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# Storytelling and Ethnographic Intersections

## Vietnamese Adoptees and Rescue Narratives

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The exit of approximately 2,000 Vietnamese orphans in April 1975 through Operation Babylift is a key part of Vietnam War debates. The Babylift volunteers, American women who aided with the children's evacuation, published autobiographies of their involvement and publicly commemorated the history. This article uses pedagogy, collective memory, and commemoration theory to examine how Vietnamese adoptees negotiate the volunteers' accounts and how they reclaim their history by labeling the volunteers' narratives as inadequate, recognize their community's agency, and create new commemorations. The article uses interviews, participation observation, and Vietnamese adoptee written life stories to discuss Vietnamese adoption. It also explores some issues of using life story texts in ethnographic research.

**Keywords:** *Vietnam; war; adult adoptees; adoption*

It wasn't until very recently that many of us have found our "voice" and have had an organized medium (one of the founding tenants of VAN) to express ourselves and explore.

*(Vietnamese Adoptee Network (VAN) listserv, July 20, 2003)*

The Vietnam War set the stage of one of the most dramatic global migration of Asian children placed in homes in the United States. At the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, President Ford authorized the *Operation Babylift* flights of over 2,000 Vietnamese children out of Vietnam and placed them in American homes and secondarily to Europe, Canada, and Australia. Another 1,000 children went to Western families during the war. The adoptees had mutually shared interracial and mixed-race experiences. Many had unknown American GI birth fathers, and White parents raised the majority.

American nurses, orphanage workers, and nuns who worked in Vietnamese orphanages during the war, or aided with evacuating children through Operation Babylift, wrote memoirs about their involvement.<sup>1</sup> The books are a part of the larger effort to honor individuals in the war rather than and political losses. They form a small niche within the inspirational book genre and are a part of the business of remembering and reconciling the death and losses during the Vietnam War, for the larger American public (Sturken, 1997; Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1996). By chronicling the former lives of these Vietnamese children, from their stay in orphanages, to their hurried flight out of Vietnam, the Babylift women volunteers' narratives highlight the plight of orphans, show widespread effects of war, and has even encouraged an author to launch into a motivational speaking and writing career.<sup>2</sup> The memoirs are successful in dominating Vietnamese adoptee history because the authors repeatedly tell the stories to sympathetic audiences and hundreds of adoption agencies and adoptive parents' Web sites promoting adoption from Asia. These privileged narratives are part of the nostalgic publishing industry to remember the Vietnam War, a market that appeals to baby boomers, Vietnamese adoptees, and their adoptive parents among others. I am grateful for my conversation with Vietnamese adoptee intellectual and leader, Indigo Williams Willing, who pointed out that baby boomers, whose lives were influenced by the Vietnam War, are consumers of post-Vietnam War history.

The themes of Babylift volunteer memoirs revolve around getting Vietnamese babies and children out of Vietnam during and immediately after the war, thereby glossing over the lives of adult Vietnamese adoptees in favor of highlighting them as saved children. With this research, I hope to add what is missing from the sanitized Vietnamese adoptee history. I will present how the organized group of Vietnamese adoptees born during the war, the Vietnamese adoptee community, claims ownership and a right to tell their life stories, creates spaces in which to recount them, and develops independent commemorations of Vietnamese adoption. Vietnamese adoptees formed the community not only to offset their isolation from one another, but also to teach Vietnamese adoptee history to one another. Members identify themselves as part of the collective. I do not intend to discuss all Vietnamese adoptees, but intend, however, to articulate a community whose members have actively created and participated in Vietnamese adoptee organizations, listservs, and conferences. The study relies on the insight of two Vietnamese adoptee organizations, Adopted Vietnamese International (AVI) and Vietnamese Adoptee Network (VAN), who represent most of the Vietnamese adoptee community. These organizations attempt to speak for the larger adoptee community. Lastly, the article offers a discussion of

Operation Babylift commemorations and some of the ethical ramifications combining written life story and outsider ethnographic research to examine mobilized communities.

Operation Babylift continues to serve as a reference point for current debates about international adoption and national identity. Vietnamese adoptee life stories and narratives exist alongside, and often in opposition, to those created by Babylift volunteers. The community's simultaneous claim to tell their own life stories, engage Babylift volunteer stories in their own spaces, and commemorate their version of history raises an interesting question: How does the Vietnamese adoptee community negotiate Babylift volunteer narratives in the spaces they forge for themselves? To understand the community's endeavor, it is necessary to explore its creation of organizations, Web sites, and online discussion groups that tell versions of their history, engage Babylift volunteer narratives within their spaces, and forming alternative accounts. I would argue that as members of the community claim ownership of their histories, they frame Babylift volunteer narratives and commemorations within their spaces rather than solely rejecting them. Instead of exclusively opposing the content of the Babylift volunteer narratives, the community develops alternative spaces to tell their own stories and commemorate their history. In this process, members weave various Vietnamese adoptee life stories and construct them into claimsmaking narratives to contend with competing accounts of their adoption history.

Pedagogy, claimsmaking, commemoration, and social movement perspectives can give light to the relationship between the adoptees and their former caretakers. I offer a discussion of Vietnamese adoptee life stories, narratives, and commemorations in two different spaces. The first space explores community creation where Vietnamese adoptees move from isolation to forming collectives that identify a need to address Babylift volunteer accounts. The second space explores how members negotiate Babylift volunteer accounts, thereby using the volunteers' narratives to form their own commemorations of their adoption.

The research relies on studying narratives, including written life histories and online dialogues, to advance the ethnographic understanding of activist, dynamic, and emergent meanings involved in remembering and commemorating Operation Babylift. One inspiration for examining life histories came from the cultural turn in social movement research highlighting new ways to examine narrative as a social practice, as well as the trend to combine ethnography and textual analysis (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998).

The textual analysis included examining Vietnamese adoptee-authored writings. I examined nearly 100 written life stories from about 50

first-generation Vietnamese adoptee authors, available from community literature, Web pages, listservs, and documents given to me by community members. VAN and AVI publish many autobiographies and life histories on their online Web pages (AVI, 2002). One of the most important spaces to examine community negotiations of Babylift volunteer accounts is in the content of Vietnamese adoptee-organized listservs, which I monitored for four years. The format of the listservs allowed members to negotiate of Babylift narratives and revisit their history in a largely emotionally safe space.<sup>3</sup> I looked for common themes in the life stories, and I found that member's writings echoed particular narratives. They included the narrative of being saved and the struggle for a voice independent of their adoptive parents, adoption agencies, and Babylift volunteers. I also interviewed the writers to gain more insight into their meanings.

I focus on the efforts by Vietnamese adoptees to convey their own life stories against the proliferation of nostalgic and commemorative public accounts of the Vietnam War and, in particular, Operation Babylift. Examinations of Vietnamese adoptee-life storytelling contribute to a small but growing body of literature on the rights of transnational adoptees. I wish to engage the ways in which Vietnamese adoptees recount their own lives, in ways that may disrupt, challenge, and ultimately rewrite popular versions of this critical episode in U.S. history.

Transnational adoption confronts an interlocking set of questions about biographical and autobiographical ownership, commemoration of history, and adoptee agency outside parents and adoption institutions. Few academic studies examine international adoptees' adult lives, and even less focus on their conscious role to become their own life narrators. Christine and Gregory Choy offer one reason for the neglect of adoptee viewpoints. They argue that narratives of U.S. benevolence, White families as saving Asian children from poverty, ignorance, and disease, and color-blind assimilation can overwhelm adoptee accounts (Choy & Choy, 2003). To address this problem, David Eng (2003), Tobias Hubinette (2002), Eleana Kim (2003), Indigo Williams Willing (2004), and Yngvesson and Mahoney (2000), part of the small group of researchers, framed adult international adoptees as consciously creating community.

Going further to discuss previous studies that have examined Vietnamese adoptee community building (Cherot, 2006; Williams Willing, 2003, 2004), one of the studies addresses how Vietnamese adoptee community members voice racial and cultural identities and imbalances in adoptive families (Cherot, 2006). However, making these claims first required the community to forge a space to speak, write, and story, and simply advocating for this

space as a political and cultural assertion. In the community's pursuit to address racial and cultural inequalities in adoptive families and the adoption process, it claims ownership and commemorates Vietnamese adoptee history within the spaces members create.

