Cumulative Grief

Xuan Pham

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Cumulative Grief

A Thesis Presented

by

XUAN PHAM

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

September 2020

Department of Art
Cumulative Grief

A Thesis Presented
by
XUAN PHAM

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DEDICATION

tặng Mẹ và Ba
Cảm ơn mẹ và ba vì sự hy sinh và sự kiên trì cho gia đình.

For my mother and father
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With great gratitude, I acknowledge and appreciate my committee whose generous dialogue has aided my artistic development and research: My chair, Alexis Kuhr, for her patience, wisdom and mentorship. Jenny Vogel, for her gentle reminder to not let fear rule the process and to stay calm. Shona Macdonald, for her advice and encouragement throughout my years in the program.
ABSTRACT

CUMULATIVE GRIEF

SEPTEMBER 2020

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A written thesis to accompany the M.F.A. Exhibition Cumulative Grief, in which the artist's personal and familial narrative explores the complexity and nuances of racial grief.
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American novelist and Pulitzer Prize winner, Viet Thanh Nguyen, in a 2019 review, calls Thi Bui’s illustrated memoir, *The Best We Could Do* “a compelling memoir about an ordinary family. Her story delivers the painful truth that most Vietnamese of the twentieth century know in an utterly personal fashion: that history is found in the marrow of one’s bones, ready to be passed on through blood, through generations, through feelings.”¹ For many Vietnamese immigrants, like authors Thi Bui, Viet Thanh Nguyen and myself, our family histories, memories, and lived experience is a deep part of our personal narrative and identity. We share a narrative that has been shaped by war and indescribable loss, hope and aspiration for new beginnings in the promised land. Our stories have been passed down through generations by oral history, blood, rice and songs. My ordinary immigration story and that of my family is not far from the template, where past, present and future are never clearly defined in a space, in a place, or in time.

The word ‘indescribable’ is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as meaning “so extreme or unusual it is almost impossible to describe.” I think about this word often. I think about how much it weighs. I think about its shape and form. I think about its color. I think about its taste. I think about the feelings it induces. I want to use the word ‘indescribable’ as a framework to talk about subjectivity, identity politics, postcolonial theory and criticism, racialized melancholia, and hybridity.

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¹Nguyen, review, *The Best We Could Do*
In the fall of 2019, I took my first Asian American Feminism class at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, taught by Professor Miliann Kang. This class and its content profoundly changed my understanding of race and gender and how it is measured in United States politics. Having never been exposed to race and gender studies through an Asian American lens until my final year of graduate studies, I regret that I didn’t reach out to find classes with this content sooner. Growing up in Omaha, Nebraska, from my early days in elementary school through my undergraduate studies, and then to gallery and museum work places, I have never been in a classroom with more than five Asian students or seven persons of color. Professor Kang's class was the first time I was surrounded by an all-female class, with a majority of students identifying as Asians. Like myself, the classroom had students of the 1.5 generation, second, third and fourth generation Asian Americans, as well as foreign exchange students, LatinX and African American students, all of us on different journeys in our higher education. To my sheer shock, I was reminded of my skewed view of normalcy in places such as the “traditional” classroom and the art field. Why did it take an academic theorization of Asian American’s experience to ease the pain of talking about racialized subjectivity? As if a lived experience on its own is somehow “lesser than,” if not theorized? Of course, the academic pursuit of gender studies has helped tremendously in articulating a better understanding of intersectionality. My only concern is that it is not moving fast enough into the real world and is only being examined in academia. How will visual art play a role in the expansion and crossover of theorization to physical and emotional empathy?

There were many inspiring readings in the course, but two stood out to me and became the base of my research, Anne A. Cheng’s, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis,*
Assimilation and Hidden Grief (2000), and David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans (2018). The authors Cheng, Eng and Han analyze the meaning of melancholy, in Sigmund Freud’s famous essay, Mourning and Melancholia (1917), where he argues that mourning and melancholia are similar but different responses to loss. Freud articulates mourning as a healthy response to loss, a process which takes place in the conscious mind, whereas melancholia is pathological, a state of permanent mourning which the subject is unable to fully comprehend or identify; it is an object that can never be recovered, this process takes place in the unconscious mind.² Cheng, Eng, and Han are recapturing melancholia as racial grief to help illustrate individual dysfunction as a consequence of what it means to be a racialized subject in America.³

