This one fits better, but it’s a lot smaller than that one in terms of what I can put in it. My mother would never want a knock-off Marc Jacobs bag.”

“Do you think she would know if there were two bags to compare? How would she know?” I ask.

“Material, I would think,” she says, sliding off the smaller pack and trying out the bigger one again.

“Ok, but that may only be because she knows what the original looks like or more-to-the-point, feels like. But both materials still frame the same construction of a purse, correct? All it takes is a replicated label and basically it’s the same thing?”

“It’s still a purse, yes, but not a Marc Jacobs purse,” she says.

“Okay, but right now you are buying a North Face backpack. It says ‘North Face’, so doesn’t that make it a ‘North Face backpack’? One is bigger, one is smaller. One is black, one has pink highlights. Both serve the same purpose, ultimately. It’s a backpack. It says, ‘North Face.’ It has the same logo. What makes buying it here different than buying it back home for seventy dollars rather than fifteen? It could be that back home they’re outsourcing to Vietnam for all of their backpacks, and we’ve just met the original vendor. If these backpacks are now being made in Vietnam, well then
we’ve just stumbled upon the original and everything else is just the shadow back home. More importantly, you don’t even know there’s a difference until you see it from the perspective of the other side, the inside of the cave, if you will. Plato essentially used the allegory of the cave to describe epistemology. If you only exist within it or outside of the cave, you do not see what teaching or learning is taking place. Only when you navigate between one or the other do you get a chance to truly understand what we learn, how we are learning it, and who is controlling that learning. In the end, our understanding is only controlled by ourselves, the ability to recognize the original as well as the shadow yet still realizing it’s the same object reflected when we name it as such.”

“That’s a pretty weighty analogy. Where do you come up with this stuff?” she asks and starts to bargain with the saleswoman.

“It’s an art not a science,” I say.

“Plato?” she asks and lays the packs side by side once more.

“Rango,’” I reply, “from the movie.”

She looks at me quizzically.

“What?” I say, “It was a long flight. Kind of like this decision.”

“I know, I know,” she says. “I just can’t decide between the two.”

“Then get both,” I suggest.

She thinks for a moment and then a smile spreads across her face.

“You’re right,” she nods, “I’ll get both. They’re almost the same but not quite.”

“Right,” I say, “different style, same purpose.”
She pays thirty dollars for both packs, and we are free to go. We make our way through the maze of vendors before heading back out of the market and towards the natural light.

**Epistemology**

Education centers on two key components: what one is taught (information) and what one experiences. These two elements come together to create an apex of understanding that lends itself to knowledge. However, that knowledge cannot be borne without also believing in the validity of the information or accepting it as truth, so these elements likewise contribute to knowledge. What supports them all is justification, the act of showing something to be correct or incorrect based upon truth, information, or experience (Matheson, n.d.). This might be imagined as a three dimensional pyramid in which the four sides of the pyramid belonging to truth, belief, information, and experience are supported by justification as its base. The highpoint, then, is knowledge. How we acquire knowledge is thus dictated by the components we are exposed to and the source by which justification is provided. Sometimes, the justification comes from others (family, school, books, religion, government, social media). Other times, justification comes from ourselves. Either way, complete knowledge allows an individual to look down upon those four supporting elements and recognize that the knowledge they have gained is indeed justified. Most often, whole knowledge can only be acquired when the pyramid is completely intact and stable. Without the foundation of justification, everything would flatten in on itself, overlapping into conflicting pools of possibility or speculation. Once justification is achieved, the sides of knowledge can be built up and
placed on solid foundation. Questions that contribute to this notion might look like the following: Is this belief justified? Is this information justified? Is this experience justified? Is this truth justified? If the answers are undeniably, “Yes,” full knowledge can be extended for the recipient. If, however, any of the answers are, “No,” that knowledge is slightly less reliable and can be put up for additional discourse or testing to determine its validity. As an example, we might teach our children the concept of “hot” and instruct them not to touch a heated stove burner because it is “hot.” As a child of three, the word, “hot” is pushed into the space of “information” and it is justified by the parent (whose knowledge is justified by their experience). The child may not believe that a burner is “hot” (which is just another word) until the child also experiences the heat by touching the stove. If he or she wants to test the validity of the information (and belief) through the touching of a burner, he or she will contribute to their knowledge by justifying “hot” through experience and likewise justify their and their parent’s belief that indeed, “hot” means “hot” (insomuch as stove burners go). This will justify the truth that “hot” means what the parent has told the child and now, because they have four sides of the pyramid that supplies information, truth, experience, and belief supported by justification, they have a complete store of knowledge. They, in turn, can pass this knowledge on to others. They might turn to a sibling, point to the stove burner and say, “hot.” This now means something to the teaching child, but if the recipient of this information is younger, maybe only two, the word is only just another word until they gain their own experiential knowledge. The cycle is then repeated.
The study of knowledge, epistemology, becomes a philosophical quagmire because it relies so heavily upon the justification of belief and truth. As individuals, we are taught to believe in the information we are given as truth and have very little reason to question its validity. In Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” (Bloom, 1991) this philosophical issue is raised through the education of chained beings who cannot see the actual source of information and who believe only in the truth or information as it is being constructed for them. There is no reason to doubt the truth (or disbelieve it) because their forced positionality gives them no other insight. Glaucon responds, “How could they…if they had been compelled to keep their heads motionless throughout life” (Bloom, 1991, p. 194). The argument is that if one of these individuals is enlightened by the genuine source (the fire and not the shadow made by the fire), they will disbelieve that what they were taught or the information they received was only a sliver of the truth, a shadow cast by the source. This, Plato suggests, is because the truth is “blinding” and causes the individual to become distressed by what he has learned, a new reality that negates the old (p. 194). Once the individual becomes accustomed to the source then he can decipher his understanding of shadow and source and appreciate his education more fully, a contribution to knowledge that is reliant upon his freedom from forced instruction. If he returns to the cave and suggests to the others that he has new understanding or truth, the company of prisoners would likewise disbelieve it and consider him corrupted, having no other store of knowledge from which to draw their conclusions nor experience to justify the belief. If the individual remains within the cave, he or she will need to continually contest the constructed information, and would most
likely, prefer to return to the top, or outside of the cave, where his newfound education serves him more fully. Additionally, once the individual has resolved the discrepancies of information, truth, belief, and experience, he or she can move forward with the understanding that the soul or self is the instrument of learning, “just as an eye is not able to turn toward the light from the dark without the whole body” (Bloom, 1991, p. 197).

The epistemological argument, “What is knowledge,” has infiltrated the works of many an educator, scholar, and philosopher. Foucault’s (1972) work discusses the formation and construction of knowledge, which is an ongoing navigation of reflection between old and new. Similar to Plato, the discovery of new knowledge is depicted as an extension of what has come before it, with new information relying on shifts in understanding within society as well as for the individual. Foucault uses language to illustrate these changes, demonstrating that as statements are made (and accepted as truth) new statements can be developed that perpetuate the ongoing discourse about what is true and what is believed to be true. He describes this as a formation of concepts, wherein an advent of new knowledge must recognize a preexisting “field of presence” (Foucault, 1972, p. 61), which is an original statement that is recognized to be foundational for the purposes of discourse. However, the formation of concepts supposes that those foundations will inevitably be altered by differing concepts that will allow that field of presence to be simultaneously recognized and challenged. Foucault suggests that these alterations come as a result of a “system of dependence between what one learnt, what one saw, what one deduced, what one accepted as probable, and what one postulated” (Foucault, 1972, p. 60). Of course, this alteration system still arises from that
field of presence and does not delegitimize the original school of thought; it only offers new insight into the subject at hand, allowing for the manufacture of differences in statements. However, he is quick to note that an “enunciative field” also involves a “field of memory,” (Foucault, 1972, p. 61). This refers to those statements that can no longer hold any validity or any accuracy or truth to their pronouncements and thus, must be relegated to the discourse of “once was” rather than “what could be.” His most prominent example is depicted in the use of the word, “psychopathology” which becomes “madness,” a substitution of difference although the meaning still encompasses the same understanding (p. 43). As a result, statements must be rewritten to accommodate for these linguistic changes to signify the evolution of time, truth, and accuracy of information.

Foucault’s next step is to demonstrate how these statement changes apply to domains, becoming the praxis of reflection. Loosely summarized, this is Foucault’s attempt to define the history of ideas, which he communicates as follows:

Thus defined - but one can see at once how difficult it is to fix precise limits for it - the history of ideas is concerned with all that insidious thought, that whole interplay of representations that flow anonymously between men; in the interstices of the great discursive monuments, it reveals the crumbling soil on which they are based. (Foucault, 1972, p. 147)

Foucault recognizes the instability of ideas, using the metaphor of a crumbling foundation to show the progression of thought processes that cannot always rely upon what has come before it. For example, the shape of the world was ambiguous until new experiences (travel by sailors) and information (observations of the solar system) demonstrated otherwise. This new idea discarded previous belief and accepted truth,
which gave way to the insemination of new information. While most educated individuals never really believed the world to be flat, those who were not exposed to these founts of knowledge might have readily thought a landscape that was seemingly endless would not take on the shape of a curved earth. Even so, the archaeology of knowledge, as Foucault proposes, is not just about the genesis of new ideas conceived of old. Instead there is a deliberate divergence, an exteriority that gives the idea its own individuality, sometimes at the expense of preexisting discursive practices. Like Derrida (1978), Foucault implies that these ruptures or events become a new line or reasoning either with or without reference to the original. These deviations stimulate the beginning of an idea not limited to what has come before it but not entirely rootless either.

“Archaeology proceeds in the opposite direction: it seeks rather to untie all those knots that historians have patiently tied; it increases differences, blurs the lines of communication, and tries to make it more difficult to pass from one thing to another;…” (Foucault, 1972, p. 181). Archaeology is discontinuous; it fabricates new strands of meaning that extend from suggestions of the old without regard to chronology. From an epistemological standpoint, Foucault’s archaeology gives context to not just what we learn but how we internalize that learning to make it our own, using the Platonic soul to propagate truth within a continuum of ever-changing belief systems. It is not to enough to solely give credit to the ideas of others as a method of analysis but instead to see where discourse can drift away from analysis to invention or creation of difference within a grid of possibilities. It moves across fields and within them, not excluding information for the sake of foregone conclusions but to support the concept that the information given will
always be inconclusive. It describes a moment that reveals what will eventually be concealed.

There is a great amount of literature that discusses epistemology from varying angles and domains. It is the eye of the needle through which so many scholars try to send a thread of reasoning through. What is most important to reflect upon is not just the “new” versus the “old” but the significance of truth, belief, information, and experience that facilitates burgeoning knowledge. An analysis of Plato and Foucault clarifies one of many approaches to understanding how we build, store, and even develop new knowledge but their thoughts are likewise relegated to a space of reflection and called upon for a scholar to extrapolate and shape the given information to suit their purpose. It is useful to draw upon these arguments to establish a field of presence, yet it is equally important to recognize the role of the individual (as well as society) in giving information new context and meaning. The individual that can resolve a four-sided pyramid of knowledge by allowing themselves to be educated through information as well as experience will be open to new truth and belief systems. In turn, these facets of understanding will contribute to the ever-changing possibilities and significance of difference, quick to realize that a foundation that one stands upon may give way to something more substantial. As a result, the new may replace the old, at least until something else comes along to change that. Then, like many concepts, these elements will be transferred to the field of memory, a space where something an individual (or society) once believed to be true is not.
Desolation Canyon

The morning is quiet, save for the occasional crunch of gravel underfoot as an early riser heads towards the bathroom, the last designated restroom until we reach our destination 84 miles down river. It is 6 AM. While I hope to get another thirty minutes of sleep in before dawn fully breaks, I am always the first one up, looking to brew a fresh cup of coffee before a queue of students surrounds the breakfast table. The drill is always the same the first day, and as the sun starts to rise above the canyon wall at the Sand Wash campground, the whispers of the students start to float through camp. The zippers of sleeping bags catch on metal teeth and slide down in sharp scales. Like hopeful butterflies, twenty-four students gradually emerge from their nylon cocoons, high school hoodies with their assorted team sports or activities protecting them from the morning chill as they get ready to take on the Green River through Desolation Canyon. Most students have never rafted before, but they are equally eager to give it a try and embark on five days of rafting and camping between Sand Wash and Swasey’s Landing, our designated take out. The river is running just under 14,000 cfs, which is a nice flow due to the snow melt off. The first day the students are eager to get on the river, but the week’s adventures are always delayed by the prepping and packing of the four boats: three inflatable paddle rafts and one oar frame. The students are divided into teams of eight and assigned to one of the three paddle rafts and a captain, usually one of the school faculty members trained to take the students down river. I am one of the captains, trained four years ago during a request for faculty to help revive the junior rafting portion of the outdoor education program. I rafted before but never considered trying to
navigate nearly 100 miles down river with eight students, most inexperienced at best, until the all-call came in. Not to be deterred from the challenge, I signed up. I was trained by one of the original developers of the rafting program and have guided every year since. For the most part, the run is relatively easy; most of the time it is considered a float trip with the exception of a few Class III rapids now and again. Nonetheless, with the job of getting eight high school juniors downstream safely, I take my job seriously and recognize that the river is just as unpredictable as the wiliness of high school students five days away from home and in the middle of Utah.

The first day of my training, the veteran captains were surprised I never guided before. As soon as I settled into the captain’s spot, my demeanor instantly changed, and I took to the task as though I had been there a thousand times before. They did not know I spent ten years as a coach and six weeks in Army ROTC boot camp. For me, jumping into activities that require leadership, confidence, and a willingness to adapt to unforeseen circumstances is nothing to fear. It was also a surprise to everyone that I could use my voice loudly and clearly, and even at 5’3” and weighing in at 120 pounds, I had no problem taking on the navigation of a 16-foot raft loaded down with 2,000 pounds of weight. The assumption that being soft spoken won’t translate into strong leadership is erroneous. More importantly, the students need to have confidence in my skills and ability; hesitation doesn’t get the boat downriver.

As we collect our last minute things and place them on the raft, I gather my team of eight around me and size them up, talking to them about what to expect. Some of the students are athletes from the school while others have never camped (much less rafted)
a day in their life. The students are different heights, weights, and genders—more girls than boys. I decide to arrange them according to who I believe will be the best fit for each position, the stronger paddlers in the bow and stern, the middle for those who seem the weakest. I consider their weight and the need to distribute it equally so we’re not too heavy in one section or another. I also consider my own ability: my preference to use my guiding oar on the right rather than the left, the need to put a couple of stronger paddlers on the left side of the boat to help me correct faster in the rapids. As the students take their spots, I start teaching them the basics on the flat stretch of the river. They soon know the commands, and we start to practice.

“All forward,” I command.

The raft surges ahead as the students dig in, their paddles dipping into the cold, brown water as we begin to find our rhythm. I feel a lag on the left and switch one of the stronger paddlers from the middle right to the middle left. I see one of the boys up at the bow continually pulling his paddle back and shout his name to get his attention.

“Push and pull at the same time,” I say, showing him how to use his top hand to push the top of the paddle away from him. “Otherwise, you’ll get too tired, and you’ll never make it the next 83 miles.”

He makes the correction and the boat surges forward with new life. I watch the team as we move steadily downriver, keeping an eye out for any weaknesses, switching paddlers one more time. The girl I have selected to sit to my right and just in front of me is a good choice. She is a solid paddler and makes command changes quickly. Eventually, I will train her to take my place in the event I fall out on one of the bigger
rapids. But for now, I enjoy the steady flow of the river, the solitude of Desolation Canyon, and the sound of eight paddles moving through the water in near-unison.

Accommodation and Difference

There have been a few key essays that approach the notion of difference in poststructural philosophy as it relates to education. In “Repetition and Difference,” Deleuze (1994) describes the method of education that solicits of the student the replication of an activity that is not an identical match in response to that of the teacher who gives the instruction. He states, “We learn nothing from those who say: ‘Do as I do’. Our only teachers are those who tell us to ‘do with me’ and are able to emit signs to be developed in heterogeneity rather than propose gestures for us to reproduce” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 23). Certainly the expectation of difference is an integral component of poststructural education. There is an expectation that nothing will ever be the same despite the insistence that the Idea be replicated. What comprises that difference is a matter of both the teacher’s perspective and the student’s approach. A response may be replicated, but the method by which a student derives at the response will be ever-changing, never fixed, and different from any others who are similarly called upon to respond. At times, those differences are nearly indiscernible. However, to assume that they are altogether the same is to disregard the nature of human beings who are fundamentally different from one another and therefore, the Same will always be different.

The primary criticism in examining the work of poststructuralists is their circularity. Their remains a constant ambiguity in their philosophical approaches which
can be tiring for many attempting to make sense of the abstraction. Of course, this is the nature of poststructuralism: that is exists without concrete definition as though it is only utilized to showcase a portion of what is logical but contrasts that to what is arguable. Reform measures that are currently enacted in the public education system follow this circular method of reasoning. As teachers, we are assigned mandated curriculum and instruction that intends to prepare students for post-secondary college and workforce readiness, but it does so at the expense of their individuality by diminishing their capacity for authentic exploration and doling out corporatized learning mechanisms that are less about study and more about assessment (Pinar, 2005). Learning, as Pinar suggests, has given way to accountability measures that uphold “social engineering” (Pinar, 2005, p. 67), a way in which reform is continually revamped to give teachers “best practices” or methods that will somehow transform their classrooms into engaging learning pods of student achievement. As as result, our classrooms look more and more like reflections of group-think at the expense of students’ and teachers’ identities. Pinar grapples with this loss of identity and recognizes that our educational model is a classroom “conceived by others” (Pinar, 1992, p. 231). While Pinar shared this reflection some twenty years ago, we still walk away from our day-to-day lives as teachers and students with his question on our lips: “Whose am I?” (Pinar, 1992, p. 232). This is a real problem for educators who want to elicit student autonomy from their teaching methods and who recognize that those minor differences that each student brings to their learning are monumentally valuable to the educational outcomes of the student and the class as a whole. In today’s educational environment we are only held accountable for getting the boat downstream.
Little attention is paid to acknowledging the student and the teacher in those efforts or their progress along the way. As a result, we are bound, once again, to roles that exist only for the sake of performativity (Lyotard, 1984), in which “the best possible input/output equation” (p. 46) is repeatedly calculated in order to best satisfy the target objective or end goal. Managing students and teachers in this way ensures that the stakeholders can check-off evaluative boxes in their factory-assembled classrooms without regard to any real learning along the way, an economy-based model that outputs students for the sake of production or cultural capital. Issues of identity, politics, and experience will be ignored (Pinar, 1992) unless we create new spaces that look beyond corporate, structured models of education. This will allow teachers to recognize and respond to the varying truth of their students and their classrooms. After all, sometimes, no matter how much training the students have or how skilled they have become, they will fall out of the boat. The true assessment of a student’s learning will be evident in such a moment. They will recognize the environment they exist within (and their inability to control it), they will turn instruction into praxis, and they will find their way back. The teacher, in turn, will make sure to pick them up. This method of accommodation accounts not just for the varied learning trajectories of the students but for the unexpected moments when the reality of difference within the Same rises to the surface.
Chapter Four: Speaking from the Margin

Verisimilitude

I started telling stories early on. They were borne from fairytale fiction, mostly involving lost princesses. They did not necessarily have evil stepmothers or a life of hard labor, but they hung from tree branches by the crook of their knees, popped tar bubbles in the hot, New Mexican summers and wandered the ditches with a bologna sandwich at the ready, either to eat or to use as crawdad bait. The princesses in my stories did not live a life of unhappiness, just with the romantic notion that “lost” would become “found” and a castle would accompany a new ending with all mysteries solved and vague ideas of “where do you come from” laid at rest. This was my first experience with verisimilitude, the semblance of things that could be true but more than likely were not. Making up stories carried me from those early days of princesses lost to unknown mothers to much more elaborate tales of war where American soldiers rescued small children from tree hollows and placed them in the care of those who were capable of sending them abroad. They were stories that rose like the dust from the desert, organic and searching for a place to settle. They swirled around me like truth but invariably they were not. They were stories as fictional as the paperwork I arrived with but telling them grounded me in hope. I had to have a story to accompany the sadness of not knowing the truth and making ones up seemed like as good a start as any.
The first time I returned to Vietnam was in 1996. I was one of ten students studying abroad in a nation that had just recently opened its doors to the rest of the world, having been shuttered since 1975 and just beginning to trust that the countries outside would not engage it in hostile take over. It was still early, though, and life in Hanoi in 1996 was not what I pictured it would be. It was slow to change, suspicious of foreign occupation, and still bristling with animosity towards anyone that vaguely resembled an enemy. At the time, street corners were being policed with officers brandishing AK-47s and the streets were empty and quiet by 10:00 PM. *Cyclos*, still a common mode of transportation, were parked on the sidewalks, neatly turned and facing the diagonal in strict lines. Their drivers would settle down for the evening in the cramped seat, sleeping as best they could until dawn brought another day and a new chance to earn a living. Living in Vietnam was difficult for me in comparison to my student counterparts. I would not fully understand why until fourteen years later, when I learned that because the American war had spilled into the neighboring country of Cambodia, a conflict that continued for the Vietnamese until 1989, anyone boasting the skin tone and ethnicity of Khmer would be received with hostility, especially in the conservative capitol of Hanoi.