One important issue this research addresses is how groups who have both conflicting and emotionally close relationships appease, negotiate, and compete. Appeasement can be a more effective strategy when two oppositional groups are emotionally close and feel their lives as interdependent. Some adoptees have considered the volunteers as mentors and part of their extended family. The relationship between the Babylift volunteers and the Vietnamese adoptees is both harmonious and problematic because although the volunteers played a vital role in bringing the adoptees to their adoptive homes, some adoptees voice resentment that in adoption dialogues and remembrances of the Vietnam War, volunteers' stories dominate over their own and conflict with their agendas of developing an independent adoptee movement. I explore the conflict between the volunteers and the adoptees because not only do the volunteers' stories eclipse the adoptee narratives, but also both groups are part of remembering and commemorating Vietnamese adoption history.

## **Babylift Volunteers From the Vietnam War to Present**

The Babylift volunteers bring tremendous gifts to the community, which are the stories and artifacts of Vietnamese adoptee history in Vietnam. This is significant because Vietnamese adoptees have very little artifacts and history of their lives before they arrived to their adoptive homes. They are some of the few people outside Vietnam that have firsthand memories of the adoptees' lives in orphanages. They are able to tell individual adoptees that they remembered changing their diapers, had a health condition as a baby, and occasionally present them with a clue about the whereabouts of their birthparents.

To illustrate, I offer a story of Keith, a Vietnamese adoptee. Keith knew little of his life in Vietnam, until he met with Ross Meador, a former orphanage worker, at VAN's first conference in 2001. VAN invited several Babylift volunteers to the conference. Meador is an American who was only nineteen years old when he decided to volunteer in Vietnam orphanages during the Vietnam War. At the conference, Keith told Meador that he lived in the same orphanage where Meador volunteered. Ross recognized Keith, which took him off guard because he was such a young child when he left Vietnam. In Vietnam, Meador had a photo taken of him surrounded by several orphan toddlers and babies. Meador gave a copy of the photo to

Keith. Although Keith had never seen a photo of himself as baby, he identified himself immediately. One of the children sitting on the floor looked uncannily like his oldest son. It was his first and only baby photo.

One of the most popular Babylift volunteer books among the adoptees is Cherrie Clark's *After Sorrow Comes Joy*. In interviews, adoptees cite the thoroughness of Clark's accounts and her decades of working in Vietnam and Indian orphanages as reasons for enjoying her memoir. They contrast Clark's autobiography to other Babylift volunteer books chronicling only the several days of Operation Babylift.

Some adoptees look to the volunteers' memories to find parts of their past that they feel are missing. Although the lack of birth records and the existence of falsified records are a source of pain and frustration for the adoptees, negotiating Babylift volunteer narratives can reconcile their life in Vietnam. Clark describes some of her struggles with getting orphans out of Vietnam and offers an explanation as to why the adoptees have numerous gaps in their adoption history, including incomplete birth records, and falsified birthdays and parents' names, and inaccurate relinquishment information.

During March and April 1975, the routine adoption procedures were completely disrupted due to the escalation of the war. There were circumstances present prior to the final evacuation of our children which prevented us from obtaining orphanage releases for them. These obstacles included our inability to return to the North as providences fell; conditions of war prohibited our travel to the (Mekong) Delta; orphanage directors refused to sign papers, for they feared that this act would endanger their lives; and officials were reluctant to authenticate documents (Clark, 2000, p. 237).

The relationships between the two groups revolve around friendship, camaraderie, admiration, and competition, and are useful to explore. Many of the adoptees enjoy close and loving associations with the volunteers, although several community members express concerns that Babylift volunteer memoirs dominate those created by Vietnamese adoptees. They feel like they have little voice in a commodified history volunteers packaged and sold back to the adoptees. The idea of Babylift volunteer memoirs as commodified culture comes from Vietnamese adoptee intellectual, Kevin Allen, who read an earlier version of this article. Allen points out that it is in those adoption agencies and adoptive parents' groups that advertise the books the adoptees become consumers of their own history. Many of these books have low or nonexistent profit margins, pointing to alternative reasons for their production outside wealth seeking (Allen, 2002, 2004).

## Life Story and Outsider Ethnographic Research

AVI also offers a place/space for adoptees to invite former Operation Babylift volunteers, overseas Vietnamese, adoptive parents, Viet Nam Veterans, war journalists, and academics to come and get to know the adoptees in their own terms. What is meant by this is that though we adoptees were once a quiet migration of orphaned infants and children, we are now speaking, as knowledgeable and expressive young adults. Our experiences, as adoptees, are unusual and can provide new insights on matters relating to place, culture, and identity—so we welcome two-way dialogues on these and a range of other interesting and timely subjects (AVI, 2005).

AVI's statement highlights some difficulties of researching a mobilized community. For the past four years, I have examined the adult Vietnamese adoptee community, where I found members to be conscious as objects of study and claim a right to voice their own history. My research began when I unexpectedly met Vietnamese adoptees online while participating in mixed-race Asian American organizations, e-mail listservs, and discussion groups. I was an outsider, a non-Vietnamese adoptee in a community of Vietnamese adoptees where insiders were Vietnamese adoptees. As an outsider, I used reflexive ethnography to inform this research method as I focused on the parts of the Vietnamese adoptee story that participants wanted told and sought their guidance in framing the research. I also used written life stories as a way to interpret a community in which I was an outsider.

Insiders are any Vietnamese adoptee born during the Vietnam War regardless of their father's race or nationality. Insider status does not depend on the level of involvement in the community. Members consider their history so unique that simply to be a part of this dramatic event creates an insider membership.

One could convey many stories of this group; stories of family reunification, war, or migration. Journalism, memoirs, and fictional accounts have created various interpretations of Vietnamese adoptees, while little documentation of their adult lives exists. In preliminary interviews, I found participants were interested in telling accounts of their collective agency and adult lives. They wanted their childhood traumas contextualized within their history of community building and activism. Jonathan, a Vietnamese adoptee, voices his unease with the dominating humanitarian and "saved" narrative in international adoption discourses. He writes on the VAN listserv:

I relate to when you say "sometimes even well-intentioned people I know assume that I feel overwhelmingly grateful for being "saved" or "rescued"

from Vietnam.” More than once in my life after being asked about my background have I gotten the big warm fuzzy smile and “Awww . . . you are so— or you MUST feel so—lucky!” (VAN, 2003)

In writing an academic piece on a community claiming a right to tell their own history, I needed to come to terms with my representation of Vietnamese adoptees and how I become another outsider telling Vietnamese adoptee history. To explain this difficulty, I offer an excerpt from Steve, who I had previously interviewed and who later posts on a Vietnamese adoptee listserv about a Vietnamese adoptee-themed novel *We Should Never Meet* written by a Vietnamese author Aimee Pham (Pham, 2004) who is not an adoptee. Steve writes the following on the AVI listserv.

Since 1975, former caretakers, orphanage workers, “experts” and “professionals” have made a fortune and a living in book deals/tours, speaking engagements, lectures, and so on by writing about their experiences in the intercountry/transracial adoption movement. One of the big complaints I’ve *fielded* [italics added] from our Vietnamese adoptee community, is that our stories and our history have been literally usurped by others for individual political agendas, profit, self-healing/catharsis, and fame-seeking (July 30, 2004).

By fielding stories from other community members, Steve composes a coherent narrative explaining the lack of adoptee voices vis-à-vis professional voices. One criticism regarding Aimee Pham and other non-Vietnamese adoptees telling Vietnamese adoptee history is that the authors have not consulted the community, nor have they included their voices. The goal of borrowing from narrative methods is to lessen a few of the problems associated between high levels of inequality between the ethnographer and the participant by including Vietnamese adoptees’ written life stories. Merging textual analysis and ethnographic methods aids in understanding the coherence already existing in members’ stories. It also assists in ethnographic comprehension of how members understand and make claims about life stories from their community.

Mobilized communities have their own intellectuals. In this case, they are the members of the Vietnamese adoptee community who claim a right to compose and interpret Vietnamese adoption life stories, give meanings, and voice interests for the larger community. Some social movement scholars have referred to these types of members as moral entrepreneurs, who organize, articulate interests, and seek public support and spaces for their interpretations of the past (Fine, 1996). This conceptualization can be

helpful to study members who voice community interests and meanings through life story writing, holding leadership positions, and commemorating history.