Applying Cheng’s framework, which examines racial grief not only as the result of racism but also as a foundation for racial identity and formation of subjectivity,⁴ and adopting the findings of Eng and Han who explore social and psychic racial dissociation experienced by Asian Americans from Generation X to Generation Y to understand how trauma and grief are passed down through the generations. I will explore the complexity and nuances of racial grief. Relying on metaphors as a means to speak to the layers of grief and the indescribable emotions and psychological impact of being a racialized subject, I will work on a micro and macro level to examine the nuances of citizenship, assimilation, fantasy, trauma and performance as a foundation for racial identity. And through the use of personal narrative, accounts of migration

²Freud, Mourning and Melancholia
³Eng and Han, lecture Asian American Melancholia and Disassociation
⁴Dienst, Deepening the discourse on racial dynamics
and immigration stories by my extended family, I will engage the process of making art and endures its failure to ease the fragmentation unearthed in the wake of grief.
CHAPTER 2
RACIAL MELANCHOLIA

Anne Cheng in, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief* asks us how to quantify grief: “How does an individual go from being a subject of grief to being a subject of grievance? What political and psychical gains or losses transpire in the process?”

She states, “the transformation from grief to grievance, from suffering injury to speaking out against that injury, has always provoked profound questions about the meaning of hurt and its impact.” Cheng sets up a framework and provides vocabulary for understanding the invisible aspects of race dynamics, particularly racial subjection. She also points out the distinct differences between racial “grievance,” which typically has legal and quantitative connotations, and racial “grief,” which has emotional and qualitative connotations. Put another way, Cheng's understanding of grief is not limited to only how race is represented in the United States but also embraces the importance of one’s experience or lived experience to tease out the complex social etiology behind racial grief.

Cheng strategically sets the stage for understanding racial grief by explaining the failure of grievance to exact “racial healing” and asking how does one bear witness to the “more immaterial, unquantifiable repository of public and private grief that has gone into the making of the [black] subject.” While situating the racialization of Asian Americans within the dominant racial dialogue of white and black opposition, she states:

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5Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 1
6Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 3-4
7Kearly, review, *The Melancholy of Race*
8Dienst, *Deepening the discourse on racial dynamics*
9Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 6
With black and white as the dominant racial categories, historical memory tends to overlook the fierce contestation over the shades, as it were, in between—conflicts that involve not just ideological differences but economic and social privileges. Indeed, the formulation of the government’s sovereign power to exclude is historically tied to the definition of aliens and citizens. Well before Brown, there was a series of key rulings in school segregation, in addition to the well-known Plessy v. Ferguson, that involved the problem of racializing Asians in this country. In 1929, Chinese immigrant descendants in the Mississippi Delta, having for some time socialized with and even married blacks, nonetheless came into fierce protest around the issue of where the Chinese should be slotted in the Jim Crow school system, culminating in Gong Lum v. Rice. (In that case, the Chinese appellants claimed that since they were clearly not black, they should be considered closer to being white.) During the Brown litigations, the constitutionality of racialization-as-segregation in the form of the Japanese internment (Korematsu v. U.S.) was re-legitimized on the grounds that “national security” was at stake. (In Arthur Dong’s documentary about traveling Asian American performers in the forties and fifties, there were poignant testimonies of Asian American performers who, after traveling long distances, could not find a bathroom, since “black” and “white” were the only options proffered.) The question of the racialization of Asian Americans is in some ways more apparently melancholic than that of African Americans in American history in the sense that the history of virulent racism directed against Asians and Asian Americans has been at once consistently upheld and denied. Shuttling between “black” and “white”—the Scylla and Charybdis between which all American immigrants have to “pass”—Asian Americans occupy a truly ghostly position in the story of American racialization.10

While exploring the complexity of making affective racialized injury visible through the discussion of Brown v. Board of Education (1954) that overturned the Supreme Court’s 1896 decision in Plessy v. Ferguson, Cheng also demonstrates that the racialization of Asian Americans and African Americans are two distinct but related processes, and she concludes both are critical to understanding identity formation and the project of nation-making in the United States. The ghostly characterization is apt for a racial category that tends to be obscured by black and white grievances against each other's racial positions. The notion of "model minority" is a racial imaginary embodying both delight and repugnance for Asian Americans: used to deny