Even so, I had a couple of friends that were like me, also adoptees from the war, and returning to the country for the first time. At times, this bonded us together, but so early on in our lives, we could not articulate our stories of loss and sadness and did not know how to share in our search for answers. As comforting as it was to find another friend with the same story, the stories were never told, lost to the ache of being so close to truth and not knowing how to find it. Verisimilitude.
I have often thought about what story I want to leave my children when they are
grown. They should be able to pass down something more than what I have to offer,
which is only a portion of accurate information. But there is no family history beyond
my life on this earth that will help to answer questions of heredity or give them a multi-
gen-erational glimpse of past and future. On my side, it is just them and me. Telling my
story is hard, not because it is difficult for me to share but because it is difficult to choose
what to share. What is relevant to tell in one moment may not be useful in another, so the
whole picture looks and feels disjointed, like parts of a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle that
lies on a table unfinished. I used to collect jigsaw puzzles. I think I enjoyed the process
of putting them together, building something that would resemble a complete image and
feeling proud of the end-result. Nevertheless, every puzzle eventually gets broken back
down again, parts crumbling in on themselves only to be placed back in the cardboard
box and shelved in the closet or shoved under a bed—forgotten. You can always spend
time putting it back together again but the pattern of reassembly will always be different.
So it goes with telling stories.

As I work to discuss the implications of being a student in America as a post-
Vietnam War adoptee, I am working to rebuild the story and its relevance to the work. It
is not the entire picture, not the whole truth, which is a large part of understanding how I
have navigated through life. But like the building of the puzzle we must start
somewhere. I always started from the outside and worked my way in. It is from here that
I know where truth is most well-defined—in crisp, hard edges that snap together to form
the framework for the story. It is here from which I have lived most of my life as a student, speaking, of course, from the margin.

**In the Time Before I Knew You**

*In the time before I knew you, time ran slow, like rivulets of honey that slide through the rifts and valleys of a sopapilla, the bread served with most meals in the city I grew up in. It was here that I popped tar bubbles with my brother in the summer, the thick welts bubbling up from the surface where the repairmen had tried to fix cracks that had grown too long and spread like veins at the end of the cul-de-sac. The cul-de-sac was where I witnessed my oldest brother launching himself out of a moving van on a bicycle, pretending, I’m sure, to be Evel Knievel on a Mongoose. He didn’t wear a helmet. No one wore helmets then. And we crashed plenty. From that point forward, he was known by his family and friends as being fearless, extreme sports taken well beyond the end of a moving van to the rivers and mountains of Colorado even decades after Knievel’s famous last ride and my brother’s launch out of the Penske.*

*In the time before I knew you, we lived in an adobe house, the thick walls made of mud bricks that kept the house cool in the summer. Thick layers of stucco were spread out to fill the gaps between them until a solid wall encased them in a silent, white cocoon. I never knew they were in there until my dad had the idea to use the master bathroom as a remodeling project. He chipped the stucco away to expose the brick underneath, their rough ledges naked and exposed after so many years of being hidden. There was also the time we replaced the shower stall in another bathroom. The bricks behind were stacked just the same, but this time there was an animal’s skull wedged into one of the bricks, its*
canines snarling out through the baked mud, mad, perhaps, that it was frozen behind the shower wall. This was before I read Poe, or knew of animals that were sealed into walls, dead or alive. It caused quite a commotion that morning as we all tried to cram into the small space to have a look. The workers dug it out, thankfully, and placed the partial skull on the edge of the counter where we imagined its life before becoming a part of our adobe house, its story preserved along with ours in each square room of our home.

In the time before I knew you, the land in our backyard was carved out one spring to make way for a large pool. The dirt was scooped out and carted away, leaving only the anger and frustration of the ants whose intricate tunnels were hauled off in a yellow Caterpillar. They bustled about trying to regain stability, their upended lives lost to the smooth shape of white plaster, Mexican tile accents, and a red brick border. Eventually, they found other surfaces to start their lives again, but not before their resentment found its way to my hand, leaving a large, red welt that stung so severely only a mixture of baking soda and water could temporarily ease the pain and only then, after the salt of my tears had dried and left wispy, white trails on my dusty, brown cheeks.

In the time before I knew you, I used to roller skate around the basketball area beside our garage, listening to the music of the Pointer Sisters on a plastic cassette player, the music drowning out the dribbling of my brothers playing three-on-three with a group of friends while I circled around them, deft enough in Minnie Mouse skates to avoid the drive for a layup and any loose balls that made their way out of bounds. Games would go on well into the evening, a couple of spotlights rigged onto the swamp cooler which lit the court in a hazy glow, my skates still spinning alongside the gears.
inside my Walkman that transferred the music to my headphones, the Sisters’ upbeat songs appropriately marking time with my brothers.

In the time before I knew you, I slid on freshly-waxed red, brick floors every other Wednesday, the lemon scent accompanying my piano lesson while my teacher, caught in a still life of old age, tapped out beats with her right foot like a tired, wrinkled metronome. I started to play the piano when I was five, my mother only allowing me to start once I could recite and understand the progression of “A to G.” I sat on top of a white stool, paint flecks dried on top of its round top, less aesthetic than purposeful, its use constant over the next ten years when chopsticks gave way to Mozart and Bach’s “Toccata and Fugue in D Minor” was the last song I ever learned in my weekly lessons.

In the time before I knew you, men with thick flannel shirts pulled the weeds from around the house; they were illegal immigrants who had made their way across the Juárez border only to find a small bit of work in our backyard. They spoke words to me in Spanish and flashed black-toothed smiles in my direction, wanting to claim me as one of their own, our skin tones matching, our faces darkening with the midday sun. Even then, I understood that my skin-color mattered.

In the time before I knew you, my father taught me to ride a motorcycle just after I had learned to master a bicycle. I started by pushing the yellow, Yamaha 80 Trials around the cul-de-sac, its weight pulling me down as I struggled to keep it moving. Only if I could hold it upright would I be allowed to ride, an eventual occurrence that took me on to the dirt roads and trails of the Jemez with my two older brothers and dad leading the way. Eventually, I would outgrow the Yamaha 80 and move on to a robust Honda
350XL, a bike I had to lean over in order to put my foot on the ground. Long gone were the days I straddled the gas tank of my dad’s Can-Am on a weekend ride, holding onto the thin cross-bar that once held a motocross number, inspiring in me the thrill of steep mountain climbs, the heart-pounding worry of jostling through a bed of loose rock and sand, and the eventual moment a dirt bike could open up at full speed, the scent of piñon lost to the swift wind.

In the time before I knew you, my uncle was diagnosed with HIV, a disease that sent scientists clamoring to find a cure for the affliction and society into a socio-political frenzy that maligned gay men every where. It wasn’t until a continent a thousand miles away experienced the epidemic and its carriers were linked to men, women, and children alike, that some people realized it wasn’t just a “gay thing.” By that time, however, it was too late; enough of the worldwide population had made up their minds, denouncing homosexuality as a harbinger of HIV and ultimately, AIDS. I was only twelve when we received the call, and I was working my way through my homework at the kitchen counter. I think my uncle was worried we would not understand or be fearful of his diagnosis or more importantly, of him. I think it just made me realize how supportive my family was of one another and taught me how to be an ally, not just for his cause, but for many other causes along the way.

In the time before I knew you I learned the hard way about love and loss and pain, each moment dropped into a deep well of sadness until I understood I would eventually be able to climb out of that abyss, like the patient raven using its store of rocks to satiate its thirst. I had boyfriends that afflicted damage to my heart and my body, my
mother on the other side, rocking the heartache away with her kindness and her anger, telling me I was better off without them, sometimes unable to mask her disapproval but letting me figure it out the hard way. She was my constant go-to in all of the times I needed to share my pain and my joy, the Khalil Gibran of my existence, the mother of all mothers that taught me nearly everything I needed to know about how to be a good mother, a good teacher, and most of all, a good friend.

In the time before I knew you, I grew up in a neighborhood without sidewalks, where street corners used to collect deep puddles of rain that made you prop up your feet on the handlebars when riding through on a bicycle. My own room was painted a light shade of pink and stenciled with large flowers drawn by a family friend. In the time before I knew you, I listened to Elton John on my own record player, a sophisticated piece of technology whose arm mechanically moved with the flick of switch, accurately and softly placing the needle. I spent nearly ever summer day for five years with my brother, trying to dig to China but making no real progress considering our best tool was a blue Plymouth in the Matchbox series. In the time before I knew you, I grew up in a land where the dry, dusty earth spoke a restless native tongue, and I listened intently, straining my ears to hear the translation.¹

In the time before I knew you, my life bent backwards and forwards like a tall, thin tree whose roots have found soil to grab onto, but the branches still reach out, searching for empty spaces to fill. Over forty years have passed in cities and countries that I claim to belong to, some feeling like the comfort of a soft, fluffy robe and others like

¹ (Holmberg, 2006)
the scratchy tag within it. It was in these spaces that I reconciled a multitude of identities, taking the good with the bad to shape me into the person I needed to become and to ensure that the opportunities that were afforded me were never taken for granted.

Where the River Meets the Sea

There was never really a moment in my life when I did not realize that I differed from my family, not as a person, but as a child of another color. It was made significant not because my parents cultivated that notion of difference but because society did. I heard it in the questions and comments of others. “Is she yours?” “Where did she come from?” “She must be adopted” “Was your husband in the war?” My parents heard it, too. My mother reports that sometimes she would get so sick of hearing such things that she would come up with witty retorts to combat the rudeness and ignorance of others. For example, someone might ask, “Is your husband dark?” to which she would reply, “Usually, during the summer.” Another time, she was asked if she had a mixed marriage. Her reply? “So what do you mean? Man/woman? Catholic/Protestant or what?” At home, though, there was no distinction between biological and adopted when it came to the rearing of my brothers and me. Why would there be? As siblings we played the same games, ate the same food, traveled to the same locations, cleaned the same rooms. There was no delineation between “my adopted child” and “my biological child” and certainly any separation between the two would only foster confusion about who I truly “belonged” to and emphasize that difference. However, many families that adopt children can make this mistake (honestly or intentionally). They will point out to their adopted child that they are “not biological,” putting a strong value statement on what it
means to be a biological child. Even now, people will say things like, “I want one of my own,” to indicate that their notion of heredity is stronger than that of any other equation that would make adopting a viable option in terms of creating a family. Adoption, then, is an alternate choice, a second or third round draft pick in the NFL of child-rearing. As a first generation adoptee of Vietnam, our circumstances contributed to this attitude, promoting the “savior” complex of many families wanting to adopt children. From their perspective, adopting a child from less-than-ideal circumstances was not about wanting children but saving children, a point that was often made to many of my fellow adoptees, which made them feel the isolation of otherness which pits desirable against undesirable; it certainly did not make them feel as though they belonged. Sadly, this is more common than not. The same goes with statements like, “You are so lucky we adopted you” or “You are lucky you got a family that adopted you.” To those statements, most of us, quite used to it after forty years, just nod and say, “Yes, we know.” However, again this reinforces the notion of “us and them,” separating biological from adopted and perpetuating dissimilarity. When these comments were made to me, it made me feel as though I was charity to my family and to them I owed my gratitude. Additionally, some, who were adopted into physically or emotionally abusive families, might have something entirely different to say, including “If I were truly lucky, they would have left me in Vietnam.”

Certainly, you cannot do much for the ignorance of others. Most likely a comment made to my parents such as “Is she yours?” would have been received with a clear look of disdain. The “saving” of any adopted child is only one moment in time. It
is the moment that describes being taken out of a war or taken out of poverty or taken out of an orphanage. It is not perpetual. Once a child is saved from that one moment, the child should be accepted into the family unit without any other expectations. There should be no expectation of gratitude nor implication that somehow that child, who is now yours, belongs to anyone else. Most people would never think to say, “You are so lucky I gave birth to you,” to their biological child. Why should it be any different for an adopted child? If a family truly adopts for the right reason, “the saving” is only a moment in a lifetime of child raising. If a family that wants to adopt a child will never be able to see that child as their own, they should never adopt.

Discussing the issues that surround transracial adoption is an ongoing process. Certainly, it is not without its pitfalls. While my family nurtured a sense of belonging for me within our family, I still looked to my skin color as a marker of otherness. My race, a socially constructed propagation of difference, reminded me that at one time I did come from another place and to the outside world, that mattered. Being raised in a white family gave me a semblance of white privilege, a secure place in the world that was bolstered by economics and education. However, that privilege was also limited to others’ perceptions and attitudes towards my race. As a result, I existed in a binary upbringing characterized by love and hate. That duality allowed me to see hate as only something I would experience when I walked outside my home. Without the love of my family to balance the scales, I would have never been able to survive. They existed for me as an isolated flow of love, support, and understanding even as I was being channeled into a much vaster sea of uncertainty. The estuary they set up allowed me to establish a
place of belonging, a semi-permanent space that could combine the good with the bad and still enable me to thrive.

Get Back on the Boat

When I think of school I am caught off guard by the multitude of racialized experiences that sent me daily preparing for battle. I remember the kid that pushed me down in a bus and called me a nigger, stepping on my head as he walked over me and out the swinging doors. I saw kids in seats all around me, oblivious to the behaviors of others because, back then, a push and a shove were common experiences for kids riding to and from home in yellow busses. No one classified such incidences as bullying and frankly, no one really cared. I knew that when I caught the eye of the bus driver as I was getting up. He had seen the incident and did nothing. Said nothing. But he watched me as I got back up, gathered my things, and made my way out the door. On the bus I knew I was on my own.

I remember walking down the halls in middle school and this kid, whose patriotism was apparent in the camouflage gear he wore, daily honored the military and his family's service. Even in the sixth grade he understood America's loss in Vietnam, and it mixed in with loose strands of my ponytail as he uttered the word, "Charlie" every time I walked by.

Then came the Vietnam War movies, open wounds festering in titles such as “The Deer Hunter” in 1978, “Apocalypse Now” in 1979, “Platoon” in 1986 and “Full Metal Jacket” in 1987. People loved that movie, “Full Metal Jacket.” Matthew Modine's signature hair flop was still reminiscent of his role two years’ prior in “Vision Quest.”
More importantly, lines from the movie became fodder for teenage language rebellion and movie quotes appeared daily in many late 80s conversations. Stanley Kubrick's sound bytes also made their way into 2 Live Crew lyrics as homemade kick boxes bumped bass tones and the phrase, "Me so horny. Me love you long time" in parking lots made for high school students trying to out-blast one another. The phrase stuck with me even after the kids had gone home, the music switched off, the bass still lingering. It was replaced with enough males to repeat it to me as an invocation for me to respond.

School was where I learned that the red, classroom door that took off my fingertip in second grade caused less injury to me than the voices of others, intent on putting me in spaces that relegated me to identities I never wanted to claim: prostitute, enemy, other. I can't remember how many times fellow students told me to get back on the boat, making it clear that my presence was neither appreciated nor wanted. I already struggled with that concept as an adoptee; I added that understanding to my experience in school as each day presented me with a need to defend myself from the degradation of others.

The Outsiders

During my participation in a special topics course, we were asked to reflect upon and share a “Wow” K-12 experience. I spent a great deal of time thinking about this until I came up with a suitable anecdote to share for the exercise: something meaningful, something positive. After we had shared around the room, I thought about how difficult it was for me to identify such an experience, as if I were groping around in the dark for anything that felt tangible and worthwhile and repeatedly kept coming up short. What I realized, then, was not that I was bereft of “Wow” experiences but that the ones that
drifted swiftly to the top of my memory bank were all negative and nearly all of them had something to do with racism. “Wow” for the innumerable kids that slanted their eyes when they looked at me and sang off-key Asian-sounding words to me. “Wow” for the boy who pushed me down in a bus and stepped on my head after daily calling me a “nigger.” “Wow” for the students who told me to “get back on the boat” and “go back to China.” “Wow” for all the moments I experienced, during my time as a student, where my race, color and gender mattered and never in a positive way. Wow.

My lived experience, growing up as the only Asian in a predominately white, middle-class neighborhood, is complicated. In elementary school I was one of a few other Asians who were also Vietnamese adoptees. In my middle and high school years, I was the only Asian in each school comprised of predominately Latino students. While the value of Latino and Native American culture was taught early on in our New Mexican education, all other cultures were invisible, not necessarily as an attempt to exclude them but because the prevailing Latino culture was so strong. This was not necessarily a negative issue because, as a result, everyone took on the assumed culture of being “New Mexican,” a banner we wave proudly because it encompasses so many traditions indicative of the ability to transcend a long history of colonial oppression.

It’s green chile season. I can vaguely smell the acrid smoke that lingers from the chile roasters who have set up shop on Federal. My mouth waters and I sometimes wish the dry desert were once again my home. The scent of roasting chiles is a comforting scent, reminding me of the onset of fall, the crunch of Dixon apples, and motorcycle trips deep into the heart of the undeveloped bosque. I remember the daily sight of hot air
balloons and the excitement that was generated when one landed in the field just beyond our adobe home. If we were lucky, my two older brothers and I could make our way swiftly through the broken slats in the backyard fence before the balloon was quickly deflated or took flight again, our collie-mix, Maggie, barking excitedly at our heels. I am a New Mexican. I look forward to Christmas and reminisce about the assembly of the three hundred luminarias that lined our rooftop, our outside walls, and the curve of our driveway on Christmas Eve. I love posole, flan and Zozobra, the fifty-foot-tall marionette that represented people’s suffering and a small portion of my childhood nightmares. Zozobra was set on fire every year around Labor Day with a fireworks display that lit up his rolling eyeballs until eventually they popped out and burned with the rest of him. He was white and fluorescent, and I would stare at him with fear and awe from our menagerie of blankets, my fried chicken growing as cold as the potato salad that accompanied it. I must have first learned the F-word at that festival, the chant, “Burn, Mother-fucker, Burn,” a constant buzz in my ear, incomprehensible in meaning as an adolescent yet important nonetheless. Amazing stuff happened in New Mexico.

Despite the nostalgia I feel in growing up New Mexican, I was not immune to racist stereotypes and social constructions of race and identity within my neighborhood or school communities. The racism between Latino and Asians was prevalent, one marked by the stereotype of laziness while the other the exact opposite. Because there was only one Asian to uphold this stereotype, especially in my K-12 education, I took the brunt of the racist blows. Suffice it to say that despite growing up in a state that revered and respected diversity of tradition and culture, ignorance still thrived and more often than

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not, it found a target in me. I realized that I would continually be confronted with racism as I grew up and that in order to survive, I had to develop a pretty thick skin to maintain a sense of self-worth not determined by others.

I see I'm on the inside looking out
peering through the narrow space
between these iron bars
that separate me from you.
You, who passes by me
as if I'm another zoo animal
you have not seen.
Pointing with laughter and amusement
shaking your head with sympathy
ignoring the obvious
taking pleasure in my captive pain.
What is it that you see?

I am dark
I am Asian
I am a gook
I am a chink
I am a nigger
I am many things

but they are not all written down
on some brass plaque in front of you.

I see me
on the inside looking out
feeling this oppression
you can never understand.
Taking shelter in a corner of my habitat
pacing back and forth in front of you
wanting out of this cold cage
because it’s been too long
and I have outgrown the space I’m in.
Some of the racism I experienced throughout my K-12 education stems from a “cultural orientation paradigm” (Marsiglia & Kulis, 2009), which suggests that a lack of cultural knowledge contributes to the barrier of misunderstanding between majority and minority groups. Ethnocentric superiority and privilege leads to the majority group’s (in this case Latino) prejudice against any cultures perceived as being different (p. 28). Because there were so few Asian minorities within New Mexico, the lack of cultural understanding was greatly pronounced. In a wider context, all of the minorities within New Mexico (Latino, African American, Asian, Native American) are subjected to the same cultural orientation paradigm and prejudice from the ethnocentric superiority and privilege of the majority group (Caucasian) in the United States. As a result, these minority groups feel much the same way about their differences as I did growing up within New Mexico when the net is cast to encompass their lived experiences as minorities in America. As a whole, our tendency towards xenophobic attitudes prevail nationwide without the cultural knowledge that comes from understanding others’ differences. Throughout my K-12 education, I became painfully aware of that, which caused me to be reflective about how I was treating others in addition to reinforcing my survival skills.

Nowadays, what I see most in education is the absence of race, not so much as a color-blind attitude towards curriculum and instruction but completely absent cultural identities. When students ask me what I like to read, I usually mention the literature of minority authors such as Haruki Murakami, Amy Tan, Toni Morrison, or Chang Rae-Lee. However, the only reason I came by any of authors (especially in K-12) was through self-
study. Minority writers were rarely available to me as a student, even as I progressed through my bachelor’s and master’s degree courses in the study of English literature. Ultimately, in my educational experience, I learned that the minority voice, my voice, would be ignored—pushed down into the floor of a bus where the sound would be masked by the white steps that tread upon it. Although culturally responsive pedagogy exists to curb this pattern, we can do so much more to be more inclusive in our practice, whether we introduce more minority writers into our courses or open up the dialogue to create opportunities for minority students to express their lived experiences within safe spaces. It is tough, however, to make this shift. No one really wants to completely overhaul a curriculum they have been working on for so many years and without meaningful resources to make the work easier, many teachers will stick to what they have rather than expand to include what they may not know. It takes mindful work to be inclusive in our selection of curriculum without tokenizing identities that sustain current stereotypes or diminish the current discourse that is more reflective of what we are seeing today. In our current dialogue, we are cultivating spaces where minority voices are starting to vocalize, calling out racial injustice as something that needs to change. It is certainly noteworthy that the platform, which was once just a place for those with heightened privilege could occupy, is being utilized by others. However, one could argue that it is not representative of all voices. There is still room on the platform, but it may take another four hundred years for everyone to step aside and give everyone his or her turn. I certainly hope not, but allowing others to speak means moving away from master narratives and respecting and allowing the many voices of the different.
In S. E. Hinton’s (1967) novel, *The Outsiders*, two classes of individuals are pitted against one another: The Greasers and The Socials. These two groups represented a society in which those that could exist in the mainstream and look, sound, and play the part, were accepted and anyone outside of that realm struggled. A story of class warfare, the novel set the stage in understanding the comparative difference between the haves and the have-nots, where those who did not live the life of privilege would find themselves at odds with the expectations, rules, and standards by which the privileged created, thereby creating animosity between the two. Despite the desire for the characters to transcend those differences, ultimately the work comes at a price with losses felt, mostly on the side of the Greasers, and the most recognizable conclusion to the narrative is that the protagonist must change himself if he hopes to change anyone else. In the end, the main character, Ponyboy, realizes that the space of otherness he must teach others to understand can only be achieved by using his writing voice as the instrument through which he must share his lived experience.