When several Vietnamese adoptees read an earlier version of this article, they were largely supportive of the term *moral entrepreneur* as a theoretical device, but there was some contention. One reason was specifically the word *moral*, which seemed to divert from their secular, social, political-, and community-oriented activities. The word *moral* is loaded with nuances in that it echoes religious movements and conservative organizing. In the spirit of treating participants as embracing their agency, and who create meanings, I changed the term. The word *community intellectual* describes the participants' concerns with commemoration, political questions, and practice. Vietnamese adoptee community intellectuals create new discourses, languages, and truths. They voice their concerns with culture, political questions, and practice. Their roles echo Stuart Hall's conception of intellectual practice, which merges theory and politics (Hall, 1992). Treating participants as community intellectuals as such enables an understanding of how they voice meanings, interests, and definitions. The research also relied on using the terminology coined by community intellectuals, including *Babylift volunteer*, originally used by the Vietnamese adoptee researcher Indigo Williams Willing.

Understanding how the Vietnamese adoptee community provided space in which to tell their life stories involved a triangulating data-gathering approach allowing me to observe the ways members understand their interests and prospects. This strategy comprised of interviews, Vietnamese adoptee-written life stories, and a roaming, multisited participant observation.<sup>4</sup> Years in the field allowed me to witness the community's evolution, from its primary focus on storytelling, emotional support, and networking to one including activist engagement designed to influence adoptive families and the process of adopting. It entailed participant observation in a range of settings: adoption agency gatherings, Vietnamese adoptee conferences, board meetings, fundraisers, educational forms, informal gatherings, and monitoring online listserv discussions paying special attention to the ways in which the community forms collective memories. It focused on the activities of several community intellectuals who mobilized other Vietnamese adoptees to tell their intimate life stories and helped create a space in which to do so.<sup>5</sup>

The life story analysis included documents from community intellectuals who set agendas, engage competing narratives, and conduct a significant bulk of the activism. Their writings attempt to represent the interests, desires, meanings, and identities of the Vietnamese adoptee population to a

wider public, thereby interpreting and framing Vietnamese adoptee experiences. In this sense, community intellectuals, who are aware of their representational strategies, can become their own autoethnographers. Their autoethnographic endeavors turn inward for a story of self and use that as a vantage point for interpreting culture and history (Neumann, 1996, p. 173). Adoptees fielding questions from other community members and weaving various Vietnamese adoptee stories into interpretive narratives can be an activist agenda, especially when it involves making specific claims about the community's history.

An autoethnography is commonly seen as an account of one's life as an ethnographer (Denzin, 1989). Vietnamese adoptee autoethnography is not just the act of a community member writing herself in the text, and the job traditionally associated with the ethnographer. The adoptee narrates a sense of self and community and provides an interpretation. Thus, the autoethnography also has features of an insider ethnography. This ethnographic task assumes a subjective and intersubjective way of knowing (Denzin, 1989, p. 27). It is based on personal and shared experiences.

The joint conceptual use of claimmaker and community intellectual to approach life story texts can improve at least some of the privilege and inequality between the researcher and participants in an ethnography. In examining documents written for public debate, the ethnographer does not frame questions. Instead, the research treats public texts as a conscious effort to create meaning, knowledge, and community cultural practice.

Using life stories previously written for public space and debate does not have the burden of eliminating all identifying markers. For this research, I kept identifying markers for writings geared toward the larger public and removed from members' writings published in more closed spaces as listservs and meetings. Because the community is tight knit, other members could possibly recognize some interviewees even without standard identifying markers. I often faced ethical questions of whether to include interview data even after participants signed consent forms and I performed the standard ethnographic methods to ensure anonymity. By using previously published life stories I could have more confidence in publishing the exact words the Vietnamese adoptees expressed, which will ensure that they felt comfortable with how their ideas are broadcasted.

This method is less obtrusive because the researcher cannot frame questions, but it also has some flaws. The ethnographer loses rich data by editing written documents to fit within the confines of an academic publication. At the same time, by editing the life stories, the inequalities between the participants and the ethnographer continue to exist.

## **Claims, Narratives, Commemorations, and Community Intellectuals**

I use narrative and claimsmaking frameworks to examine Vietnamese adoptee life stories. The Vietnamese adoptee community highlights that members have diverse feelings about their adoption; nevertheless, the members insist on their rights to share their life histories and create common narratives for the sake of community building. The community provides a space to revisit and recount trauma and displacement of an intimate adoption history, though members are careful in creating a culture in which members can voice distinctive stories and memories.<sup>6</sup> Ron Eyerman (2001) explained that remembering cultural trauma is inherently representational and does not correspond to the beliefs and aspirations of a homogenous group. Instead, individuals recount varied life stories in community spaces.

This research approaches stories as sociological phenomena, which participants produced and read socially and tell at significant moments (Plummer, 1995, p. 167). Narrative analysis includes examinations of diverse stories, commentaries, and everyday life (Gubrium & Holstein, 1999, p. 661). Examining narratives in ethnographic research is a valuable means for exploring claimsmaking, historical commemoration, and activism (Gongaware, 2003, p. 489). Individual written autobiographies and life stories can showcase activism (Crawley & Broad, 2004; Jasper, 1997; Polletta, 1999; Taylor, 1992, 1996). They tap emotions, especially moral understandings of the world (Jasper, 1997). Examining activist stories is an interpretive exercise that integrates past, present, and future events. Telling and writing life stories provides community members with an opportunity to impose order on otherwise disconnected stories and to create continuity between an imagined past, present, and future (Ochs & Capps, 1996). One who can tell, write, and commemorate the Vietnamese adoptee history has also the power to be a contender in framing larger Vietnam War and international adoption debates.

Observing Vietnamese adoptee community events allowed me to witness adoptees' conscious efforts to commemorate Vietnamese adoptee history. While the Vietnamese adoptee community makes a claim to tell their own adoption life stories, they create collective memories. Narrative examinations focus on how Vietnamese adoptees give weight to historical events and build memories through their interactions.<sup>7</sup> Through narratives, they exchange remembrances of events, fill historical gaps, create memories, and form what they claim are historical misconceptions (Gongaware, 2003; Olick & Robbins, 1998).

The Vietnamese adoptee community makes claims about the lack of Vietnamese adoptee–authored narratives and pushes against the idea of Vietnamese adoptees as intrinsically voiceless. Community stories can take the form of claimsmaking in the sense that they construct grievances and locate their experiences within a matrix of social problems addressed within their community (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). The community’s questioning as to who has the legitimate right to recount a Vietnamese adoptee history is an ownership claim.

Claimsmaking is critical in framing how the Vietnamese adoptee community articulates problems with the lack of Vietnamese adoptee voices in adoption and Vietnamese American history. Claimsmakers frame, identify, and interpret conditions as social problems, and usually have a stake in their claim. In creating claims, claimsmakers describe such situations as inadequate, assign them categories, and justify actions planned to change them (Holstein, 1993; Holstein & Miller, 1990). In this sense, their claimsmaking involves teaching the rationales behind making a claim, for example, a claim legitimizing anger and resentment over labeling international adoptees as *saved*.

Because Vietnamese adoptee storytelling involves an element of teaching a particular history, its pedagogic literature can also contribute to social movement analysis by its analysis of learning and activism (Freire, 1983; Giroux, 2000). An ethnography can also help the project to connect theory to pedagogic research by closely examining the actions and intentions of those who try to influence their social world. Written life histories are one site in which to pursue this endeavor.

## **Introduction to Vietnamese Adoptee Narrative and Commemorative Spaces**

Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz (1996) in their study of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial creations, argued that the stability and change in collective memories and commemoration emerges from a context of crosscutting coalitions and networks. Taking from their methodological cue, I identify some of the sites in which Vietnamese adoptees and Babylift volunteers compose Vietnamese adoptee history and the adoptees become claimsmakers. In these sites, members struggle to find a voice and claim ownership of Vietnamese adoptee history among competing accounts. The first site I explored is community organization making. The process in which Vietnamese adoptees recognize their potential for collective agency and a lack of their voices in their own history is both an impetus and a motivation for creating community

organizations. Their intellectual work involves engaging in autoethnographic strategies to create diverse stories into more cohesive wholes. The second site I explored inspects a Vietnamese adoptee-created conference. At the time of this conference, the community has already formed two organizations and held several conferences. In this space, community members negotiate Babylift volunteer narratives and use them for their own benefit by incorporating them into their own commemoration of Vietnamese adoptee history and as a way to introduce new members to this particular conception of history. Making a place for Babylift volunteer accounts brings conference attendees up to speed and fills gaps in the history.