10Cheng, The Melancholy of Race, 22-23
black loss and sorrow, it serves as a form of discipline by accusing blacks of not assimilating as successfully as Asian and Asian Americans.\textsuperscript{11}

Literary critic Peter R. Kearly in reviewing Cheng's \textit{The Melancholy of Race} states, “One might criticize Cheng for narrowing her discussion to two race categories—Asian American and African American—even while she mentions Native American and Latino as sidebars, but I see her choice as "strategic."\textsuperscript{12} As the failure of grievance to exact racial healing, especially through the contradictory categories of race and citizenship, grievance then becomes a performative political action that, as has been charged by white opposition, often sounds like whining or vengeful retribution. Within nations enacting public grievance, “is a social forum and luxury to which the racially melancholic minorities have little or no access.”\textsuperscript{13} And as Asian Americans who are already rendered invisible by racial dialogue dominated by white/black opposition are as Cheng calls it “more ghostly” in “the morphology of ghostliness” (The morphology of ghostliness represents an alternative to ontology, where the remains of the dead are localized and fixed, Derrida 1994).\textsuperscript{14} And in identifying the “more ghostly,” we also open up our understanding of terms such as citizenship, assimilation, fantasy, trauma and performance. As the failure of grievance is to obtain racial healing the caution against grievance is clearly addressing the current backlash against the so-called "race card" or “victimhood.”\textsuperscript{15} There is a need to fully understand the complexity of a racialized subject’s agency and to be cautious not to apply a surface understanding of racial grief or to use it in a formulaic notion. Grief is layered

\textsuperscript{11}Cheng, \textit{The Melancholy of Race}
\textsuperscript{12}Kearly, review, \textit{The Melancholy of Race}; Spivak, on "\textit{strategic essentialism}"
\textsuperscript{13}Cheng, \textit{The Melancholy of Race}, 174
\textsuperscript{14}Young, \textit{Haunting Capital: Memory, Text and the Black Diasporic Body}
\textsuperscript{15}Kearly, review, \textit{The Melancholy of Race}
differently depending on an individual racial subject, with nuances such as citizenship, assimilation, fantasy, trauma, and performance at play.

To better illustrate “the morphology of ghostliness,” Cheng uses literary works such as Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* to illustrate not only the grief associated with racial loss but also the agency within the narrator’s fantasy of grievance. In Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the narrator’s invisibility caused by radical blindness, is the central metaphor of the story. The narrator tells a story about his violent confrontation between himself and a white man:

One night I accidentally bumped into a man...he looked insolently out of his blue eyes and cursed me...I yelled, “Apologize! Apologize!” But he continued to curse and struggle, and I butted him again and again until he went down heavily...I kicked him profusely...when it occurred to me that the man had not seen me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was walking in the midst of a walking nightmare....a man almost killed by a phantom.16

Cheng explains this passage as bringing up “layers of complicated questions about the differences between perception and projection, between action and reaction, in a racial encounter.”17 Seeing it from the narrator’s perspective, the white man is “insolence,” his anger an expression of wishing that the black man is now invisible instead of being visible. “The white man’s resistance to this presence reminds us that “black invisibility” grows out of dominant culture’s privilege to see or not see, a privilege substantiated by a history of longstanding material, legal, and social discrimination. The metaphor of invisibility thus alerts us to the repercussion of this long process of social and legal exclusion.”18 Kearly puts it as:

“Invisible Man: is a seminal text for theorizing invisibility as a trope for the melancholic incorporation of the self-as-loss. If the ideology of "American cultures," sustains itself via the repeated exclusion and staged reincorporation of excluded others, then one may begin to read "racialized America" (for both the minority and the dominant subject) as a fantasy

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16 Cheng, *Ralph Ellison and the politics of melancholia*, 121
17 Cheng, *Ralph Ellison and the politics of melancholia*, 121
18 Cheng, *Ralph Ellison and the politics of melancholia*, 122
built on absences. It is crucial to recognize that melancholic identity is built on an incorporative confusion. By locating cultural and racial exclusion as a loss, Ellison's text offers a theorization of identity that recuperates that loss not as presence but as invisibility. (470) Or, more specifically, Ellison revalues invisibility as a strategy to identify that absence without denying that absence's constitutive power for the formation of the racialized subject.”

