

# **Broken Up and Inside Out: Theorizing Subjectivity in Children Seeking Asylum Through Close Readings of Two Novels-in-Verse about the Vietnam War**

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Two recent novels-in-verse, Thanhha Lai's *Inside Out and Back Again* (2011) and Ann Burg's *All the Broken Pieces* (2012), challenge familiar narratives about children's subjectivity. The two pieces of writing for young readers use narrative poetry to represent the experiences of two children—Hà and Matt—as they emigrate to the U.S. during and after the American occupation of Vietnam. In their representations of these child migrants, Lai and Burg adopt first-person narrative positions that invite readers to consider the Vietnam conflict and life in the diaspora through the perspectives of their child-protagonists. In doing so, both writers make an implicit argument about the subjectivity of children seeking asylum after American occupations of their homeland. Those implicit arguments have the potential to call for a shift in the ways that children's competence might be construed personally, ethically and legally. By considering how Lai and Burg adopt the young adult novel-in-verse to present children dealing with the crisis of relocation during wartime, the two novels enter into an increasingly relevant conversation about children's vulnerabilities and rights.

## **I. Contexts for Understanding the Importance of Children's Subjectivity**

Asylum policy is complex and often situationally determined. In the case of children seeking asylum, the issue of the competence of young people to understand the geopolitical forces that compel indigenous populations to leave their homeland during international conflicts is among the most hotly contested issues. Children's psychological competence has been the subject of sustained debate in many disciplines. Legal scholars, children's rights advocates and developmental psychologists have long contested the applicability of human rights to child refugees of international conflicts. One scholar of international law, John Tobin, has noted no "formal agreement on the specific principles or moral theory" has been drafted that fully justifies the extension of some or all human rights, as defined by the United Nations or any other body of international policymakers, explicitly to children (396). One theoretical basis that might be suggested for reconsidering children's rights is the notion of the child as a competent subject. This theory arises as a "reaction against the image of the incompetent child" and is often "characterized by considering children as objects in need of protection because of their vulnerability" rather than subjects who can understand their situations and participate in decisions about relocation (Reynaert et al 520). This particular debate between those who see children as intrinsically vulnerable and those who argue for the need for specific rights protecting childhood autonomy might be better understood as a response to the complexities of international law and controversies of human rights discourse applied to the United States' Amerasian Homecoming Act (AHA), which passed legislative checks in 1989 (Yarborough xi). The intent behind the bill was to provide a venue for repatriating and financially supporting the children of American soldiers fathered with Vietnamese women during the conflict.

The controversies that arose from the enactment of the bill were wide-ranging—weighing the rights of custodial mothers next to the rights of surviving relatives of war casualties, considering the amount and boundaries of economic support, considering whether or not the children of sex workers could be eligible if their paternity is uncertain—but, notably, few of those controversies centered upon the right of children to be consulted about who their guardians will be or to determine own identities, familial, cultural and national, independently.

Given the influx of asylum-seekers in Europe and the U.S. in recent months, it is particularly important to consider how transnational experiences of children subject to these sorts of laws might effect conceptualizations of children's subjectivity. The narratives about kinship, culture and nation that emerge out of that reconceptualization are also shaped by perceptions of those children's identities as either migrants or refugees. Since it is through the construction of these narratives that most people—lawmakers and citizens alike—come to understand how children might be either victims of military occupation or subjects capable of seeking asylum, some consideration of how popular culture shapes those narratives is, of course, in order.

Unfortunately, images of the Vietnam conflict are less marked by narratives about children than they are narratives about American exceptionalism and military intervention. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, most American's perceptions of the occupation of Vietnam are shaped by contemporary cultural representations—from films like Stone's *Platoon* and Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* to literary fiction like Mason's *In Country* and O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. These representations are typically filtered through narrative perspectives of American GIs. For this reason, it is only now, some forty years after the evacuation of Saigon, that discourse about children's experiences during and after the conflict shape the Asian American diaspora. By examining how Lai and Burg work to destabilize the notion of children as subjects who are either competent or vulnerable, an intertextual interpretation of the novels suggests that a conversation about the traumas that most often interpellate children into subjects of international law is particularly needed in both policymaking and in living rooms and classrooms.

## II. The Radical Potential of Children's Literature for Shifting Context

The use of children's literature as a means of considering childhood competence and burgeoning subjectivity is not new; in fact, Jonathan Todres and Sarah Higinbotham have argued compellingly that "children's literature, like all narratives that contribute to our moral sense of the world, helps children construct social expectations and frame an understanding of their own specific rights and responsibilities" and thus provides a means to consider to what extent the complexities of subjectivity and subjugation might be competently understood by children. Thus, any examination of how Lai and Burg shape the narratives of personal development for their protagonists necessarily reflects some tacit consideration of the limitations of childhood understanding and processing of trauma as the result of the American war and the subsequent displacement of Vietnamese children.