### **Vietnamese Adoptee Reunions and Creating Community Space**

The Babylift was our story and we want a turn telling it (Interview Seattle, October 2002).

I argue how the Vietnamese adoptee community's reinterpreting their past and its partaking in collective memory building can be juxtaposed in relation to each other in the context of often competing Babylift volunteer accounts. Confronting Babylift narratives is part of this process. To illustrate, I provide a sketch of Vietnamese adoptee organizational formation. I also offer some insight into how Vietnamese adoptees do intellectual work through their autoethnography.

The catalyst to the Vietnamese adoptees forming their own community and telling life stories began with the adoption agencies, for example, Friends With Children From Vietnam and Holt International Children's Services organization enabling reunions among the separated and trips to Vietnam in the spring and summer of 2000. Most of the reunion attendees were in their mid-twenties, had finished college, and were ready to explore their adoption histories. Some Babylift volunteers helped organize returns to Vietnam for the Vietnamese adoptees and spoke at the reunions, thereby joining with adoption agencies in the process of commemorating Vietnamese adoptee history. Babylift volunteer, Shirley Peck-Barnes, includes a quote from a Vietnamese reunion organizer in her memoir.

The (Vietnamese adoptee) reunions were well-attended the first few years, and the kids all seemed to enjoy meeting each other. We tried to make the events interesting and informative in presenting Vietnamese history, culture

and traditions. But as the years progressed and the children grew, attendance dropped dramatically. It became apparent that the adoptees were no longer interested in their heritage and were completely Americanized (Peck-Barnes, 2000, p. 257)

The same year Peck-Barnes published her book Vietnamese adoptees created two separate organizations and a year later their own Vietnamese adoptee conference, giving little evidence to the assertion that they were not interested in their heritage or their history. AVI founder, Indigo Williams Willing, discovered in her interviews with Vietnamese adoptees that only few held color-blind identities or considered themselves completely White identified (Williams Willing 2003, 2004). To address the gaps between how some Babylift volunteers conceptualize Operation Babylift and the community members' own experiences, one of the first Vietnamese adoptee projects was to create Vietnamese adoptee-run organizations where members engaged Babylift accounts.

Although many Vietnamese adoptees identified the adoption agency-organized reunions as life-changing epiphanies and begun telling their stories in spaces created by Babylift volunteers, they were ready to create spaces of their own. In an airport, on the way home from the year 2000 reunion, two adoptees started a conversation about creating a Vietnamese adoptee collective and some of their displeasure with the format of the reunions, which focused more on particular recollections of the past rather than planning for the future. Steve recaps part of this conversation in an October 2002 interview.

Who cares about the Babylift (volunteer) personalities and living in the past, the few days of Operation Babylift? We get sick of it and want a central hub of information. If this sister and this nun don't want to talk to each other, then that's fine. We will.

In late summer following the reunions, roughly fourteen Vietnamese adoptees met in Chicago to continue phone and online conversations. What resulted was the creation of two organizations: AVI (Adopted Vietnamese International), founded by Indigo Williams Willing and based in Australia, and VAN (Vietnamese Adoptee Network) in the United States. Both have similar missions of connecting with younger Vietnamese adoptees, adoptive parents, and the larger Vietnamese and Asian American communities. Indigo Williams Willing, in her *Michigan Quarterly Review* article (Williams Willing, 2004), explains one reason for her organizational involvement. It

was “to create a space for the adoptees to tell their stories and begin a dialogue with each other and the diaspora” (p. 651).

At the same time, community building resisted the emotional and geographical isolation among the adoptees. One adoptee stated before meeting other Vietnamese adoptees face to face, “I felt like I was the only one” (Field Notes, June 20, 2002). This emotional need to form community and tell life histories after the year 2000 reunions started a frenzy of community-building activities. Community members created e-mail lists and Web pages. People who lived nearby met regularly and created informal local contingencies, most notably in Boston, New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland, Denver, and Washington, D.C. E-mail was an easy and convenient meeting space and could supplement to face-to-face encounters. Vietnamese adoptees who did not attend original reunions found VAN and AVI Web sites while surfing Internet, and also through word of mouth, the community continued to grow. The networking of the original reunion attendees created a community larger than the several hundred who attended the year 2000 reunions.

Without storytelling, the adoptees cannot form cohesive narratives. Narrative conceptualizations of the past can frame create future plans (Walton, 2001). Vietnamese adoptee narratives became successful when the adoptees had enough organizational and intuitional power and a voice among competing claimants. After the community formed in 2000, Vietnamese adoptees are able to connect diverse life stories into more unified narratives. The narratives help determine what claims, symbols, and frames resonate with members and audiences, and can be just as much about personal transformation as political and social reform (Polletta, 1999).

The VAN Web site logo is a symbol of the community’s independence from adoption agencies and Babylift volunteers, displaying their own commemoration of Vietnamese adoption (VAN, 2003). It visually demonstrates the community’s collective identity, memory, and activist goals. On the logo are four chronologically organized pictures depicting their history: Vietnamese orphanage workers feeding orphans, a White mother holding her Vietnamese baby in the early 1970s, a group of adult Vietnamese adoptees eating a meal during a return trip to Vietnam, and the president of VAN holding a Vietnamese child while his White mother looks on. These pictures are symbolic of VAN’s efforts to help adoptees reconnect with their past in Vietnam, help process childhoods in White American homes, provide information and opportunity to return to Vietnam, and be part of the future of adoption from Vietnam through leadership and mentoring. This logo does not simply retell the story of Vietnamese children as saved by American humanitarianism. In this interpretation, Vietnamese adoptees

have agency where they provide an invaluable service of mentoring and advice to the next generation of White adoptive parents and their children.

One of the projects of the community is to reinterpret the past as a means toward reconciling present and identifying future needs. Remembering trauma is linked with collective memory construction (Alexander, 2004). The community engages in the emotional, moral, and ideological debates surrounding Vietnamese adoptees arrival to the United States. Some journalists and politicians had asserted that the humanitarian focus on bringing Vietnamese children was an effort to overshadow U.S. losses. Later several American journalists and academics documented the economic and political hardships of half-American children who remained in Vietnam. One of the first authorized Operation Babylift flights crashed shortly after takeoff. A total of 115 of the 314 people on the C-5 cargo plane died, including 78 Vietnamese children. The Vietnamese government had accused the United States of stealing children, and some of their Vietnamese parents sued the U.S. government for custody. US courts found 200 children not to be orphans, and they returned to their Vietnamese families (Gardner, 2001). This led to a division over the ownership of adopted children in collective memory.

Cherrie Clark writes of her and Ross Meador's final days leading to the fall of Saigon and Operation Babylift in her memories.

At the last moment Ross decided that he was not going to leave with us. He insisted that he would go back to the Center and make certain all of the staff had left safely and give away what remaining supplies we had. I was frantic with worry for him and begged him to get on the plane, but he was adamant. My last view of him was as he turned to wave good-bye with a big smile on his face. I was in tears as I helped with the last of the loading (Clark, 2000, p. 201).

By borrowing Jeffrey Alexander's conceptualization of the trauma process, volunteers and members of the Vietnamese adoptee community are a group voicing claims and representing the interests and desires of the almost 3,000 of the war-born Vietnamese adoptees to a wider public. Both VAN and AVI have honored the Babylift volunteers and have invited them to their conferences and gatherings. Charles, a Vietnamese adoptee community leader, comments on the process of remembering Vietnamese adoption on one of the AVI listserv, and connects his assessment to community building.

As an individual, I don't like the light in which our community is portrayed; "gritty" or "gripping" or whatever. I'm all for the truth of our collective experience, I would love to see our history de-mythified so that we can be honest

about our roots and the conditions in which we came to be adopted so that we can move forward as a community (July 30, 2004).

At the same time, members forward a view of adoption that decenters the idea of international adoption as a seamless transition to an idealized multiculturalism where adoptees easily adjust to the race and ethnicities of their adoptive parents, and the communities they live. Instead, some critique a superficial and weak multiculturalism, one that does not significantly change racial hierarchies or economic imperatives, but instead focuses on the privileges of adoptive families (Eng, 2003, p. 13). A superficial multiculturalism and a saved narrative can gloss over problems of abuse and neglectful parenting, which can be present in both adoptive and biologically created families. Stacy Meredith writes in her short autobiographical story of the Baltimore reunion.