The modes of invisibility form symbols of blackness that become fantasy-like or mythological, allowing society to deny “responsibility for the blackness we exclude by way of the blackness we include” and allowing for color blindness to prevail and the act of erasure to happen. In W.E.B. Du Bois’s notion of “double consciousness,” the sense of invisibility and twoness comes from seeing oneself through the eyes of another while applying that to Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, it renders the black subject incomplete and therefore invisible. The grief experienced by Ellison’s *Invisible Man* provides a nuanced perspective on subject identity in race relations and the grief associated with racial loss, such as the feeling of not being seen, or of not being considered good enough. The complex layers of understanding racial grief can be applied to desire, fear and revulsion.

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19 Kearly, review, *The Melancholy of Race*, 127-128; emphasis in original
20 Gibson, *Invisibility and the Commodification of Blackness*
21 Gibson, *Invisibility and the Commodification of Blackness*
22 Dienst, *Deepening the discourse on racial dynamics*
CHAPTER 3

DESIRE / FEAR / REVULSION

To understand the desire, fear, and revulsions of racial identity, Cheng examines Freud’s essay, “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), which looks at the two different kinds of grief. According to Freud, mourning is a healthy response to loss as he explains, “we rest assured that after a lapse of time it will be overcome” (MM, 240), meaning the character of mourning allows for substitution, or that the lost object can eventually be replaced. Whereas melancholia, is pathological, as a state of permanent mourning, and does not allow for substitution, meaning that it cannot “get over” the loss. As Freud put it, “[I]n grief [mourning] the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia, it is the ego itself.”

Cheng describes “melancholic as psychically stuck...whereas mourning becomes poor and empty, melancholia denotes a condition of endless self-impoverishment it also provides a new understanding of this impoverishment as also nurturing.” As the melancholic subject eats the lost object, it also feeds on it for nourishment, which becomes subsumed as part of its identity. Therefore, Cheng’s view of melancholia “alludes not to loss per se but to the entangled relationship with loss. Melancholia does not simply denote a condition of grief but is, rather, a legislation of grief.” While the melancholic subject feeds on loss, it conjures up feelings of resentment. “The melancholic is not melancholic because he or she has lost something but because he or she has introjected that which he or she now reviles. Thus the melancholic is stuck

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23 Freud, Mourning and Melancholia (1917)
24 Cheng, The Melancholy of Race, 8
25 Cheng, The Melancholy of Race, 8
26 Cheng, The Melancholy of Race, 8
in more ways than just temporally; he or she is stuck-almost choking on-the hateful and loved thing he or she just devoured.”

Cheng, taking a closer look at the complex psychic dynamics of the melancholic subject, writes, “First, the melancholic must deny loss as loss in order to sustain the fiction of possession. Second, the melancholic would have to make sure that the “object never returns, for such a return world surely jeopardizes the cannibalistic project that, one might note, is a form of possession more intimate than any material relationship could produce.”

Using Cheng’s theoretical tool, in which melancholia “accounts for the guilt and denial of guilt, the blending of shame and omnipotence,” I will share how a name can represent joy, pride, shame, guilt, and racialized discrimination.

What Do They Call You?

I asked my mom how she chose to name me Xuân? She replied, I wanted a happy child, a joyful child. When I was a child growing up in Vietnam, my name, Xuân Phạm, was nothing special. I recall having a female classmate in the first grade who shared the exact name as me. We even shared the same two middle names, with only one slight difference, our two middle names were reversed. She was Xuân Phạm, and I was Xuân Phạm. Xuân is one of the most commonly used names for both genders. Xuân could be found everywhere. On street vendors’ push-carts, and storefronts and shopping malls with Xuân plastered in bold lettering around the city. The word Xuân ringed loudly in poetry, dance and song.