Lai and Burg seem to encourage readers to consider the process through which subjection is understood by young people as an organizing principle in these two *bildungsromans*. In both novels, the simplicity of the language used is complicated by

the constraints of form and the complexity of content. One hallmark of the novel-in-verse, particularly when the verse is arrhythmic and irregular, is a fragmented first-person perspective. Even the titles of the novels reveal authorial concerns with the way children's lives are broken apart and reassembled by the conflict they survive. Lai's and Burg's formal departure from the traditional prose format of young adult fiction is significant: the fragmentation and ambiguity of both narratives depicts instances of trauma that Vietnamese migrants living in the U.S. face. In explicating the means by which Hà and Matt work through the traumatizing transcultural experiences through poetic language, this article seeks to elucidate the implicit claims in each novel about the ethics of transculturation, the experience of racial and cultural difference, and the correlation between American imperialism and assumptive assimilation.

Lai and Burg, with divergent strategies and intentions, are able to produce radical novels that ask young readers, and the adults with whom they might converse about these issues, to question the ideology of nationalism and the discourses about racial difference with which they are most likely to be familiar. In posing those questions, both writers seem to tacitly acknowledge the competence of children as ethical subjects—both through the demands of the reading praxis implicit in the novels, and in terms of how Matt and Hà act as exemplary subjects who are reconciling intersectional identities with the trauma of displacement and loss. Didacticism is, of course, not unique to these pieces of fiction for young readers, but the sort of pedagogical purposes that this interpretive method highlights reveal that the novels have radical potential for changing the conversation about children's rights.

These novels are radical in the most literal sense; both *Inside Out and Back Again* and *All the Broken Pieces* meet Jack Zipes' definition of radical children's literature, because the texts are "both enlightening and disturbing" for their readers. The novels are disturbing because they "touch on the traumatic" and "bring forth uncomfortable moments in American cultural history" (vii). They are enlightening because they "challenge us to reconsider what we mean when we think and speak about children's literature" (vii). Although Zipes argues that "[a]ll literature is political or ideological to a certain extent," expectations about the didactic purposes of writing for young people are often limited to an assumptively "neutral" educational agenda. One reason for looking to writing for children when theorizing ethnic and racial identity is that works from the genre are interesting artifacts of what, in particular contexts, is rendered neutral in the Western imagination.

Zipes begins his definition of radical children's literature, with an assertion that most literature doesn't encourage social change, but rather participates in the maintenance of dominant cultural norms; he writes, "[c]hildren's literature always carried with it a social code that was part of the civilizing process" (vii). One of the things children's literature can tell scholars is what the necessary preconditions are for "civilization," and any perspectives or lessons excluded from that genre would help us to intuit the boundaries of that notion of civilization. This implicit bias in much literature for young readers seems to belie the colonial history of Vietnam, wherein "civilizing" was often the watchword for the repression of indigenous cultures and the institutional oppression of subjects who were unwilling to assimilate into French, Russian or American colonial expectations. Because Lai and Burg choose to complicate how Matt and Hà respond to the assimilatory pressures they face after moving to the U.S., the novels work to reveal rather than conceal the contributions of colonialism to the trauma

the characters must work through. Both protagonists are children victimized not just by a recent invasion, but by a long history of colonial intervention and by a newly encountered process of racialization in American culture. The fact of their status as non-white immigrants living in the U.S. produces an additional layer of socio-cultural critique in the texts. While living in Vietnam, the fact of the nation's occupation was inescapable for Matt and Hà; after moving to the U.S. to "escape" that occupation, the children must then reconcile their racial status—which was invisible and normative in a Vietnamese context—with white supremacist and anti-immigrant sentiments that often pervade American society in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century.

This rendering of socio-cultural pressures on child-protagonists is not usual for children's literature, but these books are particularly anomalous when considered in the company of other pieces of fiction for young readers about Southeast Asian refugees in particular, Michael Levy found "a distinct absence of ideological stance" (qtd. in Tuon 535) in books like *Hoang Breaks the Lucky Teapot*, *The Lotus Seed*, *Dara's Cambodian New Year*, and *Dia's Story Cloth*, in which apolitical characters are victims of a war that is "simply a dirty business that one had to deal with for purely practical reasons" (232). Neither Burg nor Lai's novel fits this description. Both texts function politically as fictionalized autoethnographies.