I had trouble speaking with the (adoptive) parents who attended and asked me questions about my adoption. I had a mom come up to me and chat. She just kept saying that I should be thankful for my adoption and that my parents did the best they could. If my father beating me for 16 years and my mom turn her back instead of protecting me and acting as if nothing was happening to me is the best they could do, then that is a distorted definition of "best" (Meredith, 2000).

In the effort to revisit their pasts, deconstruct commemorations of the Vietnam War, and their personal histories, community members are their own informal ethnographers by fielding questions from other members to interpret the community's Vietnam War life histories. Greg writes to the VAN listserv:

I have seen the real (Vietnam Veterans) Memorial twice before, and each time I come away with a wide range of emotions. I would like to ask those of you who have seen the Wall, what did you feel? Is there a sense of conflict in you as well or have you always been at peace with what the symbol represents? How about those of you who have both visited Vietnam and seen the Memorial? Where do you find your heart pulled toward? (April 13, 2002)

The act of discovering members' understandings of Vietnam history is one of the ways in which the community sets agendas. Williams Willing writes that the Vietnamese adoptees create "virtual communities that encourages solidarity, collectivity, and association" (2002, p. 6). Face-to-face and online interactions develop a life storytelling culture and a desire

for alternative imaginings of their history. Almost immediately after VAN and AVI create their Web pages, Vietnamese adoptees begin sharing their stories and posting on these sites. Eleana Kim's idea of "sites of collective articulation" can conceptualize their e-mail listserv writing (Kim, 2001). The writings compose individual and group visibility and are an unofficial history of adoption from Vietnam. Collective histories and shared storytelling explains to audiences of adoptees, Babylift volunteers, and adoptive parents what it means to be a Vietnamese adoptee. Community members recount disruption, displacement, and reveal the possibilities for alternative imaginings of Vietnamese in America. They often refer to their autobiography as "my story," claiming an ownership on a piece of Vietnamese American history.<sup>8</sup> John explains one of his motivations for life story writing.

I never thought of myself as a writer, but getting something down is important for me to even if it is not something publishable. It will be history that my kids will be able to read (CSPAN, 2003).

While telling life stories can be individual cathartic or emotional experiences, they can also be part of the community agenda to appropriate their own histories. Using the contributions of James Jasper, I argue that life stories such as John's are not necessarily straightforward descriptions of the past. They are assertions of present allegiances and identities, a practice to support emotional and political lives with "important basic values" (Jasper, 1997, p. 82). Being Vietnamese adoptee, Williams Willing's insider research engages in a collective autoethnography that forges a space for other Vietnamese adoptee life stories and histories. At the same time, she highlights that adoptee narratives can be diverse and have fluidity. She writes:

I was influenced by Yngvesson and Mahoney's critique of "contradictions from which no culturally consistently narrative can be told" in identity narratives constructed for and by international adoptees" (Williams Willing, 2004, p. 649).<sup>9</sup>

Barbara Yngvesson and Maureen Mahoney (2000) examined identity narratives of adult adoptees engaging in cultural meaning struggles of authenticity. They point out that some adoptees reformulate their life stories to stress new experiences that arise from exploring their adoption histories and returning to their birth countries. Highlighting different life events allows the adoptees to examine what it means to move beyond the understandings of identity as fixed to a more nuanced approach that encompasses

identity fluidity that develops with membership in a community. In this sense, it allows flexibility in not only the understandings of identity, but the narratives forming the identity.

Vietnamese adoptee autobiography is also a response to Babylift volunteer autobiographies. One Vietnamese adoptee who read a version of this article points out that Babylift volunteer accounts can unintentionally, and intentionally, overlook Vietnamese adoptee narratives. In a discussion of intentionality, Williams Willing (2004) writes:

However, the voices of adopted Vietnamese were only given limited attention in these and similar texts, as was any critical reflection upon the adoptees experiences (pg. 651).

An example of one of the Babylift narratives is from Shirley Peck Barnes book, *The War Cradle: Operation Babylift-The Untold Story*, whose back cover includes the text:

LOST . . . STARVING . . . UNWANTED. . .

They were the tens of thousands of children in Vietnam left to wander the country aimlessly. It was Vietnam's greatest tragedy . . . children caught in the crossfire of war . . . too incidental for the concerns of generals and all uncertain of their fate under the advancing North Vietnamese Army.

In an interview, when asked an adoptive mother asks Shirley Peck-Barnes, "What would you like people to gain from the book?" Peck-Barnes replied, "Most importantly to reflect on what war does to children and to be *their voice*. . . ." (Martin, 2005). This answer does not indicate why her voice will adequately substitute for adoptee voices given that the adoptees are adults fluent in English, and many have significant material, cultural, and social capital to make their life stories known. In the last chapter of her book titled "Aftermath," she includes short autobiographies of six adoptees, though a tension between her storying and the Vietnamese adoptee community's attempts to be their own voice continues. Using the title *Aftermath* conjures up trauma and hope, which adoptees do express, but their autobiographies also express diasporic connections to Vietnam. Williams Willing engages this struggle to add more voices in narratives to the story of Vietnamese adoption. She writes in her article:

Generalized narratives of the orphans 'salvation' from inferior Third World characters are evident in adoption narratives offered by some Westerners who assisted Vietnamese orphans' evacuation (2004, p. 654).

She engages in an account of Vietnamese adoption where the Vietnamese people are viewed as barbarians because they throw away their babies, and must look “to the West for salvation” (Peck-Barnes, 2000). Being saved hides the complexities of how Vietnamese adoptees left Vietnam, and how they make sense of lives after our arrival. The community uses a politics of recognition to dismantle their victim and passive status and add a more positive interpretation of Vietnamese people’s relationships to adoption history (Williams Willing, 2004, p. 654). Williams Willing pursues this by interpreting the meaning struggles around the idea of adoptees as rescued through her ethnography.

Williams Willing identifies Barnes-Peck’s autobiography as one who while perhaps rightfully taking up the rescuer position, fails to provide empathetic space for the Vietnamese people. She identifies the silence surrounding the multiple reasons that Vietnamese gave up children, and the Vietnamese birth mothers, nurses, and so on whose stories are yet to be told in the West. She is concerned with the generalized accounts between the West and Third World and the lack of emphasis on the cause of orphans, and the absence of Vietnamese birth mother narratives in Peck-Barnes memoir.

VAN also forms a critique of Westerners as saving Vietnamese children. For example, the VAN Web page provides a link of a story about Susan Berge, a woman who accompanied Bien Hoa, now renamed Jeff Dang Lindberg, from Vietnam to the United States. Berge did not volunteer to help the orphans. Instead, she was the daughter of an employee of Esso, the giant energy company with holdings in Vietnam. Berge found herself in a situation where her privilege in Vietnam could do some help for Bien Hoa. However, the Seattle Post-Intelligence Reporter titles the story, “Woman searching for the boy she saved.” In the link, VAN provides a caveat immediately next to the title “(not VAN’s wording)” to problematize the act of being saved (VAN, 2006).

The community’s connections to the larger Vietnamese diaspora created adoptee access to Vietnamese American history. When Williams Willing publishes her article, which critiques the salvation narrative, the community is not simply telling adoptee life stories. Members are forming cohesive narratives with specific goals in mind. One of which is Vietnamese adoptees as an integral part of Vietnamese America. The next section will further explore the community’s creation of accounts to engage Babylist volunteer historical commemorations.

## **Creating a Conference and Providing Space for Babylift Volunteer Narratives**

I am so sick of hearing about the C-5A plane crash. We are all in our 20s and 30s now. Vietnamese adoptee (Field Notes, October 2002)

At times, the community responds to competing Babylift volunteer narratives by inviting Babylift volunteers into their spaces. The Vietnamese adoptee community has engaged in the Babylift volunteer stories through their own organized events where they engage meaning struggles over their history. One of their responses to Babylift volunteers is to invite them to their functions where they are able to frame and respond to their stories on their own terms. Forming a conference is an effective way to negotiate volunteers' narratives that at times contradicts those of their members. Because it is their own space, they are able frame the questions and concerns attendees will explore. One such moment was at a VAN conference held at Dorchester, Massachusetts, one of Boston's long-standing Vietnamese communities. One reason for inviting LeAnn Thieman to the second national April 2005 VAN conference titled, "Bridging the Gap, Community, and Identity for First and Second Generation Vietnamese Adoptees" is that she holds the keys to history of adoptees' past that are precious. The Vietnamese Adoptee Network gathering marked the completion of thirty years of existence of Operation Babylift since it came into being, after the Vietnam War. The conference took place in a Vietnamese community center.