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27Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 8
28Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 9
29Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 12
Xuân is a touch; when Xuân touches you, it starts out small in light vibrations, it grows to devour you in hope and joy over its season. You don’t know how or why, but you let it take over your body and mind. The texture of Xuân is hard to describe... it is vibrant, chaotic, loud and traditional. Xuân is a sight; it is the most celebrated season in the Lunar calendar. It brings colorful decoration, new spring promises, rebirth and reunion. The flower markets are filled with yellow marigolds, chrysanthemums, daisies, peach blossoms, kumquat trees and the yellow apricot flower, all symbolizing the spirit of Tết. Xuân is a sound, sung loudly and proudly in the streets, in cafe shops over speakers, in karaoke rooms, in the kitchen, in rice fields, in the home and in the mind. Much ink has been illustrated about its spirit; songs and poetry describe it as grief, longing, desire, hope, faith, happiness, joy and memory. You can hear it piercing as red firecrackers explode around neighborhoods, leaving an imprint of its former self on pavements and walls, and traces of red, burnt tissue paper and smoke lining the streets. Xuân is a smell; Xuân smells like spring floral, new clothes, incense aroma, sticky-rice cake, Chung cake and Tết cake, sweet apricot, ginger candy, coconut jam, and roasted watermelon seeds. Xuân is a taste; Xuân is the tastiest sticky-rice cake, sweet apricot, ginger candy, coconut jam, roasted watermelon seeds, sweetness of home, the powerful embrace of family, centuries-old traditions and rituals, served up in a dish of filial piety.

The word Xuân is no longer just a word meaning spring (season of spring); it has transformed into a symbol for the Vietnamese people. Mùa Xuân (the season of spring) linguistically, culturally, historically and symbolically has become a marker for rebirth. A seasonal marker for Tết (Vietnamese New Year) and a marker of war, Tết Mậu Thân 1968 (Tet Offensive). On one end of the spectrum, Tết Mậu Thân 1968 represented the downfall of Saigon,
while on the other, it was the pursuit of liberation of Vietnam from Western powers. And all the while, in the center of the spectrum, is where grief, desire, fear, and hope are indistinguishable from one another.

I was given the name Sue at age eight. After finishing a three-month ESL course at a local elementary school in the Omaha, Nebraska metro area, I started second grade in January of 1998. At the time, I spoke zero English and had only finished first grade in Vietnam. My Vietnamese was not good, and my English was nonexistent. Not yet fully firm on the structure of my native language, being thrown into ESL classes to conjugate verbs was anxiety-ridden, confusing, and frustrating. As a child, fear, envy, and shame frequently occupied my mind. They became my companions, ruling my emotions, actions and decision.

During my early exposure to the American school system, I knew my name, Xuân, was an unusual and difficult name to pronounce in this land. I can’t remember how it happened, but I was given the name Sue by an elementary school counselor and my uncle. Their intentions were good, each hoping it would make my transition to full-time schooling easier than my ESL experience. And so, I began a new life with a new identity. At school, I was Sue. Sue occupied the public space; she became a barrier, a protector, a hopeful wish for assimilation. Sue embodied everything that represented a model minority child/student. She was obedient, never questioned authority, and malleable. She became the children she envied, full of laughter, joy and confidence. She made friends quickly and easily and was a chatterbox. Sue represented Midwest American values, the whiteness that was promised through assimilation, mimicry, and self-compartmentalization. My entangled relationship with her is something that I cannot express fully in words. Feelings and emotions run high when I hear the name Sue. But lately, my ill
feelings toward Sue have disappeared. If anything, I’m thankful for her exterior, perseverance, 
fight, and for her seamless code-switching.

Xuân, on the other hand, spoke broken Vietnamese and occupied the private space. She 
often was lonely, scared and moody. Frustrated and burdened by the role of an immigrant child, 
Xuân mourned the loss of her childhood by being quiet, observant, kind, ever so helpful. Xuân 
represented grief, desire, shame, and fear. Grief over the loss of her mother tongue, desire to 
fulfill and repay her parents' sacrifices, shame for feeling never enough, and fear of being 
exposed as an imposter. Whereas Sue developed a hard exterior, Xuân had time to develop a 
vocabulary to talk about vulnerabilities. It cannot go unrecognized that Sue and Xuân thrived on 
one another and needed each other for protection, both chasing a white ideal.