The narratives work to persuade readers to reexamine the war, to better comprehend its effects on how Americans understand Vietnamese identity in the diaspora. For the nearly half a million immigrants to the U.S. from Vietnam between 1975 and 1995 the proliferation of narratives about Vietnamese identity might directly correlate with experiences of trauma and oppression as linked to racial and national identity. This persuasive push is part of what Renny Christopher has referred to as "the meta-war" over what it means to be Vietnamese; "U.S. representations collapse all distinctions between enemy and ally and among Vietnamese individuals" (5) and Vietnamese Americans struggle to find or build representations that refute such essentialism. Similarly, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud notes that associating "Vietnamese American literature only with the Viet Nam War [. . .] obscures the complexities of hybridity, the subjects' postcolonial, refugee, immigrant of color and transnational experiences, and therefore misses a large part of what is being said and represented" about people living in the diaspora (132). Most Americans think of Vietnam as a land of war—helicopters starting napalm fires and decimating the jungle with Agent Orange—and the Vietnamese as either desperately downtrodden and impoverished—driven to prostitution and theft—or incredibly dangerous—savage guerrilla fighters willing to die to cause harm to American G.I.s (53). The results of that imaging Vietnam can only be mitigated by what Michele Janette has called "tales of witness" (xix), which are narratives that use "personal experience" as a source of content and develop formal through responding to "the need to inform, to educate, to correct the record" that allows Vietnamese Americans to "claim a spot in the American psyche" (xxii) unmarked by the kinds of representation Pelaud contests. These kinds of narratives serve a forensic purpose that undertakes the sort of radical shift that Zipes finds noteworthy in radical children's literature.

*Inside Out and Back Again* and *All the Broken Pieces* provide exactly that sort of forensic narrative. Both writers also contest those representations in ways that speak to the concerns Janette and Pelaud suggest much of the literature about the conflict has overlooked. Lai's work is a *roman à clef*, based on the poet's experiences as a girl with

her mother and three brothers seeking refuge just after the fall of Saigon on an outbound boat that carries them first to a refugee camp, and then later to rural Alabama when their application for asylum is granted. Ann Burg is not Vietnamese American and her narrator is a fictionalized boy who was one of the few children of a Vietnamese mother and an American soldier who was naturalized through adoption by an American couple via the Amerasian Homecoming Act. Unlike Hà's narrative, which spends about half its pages describing the trip to the U.S., Matt's narrative says very little about the journey and focuses more upon the boy's difficulty integrating with his newly adopted American family and fitting in at school. What both novels do is represent the war, and the American nationalist sentiments the war evoked and the racism that Vietnamese Americans suffered as a result of that sentiment, from the perspective of traumatized, but capable children. This shift in focus—from reluctant occupying soldier to confused child refugee—still uses the machinery of pathos to represent the trauma of displacement for readers. By guiding readers through the emotional progression of trauma—individual and cultural—Lai and Burg implicitly call for a reconsideration of children's rights during and after an international conflict.

### III. Close Readings of New Kinds of Narratives about Vietnamese Migrants

Situating these two radical novels for young readers in conversation with popular cultural representations of the Vietnam Conflict shows that Lai and Burg posit a tacit response to the commonly iterated imagining of the war in American popular culture. Instead of considering that narrative from the perspective of a young American GI, both Lai and Burg establish a new narrative center in the children who are directly disenfranchised by the conflict. This stylistic strategy implicitly questions the dominant perspective and calls attention to the inequity in popular representations. For instance, both novels stage their protagonists' troubled relationship with an absent father. In Lai's novel, Hà's father, who was conscripted into the Navy, disappeared when she was only one year old. When Hà's mother places her lost husband's photograph on the altar, Hà feels both an intense desire to know the man and a small, secret shame that she does not (22). This shame and desire provide a potent source of pathos, which asks readers to consider how relocation and war might have real, perceptible consequences for migrant families. Although she understands why her mother chose to move her children out of Saigon, Hà has trouble reconciling that necessary move with what she feels is a kind of abandonment of her father. The terrible nature and high stakes of this family's choice to seek asylum in the U.S. is related in ways that young readers can empathize with because of the perspective and form of the narrative.

In Burg's novel, Matt's biological father is unknown to him. *All the Broken Pieces* begins with Matt remembering and rejecting his father: "He never saw my face. / But she was already swelled / with love for him when he left, / taking with him his blue-eyed promise / that it would not end there, / with the smell of burnt flesh / and the sound of crying children" (5). By crafting this poetic elegy for his lost mother and absent father, Burg uses sensory images to help readers understand Matt's perceptions of the war and its consequences for his family. The visual image of his pregnant mother, left alone in the chaos of the conflict, which is rendered in olfactory and auditory detail, produces a different sort of pathos than Hà's lament for her father. The shattering of Hà's father through relocation is replaced with the culpable blame that Matt assigns to his own

father. In this way, Burg works to ask readers if the heroes of the popular narratives—American soldiers—might not also be complicit in the suffering of this protagonist in some cases. This radical shift in considering how the war affects children demonstrates the complexities of identification and adjudication are not lost on characters and that both writers expect they will be similarly perceived by readers. If the novels seek to refute the focus on war as the singular feature of the Vietnamese cultural landscape, then this focus on soldier-fathers who are either missing-in-action or who abandon pregnant wives and unborn sons seems to ask for a more complex investigation of the ways in which the American invasion disrupted families than is portrayed in American media.