Tôi Âm

*I am standing at the end of the gated drive. The open gate is painted a light cream, the newness of the color contrasting the dingy street behind me. Several squares of thin, colored-paper are scattered on the sidewalk like left-over confetti. The 3-inch squares serve as napkins for the street café a few doors down, but patrons don’t use the small trash receptacles, knowing that in the middle of the night street sweepers will come out to clean the small gutters and sidewalks with handmade brooms. The gray, brick walls that create a walkway are protected by tree branches, their long limbs creating a
natural arch over the thirty-yard stretch to the courtyard. Bright, lime-green leaves fill the branches, blanketing the length of the drive in a canopy of vibrant chartreuse. It is inviting to say the least, and our small group makes its way down the lane to the entrance to the spa, La Maison de l’Apothiquaire. At the end of the driveway on the left there is a small wall fountain. The face of a concrete lion peeks out from beyond the foliage of a surrounding vine where a makeshift Buddhist offering is placed at the fountain’s base, incense burning in a small pot near the center. A few of us take some photos before moving into the courtyard. There are shrubs, plants, and trees filling the periphery of the courtyard, hues of green offset by the flowering of hot-pink bougainvillea. There is a pool on the left side of the spa entrance, the depth not more than five feet but offering an inviting reprieve for those who wish to escape the sweltering heat and humidity of August in Ho Chi Minh City. The three story mansion that houses the central spa is painted a crisp white as are the buildings just beyond that showcase twenty-one treatment rooms, many of them decorated with soft lavender accents. The spa was built in the 1950s by the architect who designed the Presidential Palace of Vietnam, now known as the Reunification Palace. Now, it stands before us as a symbol of a French colonization carried forward into the present as a French-inspired spa with perfumes, lotions, and herbal spa treatments offered to wealthy tourists and locals alike.

As we collect near the entrance to the spa, a woman comes out to greet our small group. She is in a white áo dài, her black hair cut in a fashionable, slanted bob, showcasing her slim figure in the traditional women’s Vietnamese dress.
“Can I help you?” she asks uncertainly, taking in the bright hues of t-shirts and shorts that characterize the clothing of our group of ten.

“Yes,” Mary says, her small frame pushing forward in front and offering both her hands to take the slender, left hand of the woman in a warm greeting. Mary always does that when she takes your hand, cupping it in between both of hers as though holding something infinitely precious.

“I’m Mary,” she says, smiling. “And these are young people that are returning to Vietnam, some for the very first time. Some of these individuals used to live here, when this was an orphanage during the war. Back then it was known as ‘Tổ Âm’. I was one of the caregivers in another orphanage that was created back then. We have come to see some of the places these orphans stayed in before they were adopted. TỔ ÂM was the first orphanage started by Rosemary Taylor. If you would be so kind as to let these young people look around that would be wonderful or maybe a short tour would be best.”

Mary smiles earnestly, still holding onto her hand. The woman looks surprised and cocks her head slightly to look at our group, most of us perspiring from the heat and looking less like spa patrons than lost puppies still looking for a place to call home.

“I didn’t know that,” she says and scans the grounds and our group once more. “Hold on just a moment while I ask,” she replies, slipping her hand from Mary’s and walking up the few steps to the spa’s entrance, tall wood doors opening up to a hardwood floor and a newly-installed counter to greet customers placed just inside the foyer.

We are in awe; each of us simultaneously trying to piece together the juxtaposition of the war-torn images of Vietnam we have been given with the beauty of
the spa. We recognize the courtyard without the pool, its glimmering blue tile once a
smaller version offset by the surrounding concrete that would daily become the play area
for forty plus babies of various ages strewn about the courtyard on thin, straw mats. In
the photos, caregivers looked on from the periphery, constantly rearranging children that
managed to crawl out of bounds. From the pictures we have been shown, we recognize
the iron filigree\(^2\) that surrounds the French doors that open up to the courtyard, a few
trees standing against the brick wall on the left side of the property, an old Mercedes
Benz parked where we are now standing, once used, Mary tells us, to pick up and drop
off children all over the city of Saigon. She says the car came with the purchase of Tố
Âm, although it was in poor shape and merely used as a means of transportation rather
than as a kind of status symbol. The woman returns, accompanied by another woman
who appears to be a manager.

“Good afternoon,” she says in heavily-accented English. “We are open for
business at the moment and so we cannot allow you to go into every area of the spa. But
I am happy to show you around some of the places that are not being used for
treatments.”

“Wonderful,” Mary says, and clasps her hands together. She beckons for a few
of us to come forward. “These are some of the young people that lived here. They come
from all over the world and are seeing their orphanage for the first time.” She
introduces us to her with the names we were given in the orphanage, mine sounding thick
and heavy in my ears upon hearing it in Vietnam nearly thirty-four years later. Josette.

\(^2\) See Appendix A
The women smile at us and nod their heads, still not fully comprehending their place of employment as a home for hundreds of orphans, babies, and children being shuttled to and fro in an aging Mercedes, boxes and baskets of abandoned children brought in through the doors on a daily basis, many of whom did not survive to see the war’s end. From their understanding, the place has always been a spa, rising up from the ashes of war-torn Vietnam as a place of business, the lightness of children’s footsteps shuffling down long hallways long-forgotten; ghosts of wartime Vietnam dissipating over time like the fumes of new paint in hues of lavender and white.

Tô Âm or warm nest was the last of three orphanage stops I made before being adopted out to the United States. I traveled down from a small area known as Thủ Đức, having been left there, I am told, in the maternity hospital by my biological mother. I have no recollection of her gaze nor the cooing sounds of myself as a baby communicating with her as a mother for the first time. There is only the imaginary sound of the slow retreat of an undefined female who left me in the hospital just a day after I was born, most likely never stopping to say goodbye. She does not exist in my mind as someone uncaring, abruptly leaving a female person, thi, to survive on her own. After all, a maternity hospital was a far wiser place to leave me rather than in the street, a field, or anywhere else that would have significantly decreased my chance for survival, especially in the middle of a war. Why she left I will never know, causing me to speculate, some forty years later, through the objective lens of cause or circumstance rather than through the emotional perspective of being abandoned, which often typifies
the feelings of children that are orphaned. It does not make it easier, however, to
postulate from a place of objectivity. I still feel the loss of my mythical mother and still
wonder if she ever feels the loss of me.

The Instability of Truth

In 2007, I spent two weeks traveling through Vietnam on what was called the
“Motherland Tour.” I was one of nine adult adoptees returning to Vietnam to visit the
orphanages and historical sites of our birth country as well as meet some of the caregivers
that worked in the orphanages that we came from. It was not my first trip back, nor even
my second. However, it was my first experience meeting a group of adult adoptees as
well as learning about the history of the Vietnam War through the perspective of those
who had worked there rather than through a subjective lens of brief photojournalistic
moments. The information was invaluable. Memories replaced years of formal
education, supplanting my knowledge with lessons on human sacrifice, the sorrow of
war, and the loss of life that accompanies it. That so many of us survived speaks
volumes about the dedication of the women and men who helped us make it through
another day. That so many did not profoundly remarks on the cause and effect of war
and the overused but aptly put saying, “Only the strongest survive.”

The question, “Where do you come from?” is ambiguous at best. Over time, I
have learned that when that question is asked of me it mostly pertains to my ethnicity. It
has been asked in politeness and with the intrusion of ignorance, all tact lost in the
demand of an answer. I used to say I was Vietnamese and that I was born in Vietnam.
Until 2007 that answer seemed sufficient and was enough of an explanation to give the
examiner a good reason to be satisfied and move on. But what I learned about myself on that trip back was that being born in Vietnam and being Vietnamese are not the same. It’s like saying you were born in America and therefore, simply “American.” What does that mean? Does that label generate succinct conclusions about who we are and where we come from? Certainly not. But what I had denied myself for some many years, or at least until I was ready to accept it, was understanding that nothing is that absolute. I had wanted to belong to the Vietnamese identity so I could answer the question, “Where do you come from?” with poignant accuracy. I wanted answers to the questions about my ethnicity as well as my birth family because so much of my life was steeped in ambiguity. Growing up, I was constantly misidentified; my race was as much of a mystery to others as it was to me. What I learned on the 2007 trip was that while I always believed that the paperwork I arrived with established a portion of my Vietnamese identity, in truth, it was fictitious. Most of us were given our names, our birth dates, and all the information about who we “were” in Vietnam was generated for the sole purpose of getting us out of the country with the proper paperwork. That is not to say that every adoptee’s history is unknown. There are some adoptees whose information is a partial or even full reflection of their family name and heritage. Nonetheless, like Ellis Island demonstrates, the need to get in or out of a country is not about accuracy but rather expedience. The part or even the whole is removed, leaving the individuals to recreate themselves as they find their way through new and unfamiliar territory.
Deconstructing Việt Kiều

The first name I ever traveled with was Kha Thi Huyen Chau. In Vietnamese, “Huyen Chau” means “black pearl.” I sometimes wonder if the woman who gave me this name wanted to give me a sense of value after it was so obvious that I had none. In the orphanage they called me Josette, a name still lingering from a hundred years of French occupation, its long lilt feeling loose and frayed in my memory’s pocket. When I arrived to America I was placed in the arms of a second mother and given another name, also French, and names that resembled black pearls were left far behind with the drifting of lotus. Throughout my life, names have been given to me and taken away, attachments to identity abandoned with time, circumstance, or tradition. Like breadcrumbs they lead me back to the beginning, to a woman who continually scrawled out information in passports, the sweltering heat of a makeshift office making her tire but the war urging her hand to move faster. Just another name in a passport. It means nothing. It means everything.

Việt Kiều is a term used to describe Vietnamese people living outside of Vietnam. The term mostly applies to those who were displaced by the Vietnam War, refugees that settled in other countries outside of Vietnam in an effort to escape the communism that would rule the country once Saigon fell in 1975. The Vietnam War was a conflict that had a tremendous impact on the lives of Americans. It was the first war to be televised, and American citizens could glimpse footage of the war at home in the United States. Alongside the tremendous loss of life shown in the conflict (for both sides of the war), came the footage of those whose lives were directly impacted: Vietnamese families and
ethnic populations displaced by year’s worth of conflict. Extreme poverty was commonplace in Vietnam even before the war’s beginning and families had very little resources on which to survive. In addition, they were embroiled within a conflict that made their day-to-day lives unpredictable. Many people had to flee the areas from which they were currently living, whether in the country or city, forcing them to migrate to more secure locations. This extreme poverty, coupled with the uncertainty of safety or a future within Vietnam, forced families to make tough decisions about their children. As the war continued to rage on, reaching heightened occupation of United States forces in 1968, the abandonment of children became an additional casualty of war. While some women abandoned children due to prostitution, rape, cultural norms, or poverty, it was also not uncommon that families with several children would give one or two of their children up to an orphanage, knowing that they would not be able to support or feed everyone in the family. Sometimes, they would give up their children “temporarily,” hoping to return for them when the conflict had been settled (Taylor & Grant, 1988). As a result of the difficult circumstances arising from the conflict within Vietnam, the number of displaced people continued to grow. So, too, did the number of orphans. In response, official orphanages, most of which were run by Catholic sisters, began to establish themselves in the mid-to-late-60s, especially when the need to take care of abandoned children from the war became increasingly important. Between the years of 1968-1975, orphans of the Vietnam War numbered just under a million. From that number, only 10% survived. By war’s end, it was estimated that nearly 25,000 children were adopted to countries around the world, predominately within varying countries in Europe,
Australia and the United States (Taylor & Grant, 1988). For those adopted children, a life outside Vietnam became both a blessing and a curse. Adoptions would become a prosocial movement in which the orphans of war could be “saved” from a life certainly more difficult than a life in a war-torn, third world country. However, Vietnam War adoptees might challenge this notion. In the United States, for example, the unpopular American conflict became a part of the adoption equation. Many adoptees were met with disdain for an action that resulted in a volatile mixture of philanthropy and resentment, especially from those who wanted to condemn all activities associated with the Vietnam War and from those who were adopted and have felt the compromise of a life saved buttressed against a life stolen.

The life of a Vietnam War adoptee is characterized by a constant negotiation of identity as adoptees work to recreate themselves apart from their homeland. This diaspora has led to a community of individuals who often struggle with the duality of trying to acculturate into a new environment, in particular that of their adopted parents, while still holding on to the history and country of Vietnam. A lifetime of questions abounds from being an orphan of war. The circumstances by which Vietnam War adoptions became a reality are populated with unknowns. This ambiguity has led to many adoptees’ dissatisfaction with their adoption, not necessarily with their adopted families, but because the lack of information about their prior life in Vietnam is shrouded in mystery. This ultimately means that Vietnam War adoptees have had to contend with the absence of knowledge and work, throughout their life, to reconcile that. For all intents and purposes, I am a Việt Kiều, having been abandoned alongside thousands of
other orphans of the Vietnam War and adopted into the United States as an infant.
However, as time, experience, and advancements in DNA testing have proven, Việt Kiều has been a label I have slowly dismantled. While I still belong to a diaspora of Vietnam War adoptees, I no longer claim to be ethnically Vietnamese, nor do I consider the country my homeland. Over time, I have worked to deconstruct what it means to be Việt Kiều, and re-envision who I am and who I am not. Oftentimes, they are one and the same.

Checkpoint

* I’m sitting in the third row, waiting my turn to take the stage. It is the end of May, 2008. The speeches of professors and instructors echo throughout the hall as each of us waits to be welcomed into the teaching profession, having made it through a year saddled with methods courses, student teaching, and comprehensive exams. I am sitting next to a fellow teacher candidate over ten years younger than me. She is anxious for the year to start; she found a placement in a district and school she feels is a good fit somewhere in a mountain town. I, too, have found a placement, one of the first students to do so, which on one hand was surprising to my cohort given the competitive pool of English teachers wanting to find placements, and on the other hand, not surprising because it was “me.” They all knew I would find a job right away. I suppose I knew that, too. As an up-and-coming teacher of thirty-five, my perspective was much different than that of my fellow classmates. At that point in my life, I would wager that it was not my education that got me the job; it was my experience.*
It is almost my turn to give my speech, having been elected by the secondary teaching cohort to speak on our behalf. I remember when they told me that my classmates had chosen me as their graduation speaker. I was honored and humbled by the nomination. I sat and chatted beforehand with my classmate before the ceremony started. At some point, we were talking about education, and I mentioned that mine had been a long time coming. She graduated with her bachelor’s degree just two years ago and moved onto the teaching certification program right away. Now, she was certified to teach secondary math and start her career at the young age of twenty-three, the same age I was when I lived in Vietnam.

“So you have a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in English?” she asks.

“Yes, I went on to work on the master’s degree just after finishing my bachelor’s degree in 1999,” I reply, “but it took me awhile to get that first degree. I had my own college-plan, apparently.”

“Yeah,” she says, “that’s pretty common nowadays. Some people are taking five years to finish their degrees.”

“Five would have been okay,” I say, “eight was a bit excessive.”

“Eight?” she says incredulously. “It took you eight years to get a bachelor’s degree?”

“Yes,” I say, “I graduated from college eight years after I graduated from high school.”

She looks stunned. “Wow,” she says.
I can tell she’s not sure what to say, mulling over what is intended to be the general expectation of a typical college student’s graduation plan in her head. Somehow, it seems incomprehensible. After a long pause, she finally turns to look at me.

“What were you doing all that time?” she asks.

I shrug.


Dead Reckoning

In 1992, I spent six weeks in Army ROTC boot camp. During one of our tasks, we were asked to individually find our way to numerous checkpoints with just a compass and a topical map in an exercise known as land navigation. Once we found all ten checkpoints, writing down the coordinates on a piece of paper, we were supposed to set our compass to zero degrees, or north, and follow that direction back to the final checkpoint at basecamp. After five hours, a bullhorn would signal the final hour to return whether or not you found all ten checkpoints. When I heard the bullhorn, I had only managed to get to six. I looked at where I was and there was no one around me to team up with or follow back to the endpoint. Setting the compass at zero degrees meant dead reckoning or walking straight through a dense forest. I thought about that for a while. What if I didn’t make it? What if it was too far to get there in an hour? What if they had to send a search party to come find me? How embarrassing would it be to be the one cadet that had to be saved playing army girl while all of the other GI Joes and Janes knew exactly where to go and how to get there? I considered the options and the levels of injury to my pride. I heard a distant road behind me. I set my compass to 180 degrees
and went south. When I arrived at the road, daylight was beginning to fade. I started the long walk towards the general direction of basecamp and was picked up by a Hummer making its way that direction.

“What were you thinking, cadet?” the sergeant clamored at me as I got in the back.

I shrugged and thanked him for delivering me to the final checkpoint where hundreds of other cadets were milling around, having successfully made it through the day with slips of paper that confirmed their knowledge of how to find an accurate course through the landscape of Kentucky.

I failed land navigation. It was probably the first thing I officially failed, which is a hard pill to swallow when you are a distinguished overachiever. But did I really fail? I found six out of ten checkpoints did I not? I made it out of the vast Kentucky wilderness knowing that my safety was far more important than a drill sergeant’s approval and a slap on the back proclaiming a job well done. Failure, I realize, is relative to how you define it.

There are methods to achieving success. We define those successes by norms that have been established as the groundwork for how that success is achieved. In most cases, that means there is a right way and a wrong way in doing things. It was atypical of me to drop out of college just five months after I graduated from high school. I walked away as the Student Body President, as the Captain of a state-champion dance team, as a student who graduated in the top 4% of the class, as the recipient of awards that clearly demonstrated a high level of leadership. I graduated from high school with a virtual
stamp upon my forehead that proclaimed: Most Likely to Succeed. The expectation that I would navigate through the next checkpoints in my life without much struggle was one that I carried with me in my post-secondary life, at least until I finally received my bachelor’s degree eight years after I graduated from high school. Up until then, it was uncharacteristic of me to do anything that did not mark my success with a plaque, a trophy, or a certificate of achievement that illustrated my academic or extracurricular excellence. However, those eight years did not account for a person who had to confront the reality of being an adoptee and the multitude of unknowns that would litter my life after I graduated. It did not present a clear-cut map on how to work around the obstacle of divorcing parents and an ideal picture of “family” that had defined my existence up until that point. It did not give me accurate latitude and longitude points to show me where to be when I found myself without a precise identity or at least one that was not bound in leadership accolades and academic success. In short, I was at a loss on where to find my true self. It was not enough to go to college and hope that a degree would show me the way to the next step. I was lost—without a compass, without a map, with only the dense forest in front of me. I dead reckoned through nearly ten years of my life after that, searching for the answers to who I was or who I might become.

In the years following my graduation from high school, I enrolled in and attended five different universities, applying to another two more that accepted me but whose campuses I would never set foot on except as a casual observer. I also received a state senator’s nomination to one of the top military academies, but again, I let the opportunity pass me by. In my time at some of those schools, I was afforded enough passing credits
to move forward with my education, but I no longer possessed the zeal that used to define my existence as a star student. Some campuses I only spent a week or two attending before realizing that it was not the right space to be, and I needed to move on. At one school, I was probably listed as AWOL until my mother called inquiring about me, and they realized I had already dis-enrolled and was gone. In all actuality, they did not even know I had left. At the time, I was old enough to make those decisions for myself, and while I am certain my parents, going through their divorce, cared a great deal about the choices I was making, they granted me enough latitude to figure it out in my own time, partly because of who they were as parents and partly because I imagine they were embroiled in their own identity shift. All of us, in those first five years after my high school graduation, were dead reckoning, lost to the nuances of unfamiliar landscape with very few tools to guide us.

In 1996, I found myself attending classes at the university in my hometown, something I never wanted for myself but conceded as my place for the time being. I worked as a cocktail waitress, making enough money to pay the rent for my small apartment in a less-than-ideal neighborhood, watching college students move through the tight spaces of cramped bodies while loud music drowned out any meaningful conversations. I was twenty-three—well past the first formative years of college life when sororities call out for Rush week, dormitory living is characterized by poor roommate match-ups, and the idiocy of believing that enrolling in an 8 a.m. class is a good idea. I gave up the traditional college experience the moment I walked away from the first university I attended, leaving behind opportunities to enroll in clubs and
organizations that would accentuate my resume with thoughtful markers of extracurricular involvement, struggling through study sessions with a cohort of students trying to pass chemistry exams, making questionable choices that might typify an eighteen-year-old’s first taste of freedom hundreds of miles away from the watchful eye of parental authority. In the next five years, I still made those questionable choices but without the stability of a university experience to keep me on the straight and narrow. I no longer had anything meaningful to lose (such as leadership roles and scholarships) and at the time, I could have cared less. I was still lost and dissatisfied with where I was and who I had become, which to me, amounted to nothing. I was unhappy, frustrated, and most of all, angry.

It is difficult to relay so many years of struggle as I work to identify who I was amidst the changes occurring in my life at the time. The disintegration of my adoptive family (as far I knew it) accentuated my feelings of abandonment and loss, triggering a series of questions that I had before felt were okay to leave unanswered. I looked to external constructions of identity to give me a sense of value because I felt like I had none. I went to school to try to “be” something, looking to find a career that would give me the definition of self that I was looking for in order to label myself with the modicums of success I was once known for. It was not enough. I traveled from school to school looking for my place—my sense of self. No matter where I went, I never felt like I belonged. I was caught within a space of hurt and anger for having been abandoned once again. I could not shake the feeling of worthlessness for having failed at being a successful student and daughter all at once. I believed that my anger towards my parents
was an affront to their adoption of me and that I was seemingly ungrateful for the life they shaped because I was so upset that the family identity I built my life upon was no longer intact. As foolish as this seems now, it caused me to question everything I knew about myself and everything I would never know. My relationships with others were surface; I was unable to form permanent attachments to anyone, and I did not look to anyone for support. Although my parents’ divorce was more about a shift in identity for them, for some reason it made me feel as though I, too, was losing myself. Their partnership had shaped the family into what it was to me: an identity of belonging. Without that, I had nothing left to belong to.