This population knows so little about their lives before they left Vietnam; therefore members value new information. They cherish small artifacts from their lives in Vietnam, for example, a photo, or even a discussion with someone who might have known them as babies or young children. An edited excerpt of my field notes taken on April 16 details describes Thieman's Babylift volunteer presentation, which the community later negotiates following her presentation.

In the center of a room, a professional motivational speaker and Babylift volunteer gives a twenty-minute PowerPoint slide show of her role in evacuating children through the Babylift to an audience of adult Vietnamese adoptees. I notice the contrast between this well put together middle-aged White woman and the Vietnamese people I see out of the window on the street. Some of the adoptees present have known me for years, and they are active in the community. Others are what the adoptee conference attendees

are informally referring to as newcomers or newbies, that is, adoptees just recently acquainted with the community. Thieman offers a simple narrative, a heroic woman in history. She details her courageous five-day sojourn where she helps to bring 600 children from Vietnam to the United States in 1975, one of whom will become her son Mitch. It is a seamless, simple, and linear narrative to companion her book *This Might be My Brother*. The short presentation glosses over the dramatics of the Vietnam War. U.S. soldiers are solely the people who have helped Vietnamese orphans. The Vietnam government is an entity putting bureaucratic and paperwork obstacles for orphans' exit out of Vietnam. She honors her heroic efforts without addressing the larger consequences of the war. Thieman includes photos of Vietnamese adoptees when they were in Vietnam that many in the audience have not seen. One photo portrays at least a dozen babies set on the floor of a minivan en route to the airport. The audience is passing around a box of tissues. Her Operation Babylift commemoration has clearly moved many in the audience.

Thieman ends her presentation with displaying a color photo with "all the characters from my book." As what one might expect from a professional motivational speaker, the presentation is simultaneously polished and well rehearsed. She makes an effort to reconcile the past with the future by including photographs of her grown adoptive son Mitch and her birth daughters, but in her presentation the characters do not have voices. At the VAN conference, the characters speak thirty years later after their plane ride from Vietnam. The abstract, faceless, and nameless babies who were strapped into cardboard boxes on a cargo plane headed for the United States are now adult representatives leading the discussion following Thieman's presentation.

At the VAN conference, the community must struggle with the desire to learn from Thieman's presentation and wanting to incorporate her narrative into a more cohesively organized and social consciousness community narrative. This reflects a symbiosis occurring between Vietnamese adoptees and their former caregivers. Kevin Allen who read an earlier version of the paper commented that Babylift volunteers receive emotional fulfillment from seeing their charges all grown-up, and Vietnamese adoptees acquire useful information about their past from the volunteers.<sup>10</sup> While the subjects of their Babylift volunteer writings are about the story of adoptee children, they are genuine when they claim that the adoptees as adults taught them much about motherhood and kinship. After the presentation, two community intellectuals who are part of the leadership of VAN set up a question and answer period after Thieman's presentation.

Janet: There are a lot of choices in adoption. Parents chose to put your child for adoption. Adoptive parents have a choice. Adoptees do not always feel like they have a choice. I don't have to explain. Knowing that is your choice is empowering.

Craig: Stories are powerful.

Janet: I don't owe people *my* story.

Craig conceptualizes stories as *powerful* by acknowledging their ability to be representational strategies. Members often use the phrases "my story" and "right to tell our story" to form claims. The word *my* denotes a custodial relationship to Vietnamese adoptee history. Another adoptee, who I met a few years ago during a VAN board meeting, before the conference, states his reasons to be involved with VAN is that he could tell his own story because he is "tired of others telling it" (Field Notes, Seattle, May 2002). This ownership claim is an activist agenda when voiced to the other community members. It is an inspirational call for others to share and a pedagogical claim for adoptees to teach one another.

Janet later declares to the VAN conference audience that she does not owe people her story and knowing that you have a choice to tell, or it not tell, is empowering. Through this statement, Janet becomes a spokesperson for the larger community by her emphasis that although adoptees did not have a choice in their adoption, they now have a choice in if, and how, they voice their adoption story. This nuances Thieman's singular agency to leave her American home to bring Vietnamese children to the United States. Janet's lack of childhood choice and the adoptee community's creation of adult options are part of an emerging Vietnamese adoptee collective history. In a previous interview with me in Portland in 2002, she makes a similar claim to the ownership of Vietnamese adoptee history. She asserts, "Adoption is a very personal thing, and I'm sure you have heard this from a lot of adoptees. It's . . . it's yours."

The community's claim to a childhood that lacked choices prompts members pose their community building and voices as distinctive to the Babylift volunteer narratives who were able to help decide how to best pursue the adoptees' welfare. It is important to highlight that the adoptees do not reveal consistent emotional reactions to the Babylift volunteers themselves. Many in community have amiable, close, and even loving relationships with the Babylift volunteers. However, Janet at a separate VAN event mentions how the Operation Babylift memoirs have nothing to do with her. She speaks about how she is past caring about people conceptualizing her as being *saved*. She expresses similar displeasures to the idea of adoptees

as *saved* as those revealed in Williams Willing (2003) interviews with Vietnamese adoptees.

An interview with Janet that took place two years before Thieman's presentation might explain some of the reasons the community continues to engage in Babylift volunteer commemorations. I first ask her about how she came to attend the 2000 conference in Baltimore organized by the adoption agency, Holt International.

Author: How did you find out about Baltimore?

Janet: I was searching online for Operation Babylift stuff, which for years there was nothing anywhere. And I ran across Cherrie Clark's (Babylift volunteer) book.

Author: Did you end up reading the book?

Janet: Um hum (affirmative). Very good, umm, though its, its hard for me to read again. It's an emotional thing for me because she describes these conditions that are so horrible, and yet these people that did so much and knowing that I was physically there, but not obviously remembering it. It's kind of a challenge. It's kind of hard for me to . . . I guess to get a hold of that concept.

Babylift volunteer, Cherrie Clark, provides some insight to the trauma of having missing pieces of past and memory as related to war. In an interview for a Web site geared toward adoptive parents, Clark has shed some light on the aftermath of Operation Babylift, thereby offering her own commemoration of the historical event.

I think for many of the children there is information and we have been able to provide that for a large number. I also think there is a larger group of kids who must come to terms with the reality that they are simply not going to be able to find out anything else. Coming to terms with that loss of history has to be taken within the context of what was going on. This was one of the prices of a dirty war (Martin, 2000).

The volunteers and the adoptees are engaging in a public pedagogy. Henry Giroux (2000) conceptualizes public pedagogy as the production, dissemination, and circulation of ideas emerging from distinctive communities. Public pedagogy refers to ideological and institutional forces whose aim is to produce material and ideological gain. It can be a struggle over identifications crucial to raising broader questions about how collectives produce notions of difference, responsibility, community, and belonging. It is a site where people negotiate relations between politics, knowledge, and

power. Through developing political and social consciousness, the adoptees are active subjects in making their culture and history, as opposed to passively accepting imposed structures (Freire, 1983).

Vietnamese adoptee exposure to Babylift volunteer accounts gives some context in aspects of their history that may take a lifetime to resolve. The struggle over Babylift and Vietnamese adoption meanings and adoption truths is an exercise where both groups mutually learn and teach about life, death, and family. In this sense, remembering trauma is a part of public pedagogy (Hall, 1992; Giroux, 2000). Collective memory creation and struggles over meanings are interrelated.