Both novels situate their readers epideictically, asking them to render a judgment about the transcultural pressures Matt and Hà face by assigning blame for the trauma each child endures, and praise for the means by which some of that trauma is occasionally, and often temporarily, relieved. Both novels feature the children suffering great difficulty integrating into their American schools. Lai's depictions of the racial issues that Hà encounters the first time she enters the cafeteria are a particular indictment of the color line in the American South. In the poem titled "Black and White and Yellow and Red," Hà reports "On one side / of the bright noisy room, / light skin. / Other side, / dark skin" (143). In addition to casually observing the de facto segregation of Alabama in the 70s, Hà also notes that no space on either side is made for her, that each side silently excludes her "as if it never occurred / to them / someone medium / would show up" (143). This works to destabilize comfortable notions of an American color line and to point out that Vietnamese migrants are new figures on the ground of institutional racism in American public education.

Likewise, Matt struggles with his racial liminality, which is compounded by the fact that he is of mixed parentage; when he's at school the other boys call him "frogface" and accuse him of having killed Americans when he lived in Vietnam. These microaggressions are the sort of racism that is most often experienced after migration and become moments of sympathy for young readers who can understand how schoolyard bullying takes on racist and nationalist tropes in the fiction. Matt's adoptive parents, seeking to provide him with a sense of community, take him to a twice yearly gathering of other child refugees, but he feels that he doesn't quite fit in there either; "We are all children / born in Vietnam. / Most of us have two names. / A new name to welcome us, / and an old name to remind us. / Still, I am different. / My face is part American" (24). This neither/nor situation that Matt's narration fills points out the inefficacy of pieces of legislation like the AHA, which cannot fully deal with how the child's conflicted sense of identity is compounded by "homecoming" to the U.S. In crafting this objection to seeing Matt's biracial identity as a vulnerability requiring protection, Burg works to demonstrate a competence and sophistication in her protagonist's burgeoning subjectivity.

These demonstrations of subjective development are rendered in simple language, using enjambment to keep syntax clear. Those formal choices indicate an expectation on the part of both writers that young readers of the texts will ken the inherent questioning of racial formation that Burg and Lai build into the novels-in-verse. In what Bunkong Tuon calls a textual "politics of innocence" (542), both writers use the assumption of vulnerability of their young narrators to reflect for American readers what a migrant child sees and feels when encountering American culture after

securing asylum. The novels then ask those readers to consider whether or not the Americans Matt and Hà encounter are worthy of praise for their kindness or blame for their bigotry. Because the novels ask for this kind of evaluative reading praxis, they create a mechanism readers can use to increase their awareness of the Vietnamese-American diaspora and to understand how the traumas suffered by refugees complicate the narrative about Vietnam in the U.S. today, as they consider the processes by which both child protagonists are either assisted or abused.

Lai and Burg use a series of poems to convey the stories they tell about their characters' transnational experiences, so the form of the narratives teaches its readers much more than just a simple first person narrative might. While prose novels usually have a continuity of narrative arc, novels-in-verse have an intense focus on particular moments and leave the gaps between those moments unwritten and therefore unexamined. These gaps are further complicated by the non-linear structure, in which both protagonists occasionally include vignettes of remembered events interspersed with the literary present of their stories. Both Burg and Lai use this formal feature to pace the revelation of information about the trauma Matt and Hà must cope with after relocation. For example, early in the *All the Broken Pieces*, readers are told that Matt is plagued by continual nightmares and insomnia, and that his anxieties, which keep him from sleeping and are realized in his frightening dreams, are chiefly about his brother. However, in the first part of the book readers are lead to believe that Matt's American younger brother, the biological son of his adoptive parents, is the dream-figure Matt fears will displace him in his parent's hearts. Only after reading the second half of the text is it revealed that Matt is haunted by guilt and terror after seeing his Vietnamese brother become permanently disabled after playing with a landmine. Because the book requires its readers to do the cognitive work of filling in the gaps in an incomplete narrative, readers are encouraged to think critically and pay careful attention to detail as they weigh the ethical implications of the character's limited choices and experiences of oppression.

The structures used by Lai are also recursive. The ways that Hà's poems are presented as diary entries reveals this fragmentation. Sometimes her poetry is contextual and bound in a particular moment, like when she describes the Tet holiday at the book's opening, but other times her poem is outside a singular time, like when she discusses being teased regularly by schoolchildren in Alabama about her name. At the bottom of the first poem about Tet, Hà marks the date: February 11. At the bottom of the later poem about being bullied, Hà simply writes "*everyday*." Even though this teasing recurs, Hà refuses to adopt an American name that would be more comfortable for her teachers and classmates and instead insists on keeping her Vietnamese identity audible in the public space of her classroom. This assertion of personal autonomy suggests that Hà is not only capable of making those choices, but also aware of the consequences that those choices bring.