In 1994, Vietnam reopened after President Clinton lifted the trade embargo, allowing American forensics teams to locate servicemen still listed as missing from the war. With it came the opportunity to return to Vietnam, a major step in normalizing relations with the country. For those of us who were a product of the Vietnam War, returning to Vietnam was a chance to reconnect with our homeland country, and for me, after my parent’s divorce became final, it could not have been a more welcome opportunity. In yet another attempt to “find a sense of self,” I found a way to join a Southeast Asia student exchange program for a year and headed to Vietnam in mid-August, 1996.

**Sa Pa**

*The road we travel by bus to get to Sa Pa is windy, dirt-packed, and deeply rutted.*

*Although it seems only wide enough to accommodate one vehicle, it is used for two.*

*Vehicles coming down the mountain drive dangerously close to the road’s ledge when*
passing our bus, and I wince at the thought of coming back down. I peer out through the window and feel as though I’m looking straight down into a dark, green chasm. There are no guardrails; the edge of the road only meets a sharp descent into an endless drop into the jungle below. The mountains loom higher above us as we make the climb at thirty-five miles per hour, the bus lurching every which way as it ambles up the road. When we finally reach Sa Pa, the air smells musty like smoke and ash from a campfire burning down to only embers. We walk into town from the bus on the same rutted dirt road. Young girls dressed in dark blue, linen skirts, and wide-sleeved, tunic tops pass by with bamboo baskets fitted like oversized backpacks resting over their slim shoulders. Some of the baskets are filled with long sticks the length of their entire bodies. Their stares are inquisitive and shy as they walk by. A few boys encourage two large water buffaloes down a rocky catwalk with a bamboo switch. One sits astride the larger of the two buffalo, his worn, leather sandals bouncing off the animal’s massive belly in the silent rhythm of the animal’s stride. I stop to look at the view as they briefly turn their heads to look back at me before making their way down to the villages below. After ten minutes, we arrive in the small town. We weave through the market, the vendors calling out while my eye catches the colorful plastic bags filled with native spices, herbs, and chilies. The scent of dry roasted corn from a makeshift BBQ lingers in the air as squatting women turn the yellow vegetable with dusty hands. I stop to examine the sweet, fried bread filled with Hmong beans; dipped in sugar on the outside, they remind me of my favorite sugar-raised donut.
Despite the long, tiresome journey, the colors, sights and sounds of Sa Pa make life in Hanoi seem like a distant, forgettable memory. Lush, green mountains, surrounds us. A misty blanket of fog covers most of the valley floor, and we can just make out the tops of the village houses. There are three primary minorities here: the Hmong (mong), the Tây (zay) and the Thái. The Hmong seem to be the most prevalent in the area and their young women and girls walk around with embroidered textiles draped across their arms to sell to the incoming tourists. As we make our way out of the market, six younger Hmong children run up ahead of our small group, their bare feet kicking up the dust in front of us. I look to the left and see another group of small children. They are high in the trees, probably eight to ten feet above ground. Their arms wrap around the trunks of trees nearly devoid of branches with which to climb. Still, they stand upon the few that there are and wave down to us.

“Ello! Ello! Ello!” they all cry in unison.

When we arrive at the part of town recommended for overnight accommodations, our group once again splits and a few of us find a room in a small hostel for 50,000 dong per night, roughly $5.00. Like most of the rooms in these Vietnamese hostels, there are twin beds. They are slightly damp from the humidity, draped with a mosquito net and covered with a thin blanket. My companion and I drop off our packs and make our way out onto the hostel’s balcony. The owner of the hostel comes out and offers us Vietnamese coffee. This strong, espresso-like coffee is filtered through a small metal sieve into two inches of sweet, condensed milk. It is much colder here than in Hanoi so the hot beverage is welcome refreshment after our long journey, and the sharp contrast
between the sweet and bitter tastes awakes our sleepy senses. We sit down in two small plastic chairs. It is just after 9:00 a.m., and the fog is just beginning to lift and roll up and out of the valley.

The view from the balcony is amazing. Bright, green mountains extend as far as the eye can see and down below a mud-brown river snakes its way through the landscape, sweeping past clusters of small hamlets that dot the valley floor. Rice paddies are stacked up the mountain slopes in steep terraces just beyond each village. The curling of smoke from a quiet fire is visible even through the dissipating fog. I inhale deeply and can almost feel the smoke fill my lungs.

This is where some of the mountain people of Vietnam reside, one of fifty-four native, ethnic tribes scattered throughout the country. The groups in this area live at the base of Vietnam’s highest peak, Fansipan, surviving off of the land without running water or electricity. They utilize the countryside to maintain their farming of rice and the raising of livestock. They live simply and primitively. Despite their small statures, they are the strongest people I have seen in the country so far. The oldest women, some eighty years of age or more, still make the daily hike out of the valley to sell their products in Sa Pa. The women constantly carry the large, bamboo baskets upon their backs and move steadily on their bare feet, their hunched bodies resembling the slow, deliberate trod of the water buffalo. I think about the day my mother called me in to watch PBS when I was twelve.
“Look at these people,” she said pointing to the T.V. “They’re Montagnards, Mountain People of Vietnam. You know, you have similar characteristics; you could be one of them.”

I remember seeing a large display of the fifty-four minorities in a museum in Hanoi. There were pictures of a person representing each tribe posted on the wall like ads for missing and exploited persons. I studied them. I looked for similarities in their faces and skin tone. It was hard to tell, the pictures were outdated and slightly discolored. If I were one of these people, would that make me more or less Vietnamese? Haven’t these tribes migrated to Vietnam from other lands? Would that mean I’d be more or less accepted?

The next day I venture out on my own. There is a small, dirt road behind the hostel that leads down into the valley. After just fifteen minutes I am winded. I sit down upon a rock and look up. I have come quite a way in such a short time, and I can see the road winding slowly back up to the top of Sa Pa. I feel tired just thinking about my return. Three hundred yards ahead, I can see that the road ends and opens up into a wide field. I spend another minute on the rock and then make my way down. As I get closer, I can hear the rush of water and realize that I have come upon the river. It is larger than I previously thought, the height at which I was looking at it the day before must have been considerable. Again, I start to dread my return. As I stand along the riverbank and look down into the water, I am consumed with tranquility. The sound of the river and the landscape that surrounds me makes me appreciate the simplicity of nature. I have left behind my boisterous companions, the daily grind of Hanoi and the
frustration I have felt the last three months living in Vietnam. I am content here, in this spot, at this moment. I am reminded of my family back home and the yearly camping trips we took in the summer. I smell the New Mexico piñon even though I’m a million miles away. I can hear the echo of my brother’s voice urging me to come look at his latest find. I can taste the smoky flavor of a burnt hot dog and the sugary sweetness of a Coke to wash it all down. I am here and I am there, and I contemplate the idea that this may be my problem.

Who I am is not a country. I cannot be defined by the labels assigned to me upon my arrival in Hanoi or by my life in America. I am not a second-class citizen of either country. I allowed myself to think that being raised as an American would make me immune to the racist stigma prevalent in Vietnamese culture. I thought that I would find exemption from the dark-skinned versus light-skinned categorization because I was clearly just “American.” On the flip side, I thought I could be American and still be Vietnamese. I thought I could claim some portion of my heritage that would explain the multitude of questions that had been asked of me my entire life. The primary one: Where are you from? I wanted to be able to answer that one question with one simple answer: Vietnam. I wanted “Vietnam” to be sufficient enough to encapsulate all of the other answers: No, I don’t speak Vietnamese. I was adopted. No, I’ve never met my birth mother or father. But “Vietnam,” as an answer, has become even more convoluted than before. The experience I have had in this country has made my ability to connect obsolete. It is not that easy. I still don’t know where I belong.
My reverie is interrupted by the sound of sticks breaking. I look down the river and see an older Hmong woman, easily over eighty years of age, and a much younger Hmong girl making their way towards me. In just a few moments they are standing next to me. The woman follows my gaze towards the opposite side of the river and says something to me. It is not Vietnamese. I turn to look at her and give her a half-hearted smile and a shrug. She points across the river with her right hand and then lifts her arm up and to the right. I try to follow where she is pointing. She speaks to me again. I do not say anything. Just then, she takes me gently by the elbow and we start to walk up the riverbank. There is a bridge just fifty yards ahead and she steers me towards it. It is an old bridge and about forty feet up from the water below. There are no planks lying across it, only three pieces of long, thick bamboo laid down across the metal supports. The younger girl steps on the bamboo and swiftly makes her way across. The bamboo bows just slightly in the middle. The woman urges me on and I comply, stepping gingerly onto the bamboo to test its strength. It seems fine although I notice that it is rotting in several spots and the bamboo is beginning to splinter. The woman steps up behind me and there is not enough room to turn back. I must move forward. The younger girl is waiting on the other side. My hiking boots feel clunky and awkward on the bamboo as I look over at the girl’s bare feet and wish that I, too, could cross without shoes. Although the bamboo dips and bounces slightly as I make my way to the other side, it holds strong and in a matter of minutes I am safe on solid ground. The old woman passes by me, heading towards a single-track path that leads straight up the side of the mountain. The
young girl follows. I assume I’m supposed to follow but hesitate. The woman looks back at me and tilts her head toward the path. I start to follow.

The path that we ascend is slightly muddy and my boots slip a little as I clamber up the slope behind them. The woman’s bare feet seem to find just the right footholds in the slick mud and she has no problem making her way swiftly up the track. The younger girl follows suit, her bare feet finding just right places to help her with the climb. I do not know where we are going but feel compelled to see where they are taking me. The old woman occasionally looks over her shoulder and talks, but I have no idea what she is saying. It is a long upward climb that occasionally weaves back and forth on the steepest areas. I wonder if I can stop to catch my breath but realize that I could not say anything even if I wanted to. We do not speak the same language. After thirty minutes of climbing, we come to a stop. We are standing on a small, flat landing, and I turn to look behind me. I can barely see the trail I just climbed; it disappears just beyond a ledge and into the dense vegetation. It is a long way down. I can see the river below and my eyes follow its body to a nearby village, past the rice paddies ready for harvest and then beyond. The land seems to go on forever. I can hear the sound of my labored breath as I try to slow my heartbeat to a reasonable pace. The lady points out to the rice paddies, the village, and the river as if telling me about the land and maybe even her home. She speaks in her native tongue and I listen. I nod. She turns slightly to her left and points again. I see a dirt road beyond her index finger. It is wide enough for a vehicle. It is a road that leads into Sa Pa. She turns back to me and nods. I nod back. The young girl starts to make her way back down the trail we just came up. The woman gently touches
my shoulder and then starts her descent. I watch as they make their way down the steep path and know that’s not the direction I’m headed. I look at the dirt road to my right. This is the way that goes back. It’s time to return; I must go home.  

Twenty years later, I can still recall those feelings standing on the edge of the river. I still remember the woman and her young companion⁴, urging me to move forward, talking to me in their native Hmong while I clumsily followed in their footsteps. They embodied a strength I no longer possessed after living in a country that, for the most part, had rejected my assimilation. I spent nearly four months battling racism, becoming the target of disdainful looks, snide comments, and clucks of disapproval. Several nights were spent in circles of questioning, accusatory looks from policeman extorting both my money and my pride. I fought through Vietnam every day, struggling to find a space where “otherness” did not mean something negative. I lost pieces of myself as I walked away from my housing compound each day, trying to find who I was and where I belonged. Ultimately, I learned that I only belonged to myself. 

Igor Stravinsky has been credited with saying, “I have learned throughout my life as a composer chiefly through my mistakes and pursuits of false assumptions, not by my exposure to founts of wisdom and knowledge” (Goodreads, n.d.) In the quest to discover who I am, I have had to look towards the past rather than where I situate myself currently or hope to situate myself in the future. I have always been an academic; I have spent ten

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³ (Holmberg, 2006)

⁴ See Appendix B
years in graduate school after finding my way back home from Vietnam and finally finishing a bachelor’s degree in 1999. I learned, at twenty-three, on the banks of a river, that those things did not define me, nor did a country I struggled to grow up in or a country I once came from. I have had to recalibrate so many times in my life that I forgot where my life has really begun.

Throughout my life, I have been asked to find points on a map that are intended to be checkpoints towards cumulative success, and I have failed. Many times. However, I have embraced the level of recalibration that is common to my life but often takes me some time to acknowledge and accept as par for the course. Only when I am ready, can I make the right move and allow myself to shift, not towards what is right for others but towards what is right for me. It is not easy; it is a process of letting go and letting go is hard. Sometimes, it means I need to go in an entirely different direction without the encouragement or support of others, second guessing my intentions, and only following what I know to be gut instinct. It is only when I discard the notion that achieving success means I have to follow in the path of others who came before me do I realize I am never lost to begin with. In fact, after the past twenty years of dead reckoning through the landscape of my life, for all intents and purposes, I am found.
Chapter Five: When Lost Becomes Found

1996

I remember. Moments flicker by me like fireflies on a cloudless summer night. I see them brushing by my face with increasing intensity, lighting up for only an instant before extinguishing themselves and sailing back into the darkness. I see the trash dumpster at the end of the dirty street, overflowing with the day’s garbage onto the curb and into a trail of black sludge. I smell the rotten stench of meat prominently displayed on wooden tables at the nearby market as if the animal that provided it had just been slaughtered for its buyers. I listen to the sound of my new plastic flip-flops slapping against the cement as I make my way through bicycles and motor-scooters to the lady with the beautiful fruit who doesn’t ever bargain. I remember. I taste the bitter broth of snail soup as if it were just served to me, the brown shriveled bodies bobbing around a maze of white rice noodles and green onions, the lakeside creatures bouncing between my teeth like a small rubber ball purchased from a bubble gum machine. I feel the persistent nudging of an old lady, her cupped hand begging me to spare some extra money from my pocket as I sip a mango shake at the fast food café down the road. I remember.

“I don’t want to go back,” I say from the comfort of my airplane seat. Its cramped space feels exceedingly roomy after a long night spent huddling with my belongings in plastic airport chairs, waiting for the delayed plane to arrive.
“No go back? Why you not go back? Vietnam very beautiful.” A man by the name of Mr. Ho asks me from his seat across the aisle. He grins and pats my hand with fatherly affection.

I shrug and yawn, hoping this will deter him from further inquisitions. It doesn’t.

“Bah, I know how you feel. I go back and forth all the time. Maybe I don’t like so much because my family back in Los Angeles.”

I nod and he reaches into his back pocket for his wallet.

“I show you. I have three sons. One is about your age, twenty-one or two...see?” He holds a small photo in front of my face, and I look at the picture of the three Vietnamese boys sporting the latest American clothing styles.

“Nice,” I say approvingly. “Uhhh, what time is it?”

He glances at his watch. “About three a.m. You have family in Vietnam?”

“No, not really. My mother was from Vietnam, but I live in the United States.” I try to be as evasive as possible, knowing that this string of questions will only lead to more.

“Hmm, your mother still there then? Do you speak Vietnamese? Maybe you aren’t whole Vietnamese, maybe only half. Where your father from?” His interrogation will not be deterred. I give in.

“My father lives in America. I am adopted,” I say resignedly.

“Oh, your father in military, live in America, mother in Vietnam. She speak Vietnamese?”
“Yes, I suppose she does, but I have never met her. I was adopted very young,” I say.

“Yes, father American soldier, meet mother in Vietnam. You visit her now?” he asks after his imagined version of the story.

“Yeah, sure.” I know my attempt to explain has once again failed. Adoption isn’t a word in the Vietnamese language. Apparently, neither is sleep. I yawn again with exaggeration and this time he notices.

“Very late. Time to sleep. We have a long way until Los Angeles. Someday, I will bring my sons to Vietnam. Someday, maybe you will want to go back and visit mother again.”

“Maybe,” I say and smile politely before closing my eyes to the dim airplane lights and my ears to any more questions.

I am resentful towards Vietnam. The memories I have burn hotly in my mind like a branding iron. I wanted to find my biological mother, to find my identity, to find peace from the land I only saw depicted in American-made war movies. I wanted to resolve the conflict of my heart that troubled me from the time I was five and old enough to know what it meant to be adopted. I never thought I would get the chance, not when I was twenty-three. I thought I would have been much older, able to consider my life as it was, accepting the fate that I was given as a mature and stable adult. I did not believe I would go so soon. I did not know what was in store for me. I merely packed my bags and stepped on an airplane that delivered me into a world I had only been able to imagine before then. But even as I think of these things, I’m forced to look at the moments of my
life that propelled me to that time. Those four months living in Vietnam—twenty-three years before that. And I remember.⁵

Bụi dội

In late December, 2015, I traveled to Vietnam for my fifth trip to the country. I was anxious; I spent the last five hours on the plane from Seoul to Ho Chi Minh City, contemplating four decades of personal and academic research and its impetus. I talked with my seat neighbor, a businessman from Korea who shared pictures of his children from his Samsung phone and spoke to me about his brief but constant travel to Vietnam. He asked me if I was going on vacation, and I replied that I was going to visit family. I did not elaborate, having learned long ago that such elaboration would take time for a conversation that could not adequately be conveyed in five hours. After all, it has taken me forty-two years to talk through it and even now, only looking through the lens of education. As we were making our final approach into Ho Chi Minh City, I was reminded of the time when I first made the descent into Vietnam in 1996. I remembered seeing a lotus garden in a nearby field as the plane glided towards the runway. Pink petals rose up from the murky water, establishing their beauty in all of that darkness. It was the first moment of peace I saw in Vietnam especially given the countless images of war that we grew up with, and I was hopeful that my time in the country would mimic the resolute life of the lotus, a resurrection of being even though its roots were invisible. It did not turn out that way for me, however, and I walked away from the country with inescapable emptiness and frustration, most of which I carried with me through the next

⁵ (Holmberg, 2006)
seven years until I established my own family in 2003. Even then, while the birth of my son gave me the link to biology I was always hoping for, it did not answer the questions I still harbored, trailing behind me like tangled lotus roots floating just beneath the dark surface. Now, here I was looking down at the landscape of Vietnam almost twenty years later, and a part of those roots I could now trace back to the beginning.

In 2010, I took my adoptive mother to Vietnam so that she could see and experience the country for herself. Most of my life as an adopted daughter was consumed with understanding the country of my birth and how it impacted me as an individual searching for a sense of wholeness. She witnessed my anger and my hope and was always a phone call away when I came back to the dormitory compound to relay the good and the bad times living in Hanoi in 1996. I took her back to the gate of A2 Bách Khoa and showed her the guard post where her phone calls were answered and often met with the phrase, “306 no home.” She walked with me across busy streets, motorbikes whizzing past us with insistent horns, a tangle of traffic congesting every inch of the street. She was able to witness the fast-pace of 21st century Vietnam and the effects of a market economy, the population expanding and each generation becoming more progressive, relinquishing the conservative communism that once shaped previous generations. That year I received my first DNA kit; it was given to me as part of a project that wanted to reunite adoptees with their birth families and gave Amerasians the hope to secure a visa to the United States if they could prove their paternal ties with the country. While so many adoptees looked for a way to trace themselves back to biological family in Vietnam through a simple cheek swab, so many Amerasians were looking for a
way out, the DNA kit a potential means to expunge them from a harsh life in Vietnam to something—anything—that would be better. Since the end of the war, their lives in Vietnam were characterized by extreme poverty and harsh treatment by a country that wanted to erase America from its painful memory, which included any offspring that could have been born from their occupation. They are known in Vietnam as bụi đồi, the dust of life. Their worth is determined solely by their association with the enemy, their mixed-race skin tones belying their ability to exist without being relegated to the lowest class in Vietnam. In contrast, many adoptees still look to their motherland to bring them home, recognizing that the circumstances of their adoption (in the midst of civil war) does little to assuage the constant nagging that there is something else out there, clues to biological family that can answer the primary question: Why did you give me up?

It took me some time to finally take the test; it lay on my dresser for over a year before I summoned the courage to send it off. In the quest to find the truth, the fear that the answer will not be what you are looking for weighs heavily on an adoptee’s mind. While so many of us have already imagined (and even partially accepted) the multitude of scenarios that caused our placement in the orphanages during the war, the affirmation of abandonment is almost too difficult to acknowledge. It means also recognizing yourself as bụi đồi, the dust that no one wants, and a lifetime of revisiting that theme has far-reaching affects in building one’s self-esteem.

**The Truth Revealed**

When I received my results, I was surprised to find that I was 100% Asian. A part of me was secretly relieved, recognizing that my rejection from the country in 1996
was somewhat unfounded. I was ethnically Vietnamese, at least partially, and did not belong to some disparate race of nothingness. Additionally, I could finally answer the question, “Where are you from?” with a semblance of accuracy, no longer having to shrug my shoulders and say things like, “Your guess is as good as mine,” or “I don’t know;” or “How much time do you have to hear the story?” In many ways, just knowing that I was ethnically bound to someplace—any place—helped me to reconcile the frustration that came from only being able to say, “I was born in Vietnam,” which means nothing and everything all at once. In addition to establishing a notion of ethnicity (75% Southeast Asian and 25% Chinese), listed on the results was a set of biological matches, mostly distant cousins. While I did not expect that an immediate family member would rise like a phoenix from the ashes, I imagine I secretly hoped that something would surface that would give me additional clues into my chain of being. A 5th cousin, while certainly exciting at the time, was so far removed from the top that it could offer very few answers except affirm the statement: I exist.