At age 23, after finishing my BFA thesis, an unsuccessful body of giant ghostly figure 
paintings dealing with the giant burden of filial piety. I was left with despair and fear. Did the 
paintings allude “enough” to the weight of filial piety, or had I, in rejecting being pigeonholed as 
an “Asian female painter” painting about Asian subjects. Had I made it harder for myself to 
speak about race? Was I still practicing the myth of model minority and reinforcing toxic 
tropes? Feelings of inadequacy quickly set in, and for the first time since 1998, I recognized that 
Xuân was present in the room and with Sue.

Looking back, I now know, these large paintings of ambiguous and veiled figures were 
nothing more than the contradictions and fractures of a racialized subject and their psyche. The 
false promises of “belonging” and “citizenship” became a formulaic performance of assimilation, 
mimicry, stereotypes, tropes, and self-compartmentalization. The promises that I easily accepted 
as a child are now no longer appetizing. And so, for the next two years, I slowly started the
process of reclaiming my given name. I would privately practice introducing myself as Xuân in the mirror until I was comfortable with hearing it said out loud. It took me a long time to learn to love Xuân without Sue, and I’m still on that journey. I also understand now that I am not mourning Sue/Xuân, but I am in a forever state of grievance over the loss of what Sue/Xuân represented. At times I wish Sue was present in certain situations, as I have always admired her confidence, maybe because she had sixteen years to practice or maybe because she had no other choice than to survive. Whereas, Xuân is still learning how to negotiate as Xuân: she is only five years fresh from reclaiming her given name and is, at times, indecisive. Cheng, in illustrating the internalization of the white ideal in Toni Morrison’s “The Bluest Eye,” cites the moment when the young black girl prays for her eyes to turn blue, “the little girl must internalize not only the white ideal but also the ideal of black womanhood as a longing after the white ideal” Cheng proffers, “this profound internalization of ideality, in its history and practice, can gesture, surprisingly, to shades of resistance as well as acquiescence.”

The desire for Sue to re-appear or be part of Xuân’s life has been brought up before, especially in the process of artmaking or within the studio. As Sue, I occupied the role of a protector, made to shelter myself from racialized discrimination. But under her protection, Xuân had no voice and became an empty shell. So, for Sue to now re-enter the artist’s space would jeopardize the meaning of self all over again. Cheng explains this best, stating, “at the heart of loss there is now an active exclusion and denial of the object. In a sense, exclusion, rather than loss, is the real stake of melancholic retention...For the ego is not the only ghostly presence the melancholic ego is a haunted ego, at once made ghostly and embodied in its ghostliness, but the

30Cheng, The Melancholy of Race, 18
“object” is also ghostly—not only because its image has been introjected or incorporated within the melancholic psyche...the melancholic ego as formed and fortified by a spectral drama, whereby the subject sustains itself through the ghostly emptiness of lost other.”

Cheng provides a rethinking of the key psychoanalytic terms of melancholia, assimilation, identification, and love. In making the politics of these terms available, she reorients and thus helps negotiate the tenuous space between a racialized subject and how that subject experiences grief over racial injustice. Writing that “lived experience is the most important filter,” Cheng adds, regarding racial melancholia and grief, “account[s] for the guilt and denial of guilt, the blending of shame and omnipotence in the racist imaginary.” Cheng also critiques reductive declarations of “internalized racial, ethnic self-hatred, accentuating that the psychic dynamics of minority figures are much more complex and often fraught with conflicting, contradictory emotions.” Therefore, to fully comprehend racial melancholia one must understand the intersectionality of an individual’s lived experience, including their personal and family history, and rethink the term “agency” in relation to forms of racial grief. “When it comes to facing discrimination, we need to understand subjective agency as convoluted, ongoing, generative, and at times self-contradicting negotiation with pain.” And so, for now, I continue to live in complete disarray haunted by loss, with my messy past, that I am both repulsed by and longing for.

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31 Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 9-10
32 Kearly, review, *The Melancholy of Race*
33 Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 12
34 Tran, review, *The Melancholy of Race*
35 Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 15
The colonization of Vietnam began officially in 1874, continuing until 1945. The French built official government buildings, villas and Cathedrals across the country, bringing with them a European Colonial aesthetic, which greatly influenced the architecture and landscape of Vietnam. Justifying their so-called “civilizing mission” colonization brought France’s best traits (the legacy of the Enlightenment and faith in scientific progress) as well as their nation’s worst practices (systems of colonial exploitation and racist disdain for the non-white other in territories under France’s colonial rule), deeply affecting the individual Vietnamese psyche.