Because these narratives defy a simple forward progression from one moment to the next, the form of the novel-in-verse encourages readers to see how the protagonist's perspective is revealed through both important singular events and shaped by ongoing occurrences. Because the kinds of racist and anti-immigrant sentiments Hà faces are presented outside linear time, the effects that those moments have on how she comes to understand herself are among the most important features of her subjective development. The competency with which she negotiates these affronts to her culture

and identity mark her as a capable subject, cognizant of the social systems that constrain her in her new home. Because of their innovative construction of temporality and subjectivity, both novels are at once streams-of-consciousness and retrospective musings. The characters are somehow both traumatized subjects vulnerable to exploitation and powerful agents of change and rejuvenation, which complicates the mutual exclusivity of children as either victimized objects or fully functional subjects.

The books' fragmented and nonlinear structures also allow readers to identify symptoms of trauma in the poetic first-person voice. For children who have the sorts of experiences that Matt and Hà do, there is no distance between the traumatic experiences they have had in the past and their mundane experiences in the present. Both Matt, who is plagued by nightmares, and Hà, who is desperately homesick, revisit their pasts even as the novels progress into the narrative present. For instance, both children use the image of a monsoon, terrifying as rendered through the memory of a small frightened child, to describe the experience of enduring the war. By using this kind of natural imagery that seems to be a source of universal terror, both writers succeed in managing the tenuous tension between making the narrative familiar to young readers who are not migrants and preserving the specificity of the experience of surviving a military occupation.

Sometimes, this tension is produced by situating the universal, and mundane, next to the specific, and traumatic. In an early poem from *Inside Out and Back Again*, Hà remembers avoiding the subject of the war in her South Vietnamese classroom:

Every Friday  
In Miss Xinh's class  
We talk about  
Current news. (18)

This description of typical discussions of civics might seem especially familiar to students, but Lai follows up with a shift in tone that reveals that "current news" doesn't concerns celebrity marriages or fluctuations in stock prices:

But when we keep talking about  
How close the Communists have gotten to Saigon  
How much prices have gone up  
Since American soldiers left,  
How many distant bombs  
Were heard the previous night (18)

By integrating the deprivations and effects of the war into the familiar classroom space, Lai's narration works to disrupt identification and produce sympathy. But that isn't the end of the implicit commentary offered on the situation of Vietnamese schoolchildren. Lai's teacher halts the discussion:

Miss Xinh finally no more.  
From now on  
Fridays will be for happy news.  
No one has anything

To say. (18)

The emphatic function of the last two lines produces a jarring effect. There is no good news for Hà in Vietnam. The circumstances that prompt her family's relocation are presented with a frankness that indicates the narrator's total capacity to understand the consequences of the conflict. The fear of hunger and attack are real and present in the children's lived experiences, but they are prevented from narrating these experiences by the teacher. The use of enjambment to fragment the phrasing works to visually illustrate (as the poem is laid out in snippets) the affective experience that Hà is having in her classroom. The radical potential of the form's implicit commentary on the content—that ugly truths about war cannot be fully represented in mundane contexts—make clear that the trauma of living in a militarized zone and under a totalitarian government inhibits Miss Xinh's students' free speech, but not their understanding. The passage also has a meta-textual quality. Here within the narrative Lai indicates the difficulty faced by writers of fiction for young people, who may be silenced by prohibitions against troubling narratives. Since the genre is used for pedagogical purposes, its often constrained by the focus of Miss Xinh's "happy news." Zipes describes this constraint as a natural outgrowth of concern for children; he writes,

We tend to repress the crucial issues that children need to know to adjust to a rapidly changing world. We tend to repress what is at the heart of the conflicts that determine our lives. We have tried to 'nourish' children by feeding them literature that we think is appropriate for them. Or, put another way, we have manipulated them through oral forms of communication and prescriptions in print to think or not to think about the world around them. (vii)

This critique of that sort of repression, as a kind of violation of children's rights to cognitive and social development, is an innovative way to replicate the experience of trauma. Like the fragmentation of the form that marks the novel-in-verse, the ways these novels treat repression speak to the socio-structural means by which trauma and vulnerability can be better understood. The competent child may still experience trauma without that experience negating the subjectivity of the child. In fact, the form of the novels is particularly concerned with showing how vulnerability and competence are linked, developmentally, rather than the diametrical opposites some current theorists imagines them to be.

#### **IV. Competence and Trauma in Young Adult Literature about Asylum Seekers**

Young people victimized by foreign occupation are often doubly "incompetent" according to international law: first, they are not mature enough to be capable of calling for asylum and second, the impact that the occupation has on their developing psyches often makes them "incompetent" because their vulnerabilities have been exploited. For this reason, it becomes important to understand how child-survivors of war might use narrative to demonstrate their competence in two ways—as legitimized speaking subjects and as psychologically-whole analysands, fully capable of understanding the

impact that trauma has had on their situations. The formal choices that Burg and Lai make are so potent because the novel-in-verse provides a vehicle that responds to both these narrative demands.