Since 2011, I have taken two more DNA tests, partly to see if any immediate relatives would surface and partly to reassert my ethnicity, each result offering a facet of sampling triangulation, depending upon the population being tested. 23andMe, for example, extends far beyond United States borders and my relative matches, mostly distant cousins, number well over two hundred. In comparison, my Family Tree DNA kit only matches me to just under thirty relatives, most of us belonging to specific projects that relate to finding family within Southeast Asia. Participating in these projects and DNA testing, while offering the hope of finding close relatives, has also given me
additional clues about my ethnicity, including strong evidence that part of my heritage derives from Cambodia. This information revealed to me that part of the rejection I felt living in Vietnam in 1996 stemmed from the conflict that spilled over into Cambodia long after American troops withdrew from Vietnam in 1973. Vietnam’s war with Cambodia lasted until the 1989 and as a result, Cambodian and Vietnam relationships are still strained. Much of the population, especially in Vietnam’s northern territory, also view Khmer as *bùi đồi*, which explains nearly everything I felt living in the city for those four months twenty years ago.

In April, I received email communication that a close relative was matched to me on my Family Finder DNA test, the original test I took in 2011. Excited and scared, I logged into the test to see what awaited me. A female, listed as a first or second cousin, lingered at the top of the matches list, eliciting a series of emotions I learned to suppress after so many years of waiting and realizing it was a long-shot that a close relative would surface. Knowing that my paperwork was false, the only chance I had to reunite with close biological family was through the tests. Since the tests cost $99 to process, I knew there was a slim chance anyone in Vietnam would spend the money to find long-lost relatives, especially a child they intentionally left behind in a maternity hospital forty years ago. A hundred dollars in Vietnam would provide nearly two to three weeks of living for a family in Vietnam (living frugally). Spending $99 to find family would be unheard of unless finding an overseas relative could benefit them in the long run. The match that surfaced in April was an Amerasian female who was trying to establish a paternal link to her African American father. Her test was sponsored by the same project
that handed out test kits to adoptees in 2010, and it was processed with a batch of other Vietnamese hoping to establish American paternity. So far, it seems, I am her closest relative, according to the quantity of centiMorgans (cM) that match relatives to one another. While I was excited to learn of this new, closer cousin, she was still not an immediate family member; I recognized that it could very well be an isolated connection that would do nothing more than remind me of a truth I could never know. However, after pictures and news media of a few adoptees’ reunions with biological family were shared in the Vietnamese adoptee community (and on national television), I started to consider the possibility of tracing this second cousin’s family to my own, realizing that an inquiry that led nowhere would not change the lack of information I lived with already. Additionally, I started to consider my age, forty-two, and what this would mean for any family living in Vietnam. My mother or father would have to be in their sixties or seventies at the minimum, the same age as my adoptive parents. Would they still be alive? Would I miss the chance if I did not search now? How would I feel if I found them, but I could no longer meet them because they passed away? Would it be okay for me to live the rest of my life not knowing or was it worth a shot to search for the answers? In the end, I chose the latter.

**Finding Family**

The process of reuniting with family is not easy. It takes a lot of people who care about helping you and of course, is not without monetary cost. Through a fellow adoptee, I was lucky to be introduced to a mutual friend, Joe, that once lived in Vietnam and was an Amerasian himself, emigrating to the United States when he was fifteen with
his mother and siblings in the mid-80s. Two years ago Joe found his father, an American soldier who was looking for him as well but had given up the search after finding the task comparable to searching for a needle in a haystack. Indeed, searches are exhaustive and nearly fruitless, especially since Vietnamese records were destroyed after the war or even non-existent. Many of the districts were reestablished over the years and street names and neighborhoods were renamed and redrawn to comprise today’s Vietnam map. A lot of the families fled Vietnam just after the war’s end, many of whom constituted the large population of refugees or boat people who established themselves in countries around the world, including the United States. Many families still living in South Vietnam left war-torn Saigon in search of a more peaceful countryside, trying to reclaim their lives in the midst of tenuous times. With the still-looming fear of being thrown back into further upheaval when bombs dropped in the middle of the night and food and safe shelter was hard to come by, they took a chance to find safe haven amidst the instability that would characterize Vietnam for the next thirty years. It was not until the early 90s, just after the suppression of the Vietnam/Cambodian conflict, that Vietnam could finally start repairing their economy and ultimately their citizens’ lives. Normalizing relationships with America was just one of these steps. Investing in a market-driven economy that allowed Vietnam to participate in worldwide trade agreements further gave the country its boost and informs how it looks today. Now, it is a bustling metropolis of foreign investment and business that showcases Vietnam as one of the top countries for trade and commerce in the world. While there still remains government strife and class disparities, the majority of Vietnam and its population have moved on from any and all conflicts with
little concern for a past plagued by civil unrest. As a country they have successfully moved forward and the world along with it.

When I made the move to trace my cousin’s family’s line to see if I could find my own, I already knew that it would take some time. I knew that my hope would need to be checked at the door and that I could not expect anything more than time and money spent on possibility, with a high probability of failure. I had nothing more than my cousin’s name to go on. From the search, I learned that she was a second cousin; her mother is my first cousin. Her mother’s parents were my aunt and uncle, and I was attached to one of those lines. From whose side, however, took some time to trace. The search for the family started with my connection in the United States, Joe, and would transfer to another connection in Vietnam, Quynhle, who spent nearly a month interviewing people and traveling around regions of Vietnam asking questions about a child given up sometime in the early 1970s. It was an incredible experience to be a part of, not just because it was my family they were tracing but because, as a researcher, I knew that the information gleaned throughout the investigation would inform a multitude of answers to a lifetime of research questions and ultimately, add to my store of knowledge. Additionally, oftentimes these two investigators would pass on knowledge in real time through a series of text conversations that would include my corresponding with Joe while he was talking to Quynhle simultaneously. I would get the results as they were playing out, especially as they got closer and she was sitting with my family in Vietnam talking to them about who I might be and whose side of the family I may have come from. Nearly everyone contributed to the effort, helping to write down family trees that would show connections
and links to one another. All of them were surprised that I existed, and only a couple of people refused to acknowledge that such a person would exist in their family (the social stigma still prevalent). In a swift, two-month’s time, Joe and Quyhnle had most of the pieces to the puzzle, family trees extending up and out from the the second cousin to the possibility of being linked to the aunt’s or uncle’s side of the family (see Appendix D for the initial, handwritten family tree). We tested both sides of my first cousin’s family, obtaining DNA from two males that resided in separate regions and represented a paternal or maternal link. The DNA tests made their way back to the United States with the help from another Vietnam contact who happened to reside in Colorado. I met him in a parking lot in Parker, Colorado a week after he arrived, anxious to be in control of the process from that point forward. I sent in the two tests with $200 for processing in early October, 2015. It would take six to eight weeks to get the results. While we waited, the families in Vietnam speculated. They were surprised and doubtful themselves and wanted proof as much as I did that I was connected to their family. In the space of that time, I was given pictures and names. I saw faces that could be sisters or brothers, aunts and uncles, even a father. I learned names that were foreign and without value to me, potential relatives that existed as names on a tree that I might or might not belong to. They asked for pictures of me as a baby to see if they could recognize me, one of the males remembering that he saw a girl for a short time in the same household as one of his half-brothers. She was taken away by the mother and no one saw her again, the mother or the daughter. Memories swirled in those eight weeks, flitting to the top of a family member’s cognition only to be forced back with forty years of in between, a lifetime lost
to remembering an absent child, trying to figure out why she was in America and not in Vietnam. It was a long wait—one heightened with anticipation and a chance to find truth, an abstract concept about which I spent the better part of the previous two years delineating its nonexistence. On November 27, 2015 the notification that results were finalized came through in an email. In the early hours of the morning, while I sat in solitude, I logged on to the first test, my heart pounding, my awareness of what this could mean for me barely registering in my mind. I clicked on the “Matches” tab and in an instant the page populated with a list of names. I looked towards the top. Nothing. I scrolled down to the bottom. Nothing. I saw there was another two pages of results and I clicked on those. Nothing. My name was not listed as a match to this man at all. My heart fell, knowing that the search could be futile, and I needed to prepare for that again, a lifetime of searching leading to nothing concrete except the recurrent feeling of being incomplete. Nearly forty years of searching for clues, moving to Vietnam in 1996, traveling back and forth in subsequent trips only to learn that my life was partly fiction, and finally giving up hope that there would ever be a knowable answer came rushing back to me like a tidal wave. I let it consume me, rebounding back to the spaces when I acquiesced that a lack of knowledge and absolute truth would always be a part of my life. I reeled the line of optimism back to its resting space before I allowed myself to login to the second test. My anticipation was at rest; doubts lingering as I entered the kit numbers and the password for the site. I was greeted with the home screen, the familiar icon of “interpreting results” now replaced with the declaration that the batch had been processed and all matches found and listed on the appropriate page. I clicked on the “Matches” tab
and glanced at the top. My name was posted first. The cM meter was filled in almost to the top, five times the amount of my second cousin. I looked at the name of this man and his relationship to me. He was my brother. Not nothing. Everything.

Verisimilitude II

My biological father had four wives. On paper, this probably means he had one wife and three mistresses, the first wife taking on the “obligations” that the other three wives created from my father’s and each of their unions. I am the daughter of the third wife, a woman who dropped off two sons to be cared for by the first wife before she said “No” to me. As a result, I went back to the hospital from which I was born and was left there again, my mother vanishing into thin air as soon as I was transferred to the hospital staff. No one has seen or heard from her since. In my dreams, I always thought that it would be the mother I found, the person who knows the answers to the most basic questions: When was I born? What was my name? Why did you give me up? Why did you leave?

I never expected to find the father. Or the brother. Or the half sisters or half brothers. I never expected to find anyone. In my dreams it isn’t the father that matters; it is always the mother. It is from her that I always thought I inherited the shape of my body, the color of my skin, the curl in my hair. It is from her that I learned to be silent in my frustration, my needs put on hold in the absence of consideration from others. It is from her that I expected the chasm between knowing and understanding to be bridged, the abyss called truth reconciled forever. However, she will remain fiction, the part of the truth that could be real but most likely is not. Verisimilitude.
I have been a mother for eleven years now; my oldest son is a reminder of the many years I have lived to be a part of the universe in which he lives. I am not the sun around which he has revolved. He is the sun. The first blood relative I ever knew. In my son I saw a portion of the answers—a semblance of the truth—not the whole truth. A part of who he is resides in his father. He has inherited his sensitivity, his empathy for others. The father still remains a part of the puzzle, contributing pieces that comprise the image—a semblance of the truth—not the whole truth.

My biological father must have been charming, wooing four women into sharing his universe and three out of four of them staying on, complicit in his infidelity. This is not uncommon in Vietnam. A man often takes on a second wife and life goes on as usual. Half-siblings become whole, sometimes sharing the space without much regard to who belongs to whom and why. Of course, it depends on the circumstances; sister wives still harbor pangs of jealousy, frustration, and anger, and drama ultimately ensues. I am lucky in that regard. From what I understand, most of my biological family remains intact, save for the ones that emigrated to the United States and the one lost daughter taken back to Tu Du maternity hospital to be shuffled back into the system. They weren’t looking for me, but they knew I existed. At some point, someone might have mentioned my absence, a brief exchange over cà phê sữa when the past settled down and the flag that was now raised was no longer a foreign intrusion, communist ideology becoming commonplace in their lives. When the woman who came asking about me paid them a visit they started to put pieces of the puzzle together. They mapped out family trees, listed great uncles and aunts, multiple wives and their children, drew splits and connections.
Some remembered me as though I was a misplaced shoe, its match lost “sometime between 1971 and 1973.” The woman who traced a second cousin back to my father traveled across several regions to put together the story, branches of the tree extending well past the roots of inception. Most of the family branches were curious and even hopeful, while one or two were surprised by the news and hesitant to claim an illegitimate child on their side of the family. I don’t blame them, really. Social stigmas are not meant to evoke sympathies, even if a child is at stake. The branches of my family were traced back and forth from Saigon to its outer limits and beyond, clusters from each maternal and paternal great grandparents spreading out like the delta. My great grandmother on my father’s side was Chinese. Originally Han, it seems, according to my DNA test and the story passed down from the family residing in Gò Công. There were four siblings from my great grandparents: three sons and a daughter. My line extends from one of the sons (my grandfather) and from his offspring my father, still living, age ninety-four and only in and out of lucidity. He resides in Gò Công in a home surrounded by the images of those who have passed on: his parents (my grandparents), some of his siblings, his first wife, even some sons and daughters. One of my brothers would be among those not living, the second son accepted by the first wife but who did not live past being a toddler. My father does not remember the living at present; he needs help remembering the past. I doubt he knows who I am. I imagine I am a fleeting memory like his 3rd wife, my mother, a wisp of memory hanging loose from the more intricate web still intact. I am still there, clinging to the structure if only to exist as a fragile thread on its outskirts. My mother, however, let go a long time ago. She cut herself from the
weaving of the Lê family and set herself free, vanishing into the air and carried off into another kind of life. I imagine her like the small spider in “Charlotte’s Web,” her voice trailing off as she gets lost in the wind, confident that the risk of letting go is worth taking, gliding past the border to uncertainty. From her, yes, I inherited poststructuralism. From her I inherited the inability to stay within the Same. She abandoned the structure after nearly ten years and went to find Difference. Her complete reasons are unknowable but there is a level of understanding in why she made that choice—a semblance of the truth—not the whole truth. Verisimilitude.

Reunion

When the plane finally landed in Ho Chi Minh City, it was almost lunchtime. I had flown for nearly twenty hours at this point, making a midnight transfer from Los Angeles to Seoul just days after Christmas. While I would typically spend the winter break reorganizing for the new year, making last minute donations to Goodwill, or trying to find space for some new kids’ toys, this time, I was headed to Vietnam to meet my biological family. The decision to go to Vietnam at that point was made because of my father’s health. At ninety-four, he was already declining mentally. The family told me that if I wanted the chance to meet him, that I should come as soon as I could. They feared that not meeting him in my lifetime would cause me to feel great regret, and they were right. I knew that if I wanted a chance to see my biological father in person, whether or not he could recognize who I was or why I was there, I needed to go right away. Never mind that it was winter break, or I had just returned from Nicaragua. It was time to go and this was the only time I could manage to do so without risking too much
time away from my job. With the support of my administrators, I scheduled a 10-day trip, missing the first week of the return to school so that I could reunite with the family I had not known existed until two months prior.

One of the hardest choices to make in going was the selection of my travel companion. I wanted my spouse to accompany me, but our three kids needed someone at home to take care of them, in addition to the fish, the dog, the two new kittens, and the chameleon. My mother also offered to come along; in a way, I think she wanted to meet them as well, if anything, to thank them for making the choice they made to allow her to be my mother. In the end, I settled on a friend and fellow adoptee, Mike. He accompanied two other adoptees back to Vietnam for their birth family reunions a year prior and was the photographer and documentarian of their trips. In addition to needing his photography skills, I also felt that I needed someone that could understand the enormity of the situation, especially as a fellow Vietnam War adoptee that also lived over four decades without knowing anything about biological family. I knew that in the times I could not articulate some of my feelings, he would still understand where I was coming from. Furthermore, I needed to meet the family in my own space, without being overly cognizant of being an adoptive daughter, a wife, or a mother (my son also really wanted to go). In essence, I just needed to go by myself for myself. The issue, of course, was that I could not go on my own despite my previous solo residence in the country and travel throughout SE Asia without much concern for my safety. I was a mother now, however, and not an early-twenties student with a heart full of angst and little care for my continued existence in the world. Nonetheless, I was traveling halfway across the world
to meet complete strangers; I could not just go on my own at this point in my life. Once plans were made and travel arranged, we headed back towards Vietnam. I traveled from Denver; Mike traveled from Hawaii. Our planes landed an hour apart, his arriving just before mine.

Despite the thirteen-hour time change, I was alert and ready for the day. Gathering my belongings from the overhead bin, I made my way through the airport towards baggage claim. I met Mike, and we made our way through customs, our visas and passports accepted without concern or disdain. In previous travel, study of my passport was often met with resentment from customs officers, their power to suspend my entrance or exit into the country permeating through the thick, Plexiglas window. They saw my citizenship as an affront, an escape from a country they still belonged to and as government officers, held strong allegiance to. The rift between government officials and the citizens of Vietnam is constant. While a younger generation of officers are less punitive than their predecessors, corruption is still prevalent and at the expense of any citizen, regardless of their party alliance. Previous trips yielded discomfort and worry as I waited for the stamp that would allow me to enter as well as exit the country, a passport officer’s scrutiny eliciting guilt for possessing a foreign passport, much less an American one.

Once we gathered our luggage from customs, we made our way to the exit, knowing that the cool air-conditioned airport would be replaced with the high humidity of Vietnam in a matter of seconds. There was a large group of people waiting beyond the sliding, glass doors. They looked above one another’s heads for a sign that their party
had arrived, large families huddled together to greet a family member or friend arriving from a trip. On previous trips, walking through the cordoned path felt as though, for a moment, you could be a celebrity. However, there were no red carpets in front of you, only unfamiliar faces lining the sides and the immediate onslaught of taxi drivers vying for your business once you reached the end. I knew that this time, making my way through the sea of people that waited outside for family members, I would find mine.

I envisioned this moment for decades, wondering what my emotions would be, how I would act, what the family would do. I spent the previous five hours deliberating the years that brought me to this point: a culmination of emotions and identity shifting that was the shadow of my life for more than forty years. I relived the curiosity of an adopted child, the storied life of an orphan of war I relayed to my high school friends, the frustration of rebuilding an identity in the collapse of the one I had always known, the anger of being outcast in a country that was supposed to be my motherland, the dismissal of hope that came with realizing there would be no answers to the questions I always asked of my existence. In that moment before I stepped out of the airport, I recognized that within the next five minutes, my life would be forever changed.

I knew that I would be meeting at least two of my brothers, a translator, and Quynhle, who spent the previous month traveling the area in search of my question’s answers. I knew what my brothers looked like. Pictures were shared instantly when Quynhle snapped informal shots of my brothers as they contemplated my existence, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes at a street-side table a half-a-world away. I studied these pictures for a month before traveling to Vietnam, trying to find the same
facial features that I could connect to my own. They looked tired, thick lines of hard labor, country life, and a lifetime of common Vietnamese smoking and drinking habits aging them quickly. My youngest, half-brother was the patriarch of the family now, the family inheritance of land, business, and management of family affairs his responsibility now that my father was ailing and no longer able to take charge. In my family, the passing down of family wealth and management fell on the youngest son, rather than the oldest, to help support future generations to come. The house in the country was built for him by my father at the age of eighty-one. It took him three years to build. Now, he sits inside the interior, front room and is predominately cared for by my brother and his wife. A pink, crocheted beanie rests atop his fuzzy, white hair, as he watches the sons and daughters of his legacy wander in and out of his vantage point by the open door. He knows who they are, but he can no longer communicate with them as a paternal figure. I suspect he, along with the family, is waiting for the inevitable, but the constitution that marked over ninety years of his life, the strength he still carried to build houses in his 80s, is a constant and resolute marker that life endures and my biological father along with it.

I saw Quynhle first, her long, brown hair cascading down the backside of her dress. She smiled widely and waved. Quynhle is also Amerasian, one of many children unable to determine paternity but dedicated to helping others try to establish theirs. Her work to help others is ongoing as she continues to do what she can to provide for the communities of outcast Amerasians that live in near-destitute conditions in the city and its outskirts. When I was introduced to her, she knew of my second cousin. She
remembered her and went to find her in order to help me. Over the time she spent searching for my family, she did not ask for compensation, only used any money I sent to pay for travel costs. Without Quynhle’s tireless efforts, I knew that the reality I now faced would never be possible. I smiled and waved back, searching the group for the familiar faces of my brothers. They stood to the side, their small frames a reminder of the Vietnamese life they lived. My own body, well-nourished in Western society, felt clumsy and heavy as I made my way to where they were standing. The translator greeted me happily and accompanied me to make introductions. My brothers were not smiling, not from unhappiness, but from a life of living that was marked by work rather than pleasure, a look I got to know well in the time I spent with them. I imagine, as well, they were unsure what to do at first. I reached out a hand to shake each of theirs, knowing that hugs were neither common nor appropriate at the moment. I was, after all, a complete stranger to them.

As the story unfolded in their lives in the early days of fall, my biological family learned about who I was from a one-page autobiography I wrote and pictures I sent. Joe translated my autobiography and sent it to Quynhle. She printed the pictures I shared over social media to place in a small, plastic album. The pictures chronicled my life the best I could convey, starting from the photo that the orphanage took to include in my passport and every two or three years after. I sent pictures of my brothers, my parents, my spouse, the kids. I sent pictures of myself with orthodontic braces, at school graduation ceremonies, as a toddler whose brown face would never match that of the family who raised me. I excluded pictures of myself on vacations or ones that depicted
the wealth of my life in the United States even though I would consider myself middle
class, a comfortable but hard-working space that lies between excess and poverty. I was
mindful that despite some of the years we struggled in our day-to-day, the money I
earned even as a teacher with three kids would go much farther in Vietnam, and I would
still be considered wealthy, an issue that often makes reuniting with family challenging.
The expectation that a wealthy western relative should provide for a family halfway
around the world is common and certainly a part of the deliberation when adoptees start
to search for biological family. It was assumed by others (even those helping me in the
search) that this would be my expectation, but I would not know how that would feel or
what I would do in the circumstance unless I was put in the position to find out for
myself. In the documentary, “Daughter from Danang,” (Dolguin & Franco, 2002) this
was the cultural impasse for the woman who found her relatives. In the end, the cultural
clash caused great pain for both sides and the daughter returned back to her life in the
United States as a military daughter and wife, trying to ignore the issue and resentful and
angry as a result. Mike, who accompanied me on the trip, calls this the “Daughter of
Danang syndrome,” the cultural conflict that occurs when an adoptee trying to find
biological family learns that the only thing the family wants is money—no relationships,
no happiness for the reunion, all hope of finding your way back crushed by the weight of
Vietnam’s poverty. This issue was so pervasive in the early nineties that families in
Vietnam would often “claim” adoptees as relatives, wanting to change their class
circumstances by preying on the absent knowledge of war adoptees. Without DNA
testing, this could be easily done, especially with so many adoptees looking for a
connection back to Vietnam, fiction replacing fiction in a sad attempt to take advantage of the vulnerability and heightened emotions of a war adoptee. Even now, adoptee reunions communicate the same story. Although DNA testing makes manipulation slightly less plausible, a family in need can become a family of greed. A couple of my own friends have found themselves in this position, their biological reunions less grandiose in terms of reconciliation, the understanding that what we can give as a person less important than what we can give in terms of wealth. It is a sad result of many adoptee reunions, especially because the build-up of decades of hope in finding a biological match that can bring peace to oneself is manifested in so many of us. I know that even though my adoptive family was one of the most loving families I could have received, I was still looking. I wanted to know why I was left. The choice to pursue a search, even with faced with the strong cynicism of others, allowed me to at least put wonder to rest, no matter what the outcome—positive or negative. After forty years, I believe I was prepared to accept whatever the result of a reunion would be and took that attitude with me the moment I stepped on the plane to reunite with my birth family. But before that happened, I struggled to compile forty-two years in a series of twenty-some photos and realized they would never do justice to the life I lived or could adequately convey who I was as a person. It was something but not everything. At the very least, it gave my brothers a photo with which to recognize me.