At the VAN conference, the Vietnamese adoptees are able to frame Thieman's presentation through their following discussion. Thieman shows a photo of an American mother holding a Vietnamese baby and explains the desires of adoptive parents by her following statement: "They were waiting for people like me to bring them here." She presents the photograph as a historical artifact, a justification for Operation Babylift, and a particular vision of this event as a destiny. The Vietnamese children were fated to go to their American parents who were patiently waiting for them. The adoptees are able to negotiate Thieman's statement. Thieman comes on their terms, at their conference, and invited by them. Her presence illustrates the adoptees' desires to find community and an effort to discover answers to the questions of their birth and their exit out of Vietnam even though many are fully aware that they many never answer all their questions. It is the pursuit, or specifically the choice to pursue answers, is a path in itself and not necessarily a realistic expectation for a lucid outcome.

The VAN conference is a collective memory-building project. One of its accomplishments was collective memory creation, which functioned as a way to expose new Vietnamese adoptee members to Vietnamese adoptee history (Gongaware, 2003, p. 486). Janet, like many other Vietnamese adoptees, find one another through reading and contacting Babylift volunteers who provide contact with other adoptees as well as information about their pasts not easily available anywhere else. Finding birth records, names of birth parents, and locations of orphanages where they stayed are precious to a community who has little documented evidence of their lives in Vietnam.

By inviting Thieman to present at their conference and leading the post-presentation discussion, the community can give access to information for the Vietnamese adoptees new to the community, the newbies, and help themselves partake in Thieman's historical commemoration project. In this sense, the community develops their own collective memories alongside Thieman's presentation and uses Babylift volunteer accounts as a way to commemorate

their own history. An edited excerpt of my field notes taken during the second day of the VAN conference, (on a talk about marriage and dating), the day following Thieman's Operation Babylift presentation illustrates:

As I walk into the Vietnamese American Community Center hall, I notice scattered throughout the room are Vietnamese artifacts and signs in both Vietnamese and English. In the large room, the audience divides itself. The adult adoptees and their spouses are seated one side of the room and the adoptive parents on another. Their children, the second-generation young adoptee kids, are playing on the outside jungle gym. On the stage are adult Vietnamese adoptees leading discussion panels on dating and parenting. Speakers introduce themselves, and set up a question or describe a racial problem they faced growing up as adopted. Then the adoptive parents ask questions. One of the panelists accounts her racial hurdles with interracial dating that finally leads to a satisfying relationship with another interracial partner. She goes as far as joking that she has become a "broken record," on the account that she feels as if she needs to repeat how important race will be to the new generation of adoptive parents and how parents must encourage racial conversations with their children. Some of the other panels nod in agreement. At the end of the introductions, one of the panelists specifically asks the adoptive parents if they have any concerns they "can inform them about," taking up a role of teacher and expert. One adoptive parent asks, "How should we not overemphasize race?"

Thieman, who is sitting in the audience, immediately responds and contradicts the adult adoptee panelists through her warning that adoptive parents can overemphasize race. In her caution about not stressing race, which is coincidentally closer to earlier assimilation adoption models, Thieman counters that her Vietnamese adoptee son Mitch did not want to talk about dating "and for all I know he has only dated White woman, as far as I know." (Since I did not interview Thieman I did not know whether this statement was about the fear of Mitch romantically rejecting her race.) She identifies herself as a trailblazer, a member of the first generation of parents who adopted from Vietnam. It is a common-sense expertise based on experience, a logic pertinent to the adult adoptees panelists, who poise themselves as possessing an expertise because they were also part of that first generation.

At the end of the panel, presenters and attendees gather for pictures. The panelists and the other adult adoptees wait to take their picture with Thieman, many of which VAN posts on its Web page. Thieman appears to have fulfilled the role that the VAN members asked her to do, which is to act as an Operation Babylift historian. At the same time, they decenter her

common-sense expertise and authority by creating panel titles such as White Privilege. At the conference, they now frame the questions and concerns for the new generation of adoptive families reaching farther than a humanitarian Operation Babylift story.

Thieman tells for the benefit of the audience members who did not see her Operation Babylift presentation that is a professional motivational speaker and excitedly states, "I get paid to tell your story and I do it about 40 times a year." Thieman tells her Operation Babylift story to make a living, but her enthusiasm is genuine and warm when she tells the audience that the five days she spent bringing children out of Vietnam changed her life.

Members of the community also share this enthusiasm to tell Vietnamese adoptee history. Sean writes the following on the VAN listserv:

I can't tell you how valuable it feels to me sometimes when I'm given the opportunity to explain, in person, my background to someone else when they find out I was adopted—especially when they admit they knew little or nothing about that part of history. (August 3, 2004)

This community member assigns an emotional value on sharing life stories and educating others. Activism in Vietnamese adoptees' public speeches and writings are an "opportunity to articulate, elaborate, or affirm moral sensibilities, principles, and allegiances" (Jasper, 1997, p. 15). Using the theoretical contribution of social movement theorist James Jasper, I could argue that Sean highlights and publicly express parts of his own life story to intensify the community's rhetorical message, thus providing the foundation of a *moral protest* with politics of recognition in mind.

Associated with notions of narratives as activism is the idea of narratives as identifying problems, trauma, and emotional loss in international adoption. The cultural construction of trauma begins with claims about the shape of social reality, its causes, and the responsibilities for action such causes imply (Alexander, 2004, p. 11). The Vietnamese adoptee community and Thieman engage in sense-making struggles, grappling with Operation Babylift contexts that involve identifying the nature of the pain and "the nature of the victim and the attribution of responsibility" (Alexander, 2004). Both try to connect the nature of disruption, war, and a mass exodus of babies and children, and claim rightful ownership of this history. Remembering the events of Operation Babylift becomes cultural struggle and practice.

## Commemoration Discussion

If it wasn't for the military for putting this pressure, there is a very high probability we would have been left (in Vietnam). It was the obligation for the United States to clean up their mess, whatever mess it is. (mixed-race Vietnamese adoptee; CSPAN, 2003)

Both adoptees and Babylift volunteers have made public claims about what is racially or culturally important to Vietnamese adoptees. Adoptee communities have actively pushed the idea of the international adoptee experience as cultural loss, and encourage adoptive parents with young children to expose them to their birthland culture. At the same time, the pose the international adoptee experience as distinctively racialized. Babylift volunteer, Shirley Peck-Barnes, opposes many of the adoptee activists in her following statement:

Most foreign-born children become Americanized and are not interested in their foreign culture. Since we are a nation of immigrants we often absorb various cultures and traditions. It most probably is wise to leave the choice to the adoptee. As an adult he/she will either express interest and find the path to his culture, or not consider it important to him. (Martin)

With this statement, Peck-Barnes speaks directly to the progressive movement in international adoption led by social workers, adoptees, and adoptive parents to form a systematic effort to educate international adoptee children of their homeland culture. This statement of Peck-Barnes not only makes a claim to how Vietnamese adoptees pursue their ethnic and foreign heritage, but embeds her argument in a particular commemoration of Vietnamese adoptee history as assimilated to White American culture

This tension to remember history between Vietnamese adoptee and Babylift volunteers echoes a difficulty examined by Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz (1996) who explored what transpired during a division among symbols to narrative and commemorate the Vietnam War. The politically and morally problematic Vietnam War, and the U.S. defeat, spawned a host of life story narratives and memorials remembering the war, illustrating what Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz's termed as a *culture of commemorations*. Individual heroic efforts overshadow U.S. losses.

Vietnamese adoptees hold an exceptional role as symbols of war reconciliations and recovery where positive accounts of Vietnamese adoption attempt to resolve death and defeat. Within this larger project to

commemorate the Vietnam War, many Vietnamese adoptees express concerns of not having a voice in public debates about their adoption, and organize to have their stories heard. Their activism since taking part in adoption agency–organized reunions in 2000 challenges this representative inequality. Indigo Williams writes an article asserting her agency as a product of the war to protest the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

I have lived a life of both displacement and opportunity in the west. Even from the dust life can grow, survive and even flourish if nurtured in time. I have since traveled back to my birthplace and reconciled with my past. From the dust of my past my attention now turns to a new looming storm of war—a new desert storm. What is different? The rice fields and jungle mists are soon to be swapped for Middle Eastern dry sandy plains. The smell of napalm in the morning is soon to be swapped for the mother of all bombs. We are also becoming more aware that we have many different subjective experiences and positions. Women at times of war have been involved in roles of aggressors and victims, soldiers and civilians. This will continue. (Williams “Dust to Desserts”)

## Critical Ethnography and Written Life Stories

The method of using written life stories helps to make ethnography critical by assisting the ethnographer to understand how participants address their world. This textual method is unfettered by ethnographers’ questions, addresses issues of anonymous research in tight-knit communities, complementary with face-to-face ethnographic rapport, and helps to deter slash-and-burn ethnography.