Trauma theorist James Berger notes that “trauma as it first occurs is incomprehensible. It is only later after a period of latency that it can be placed in a narrative” (577), but Cathy Caruth argues that “the impact of the traumatic even lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located” (8). According to either definition, time is disrupted for the traumatized subject and both Burg and Lai work to adapt the poetry to a form that recreates the experience of atemporality and illegibility. As discussed in the previous section, both novels-in-verse permute temporal norms in the recursive structures of the narratives. The narrators’ experiences, and the psychological states those experiences and narratives imply, would seem to mark both characters as vulnerable rather than competent. However, the degree to which childhood trauma is connected to self-awareness cannot be underestimated, and in the case of Matt and Hà, that vulnerability becomes a conduit to autonomy.

In his treatise on childhood trauma, Dominick LaCapra notes two features destabilize communication and perception for the child in crisis. The first of these is the cyclical return of that which is repressed (574). No matter how much Hà tries to ignore the war—given her mother’s hollow reassurance and her teacher’s poorly disguised censorship—the facts of the conflict are always already part of her experience. The absence of her father is directly related to her identity—the only daughter of a mother who must work hard and make do with less to feed her family of five without the help of a husband. This does not, as it might seem at first, make Hà a disabled or incompetent subject. In fact, one limitation of the competent child model for human rights is that this sort of “discourse is also embedded within the evolution of professionalization, a blue print of the educationalization process” (Reyneart et al 529). The notion that as children develop they become increasingly more “adult” through the process of interpellation into state systems, ideological and otherwise, is measured by the extent of the children’s reliance upon their parents to negotiate identity for them. As one legal scholar put it “one could even say that children’s rights [as derived from the competent child model] have – paradoxically – become the bearer of a new movement of protecting children by controlling parenting” (Reyneart et al 529). Hà’s ability to reject the “professionalizing” or “educationalizing” message of her mother and teachers illustrates that her competency exceeds their expectations of her understanding. Because Lai constructs her narrative through the eyes of the child herself, readers cannot ignore the truth that Hà perceives everything and understands most things as she comes of age in this precarious position as a migrant. Similarly, the fact that Lai makes Hà’s awareness so apparent to young readers suggests the writer’s faith in that audience’s ability to understand, accept and empathize with her protagonist. In her specific questioning of complicit silence enforced by parental oversight and educational institutions, Lai indicates that any test of competency cannot be easily formed from outside observation, but can be perceived quite easily from within and narrated from that interior perspective. The novel itself makes Hà a witness to her own autonomy.

The second feature of childhood trauma, as LaCapra explains it, is a clear dynamics of transference. La Capra notes that “[t]he failure to come to terms with discursive returns of some traumatic event usually signals the failure to recognize one’s own emotional and ideological investments in the event and its representation” (575-6).

Matt's poetry demonstrates both repression and the dynamics of transference. Berger explains that transference and the inability to verbalize the experience of trauma are related: "Transference in psychoanalysis is itself a return of the repressed, or rather a more conscious summoning of the repressed [ . . . ] It is imperative therefore to recognize the symptom and the trauma as one's own, to acknowledge that the trauma still is active and that one is implicated in its destructive effects" (576). This kind of self-knowledge is, of course, difficult to accept when the subject feels excluded from every social group that might become a source of support. For the first two years after his adoption, Matt and his parents attended weekly lessons in English together. Matt remembers that they "spent the day reading / legends and fairy tales, / how Au Co was a beautiful mountain fairy / who married Lac Long Quan, a daring dragon prince" but they never "talk about the American War / how tanks lumbered / in the roads / like drunken elephants, / and bombs fell from the sky / like dead crows. (19-20). This pair of passages from *All the Broken Pieces* fulfills the same testimonial purposes as Lai's use of Hà's perspective on Mis sXinh's prohibitions in the classroom. Matt's parents, the counselors at the adoption agency and the English language tutors all collaborate to help him form a positive attachment to Vietnam, but Matt silently notes that the country and culture he was taught about in these sessions "wasn't any Vietnam [he] remembered" (21). Because of the difference between Matt's memories of Vietnam and what he is taught about the country, he doesn't talk about his nightmares or secret guilt about his brother. Instead, he represses those memories until he is so anxious his parents feel they must intervene. One way Mr. and Mrs. Pin try to help their son is by encouraging him to attend a Veteran's group therapy meeting. Matt forms a particular bond with Jeff Harding, a Vet who also teaches piano, because they share similar perspectives on music and the war; Burg writes "Jeff's Vietnam is [Matt's] Vietnam" (30). The staging of a scene of identification between a veteran and a small immigrant boy does the overt work of authorizing both experiences. Because Burg mirrors Matt's childhood trauma with Jeff's adult PTSD, the novel works to show that trauma cannot mark a subject as incompetent and may, in fact, be a measure of the extent to which the subject is able to understand the enormity of the traumatic event. Additionally, by overlapping the experiences of the returning American G.I. with the child refugee, Burg succeeds in augmenting the narrative most Americans have come to accept about the war without excising the ideological intentions of the ethnographic piece of fictionalized narrative poetry she constructs.