There were more people at the airport than I expected. My second cousin, her mother (my first cousin), and a few others were also there. Like my brothers, I shook hands with each, accepting the awkward space that existed between us as part of the
cultural experience. I did not cry, although I anticipated that I would. However, except for Mike, all of these people I was meeting for the first time. They were strangers to me and I to them. Although I imagined a more emotional reunion, I kept my feelings in check and prepared for the rest of the day, which included lunch near our hotel and potentially, a dinner as well. While the time change should have made me sluggish, I was too excited to care about resting, a million questions swirling through the vestiges of my mind and without the ability to speak Vietnamese, many would most likely go unanswered. While I contemplated the magnitude of the moment, Mike had his own reflection about our first meeting. He writes:

My observation about Joie is that she has a unique way about her. I see her as being powerful yet not controlling. Humility and compassion is her way. I saw this the first time I met her in Vietnam in 2010. I saw this when we met again at the airport in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) in 2015. There is a warmthness to Joie that is hard to explain, perhaps best described as unassuming. I was excited and curious how this family reunion, 42 years in the making, would turn out. I arrived an hour before Joie, so I waited for her just outside and down the escalator of Vietnamese customs. We collected our luggage, took and deep breath and exited to the madness of the waiting crowd outside the airport. It is Vietnamese custom to bring the whole family, extended and all, to greet returning family members. As we exited the airport and scanned the crowd, we saw a familiar face: the lady who helped Joie find her family. We greeted her then the introductions started. We met Joie’s brother, Đat, her half-brother, Thanh, and other family members. I
remember snapping off a bunch of photos. As all of this is unfolding, I wondered what Joie is feeling inside about this. Does she feel uncomfortable meeting these strangers who carry her DNA in their bodies, yet she has never met nor even knew they existed? Does she love them as she loves her adoptive brothers in the U.S.? I would not think so as there is a history of arguing over toys, food, or other sibling situations with her adoptive brothers. There is no emotional attachment or history to the individuals who are her biological brothers standing in front of her. They could be like the millions of strangers that we walk by in our lives, yet now, they are her brothers and part of her family. On top of all this, we have the cultural aspect of meeting to deal with. For example, how are we to greet my new friends and her new family? Do we shake hands, hug, or kiss on the cheek? This must have been an incredible, huge concern for Joie. (Frailey, 2016)

During those first few hours spending time with my brothers, I learned a little about the family and about how they felt. I understood that my full brother, upon finding out that his sister was alive and well in an entirely different country, could barely sleep because he was so excited. This, I believe, stemmed from the absence of his mother, the death of our other brother at the age of three, and the loss of his little sister. For most of his life, despite being raised by my father’s first wife and living closely with our half-brothers, he was still the only one in his family group. He lived a solitary life, being the only sibling left from our mother’s and father’s union. Now, with his sister returning to Vietnam, he knew he was not alone. This information, of course, stood in sharp contrast
to the aloof man before me, who peered at me with curious eyes across the lunch table; his quiet voice and shy demeanor displaying less of his excitement than the suspicious emotions of a stranger. Occasionally he would glance my way in between slow drags of a cigarette, yet our unfamiliarity with one another and cultural gap kept both of our emotions in check. Our translator tried to bridge the gap as best he could but forty-two years is an awfully long time to bridge and very little could be shared in the space of an hour. After some time, it was decided that we should get some rest and rejoin for dinner where I could meet more of the family, and we could learn more. Mike recalls:

We made it through the greetings and what I sensed about the family, especially her brother, Đat, was sadness. I sensed sadness in Joie as well, but she still smiled radiantly and tried to correspond with them. Although I noticed this more than anything, I also detected that they had a sense of responsibility to her even though they had never met. Her brother, Đat, left an impression on me. He seemed to be deep in thought all of the time. He had a sense of humility about him. He was kind and quiet. Đat was drawn to Joie and often looked at her. Perhaps he was awed by the fact that he was looking at this person that shared DNA with her, and it was like looking into a mirror. The result was that he had a brotherly way about him from the onset. (Frailey, 2016, para. 3)

While my own thoughts were reeling from just that first meeting, I knew that the next ten days would continue to give me insight, new knowledge acquired in every introduction to members of my biological family. I was scared and fascinated all at once. I wanted answers, but I knew that it would take some time to get them. I was happy,
though, for the first time being in Vietnam. I remember returning to the hotel that afternoon thinking, Yes, this is it. This is what it’s all about. Prior to that, I had not intended to visit Vietnam again.

A Step Back in Time

The bustling of Ho Chi Minh City gave way to the countryside. Traffic dissipated with every mile marker we passed, black numbers written on small, white columns reflecting the more-common metric system. Small districts established on the periphery of a city of over 8 million people became few and far between as our rental van rumbled down the highway, the horn constantly deployed as it weaved between motor-scooters heedless of traffic rules. Once we passed the last prominent marker of city life, the open road offered a reprieve from the congestion of each peripheral district and green rice paddies began to dot the sides of the road. People walked along its edges, carrying goods, pushing carts, shuffling dusty, sandaled feet with no apparent hurry. There was nowhere to go but up and down the single highway which connected town to town like a simple dot-to-dot picture. We were headed towards Gò Công, the residence of my biological family living in the country. My two brothers sat in front with the driver despite the extra seats in the back of the nine-passenger van—more than enough room to accommodate all seven of us. However, they felt more comfortable riding shotgun, partly to assist the driver in his navigation and partly, I imagine, to avoid the awkwardness of sitting next to a sister they have not seen in forty-two years. I was okay, however, with the arrangement and occupied the seat behind them next to my oldest half-brother’s daughter, my niece, who was serving as our translator for this leg of the trip. In the hour
and a half drive time I listened to my niece’s story of how she met her Swedish husband. 
She shared an abundance of pictures from her 2014 wedding that were saved on her iPhone, a blend of Vietnamese and Western customs depicted in each frame as she explained the more traditional Vietnamese wedding photos. She was very proud to share the pictures; her wedding áo dài gave way to various dresses of western culture, each picture offering the chronology of the celebration. Her slim figure, matching outfit, and neatly applied makeup were clear indicators of her living within Ho Chi Minh City as opposed to the more casual dress of those living in the country. She was happy, kind, and eager to share what she could. She was still working on her paperwork to move to Sweden to be with her husband, who, since their marriage, lived almost 9,000 miles away, their lives temporarily split once his travel visa wore out. Her English was very good and a welcome relief as we made our way to the more traditional countryside. With each passing minute, the now-rural areas of Vietnam began to emerge. Family tombs, containing the ashes of the patriarch and matriarch of the families, stood like large, concrete markers of land occupation. Rising up from the middle of the rice paddies, they were evidence of a long-standing Vietnamese tradition. Small offerings of fruit and incense were placed at the foot of each tomb, some well-kept and others worn and crumbling after so many years exposed to the weather. Skinny chickens darted about on the outskirts of the road, waiting to be captured and strung up by the feet, their necks eventually slit to let the blood flow into a small porcelain bowl, the thick red liquid left to congeal for the family’s next meal. Makeshift ponds held a raft of ducks floating in too-shallow water, but they were happy nonetheless as they crowded in the small area. Every
once in a while a dog, recently pregnant and showing worn teats, would saunter by, stopping every now and again to chew at its incurable mange. Small piles of trash accumulated by the street, presumably swept up and carted away by the local garbage collectors. With no receptacles for trash, anything not eaten or used was tossed on the ground without concern for the environment. While Ho Chi Minh City boasted some receptacles for trash, life in the country operated just as it had for centuries; only new modes of transportation, a paved highway, and small piles of plastic water bottles depicted its existence in a more-modern era.

After another thirty minutes, we abruptly pulled off onto the side of the road. I looked out to see that we were in no place in particular, a couple of family-owned businesses on each side of the highway. My brothers descended from the front of the vehicle and moved toward the rear to get our luggage, two large suitcases each for Mike and me. I was embarrassed by the weight, usually accustomed to traveling quite light, but one suitcase contained gifts for the family and unsure of what to bring, the offerings accumulated as small tokens of American culture were packed tightly into the space of my luggage. My other bag, a medium-size, neon-yellow duffle, held my clothes and pretty much everything else I packed for the 10-day trip. My experience with traveling taught me to keep it simple, leaving any unnecessary clothing behind and most definitely anything that would boast of being a wealthy American, including diamond wedding rings, fancy jewelry, and clothing that would seem out-of-place in the remote areas of Vietnam. Even before leaving, I worried about bringing my iPhone, an obvious symbol of American wealth and privilege. When I arrived in Ho Chi Minh City, however, I
realized iPhones were ubiquitous, more people owning them outright as a symbol of prosperity. I still rented mine from AT&T. Despite this new revelation, I still tried to keep my American privilege in check, working my best to stay traditional and conservative with clothing choices and not flaunting anything of value that would mark me as another wealthy foreigner. Not matter what, however, it is almost inescapable. Western equals wealthy no matter which First World country you come from or which economic class you truly belong to.

Dat and Thanh pulled the luggage behind them and onto a small dirt trail after we paid for the van and it skirted off and down the highway. Mike had his camera out, ready to take photos of the first time I would meet and see my father. I followed awkwardly behind, making my way to the country home I saw in pictures a month prior, my tennis shoes kicking up dust from the path. I felt nervous and shy, not enjoying being the center of attention as our group of seven approached the house. My father was sitting in the same chair I saw in the photo they sent. He was laying back, the wooden chair reclining slightly from his small frame. His cheeks and eyes were sunken in, his mouth slightly agape as he rested. At the age of ninety-four, he looked like he was dead, and for a moment I wondered if I was too late. When I walked up the couple of steps to the house, more family members gathered around to see us, waiting for proper greetings until the reunion moment had passed. Again, I hated being in the spotlight; all eyes were on me, waiting to see what I would do and how I would react. I was glad there was not a film crew in tow, a common occurrence for many adoptee reunions as they are rare and certainly worth capturing. But for me, a mostly private person, bringing a crew to “tell
my story” would make me feel as though it was not my story at all, wrought instead by a team who had not been with me the last forty years as I struggled to find a permanent place in the world. Instead, I brought Mike as my cameraman, hoping a less obtrusive reunion would put the family at ease while still documenting the moment. We gathered around my father, my half-sister coming around the chair to wake him. He blinked a couple of times and looked up sleepily, his vision slightly blurred by the slight onset of cataracts and the advancement of old age. My niece knelt down to speak to him as he looked around at the sea of faces now gathered around his resting post.

“Ông nội,” she said, placing her hand on his knee while addressing him as “grandfather.” He recognized her immediately and started to shake off sleep. She continued to speak in Vietnamese and pointed to me, standing to the side and feeling the weight of the moment. He looked up and saw me. I smiled. Eventually, my niece started communicating with scraps of paper, big letters drawn out for him to read and try to comprehend. From my understanding, they were talking about my return, and told him repeatedly that I was Đat’s sister. I had come back. After twenty minutes, he finally could grasp a bit of what they were telling him. He looked at me, and finally said, “Em, Đat.” Đat’s sister. For a brief moment, he recognized me as part of the past, tied to a woman he once shared enough time with to father three children and who, forty-two years ago, disappeared with me in her arms. He never raised me, but for one split moment, he knew exactly who I was. I was my mother’s daughter. His daughter. Đat’s sister.

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6 See Appendix E
In the next half hour, I sat next to my father on a small, plastic stool, more people coming in to explain my presence (as well as Mike’s) and our reason for being there. After the initial moment had lapsed, other family members started to drift away, going about their business as if my being there was the most natural thing in the world and now they could carry on. At one point, tears welled up in my eyes and I let them fall, mindful of the people watching me with careful concern. I imagine they each had their own questions about what I was feeling or where I had been for forty-two years, but for now, everyone understood that I had come home and that, quite honestly, was enough. Mike reflects:

As the story unfolds in my mind and before me, I am taking photos of all I see in the immediate moment with every click of the shutter. I see this strong, powerful, humble, and compassionate lady (Joie) as a lost daughter, sister, niece, or aunt. I notice Joie is as warm to them as I had known her to be to me. She tries to converse with her father but I see hesitation in her behavior as to whether she should embrace him or not. I see a bit of uncomfortableness as her father does not recognize her as his daughter and the niece is repeatedly saying that Joie is your daughter, Joie is your daughter. After many times of the niece saying this, the father acknowledges Joie is his daughter, and I see tears in Joie’s eyes. I continue to take photos through the tears in my own eyes. As this dialog is happening, the cousin that linked Joie to her brother, grabs Joie’s father’s hand and Joie’s hand and puts them together. I wonder, “What does it feel like to touch your father’s hand for the first time in forty-two years?” and the camera shutter
snaps away. This beautiful image is now caught in digital image for us to savor forever. Interestingly, Joie and I never talked about this moment as so much else happened. In this encounter, I saw Joie as warm and engaging yet there was still an uncomfortableness in her actions. As Joie sat next to her father and talked through her niece, I see Joie has moments of sadness and several times buries her face in her hands. I see her looking at me and her brother, Đat, on occasion. In all of this, I still capture the moment and when I look at those photos, I still wonder what was racing through her mind. It is something I think about and reflect upon when I am documenting these adoptee reunions, but I cannot say I will ever understand this feeling. (Frailey, 2016, para 10)

Reconciling Past and Present

In the days that followed my reunion with my biological father, Mike and I slowly became a part of the pace of Vietnam’s country life and my family’s life within it. While we stayed in an inexpensive hotel ($11 per night) just five minutes away, we met the family for meals, were taken to the clam beach, shared coffee, tea, and an abundance of Vietnamese meals in informal gatherings. We were picked up by motor-scooter each day in the morning and returned during the allotted Vietnamese nap time. We were not asked to stay at the families’ houses (my other half-brother, Hồ, lived just behind my father’s house) nor were we asked if we wanted to. In a way, despite the cultural expectation that families all stay together (even sharing the same sleeping spaces), I believe they knew that our being strangers was still the reality and as much as we respected their cultural norms, they respected ours. Americans are not typically communal and build houses
with separate rooms just so each person can have their own space. I learned one day that my brother, Đat, was very sad for me because I was in the hotel room by myself. He believed that I must feel very alone even though I needed the time to myself, not just to be comfortable but because I could not process with other people around me. This was just one of the cultural differences between my life as an American and their lives as Vietnamese. Over the next few days, we would learn about many more.

In the country, we had nowhere to go but down the street. Each morning or early evening Mike and I would walk down the highway and see how far we could go before we could glimpse more bustling civilization. It turns out it would have taken us at least ten miles to get there. We spent the next three days in Gò Công, getting to know brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews. Each day provided us with the opportunity to meet members of a very large family, my father, Tuc, responsible for most of its creation (see Appendix F for the formal Lê family tree). When we arrived at the house, I would always make sure to say hello to my father and for the first ten minutes, we would go through the reminder of who I was, “Em Đat,” until my father could remember and recite it on his own. He would also remember my mother and tell me that she was Khmer, the ethnic label for Cambodian. One day, the translator told us that everyone remembered that she was very beautiful and nice, “for a Khmer.” A couple of times, when I sat down with him, he talked to me in Vietnamese about climbing the tree just outside (which broke his legs) and needing a haircut. My brothers told me they tried to tell him not to climb the tree (he was ninety) but he was stubborn, independent,
and did not really want to do what others told him to do. I realized, then, I was definitely related to this man.

We were also there for the death anniversary of Thanh’s mother, which is celebrated with the entire family, close friends, a wall of speakers and karaoke music, fancy place settings, and special dishes. For all of our meals I sat at the table with the men, mostly with my brothers, the women sitting together in their own area and helping bring out dishes and clear them away. Sometimes, I felt awkward in this position, knowing that if I had lived my life in Vietnam, my place would never be with the men, nor, perhaps, would I want it to be. In my time there, I mostly bonded with the brothers, my half-sisters moving in and out of the picture, but rarely did I have the chance to get to know them like I did Đạt, Hồ, Thanh and Bửu, the three oldest sons (after one passed away the previous year) and the youngest. One day we did not have a translator and so we spent our time trying our best to communicate with my limited Vietnamese. Sometimes, I could figure words out, the Vietnamese language coming back to me after twenty years when I was as a student in Hanoi. Even then, however, I never went to class. After realizing I would never assimilate into Vietnam, I rebelled and stopped learning the formal language. I never expected to need it like I did now and back then, I did not care. The Vietnamese people’s rejection of me in 1996, another blow to my self-esteem and pride, forced me to reject Vietnam as a whole. Only on this trip did I truly feel like I understood my place in the world, not as Vietnamese, not as American, just as me. Mike writes:
What I learned about Joie and myself was that even though we both are well educated and have privileged lives, we are humble enough to appreciate a life of pure existence. I think that was when I realized no matter where we are, our essence is still the same. We will be who were are no matter where we are. This was demonstrated over and over throughout our visit especially in one photo I took one day. After trying to catch a fish with a bamboo pole was unsuccessful, Thanh broke out a throw net. As he hauled in the net full of fish, Joie jumped right in to help sort the fish and remove them from the net. In that photo, Joie did not call herself out as being a Westerner or American; she looked like a member of the family, especially with the traditional Vietnamese hat on her head. If one didn’t know it was Joie under the hat, they would just say that it was a beautiful, Vietnamese-family, fishing photo. As I stood across the pond shooting pictures with my telephoto lens, I was amazed at the beauty of the scene. I was saddened by the fact that forty-two years had gone by before a photo like this was taken of my friend and her family. I was grateful to be there to capture it for her. (Frailey, 2016, para. 15)

Eventually Mike and I moved on from Gò Công and return to Ho Chi Minh City, taking a side trip to Da Lat for a couple of days to talk through our experiences and take a step away from the reunion experience. While we did not intend to return to Gò Công at the end of the trip, at some point I realized that I needed to go back, test my father’s DNA, and say goodbye one last time. In the short time that I had in Vietnam, I learned

\footnote{See Appendix C}
that my father worked for the U.S. government during the war as a driver of high-ranking officials. He could speak French and English fluently. The family told me that had I come to Vietnam ten years earlier, he would have been able to speak to me in English and most likely, remember who I was. Unfortunately, his immobility caused his mind to slow, and he loses pieces of his memory with each passing day. He also built Thanh’s house, a tradition for the youngest son when he gets married, and was known for his architectural skills, including the creation of two official family tombs, the first occupied by the first wife and the second reserved for him. One day, while studying the dusty structures and grout lines of the ceramic tile, Thanh showed me where his ashes would be placed, a small space on the bottom right where an urn could be positioned inside, a turquoise tile then placed over the spot and the tomb permanently sealed. The enormous tombs were largely symbolic, marking the establishment of the family on that tract of land, which, because my biological father worked for the U.S. during the war, he earned enough money to buy over twelve acres, mostly used for farming shrimp and vegetables. Nowadays, some of the land has been sold and some rented to farmers, but it is evident that the family still owns and controls much of what Tuc initially purchased over forty years ago. The family also shared that once my biological father moved to the country after the war, he had great parties. He was social and loved women and dancing. He did not, however, turn his back on any of his children, keeping them within the family unit to share the space together. Only his second wife and children and myself were the exception. However, the true story behind those circumstances I do not yet know. What I do know is that when I came to the country, in a rare moment of lucidity, he told my
brothers to give me a job because apparently, I had returned home because I needed a new place to be and of course, that place was within the Lê family.