Using written life histories can enhance a critical ethnographic project. Merging narrative and ethnographic research is complementary. It offers a way to create an interpretative narrative of a community. Yet to pursue this method the ethnographer must take into account the social and ethical relationships between the interpreter and the one interpreted. Methodological reflexivity is not enough to produce a critical ethnography.

I was interested in the activism of the Vietnamese adoptee community, but that required me to understand how members framed power, interests, and inequality. Community members rethink narratives that have a plot and existence separate from the lived experiences of the adoptees. They do this often in their life story writings. Members of the Vietnamese adoptee community create autoethnographies that embed themselves in ideological

productions and reproductions of Vietnamese adoptee history. Using written life stories can help ethnographers appreciate community projects.

I had to explore all the communication sites in which community members engaged to understand how they challenged previous interpretations of Vietnamese adoptee history. Interestingly enough, the Vietnamese adoptees themselves were acting as informal critical ethnographers. They were urging audiences to interrogate the status quo of international adoption history and the supposed neutrality of their adoption. I had to use critical ethnography to keep up with their narrative making and activism.

Exploring narratives of the community intellectuals can eliminate some of the inequality between an ethnographer and participants when the ethnographer examines written life stories unfettered by her questions. It also allows her to examine the ways in which community intellectuals uniquely interpret and frame stories of other community participants.

Including life story writings may decrease some ethical problems of anonymous interview research. Ethnographic writing often includes more excerpts of taped interviews. Although I had many taped interviews that included rich sources of data, I could not disclose all without infringing anonymity because community members could recognize one another. For example, I could not incorporate many details of a private interview following a public presentation where I had received valuable information on the member's intentions. It would have provided important knowledge, but the participant could be identifiable among the community, thereby making the research unduly exploitative. As a result, I could only include severely edited portions of this interview. This is a common problem for researchers examining tight-knit communities.

Instead, I supplemented interviews with community members' public writings. One benefit to this strategy is less worry about interview questions unfairly framing participants' stories. There is not as much ethical ambiguity knowing that participants were comfortable with making their stories public, stories they had previously published or told elsewhere. Using published speeches and life stories in ethnography can enhance taped interviews, though it does not entirely remove the inequality between the research and the researched, altogether.

Using written life stories can assist in alleviating slash-and-burn ethnographies on a limited level. Gary Alan Fine (1999) argued that a publish-or-perish need contributes to slash-and-burn ethnography. The publish-or-perish notion provides justification for rapid publication and the belief that methodically learning the contours of a situation is not possible or even necessary. Instead, the ethnographer relies on her own assumptions and

claims. Publish-or-perish not only can produce slash-and-burn ethnographies, but also limits researchers' ability to make ethnography critical. Knowing what one believes is less time consuming than learning what a community believes. Trying to understand how our participants interpret power and inequality takes time.

In this age of publish-or-perish and increasingly high teaching loads, ethnographers might not be able to spend adequate time in the field. Ethnographers can keep up with participants by collecting life histories before and after their fieldwork. It helps to unite what ethnographers do "there," as in fieldwork, from "here," the academy (Segall, 2001). At least we can read some of our participants' writings at our desks. Of course, reading ethnographic texts will never completely resolve this problem.

Written life histories are not substitutions for face-to-face interactions or ethnographic rapport. However, researchers can approach them as complementary. Over the years, I have built strong relationships with several research participants. Unfortunately, with time constraints and geographical distance, participation on listservs might be the only day-to-day interaction I have with the community while the university is in session.

Critical ethnographers often engage in what participants are to do. If the communities the ethnographers study are online, then they must also be there. For the community I study, online is where members develop a significant chunk of discussion and direction. This is how the leadership gets their information.

In the age of our academic squeeze, ethnographers must still find creative ways to understand the lives of our subjects. Textual experimentation will not resolve the slash-and-burn and rapport issues. On the other hand, in communities such as the one I study, it is effective to supplement other research methods.

## **Conclusion**

I do not intend for this research to belittle or trivialize the love, affection, and friendship that many of the Vietnamese adoptees have with the Babylift volunteers. The groups have a shared camaraderie, affection, and friendship not adequately addressed in this article. In public speeches and writings, the Vietnamese adoptees have expressed kindness and appreciation to the Babylift volunteers.

After the community mobilization in 2000, Vietnamese adoptees address and negotiate Operation Babylift memoirs and historical commemorations.

The community's collective action not only produces new historical memories, but also provides access to spaces in which to tell life stories. Through this endeavor, the community claims ownership of their history, one that unequally favored narratives from non-Vietnamese adoptees. Instead of exclusively opposing the content of the Babylift volunteer memoirs, the community develops alternative spaces to tell their own stories, commemorates their history, and frames Babylift volunteer accounts within their spaces. In their practice of linking historical and cultural interpretations, members negotiate and include Babylift volunteer voices rather than solely rejecting their accounts. In many ways, this action is part of the larger movement of historical revisionism and deconstruction of the Vietnam War.

Because Vietnamese adoptee mobilization involves education, pedagogy theories can contribute to social movement theories by examining how learning occurs in activist communities (Freire, 1983). Using written life stories and treating participants as community intellectuals, ethnography is part of the project to connect theories of culture and politics. Ethnographic studies of community intellectuals can be part of this task to understand how members transmit ideas beyond the confines of their group. Their claimsmaking is part of a larger politics of recognition project where intellectuals are not only cultural and historical creators, but also hold pedagogical roles where they are teachers.

An examination of this community reveals the ways in which members use stories of self as vantage points to develop life histories. As the community matures, members often highlight parts of their life stories into socially and politically meaningful terms. Community intellectuals weave individual Vietnamese adoptee stories into cohesive narratives, thereby commemorating their own version of Vietnamese adoptee history. Stories of the Vietnamese adoptee community offer members a set of canonical symbols, plots, and characters through which they can interpret, negotiate, and create their social world. They help sustain memories and ensure the survival of the community. The community provides a context in which individual life stories and memories connect with others, thereby jointly fashioning into more unified collective memories. As an activist project, the community unites Vietnamese adoptees by and through collective representations. It forges the individual into memory and represents this individual as part of a collective.

However, it is helpful to point out that the adoptees have not formed a core legitimate set of voices that have exclusive rights to speak for others. Instead, the community creates a space allowing various Vietnamese adoptee expressions. Members have diverse opinions regarding the political and ideological intentions of the Babylift and current adoption from

Vietnam. Their voices are varied, yet the general movement is toward narratives independent of Babylift volunteers.

The community illustrates Girioux's conception of how cultural workers' moral imagination and political passion creates a space for political practice (2000, p. 345). Examining successful claimsmaking can help other potential claimsmakers plan their own strategies (Best, 1989, p. 249). Sympathetic commemorations and memories reproduce themselves (Wagner-Pacific & Schwartz, 1996). It is highly probable that as the community continues to grow, so will their alternative commemorations of the Vietnam War and adoption.

## Notes

1. See Peck-Barnes, 2000; Thieman, 2000; and Clark, 2000. Clark's memoir is distinctive from the others in that although Operation Babylift is a central narrative, it documents her decades of service in Vietnam and India orphanages.

2. Indigo Williams Willing coins the term *Babylift volunteer*.

3. For more on autobiographies on the Web see, Sorapure, 2003 and Zalis, 2003.

4. Jasper defines biography as "individuals' mental worlds, conscious and unconscious, which for biographical reasons are subsets of items in the broader culture" (Jasper, 1997, p. 20).

5. I attended more than 47 informal and formal events where I conducted 19 formal in-depth interviews and over 35 informal interviews. I identified interview subjects using snowball sample techniques where the initial set of participants introduced me to others (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

6. Shared culture in activist communities revolves around the "meaning, feelings, and judgments that are shared, usually because they are embodied in texts or images or reinforced by expectations" (Jasper, 1997, p. 45)

7. For an examination of how meaning is created in public arenas, see Hilgartner and Bosk (1988). See Gongaware (2003) for an account of collective memories and meanings in a social movement.

8. Interview April 2002.

9. Williams-Willing (2004), p. 649. Quoting Yngvesson and Mahoney (2000), p. 83.

10. I borrow this idea from a conversation with Kevin Allen

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