Lai, on the other hand, works in direct opposition to that narrative. Beginning by contesting the assumption Pelaud reports that every Vietnamese man is a Viet Cong waiting to cause maximum damage to Americans, Hà's father disappears fighting the Communist encroachment on the capital. Additionally, her oldest brother, Quang, is a voice of dissent against seeking refuge abroad, arguing that it is his duty to defend his homeland and his mother's duty to wait for his father's return. Tuon notes that "when the family moves into their first apartment in Alabama, with the first three months' rent paid by their immigration sponsor, Brother Quang immediately reminds the rest that this is one way for the U.S. government to 'ease the guilt / of losing the war' and, by implication, of abandoning South Vietnam to the communists" (534). This scene is one of several moments of active resistance in the text that causes Tuon to read the novel as "a gentle yet persuasive critique of the U.S. and its treatment of Vietnamese refugees, who not only cultural and racial outsiders but also reminders of a lost war that it wishes

to forget” (534). The project of both novels is to insure that the conflict, and its impact on child refugees, is not forgotten, but can be integrated into existing understandings of the war to produce a more complete and nuanced understanding of how children deal with the trauma of military conflict and adapt to the pressures of securing asylum in an invading nation.

In fact, by closely examining the confrontations with racism and nationalism that both Matt and Hà face after emigrating, readers may see that Burg and Lai ask that they examine the attitudes about Vietnam that popular representations often reinforce through the relationships between their protagonists and the American communities they must acculturate within. Burg does construct a secondary plot, wherein Matt must face Rob, a member of his baseball team intent on bullying Matt, whom Rob blames for the death of his older brother, who was drafted to serve in the war. In crafting a confrontation and resolution to this plot, Burg frames a similar critique to the one Tuon finds in Lai’s novel. Immediately after Rob accuses Matt—“I hate you, he says, My brother / died / because of you” (188)—Matt has a kind of panic attack, complete with audio hallucinations:

I think I might crumble  
Right there on the field  
With Rob stumbling along  
In his own private darkness  
And the voices of Coach Robeson and Dad  
Talking about the war and cancer  
Stuck in my head—  
Over and over  
I hear Caveman Joe spending  
The rest of his life pretendin’  
And Jeff calling me a Vietnamese kid,  
The one who reminds everyone of the place they want to forget.  
I hear laughter in the bleachers  
And the sound of her voice shrieking  
*Bui Doi, you cannot stay here*  
While helicopters whirl and babies cry.

The only way Matt can make the flashbacks stop is to confess to Jeff that his Vietnam is frightening and to confess to Rob that his own brother died. As he comes out of his panic attack, Matt remembers that he tells Rob, “*I lost my brother too, / I say, and my words surprise me / He isn’t dead, but he’s gone just the same. / and it’s my fault. My mouth is saying stuff / I don’t even know I’m thinking. I’m sorry that your brother died. / I’m really sorry. / I know how you feel.*” (191). This very loss of narrative control—the inability to know what prompts speech out of the traumatic narrative—proves that the mitigating factors on child-survivors’ competency may be baseless. Even from a place of developmental progression and stymied narrative powers, Matt is able to speak his truth to his persecutor and to identify with Rob across racial, national and experiential divides.

When Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok developed their adaptation of Freud’s notion of post-traumatic hysteria and LaPlanche’s insights on grief, they theorized that

the talking cure Freud suggested was actually inhibited by the psychosomatic response to loss that LaPlanche argues is the cause of adaptive transference. If that response was to be overcome, according to Abraham and Torok, the analysand would need to talk not just to any analyst but one that served as a “guarantor of meaning” (128). Choosing to disclose previously repressed memories to Jeff and Rob, then, marks them as people Matt believes have the capacity to understand the fear, loss and guilt he suffers, which indicates a sophisticated social competence.

Rather than considering how and why the testimony of child-refugees might mitigate the scope of international law, it may be important to insure that young asylum-seekers have access to these kinds of guarantors. *All the Broken Pieces* works explicitly to represent this process. By working through the disclosure of that trauma, Burg works to position the dominant narrative about the chief victims in the war being draftees alongside the many other kinds of victims, which is appropriate when one considers that there are almost ten times as many displaced Vietnamese people living in the U.S. as there are names on the Vietnam War Memorial. Thus the novels speak to an audience of Vietnamese Americans in a way that affirms the truth of their personal and familial histories without the nationalist bias of the mainstream narrative while also communicating with an audience of non-Vietnamese Americans about the experiences of Vietnamese Americans in negotiating American cultural norms, which can exacerbate the cultural trauma created by the American invasion. This context for the development of the children as subject implicitly demonstrates the impossibility of gauging competence without a great deal of context. Lai and Burg work to build stories that have that sort of context in a form that reveals the dialectic shift between competence and vulnerability.