**What the Future Brings**

*I found my biological father when I was forty-two and he, ninety-four. Too many years have gone by to make a real connection but when I met him, at least I understood something about myself—that life is not about waiting. Time does not heal all wounds; it just makes you wonder when you got hurt in the first place. My biological brother and I text every other day. Mostly, we just say simple things like, “Have a good day,” or “I wish you good health.” We don’t have enough words to fill the gap of those forty-two years. If I had the language, I would ask what his life was like and if he remembered me before I got lost. I would ask a lot of things. For now, we just move on, living lives a-half-a-world-away from one another unsure of what the future brings.*
Mythical Mother

My mother came in the mail today. At first I didn’t recognize her, she was shuffled in between lawyer’s papers and documentation about my life before now: my life as a Vietnamese orphan. But, I finally found her. I traced her name down from mine and I cried, holding this paper in my hands, this identity—produced from my father’s fax machine. A copy of a copy of a copy. Not the original. I knew this already, but I didn’t know her until today. I did not see her except for in the myths that she created in my mind. Her long, black hair sweeping the soft folds of her clothing, the grace of a hand scooping up white grains of rice, laughter that rises loudly before dying softly on closed lips, the glint of teeth from a smile only I have. I knew her then, in my dreams. But she never had a name. Until today, when I discovered I was not just left by a nameless stranger. She really did exist and in knowing that, so did I.8

In 2006 I graduated with a master’s degree in creative writing. My thesis, a non-fiction work that discussed much of my time living in Vietnam ten years’ prior, was built upon a reality that up until that point, I thought was the truth. A year later, on my third trip to Vietnam, I learned that none of my paperwork was real, and it changed my entire outlook on what I could honestly share. It made me feel as though most of what I wrote

8 (Holmberg, 2006)
in my master’s thesis was false, not the emotions or the moments that I described, but the reality that I had built my life upon up until and during that time. I wrote pieces that conveyed a student that was immersed in self-study, continually reflecting upon the information she was given and responding through a series of vignettes that while accurate in their description of what was happening, were shaped around falsehood, the portrait of an imagined life that held only a sliver of the truth: I was left. During my time in the creative writing program, I read Schneebaums’s (1969) *Keep the River on Your Right*. This was my first autoethnographic reading, and it was a vivid reminder of what it means to be fully submerged in the subject of which you are studying. Ethnographers spend a great deal of time cataloging time spent in cultures, taking field notes that later inform insight into a phenomena or understanding of that culture (Creswell, 2013; Ellis, 2004; Maxwell, 2013). For Schneebaum, that meant ascribing to many of the cultural norms of which he found himself living within—homosexual practices (which was his natural sexuality) and cannibalism being just a couple. While many research texts consider this immersion as, “going native,” (Tresch, 2001) I can understand how easily this can occur. The years spent in full ethnographic study are not just moments here and gone. It lives with you; it breathes in you; it is you. My study has been ongoing, not just in the past two years I started reducing my dissertation to “something about difference,” but throughout my life as I began to shape my research questions. To suggest that my life experiences as a Vietnam War adoptee that shaped my work as a student and a teacher is exclusively relegated to this dissertation would undermine the years of work I put into taking copious field notes about my life the past forty-two years. I started truly writing
when I was about ten. I wrote about my frustration, the days when kids laughed at me for being Asian and slung names at me like rocks from a slingshot. I wrote about the days I fought through thoughts of suicide\(^9\), wanting to throw myself off a roof because I could not handle the depression I accumulated in the recesses of my adopted life, feelings of abandonment and loss clinging to my shoulders like a heavy, wet cloak. I wrote about the university classes I failed because I could not concentrate on what lay in front of me, which stemmed from the loss of another family unit and my identity along with it. I wrote about my return to Vietnam, living for four months in a country that rejected every part of my being—the color of my skin too dark, the shape of my face too Khmer. My story is told in these field notes, decades of truth placed deftly between pages of fiction. They are a part of what I bring to this work, notes that inform what I have gleaned throughout my life in addition to my most recent visit to Vietnam. The truth is that there is no absolute truth (Williams, 2005). Truth always changes and ourselves along with it.

Just a few weeks before I returned to Vietnam in December, I received a picture of my brother’s birth certificate. It had my mother’s name: Sơn Thị Samouth. This was her real name; she was not a myth. I, however, still am. I have a storied life that describes what could be real but has often followed the shape of fantasy. I have propagated the mythopoetic (Derrida, 1978) writing of an adoptee. Sometimes, I just made stories up, at least in my head, just because there was no other information to go on. My adoptee narratives were born of fantasy and reality, the awkward space of writing

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\(^9\) Suicide is a common occurrence among adoptees; they are four times more likely to commit suicide than non-adoptees (Keyes et al., 2013).
that allows the pen to drift from its intended story and search for an alternate ending. I do not have a birth certificate with my name. I do not have a paper that gives me the exact information I spent a lifetime looking for: a biological father, a biological mother, a place where life began, and the time before I was left. I am still searching for the truth. I am still working my way down the river, keeping the river to my right until I find the mission (Schneebaum, 1969).

**Whose Am I?**

When I was just starting the teacher education program in 2008, we were assigned a series of books such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2000), *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (Noddings, 2002), and *The Light in Their Eyes* (Nieto, 2010). These are all books that remain on my bookshelf, a staunch reminder that the words of academics and teachers that have come before me have established themselves as true professionals in the field. They did time in the classroom. They wrote papers. They published books. I read them all and extrapolated what I could from each, taking their words as instructional advice that would enable me to be a good, classroom teacher. I paid attention, working to synthesize my own philosophy of teaching through a combination of what I learned and what I already knew. However, out of all these worthwhile books, one of my favorites was Frank McCourt’s (2005) *Teacher Man*. His opening chapter, describing his first day as a new teacher where the sandwich was thrown by Petey and living within the moment, he ate it, stayed with me even as I started my own first day of teaching. I love that story. It told me that whatever came my way it was necessary to be

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10 (Pinar, 1992)
proactive rather than reactive. I learned from his narratives that there is no such thing as perfect curriculum or instruction. There is only you, a class full of students, and an hour or more of time to try to make a connection. It is a tough job to say the least. In Chapter 1, McCourt (2005) relays the reality of the secondary classroom: the inability to wholly control others but the ability to establish a modicum of control just by being yourself. In examining my identity as a teacher, I realize that what makes me a strong teacher is that I deliberately bring who I am into the classroom. I am not trying to be a teacher, shaping myself for the act of teaching performativity. Instead, I just try to be myself. When I ask my students what they know about me, they can easily provide the answer: an adoptee from the Vietnam War, a mother, a student, an Asian, a lover of green chile, a writer, a military dabbler, a mobile-technology fixer, a hip hop dancer, a coach, a music editor, a raft captain, a world traveler, a wife, a daughter, a video game designer, a college dropout, an almost-doctor of philosophy, a runner from La Llorona, an occasional Spanish-speaker, a story-teller—the list goes on. By sharing my stories, I connect with my students. I am not trying to be invisible, masking who I am for the sake of performativity. That is not to say that I share everything, but when I have something to share that contributes to teachable moments, I am not afraid to expose the inner workings of my strange, storied life. In turn, they tell me their stories—the good and the bad. They share with me the break-ups, the homelessness, the struggle with late-night work shifts, the joy of getting their license or their latest pair of shoes. In my classroom I see my students—these complicated, varied, malleable individuals who are sophisticated and naïve all at once. They are undocumented and popular and poor and privileged. They are
bullies and prom queens and musicians and leaders. They are funny and edgy and respectful and polite. They are gay and straight and transgender and cisgender. They are scared and proud and quirky and depressed. They are all of these things and so, so much more. McCourt writes, “It was clear I was not cut out to be the purposeful kind of teacher who brushed aside all questions, requests, complaints, to get on with the well-planned lesson” (McCourt, 2005, p. 24). This, of course, rings true for me. No matter where we situate ourselves within education, there always exists a moment in which who you are must not give way to what you are. “They thought I was teaching. I thought I was teaching. I was learning. And you called yourself a teacher? I didn’t call myself anything. I was more than a teacher. And less” (McCourt, 2005, p. 19)

In Chapter 3, I emphasized the work of Pinar (1992) who posed the question, “Whose Am I?” (p. 232) While he connected this question to the realm of education and classroom instruction, this is truly the question I have been asking myself my entire life. It speaks to what I understand about shaping identities, and in the many times I struggled with defining who I was, I always felt as though I belonged to someone else. In spending the time to write stories about my life, I realize that my identities have not changed, they have only become substitutions of difference (Bhabha, 1994). What I have gleaned, then, from sharing my experiences is that to understand identity is to understand the repetition of difference within a concept (Deleuze, 1994).

To ask the question, “Who am I?” refers one into the space of the questioning of identity and as an extension, the question of being (“Whose am I?”). Deleuze’s explication of identity (described in Chapter 1) was meant to be applied as an
undetermined concept; again, that which cannot be named. (In this analysis, I am using the notion of one’s personal identity as the undetermined concept, found in the statement, “Who am I?”). Revisiting Deleuze reveals that identity is difference within a concept, in this case, an attempt to name the concept of personal identity which has been a lifetime struggle for me. For example, I have determined that I embody a long list of identities that have been shaped over time, a return to Foucault’s (1984) notion of immature to mature. Throughout my life, which is not entirely ahistorical because of the fact that I was born within an important event in American history, I have accumulated these identities, but one does not negate the other, tied to a present that erases the past. For instance, I would never say, “I once was a daughter” (unless I have disowned myself from my family but even then, the identity of being a daughter is still existent whether one recognizes it or not.) We do, however, make statements such as, “I once was a sound designer.” This places a career in the past but again, that identity is not necessarily absent from my repertoire of skills. For the present time, I am just not utilizing that identity. It does not negate that identity as if it never were. If we were to take the example of divorce, one could say they were “once married.” Despite the current reality that is not bound to being a wife or being a husband, the identity that was “once married” remains a part of one’s life. While that identity is not presently enacted, it informs, most definitely, one’s present and future identities, which lends itself to a repetition of difference if that person decides that they would like to get married again. It will not be the same marriage (the concept) but a repetition of the marriage concept as a different person (more educated or enlightened, perhaps), a repetition of difference within the
concept. Deleuze writes, “Repetition is not content with multiplying instances of the same concept; it puts the concept outside itself and causes it to exist in so many instances \textit{hic et nunc}.” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 27) \textit{Hic et nunc} or here and now, describes the way in which we repeat salient personal identities, not as identical instances, but as repetitions of difference. Our identity becomes fragmented or split between once was and what now is. Bhabha (1994) likewise describes this split but applies it to the colonized and colonizer, using Frantz Fanon’s (2004) work. He writes, “…the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 63).

Bhabha represents the shaping of one’s identity as being a moment in which what is being demanded of us by others (Lyotard’s performativity) is juxtaposed against what we truly desire, a classroom not conceived by others for example (Pinar, 1992). Our desire to be who we want to be, not tied to a colonizer (in this case those who want us to be \textit{for} them), is the struggle that dictates finding one’s true space in the world.

The demand of identification – that is, to be \textit{for} an Other – entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness. Identification…is always the return of an image of identity that bears the mark of splitting in the Other place from which it comes (Bhabha, 1994, p. 64).

For me, the demand came in many forms. First, through derogatory remarks that relegated my identities into words such as “Charlie,” “chink,” or “gook.” These words became the spaces that others demanded of me, a space of difference that was \textit{not} accepted by the master entity. Telling me to “get back on the boat,” was the demand that asked me to return to where I came from, my otherness unable to assimilate into the governing body of culture whether that be Latino or American. In response, I had to establish a second self, an Other not defined by those who used markers of my difference.
as a means of exclusion. What I did, I believe, was replace negative with positive, returning an Other bound to markers of scholastic achievement rather than ethnic difference but that Other was also the “return of the image” from which my difference was inculcated. I reinforced the model minority myth of my being Asian, which was the very thing others decried. In the case of being a teacher, my Other identity of teacher (the one that rejects performativity) is still the return of the teacher, just not the one the colonizers imagine it should be.

**When I Became Invisible**

The attention is focused on curriculum development. My colleagues work through exercises that could assist our future students in understanding literacy. While we work through the development of activities that will scaffold student learning, someone poses the question about working with ethnically diverse students. The instructor gives a rambling reply and continues to lecture on how literacy strategies are integral to minimizing student-learning gaps. Another question is posed and I am only half-engaged, my attention focused on the myriad of graphic organizers that clutter my workspace. I hear her response. She opens with, “We’re all white here…” My head snaps up and the silence expands, a deep breath of horror spilling into the corners of the room. My colleagues are stunned and turn to look at me, possibly expecting a response. The instructor has no idea what she has done. I shrug. It’s not like I haven’t been invisible before.

To be invisible to others is likewise a struggle conceived of the colonizer and colonized. It represents an absence of personal identity, the *colonizers’ desire* to ignore
differences within the concept of being human. “To see a missing person is to transgress that demand; the ‘I’ in the position of mastery is, at that same time, the place of its absence, its re-presentation”(Bhabha, 1994, p. 67). In the moment when my colleagues felt shocked by my dismissal of my ethnic identity and hoped that I would respond, they were unaware of a crucial understanding: that in order to comment, I would have had to “re-present” myself as the Other, the very entity that this professor wished to ignore. In the following moment, she realized her mistake and made the statement, “Oh, except for Joie.” By then, however, it was too late. We all knew that I was rendered invisible as a student and as a person. Bhabha describes these moments as an interrogation of identity, or that which denotes “…a moment in which the demand for identification becomes, primarily, a response to other questions of signification and desire, culture and politics” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 71). Ralph Ellison (1980) describes this phenomenon in his important work, “Invisible Man.” In the Prologue he writes,

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (Ellison, 1980, p. 3)

In the anecdote about my classroom invisibility, this notion is similarly revealed through the professor’s statement of “We’re all white.” To see only herself reflected in the students she was teaching was a part of that latent desire to ignore any difference that was in front of her, namely me. In the struggle to define myself apart from others’ desire to suppress my existence (or ask it to disappear), I had to come to terms with my lack of visibility and recreate myself in my own image as a reflection of what I am not what I am
not. Ellison writes, “It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first, I had to discover that I am an invisible man!” (Ellison, 1980, p. 11)

If we return to my poem (included in Chapter 4), one can see where I ask the question, “What is that you see?” (line 12). There are two answers to this question: difference and nothing. The colonizer sees the differences marked by Otherness and desires to make it invisible, thereby demanding of me to repress myself by keeping my identity within the cage as a wild, untamed being. There are actually two versions of this poem; the one I provided earlier eliminates my perspective. However, if I show them side by side, I illuminate the split between demand (the colonizer) and desire (the colonized):

I see I’m on the inside looking out peering through the narrow space between these iron bars that separate me from you.
You, who passes by me as if I’m another zoo animal you have not seen.
Pointing with laughter and amusement shaking your head with sympathy ignoring the obvious taking pleasure in my captive pain.
What is it that you see?

I am dark
I am Asian
I am a gook
I am a chink

I see I’m on the inside looking out peering through the narrow space between these iron bars that separate me from you.
You, who passes by me as if I’m another zoo animal you have not seen.
Pointing with laughter and amusement shaking your head with sympathy ignoring the obvious taking pleasure in my captive pain.
What is it that you see?

I am dark
I am a woman
I am Asian
I am a gook
I am a nigger
I am many things
but they are not all written down
on some brass plaque in front of you.
I see me
on the inside looking out
feeling this oppression
you can never understand.
Taking shelter in a corner of my habitat
pacing back and forth in front of you
wanting out of this cold cage
because it’s been too long
and I have outgrown the space I’m in.

I am adopted
I am beautiful
I am many things
but they are not all written down
on some brass plaque in front of you.
I see me
on the inside looking out
feeling this oppression
you can never understand.
Taking shelter in a corner of my habitat
pacing back and forth in front of you
wanting out of this cold cage
because it’s been too long
and I have outgrown the space I’m in.

Studying the poem side by side reflects my desire, or subjective ability to recognize the hybridity of my identity—both positive and negative. In addition to the change in phrasing, I also bold the “I am” statements, as though I am working to establish a stronger sense of self amidst the oppression I feel. While I titled the poem, “On the Inside Looking Out,” I recognize that the perspective can easily be reversed as a 3rd person observer. As a researcher, I am reflecting upon my own identity “on the outside looking in,” and the poem’s subtle changes were manifested as a result of this paper written in 2016. The original poem I wrote while living in Vietnam in 1996.

While there have been many times in my life where I have been rendered invisible, I recognize that this is just another repetition of difference that reveals itself on the part of the colonizer. To be acknowledged as a person of color means that to be “unseen” is part of who I am as well. It represents the hundreds of repetitions of identity
that are ignored and reduced to a split that illustrates, once again, who I am and who I am not. Depicting the invisibility of identity is crucial; ultimately it is seen in the cry of “Why can't you see me for what I am rather than what you want me to be?” To the colonizers I respond: “I am many things, but they are not all written down on some brass plaque in front of you” (lines 19-21).

**Present Presence**

A return to Foucault’s (1972) field of presence and field of memory (p. 57) allows one to think about the statements we make with respect to the questions, “Who am I?” or “Whose am I?”. We make these statements as declarations, determinations of personal identity that have evolved throughout time. Once I got married, I became, “Mrs. Norby,” a name whose declaration is not bound to my own identity more so than my husband’s. In a more formal address, I might be referred to as, “Mrs. Scott Norby,” especially in countries where patriarchal constructions of identity are emphasized, relegating my initial field of presence to a field of memory. This occurred on our honeymoon when the waiter at the hotel restaurant referred to us as “Mr. and Mrs. Scott.” As an individual, I continually tried to present myself for *who I am* rather than *whose I am*, becoming almost fanatically independent. Nevertheless, I still could not escape belonging to another identity because the ones I was given—a fictitious name in a passport, an adoptive name, a married name—all belonged to identities I joined rather than created for myself. In addition, we are ascribed identities by others, some of which we want to reject outright but serve, ultimately, to perpetuate alternate identities of resistance as a response. Lastly, we label ourselves with identities that speak to *what* we are rather than *who* we are. Even
though I make the statement, “I am a teacher,” like McCourt states, “I was more than a teacher. And less” (McCourt, 2005, p. 19). In Vietnam, Mike once asked me if my family knew what kind of person I was back home. Did they know that I held nearly four post-secondary degrees? I said, “No, and it doesn’t matter anyway.” I could not expect that my education, a distinct label of status and position in the United States would mean anything to anyone in Vietnam. While teachers are highly revered in Vietnam (more so than in the United States), I was not trying to be a teacher. I was just trying to be myself. My family, in the middle of negotiating my place in their world had to accept me for who I was not what I was.

Now, I am in a new space where, in addition to belonging to immediate and nuclear families, I also belong to the Lê family. I should mention that this “belonging” is not automatic. It comes from establishing a presence worthy of acceptance, a sameness that can be replicated closely enough to warrant a proclamation of belonging. This was affirmed on the last day being in Gò Cổng, when at a lunch my biological family said to me, “We know that you have been gone, but we want you to know that you now have a place in the family. You belong, also, with us.” (They even included Mike in the family.) This “also” was indicative of the recognition of who I am as an American and the myriad of identities I built in the forty-two years before I met them. As a result, I am a “sister” yet again, different from the sister I am in my other family but still existing within the same concept. I am repeating the notion of difference within the Same.

The negotiation of one’s identity is an exercise in constantly redefining what has come before, a loss of oneself only to be replaced with another self or a constant
reenactment over time. It is a repetition of difference of identity that is metonymic, a substitution that still reflects the narcissistic search for “I” but in my case, only through understanding the lifelong implications of “we.” As I now shift into a present presence, I must recognize that, “This may be no place to end but it may be a place to begin” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 93).

**For What Your Worth**

There are four key elements of rejection that must be addressed as they relate to the adoption experience: rejection by the biological family, rejection by society, rejection of the adoptive family, and rejection of oneself. Each of these concepts played an integral role in the navigation of my life as an adoptee, oftentimes framing entire periods of disillusionment or even preventing me from fully pronouncing my dissatisfaction with my temporal existence. However, rejection, as a concept, is difficult to articulate; it is an unending morass of complicated threads that accompany the question, “What does it mean to be adopted?” This stems, partly, because of society’s inability discuss the topic in full, limiting our discourse to oversimplications such as, “all adoptees feel rejected,” or “each adoptee must reconcile rejection as some point in their lives.” While this may be true, the poststructuralists would argue that this constrains understanding to universal truth, which is limiting to individuals who each experience adoption differently. As a result, I cannot speak for others on this topic; I can only lend my perspective. Furthermore, this topic of conversation is very often diminished with respect to discussing adoption at large (outside of academic circles). Oftentimes analysis of the experience is capped by the paralyzing fear that discussing adoption rejection is to
recognize that all those involved in the experience must confront the loss of a belonging, especially for the adoptee and the adoptive family. Therefore, it is useful to return to the philosophical underpinnings of this work is to underscore the implications of the adoptee experience. In other words, in order to understand adoption, one must understand the rejection of difference.

**Rejection by the Biological Family**

The first element of rejection an adoptee must face is that of their biological parent (mother or father or both) or family. The decision to relinquish a child to be adopted is embroiled in too many factors and contexts to discuss in this work. Each situation is different and therefore, should only be considered within the time, space, and history of that decision, whether a result of social stigma of unwed mothers, through government mandates such as China’s One Child Policy, the outcome of sexual abuse, the age of the parent(s) at the time, wartime instability, poverty, or a multitude of other reasons which results in a child being put up for adoption. For the sake of this paper, the relinquishment of the child (myself) during the Vietnam War establishes a semblance of understanding of the importance of time (*when*) as a factor. The *why*, however, remains inconclusive. To grapple with the *why* is part of an adoptee’s negotiation of rejection. For me, this played out in the mythopoetic writing of my life, which surmounted to a series of narratives (fiction and nonfiction) that gave me a response to rejection, a storied excuse for the concrete understanding that my biological family just did not want me. To a group of high school friends who once asked me about what happened, I said that the war had caused my parents to put me in a tree for safety and that a passing American
soldier heard my cries and took me to an orphanage. From there, I was adopted out to the United States. Never mind that the story ignored the invisibility of my birth parents in this equation (and their loss of a daughter). What I knew others wanted to hear from me was a war story and not one that told of prostitutes, rape, the poverty of war, or the Vietnamese perspective, but one that included a soldier and an American one at that. By propping up the American savior narrative, I allowed others to come to peace with my existence, a justification for my presence that allowed opponents of the Vietnam War to allow my difference to be accepted rather than rejected. By sheltering myself from yet another dismissal of my adoptee status, I could reduce the pain of “feeling rejected” by my birth family as a whole. It was an adequate response, but it could never truly override the pure emotion of what it feels like to be rejected. Deleuze (1994) confronts this issue through the discussion of the Platonic myth or the development of fantastical stories that serve the purpose of educating others without those stories needing to be empirically verified ("Plato's Myths," 2014). Deleuze (1994) suggests that this myth-making exercise is a mediation of difference (p. 61) to allow for oppositional concepts to be recognized (such as truth versus fiction) while not negating either one. This mediation supports the logos of myth-making, giving the speaker authority over undetermined concepts such as the analysis of rejection (p. 29). In order to mediate the rejection of difference of concepts, in this case, a rejection or acceptance of being, Deleuze proposes an ontological argument between the question and the problem. He writes, “In this relation, being is difference itself. Being is also non-being, but non-being is not the being of the negative; rather, is it the being of the problematic, the being of problem and question” (Deleuze,
In other words, the question, “Why did you reject me?” becomes “Why do I exist in this space?” an ontological problem of existence that accounts for most of my questions throughout my life. Overall, what is most important to understand is that an adoptees’ analysis of both the problem and question of rejection is the why, a word that many adoptees, including myself, spend a lifetime trying to reconcile.