Because Hà and Matt have suffered through traumatizing experiences, their conceptualizations of themselves and of the cohesive narratives through which they understand their lives are rendered fragmentary. Abraham and Torok noted that people who suffer from childhood trauma are often unable to provide a cohesive narrative about their experiences; instead, their use of language becomes broken and difficult to follow, with large gaps and unexplained jumps back and forth in the progression of time. This broken narrative reflects the disturbance of the analysand’s sense of self, which is caused by the trauma’s disruption of normative development. Abraham and Torok have noted that the fragmentation of narrative becomes a kind of “cryptic language” that serves the purpose of “disguise[ing] the traumatic wound because it is unspeakable, because to state it openly would prove fatal to the topography of the ego” (142). The formal innovation of the novel-in-verse is that it replicates this experience of trauma. This makes the texts function didactically. Both novels communicate with young readers about the history of American hegemony. Rather than couching that data as dates of key battles and numbers of casualties, Lai and Burg craft a set of extremely personal stories. The forensic narratives that readers must reassemble are individual experiences couched in a diasporic lexicon.

## V. Conclusions about the Relevance of this Theorization of Childhood Subjectivity

Each novel is built of poems framed from a distinct perspective that destabilizes the way Vietnamese identity is understood by non-Vietnamese Americans, and works to contradict representations proliferated by popular culture and literary fiction about the war. In doing so, the novels may persuade readers to reject the simplistic narrative of Vietnamese cultural trauma and racial formation. One more potentially radical outcome of the reading is the possibility that young readers may actively transfer knowledge from one context to another. Although the American withdrawal from South Vietnam occurred decades ago, American troops are still deployed in Iraq, Afghanistan, along the DMZ in Korea and may soon be further deployed in other parts of the Middle and South east. If the lessons learned about how the American military intervention affects people who are displaced in the conflicts in which it intervenes can be drawn from Vietnam, then perhaps there is a chance that those young readers are better equipped than some of the characters in these novels to respond to the rapid changes that displacement due to war produces in the world. The endings of both novels seem to encourage such considerations.

Like the current debate about children as asylum seekers, the novels lack a clear resolution in their denouements. Tuon notes that Lai's book "does not conclude on a happy note" (547). Hà's father is still missing, now presumed dead; her family still struggles in poverty. She will still face racism, even if readers have seen that she has learned to cope with it. Likewise, Matt is likely to remain estranged from his biological family; although his adoptive mother promises that they will make inquiries about his mother and disabled brother still living in Vietnam, she also notes that all they can do is try. While Rob and Matt have settled their differences, Matt will still have to live in a country full of relatives grieving for dead draftees and some of them will nurse the same grudge Rob has just laid down. As critical race theorist Megan Oborn puts it, both characters experience "a kind of perpetual trauma" born out of the "two irreconcilable ways of seeing/remembering one's national and personal history and experiences" (226). Looking for some "end" to the traumatized experience of subjectivity to measure developmental competence is always necessarily a futile interpretive effort when discussing trauma and its limitations on rights, which Lai and Burg seem to understand as they craft their characters. The ambiguity of both endings refuses to satisfy expectations that children's literature will end with a fully cathartic Aristotelean resolution. Oborn goes on to note that "the possibility for a mode of expression/representation" as presented through the two first-person protagonists "can resist the overarching assimilative ideologies of US liberal multicultural discourses of identity construction" in ways that subjective tests of the limitations of human and children's rights cannot; "Though 'creative listening' [or attentive reading] seems promising in terms of resistance to hegemonic discourses of subject interpellation" young readers and critics of children's literature alike "must keep in mind that it is a difficult, involved, and potentially painful process" for child refugees to negotiate the duality vulnerability and competence (240). Burg and Lai work to reveal, in simple language, what that process is like for Hà and Matt without giving in to the temptation to resolve their trauma's fully and happily. Instead, these hopeful, if sad, endings remind readers that trauma is not a problem to be solved, but a condition to be managed.

Likewise, readers are taught that although wars may end with the withdrawal of troops, the real consequences of military action are long-reaching. These two endings ask readers to deliberate about the ethics of the war that has irrevocably disrupted these children's lives and to decide where the blame and praise for their burgeoning recoveries should be placed. In making those epideictic judgments, young readers are asked to consider the limitations and opportunities for burgeoning competence and subjectivity as relevant to an ongoing consideration of children's rights as revealed by radical children's literature.

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