Interestingly, when I started to hear the story of my being “lost” by my biological family, I was told that my father’s first wife did not want to take care of me like she did for my two older brothers, Đat and Thông. Hearing this, of course, re-instilled feelings of rejection into my thought-process. Then, I was told that it was my biological mother who made the decision to take me back to the hospital and be relinquished, a story I heard from the American caregivers as well. The biological family told me they had no idea what happened to me, and they thought I was living in Vietnam with my biological mother this whole time. In short, the answer to the question, “Why?” can never be fully answered. While my biological family has some firsthand insight, we cannot confirm the truth from those who knew what happened at that time: my biological father (who does not remember the past), his first wife (who is no longer living), or my biological mother (who is still unaccounted for). In other words, I must continue to question my adoption story and negotiate rejection as a constant and ongoing element of my life.

Rejection by Society

Society’s comfort level with adoption, while definitely improved over the past twenty years, has been precarious at best. While adoption can be a celebratory event for many parents and children by giving shape to a nuclear family that might not otherwise
exist, the perception that adopting children is a less-ideal, alternative option to having biological children certainly still prevails. I have been asked at least a hundred times when I knew I was adopted. I find this question odd, not just because of the obvious racial differences between my adoptive family and me but because I never felt like being adopted was something I should feel ashamed of. It was only through others’ perceptions of adoption that I learned that being adopted was akin to being an anomaly of the typical nuclear family. I was the “red-headed stepchild” that everyone recognizes as being different and has been relegated to being worth less than others. Additionally, the shame that parents are made to feel by not being able to “have one of their own” is another burden that divides adopted from non-adopted, which sadly lends itself to the devaluation of adoption as an option for many childless families. As a result, I learned that the word, “adoption” was a negative construction of being, a second-hand reality that was certainly not worth boasting about. Again, if we return to Chapter 4, the ignorance of others’ perceptions of my family’s nuclear makeup was continually brought to our attention. In others’ minds, my existence could only mean several things (ranked in order of acceptability): 1) My mother was babysitting someone else’s child, 2) My parents were an interracial couple, 3) My father served in Vietnam and had an extra-marital affair resulting in a child whom he brought home to be raised within an already-existent family, 4) I was adopted. Of the four scenarios, only the first was the most accepted and excusable. The other three, all questionable conditions of an “ideal family,” were lost to the inability of society to accept that adoption, or shaping a family through a different set of circumstances, was okay. This cultural impasse reaffirmed the belief that society (at
least in America) rejected adoption, any notion of difference, and therefore, as an
extension, me.

There have been two British-made movies that discuss these issues: “Secrets and
Lies” (Leigh, 1996) and “Philomena” (Coogan, Pope, & Sixsmith, 2013). Both explore
the shame of unwed, young mothers who were forced to give up their children because of
social stigma. Each follows the searches of daughter (“Secrets and Lies”) or mother
(“Philomena”) with the hope to reunite with biological family. When I saw “Secrets and
Lies,” just after my return from living in Vietnam, I remember reliving a thousand
moments in my own life that brought me to tears. Of course, I had just returned from my
own “search for self” and because of those circumstances, my feelings of rejection were
reinforced tenfold. Nevertheless, the implication that you must rationalize your existence
against society’s values and norms is an additional element of an adoptee’s negotiation of
rejection.

**Rejection of the Adoptive Family**

In the film, “Secrets and Lies,” the main character, Hortense Cumberbatch,
desires to find her biological family. In the scene where she is sitting in the social
worker’s office to gain access to her paperwork, she is asked by the social worker, “What
are your expectations?” to which Hortense replies, “I just want to know” (Leigh, 1996).
This scene is indicative of a million adoptee requests for answers (and knowledge), which
accompanies the circumstance of being adopted. While many of us desire to investigate
that knowledge, the search can very rarely be done without keeping the feelings of the
adoptive family in mind (in addition to realistic expectations). It becomes difficult, then,
for many adoptees to articulate the desire for a birth family search because to vocalize that you are actively in search of these answers naturally fosters the insecurity of the adoptive family who might construe that search to be a rejection of the life they have already created for you. This is probably more common than not. In my case, my family was always really supportive of my search for answers, at least in terms of exploring the culture of Vietnam through books or movies, sharing other adoptees’ stories found in media or articles throughout my life, and trying to encourage my interest by exposing me to the select elements of Vietnamese culture we could find in New Mexico, namely the cuisine. They did not, however, make overt efforts to introduce other Vietnamese children to me or send me to language or culture camps that would expose me to a broader Vietnamese community. My parents felt that to raise me within their family would mean that there would be no difference in who were were ethnically. To them, I was just another one of their three kids being raised in America. However, when I did start to look more closely at doing a birth family search, from the time I returned to Vietnam in 1996, since I first submitted the DNA test in 2011, and most recently, when I launched a full biological family search, it became more evident that in order to do so, I would have to tread lightly, navigating the narrow space between adoptive and biological with caution and sensitivity. I never asked my family if it was okay if I searched for my biological family, but at the same time, I was always cognizant of their role in the bigger picture of my life and never wanted them to feel like I was rejecting their place in shaping my sense of identity. I believe this is one of the most complicated elements of rejection to negotiate for an adoptee. The feelings of rejection that are advanced by an
adoptive’s search for biological roots is transferred from adoptee to adoptive family. Their fear is that the adoptee has rejected difference in search for the Same, a return to the structural notion of hierarchal understanding. While those of us who were adopted from wartime circumstances or other similar conditions may receive an “I understand” pass from our adoptive families, it does not diminish the feelings of the family who may feel a strong sense of rejection whether they articulate that or not. Even at my age (forty-two), I still try to consider the feelings of my adoptive family as I make my way through this new chapter in my life. I have changed a part of my name and reclaimed the surname, “Lê,” which has everything to do with how I see my work as a person of color. Even in doing that, I had to discuss the possibilities of a name change with my adoptive family in addition to my spouse. By altering my identity to take on the name of my biological family (whom I just met), I had to recognize that by doing so, I was rejecting the part of my identity that my immediate family and nuclear family laid claim to: my adoptive name, my married name. As one can see, this a very complex issue and one that genuinely takes great care to work through. It is easy to see that the fear that many adoptive families face is that as much as we feel rejected by our adoption circumstances, they, too, can feel that rejection as well. It is a tough space to be in and in the end, contributes to the difficulty of an adoptee’s mediation of rejection.

In poststructural terms, this would mean that an adoptee in search of “those who resemble me” or “those whom I once belonged to” are looking for or trying to find the Same. They might say, “these are my people” or “these are the same people as me.” The Difference, in this case, is not the otherness that is an extension of the adoptee or
adoption as a circumstance, but more central to how an adoptive family is “different” from the adoptee in comparison to ethnicity, genetics, culture, or even sexuality (in the case of gay or lesbian adoptive parents). The Difference, in this equation, is not focused on the adoptee herself rather than the family who is different from the one that gave birth to her. This is especially true in the case of transracial adoption, but there are probably additional examples as well. Ultimately, this reversal still bolsters feelings of rejection, especially on the part of the adoptive family because once a search for the Same takes place, it must come as an opposition to Difference.

Rejection of Oneself

The final element to reflect upon is the way in which an adoptee rejects oneself, especially in terms of their worth. This is most certainly the case for me as I work to reinstate a sense of value that was first lost in knowing I was an “orphaned child.” After that, through society’s rejection of my family’s nuclear condition as being purposeful, through the innumerable racist accounts I endured throughout my life, through my inability to assimilate back into Vietnam in 1996, through the experiences in education that made me feel as though I was invisible, through my inability to meet the evaluative standards of an “ideal” teacher, or finally, through not being able to write a dissertation that followed the ground rules of the academy, activated a sense of worthlessness in me that even today, I struggle with. To allow anyone to see my work, to read my writing (creative or academic), or to judge my value as a person, an adoptee, a teacher, or a student can be a painful exercise. Over time, I have rejected myself as being a person of value. While many would consider that to unbelievable, I only know what I know to be
true: that I am a different. In order to understand adoption, and therefore, my lived experience as an adoptee, one must truly understand the rejection of difference.

**The Poststructural Language of Alterity**

In the poststructural literature of Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and Lyotard, the discussion of *différence* is integral to their work. Each of these philosophers have approached the topic describing it as an explication for moving beyond universal truth by attaching the notion of reason to lie not within the center (logocentric) but on the edges of an ever-changing reality. To illustrate this, they take the use of language and show how multiple variations of meaning through words or writing produce signs that diminish or reflect reader understanding. In varying ways, they depict that the manipulation of language can affirm or reject what has come before it by showing that what was once true may not always stay true, especially over time or across cultures and their languages. Additionally, they show how words are meaningless if tied to permanent functions of truth because any one statement that can be made within history can be changed or refuted, replaced with a newer truth with respect to the original statement. For example, I received the paperwork from my father’s fax machine that showed my birthdate, my birthplace, and my birth mother’s name (see Appendix G). I took this paperwork with me to Vietnam in 1996, hoping to use it, at some point, to trace biological family. At the same time, I understood my reality to be presently fixed, that since one country I lived within could not accept me for who I was then certainly the other could. Unfortunately, my reality living in Vietnam for four months was also highlighted by rejection, a new, harsher understanding that I had to accept as a replacement for my own naïve perception.
of what it meant to “be from Vietnam.” Then, in 2007, I learned that the papers I thought to be true for three decades of my life were actually false and the absence of truth had to fill the void of meaning for me for the next ten years. As a result, I sought to abandon the notion of anything concrete that would show me who I was other than myself, letting go of other people’s perceptions of who they thought I was (positively or negatively) or who they wanted me to be, and ignore any words on paper that claimed the truth for me. I learned that over time the only person that could hold a mirror to my existence was myself. In the end, I could not “be” in any space that framed a central reality and essentially I learned that who I am is wholly up for grabs, not just in the past but also in the present as well as the future. Nevertheless, I am tied to that notion of being and nothingness (Sartre, 1965) but am not, as Sartre suggests, fully able to exist because of my own free will. My experiences, race, profession, children, culture, and the society I exist within shape me. I bend my will not necessarily to their understanding but through my own understanding of who I am within and around those elements. I change, not always because I want to but sometimes, because I have to.

Since embarking on this study, I have sought to answer three questions, all of which were shaped within a time frame that is bound to my work as a scholar, a student, and a secondary language arts teacher. Inevitably, those positions will shift in my life, when I move beyond the label of “graduate student” or if I decide that teaching high school is not for me. At that time, a new truth will supplant the old, but it will not negate what I once was nor the narratives of experience I shaped along the way. They still speak of truth but only insomuch as that truth was tied to that past reality and not the one in

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which I will exist within in the future. I found half of my biological family at the tail end of this study. I received confirmation through email that a man, Lê Van Tuc, is indeed my biological father. Through social media I saw a snapshot of my brother’s birth certificate, which showed my mother’s real name (see Appendix H). These moments were shared with me through methods of communication that only within the last twenty years have been fully realized. As we evolve over time the language we use, the words we see, or the writing we share will not inform us of a universal truth in communication or understanding. The language we use is just a section of a much longer narrative with subtext that denotes a past, a present, and the implication for the future.

In my profession, the language we use to communicate new ideas become buzz words that we are asked to embrace if we want to speak the same 21st century language of education. These are concepts that are understood through fancy terms such as “data-driven instruction” or “enduring understandings” or “driving questions.” Somehow, in the space of where we situate ourselves in education, they make complete sense to the educator, especially to those up-and-coming-teachers who are just now sitting through methods courses. They mean something to them because the language being supplied right now binds them to a definition that communicates the intent for finite understanding. But are they finite? Will these words just be replaced in two years with another string of nouns, verbs, and adjectives that make us sound more thoughtful than we really are? Are they really value-driven or can I just reject them because they sound ostentatious and in my classroom are completely meaningless to me and more importantly to my students? What is the language that we use to describe that which does
not indicate truth? Is it the term “poststructuralist”? Will that not just be another term to be replaced in a hundred years’ time? It is hard to say, which is why the language of poststructuralism is so useful in understanding this work and analyzing the language of education altogether.

Working with language became my coping mechanism during the times when I could not articulate my feelings of pain, sadness, or frustration. I turned to pages of spiral notebooks when I did not know how to fight against the derogatory remarks that I almost-daily endured, especially in elementary school. When I had enough language to communicate those feelings, I was able to fill those pages and continued doing so throughout my writing life. Writing also allowed me to voice a part of who I am that is usually reserved for rebellion, a method of communication that supplied the counternarrative to what was expected of me. Throughout my education, especially in my post-secondary work, I have incorporated my creative writing in academic papers because it allowed me to express ideas in my own way, heedless of the formal conventions that I knew would allow me to pass or fail. Even in this work, I deliberately chose to experiment, not as a means to disrupt the norms of academia but because the reality that academia was asking me to exist within was centrally located, and I could not, however hard I tried, work within that reality. I spent a year trying and once again, I failed. But again, what does that really mean? We determine our worth by moments dictated by others and fail to see the “good” in what we are doing even if it is not quite normal. I think this is what Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze and Lyotard faced. They grappled with some of the philosophies of structuralism and sought an alternative to
describe freedom from the center. A couple were lambasted for their work (for one reason or another), a few were scrutinized and vilified by some of their peers, and one was even locked up for his “madness.” In starting this project, I never would have imagined that the philosophies of four French men would align so much with my own. Only through investigation of their lives and study of their work was I able to understand that some of their own differences (and lack of acceptance in society) informed their work as well. If they were alive today, I would ask them, “Is this what you were trying to say?” Invariably, I would expect each of them to say, “No.” The spirit of poststructuralism is that the difference is celebrated in the student and the teacher. While these four philosophers exist as a core focus for learning more than I do, even they would most likely argue that their work is perpetually up for reexamination—Lyotard’s (1984) belief that narrative can be re-read throughout time. With these reexaminations comes a shift in one’s subjectivity, which changes the perceptions and values of the observer who, despite previous examination of the work, can derive alternate meaning from the text.

Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland (Lovett & Tenniel, 2015) is an apt example of this idea. The story told for children is one of fantasy and imagination, where characters find themselves within an alternate universe in which their way in and way out becomes a method of confronting truth and fiction all at once. Really, it is a story in which Alice, seemingly trapped in a fantastical world of anthropomorphic animals and non-living elements (a deck of cards) can escape the world by calling out that which she already knows: a pack of cards is just, exactly, that. Carroll writes:

At this the whole pack rose up into the air, and came flying down upon her; she gave a little scream, half of fright and half of anger, and tried to beat them off, and
found herself lying on the bank, with her head in the lap of her sister, who was gently brushing away some dead leaves that had fluttered down from the trees upon her face. (Lovett & Tenniel, 2015, p. 108)

In Alice’s world, the confrontation of one’s subjectivity takes on critical meaning for the character. She must escape the the identities that are being supplied for her (with regard to other characters as well as her own) and move beyond them until she can find her way back home, which, coincidentally, is to return to the bank of a river. As an adult reader, *Alice in Wonderland* becomes a philosophical novel about alterity (Bhabha, 1994; Deleuze, 1994; Derrida, 1978; Lyotard, 1989), the perspective that the state of being different or “otherness” is a consequence of seeing oneself as a replication of difference with reference to the *Same*. It is a series of metamorphoses that are understood as being a part of something in which, sometimes, the character has no control. While states of being (small or large) can be addressed and even counterbalanced with the right formula, Alice is nevertheless in a constant state of negotiating *how to be* in order to extricate herself from the space in which she resides. This is most evident in Chapter 2 once Alice has eaten the cake that has now made herself too large. In her state of woe, she remarks:

*Dear, dear! How queer everything is to-day! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I’ve changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I am not the same, the next question is ‘Who in the world am I?’ Ah, that’s the great puzzle!* (Lovett & Tenniel, 2015, p. 16)

In describing her present realities (too big or too small), she becomes overwhelmed by the concept that she is two things at once: her original self and a replication of her original self albeit too little or too big. She describes this doubleness in the line, “‘But it’s no use now,’ thought poor Alice, ‘to pretend to be two people! Why, there’s hardly
enough of me left to make one respectable person!’” (Lovett & Tenniel, 2015, pp. 12-13)
The doubleness that Alice describes in her sentiments is analogous to the philosophical
notion of alterity. Bhabha describes this as an “uncanny sameness-in-difference”
(Bhabha, 1994, p. 78) in which becoming anything is largely metonymic, the naming of
identities that exist as substitutions for the same identity which still resemble the
identified character, in this case, Alice. It is the replacement of identity for all of the
elements that describe it such as “teacher” for all the roles a teacher must take on
(counselor, test administrator, disciplinarian) or “adoptee” for all the differences within
the scope of that identity (1st generation, 2nd generation, international, or domestic).
When I describe myself in terms of alterity, it is with a clear understanding that the
perception of my own state of being is not entirely self-ascribed. Sometimes, I have been
forced into those alternate worlds, the rabbit holes of identity, in which the negotiation of
myself within those spaces is largely a recognition of what is truth and what is fiction. I
return to my earlier sentiment: Who I am and who I am not is oftentimes one and the
same. Ultimately, I am just a person, a Ponyboy, sharing my experiences with others,
recognizing that the unexpected and marginal realities my students face changes their
truth and therefore, their identity, every day I see them. My students are all different and
so it takes a teacher that understands the implications of difference to “get them.”

**Difference**

To fully understand the primary theme in this work is to analyze the concept of
difference. From my perspective, difference allows for a movement away from
knowledge in order to encourage a direction that fosters independence without regard to
shadow or source. It is not that hard to understand, but somehow we have become so accustomed to the darkness of the cave that we are unwilling to explore the light. We misconstrue shadow for source and vice versa and submit to being chained to the will of others. *Difference* in this work is a replication of the *Same*. It is alterity expressed in a conceptual, theoretical, and philosophical form. It is a departure from the cave entirely, an opposition manifested to set up new spaces of understanding not conceived of light or dark or shadows and chained beings. It is to start another fire, different from the original that was first created by others. It is to turn away from the navigational direction predominately acknowledged as “true North” and to set the compass to 180 degrees. It is to go South, regardless of what other people think about what you do and who you are. It is to be lost once again without the intention of caring whether or not you will ever be found but knowing, still, that the banks of the river will always be there.

While the poststructural philosophers I studied in this work sought to describe difference through investigations of language, politics, or repetitions of concepts, I sought to address how difference is a philosophy of experience, a process that has vast implications into our ontological and epistemological understanding. As a result, I have come to understand that my alterity was shaped as a result of being an adoptee of war, which informed how I saw myself in addition to how others saw me. At times, this identity was in conflict with how I was being raised: as a person of value and importance to my adoptive family. On one hand, I had the strength and support of a family that cultivated in me a strong sense of self and on the other hand, I was made to feel worthless and rejected by my circumstances and society as a whole. These conflicting spaces of
being caused me to constantly lose my true identity, and it took me decades to reestablish. Finding myself only came through an abandonment of everything I thought made me who I was, a personal rejection of the *Same* and an acceptance of being different. Perhaps it is an innate survival instinct that has allowed me to reaffirm my worth in this world in the many times it was put up for question. Perhaps it is resilience. Either way, I have come to realize what truly informs my philosophical understanding of what “being different” represents: a repetition of concepts with personal experience at its core. I do not know whether I have answered the questions of my life, nor the questions I posed for this project. I do know, however, that after all of my research I have found something of value—something good. It is not just the retracing of footsteps to a countryside in Vietnam to find biological family or the letting go of too many times when the negative perceptions of others eclipsed the joy of my own life. It is the acceptance of difference as being meaningful to the lives we lead and the roles we perform. I am still a mother, a teacher, a scholar, a student. In those roles, I am good. I am not the same, however, as others who occupy the same roles. We are not the same. We are replications of the *Same* with respect to the *Idea*, and so then, should our work and lives reflect that.

**Finding the Good**

Lightfoot-Lawrence’s (1997) method of portraiture asks the researcher to search for the good, to find the positive in all of the negative we might find in our search for answers. She asks the researcher to paint the picture of the subject, to use the brush of story and metaphor to convey what they see. She asks the researcher to use this method to communicate to others in a language they can understand in order to see the portrait as
a type of repetition—a reflection of what the researcher captures in their mind’s eye. She asks the researcher to reveal and conceal all at once and to illustrate not just the subject but the mirror of infinite possibilities in which the subject can be seen. She asks the researcher to hold the portraiture up for others to analyze, so they can ask, “Is this good?”, and she asks the researcher to wait patiently for the answer. I waited forty-two years for the answers I was looking for. Who am I? A product of history, a mixture of culture, a blend of what once was and now is. Where do I come from? Moments. Circumstance. Experience. Where do you find the good? Right here. Why. Me.
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Appendix A

Figure 1: Tò Am courtyard, 1969 (Taylor & Grant, 1988)
Appendix B

Figure 2: Hmong guides. Sapa, Vietnam. October, 1996
Appendix C

Figure 3: Sorting Fish in Gò Công. December, 2015 (Photo credit: Mike Frailey, 2016)
Appendix D

Figure 4: First handwritten family tree. Date sent: September 13, 2015

Figure 5: Second handwritten family tree. Date sent: October 17, 2015
Appendix F

Figure 6: Niece writing down "Joie (Choi) many years lost." December 30, 2015 (Photo credit: Mike Frailey, 2016)
Figure 7: Fax copy of adoption papers. Fictional mother’s name, 1973
Appendix H

Figure 8: Real mother’s name, 1969, Sơn Thị Samouth