As missionaries' influence spread the gospel of colonialism, the “civilizing mission” made its way to Vietnam. Among its many forms was “gạch bông,” which translates to flower tile. The first appearance of hydraulic cement tiles (also known as encaustic tiles) from Barcelona, Spain, was around the 1850s. Hydraulic cement tiles are different from clay and porcelain tiles: each tile is made by hand, one at a time, using mineral pigments, cement, a mode and hydraulic press. The distinct difference between hydraulic cement tiles versus clay and porcelain tiles is that it doesn't need to be glazed on the surface, and they are not fired, but instead, are cured in a bath of water for 24 hours. The tiles derive their durability from the combination of layers poured into the mold; first, a dehydrated finely ground Portland cement layer is overlaid with a coarser layer of sand and cement, after which the pigment layer is hydraulically pressed into the surface becoming a part of the tile. Cement tile flooring was much cheaper, more durable and easier to make than the previous handmade glazed ceramic tiles and,

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36 Van and Clarke, The Great Hanoi Rat Hut
therefore, more universally available for houses. Barcelona exhibited this new form of tile making in Paris, France, at the International Exposition of 1867. In French architecture found across Vietnam, gạch bông is always present. The flower tile became a motif of wealth, class, beauty, and memory for the Vietnamese people.

I became so intrigued with the vast metaphorical potentials of tile making as a mode for tracing history and placing a tangible object/method of production such as hydraulic cement tile within the context of colonialism, allowing for layers of recognition of colonial strategies to be visible. Certainly, through the nature of colonialism, the gạch bông motif became another export of colonial aesthetic value. Of course, when we talk about aesthetic theory we have to acknowledge that culture is also present in the dialogue, as one cannot be without the other. The multiple analogies of the tile not only led to insights to better articulate colonial mentality and the representation of the social and economic ramification of desire and class, but it also speaks to its functionality as barrier and protector from water damage, and is also an art form that is both highly decorative and modular. The tile placement on the floor naturally became an extremely important key metaphor to express the ideologies and strategies of colonization, such as replacing indigenous hierarchy and forming a new foundation where power is transferable. These examples of strategies of erasure also aid in the understanding and formulation of a racial subjection and racial melancholia.

In my tile-floor installation for Cumulative Grief tile Floor (Fig. 1), I drew inspiration from the quatrefoil motif, tracing its history and origin back to Spain, where it first emerged. Naturally, as this new technology of hydraulic cement tiles was introduced, it got adopted,

37Villalagoontile
merged, and translated into other European nations’ aesthetics of tile making and tile flooring.
While consciously borrowing a recognizable floral Spanish motif for my installation as a starting point for dialogue of origins within colonial aesthetics, I chose to cast my 8”x8” inch square tiles from plaster, a material that has multiple usages in building and construction, preservation, the health field, and art. But most effectively, plaster is a material that is ephemeral, both fragile and durable enough depending on water to plaster ratio and cure without the need for firing. Each of the plaster tiles is hand-painted with acrylic paint colors of burnt sienna, cadmium yellow, cerulean blue, and gray reminiscing of Spanish colonial style.

The total dimensions of Floor (Fig. 3) are 104’ feet wide by 240’ feet long. This long rectangular shape spanned across the middle of the gallery floor, leading and drawing the viewer's eye to the back wall window, where there sits nine pots of ornamental grass living under grow lights. My 8”x8” inch square tiles are not made of cement, but rather, plaster. Ephemeral and easily cracked under the weight of visitors’ steps, the tiles will slowly return to the dust from whence it came. While juxtaposition the traditional Spanish tile flooring, which is floor to wall tiling, meaning that tiles are laid across the span of the room/space ending where the floor meets the wall, whereas the French method of tile flooring which added borders around the tile flooring to emulate luxurious rugs, I allude to this French practice of tiling floors which are familiar from my youth. By marrying the two former colonial powers, Spain, and France, together in Floor installation I hope to illustrate the history of colonialism as its translations and become a hybrid form that lives in the psyche of its former colonies where it can take many forms of beauty, desire, wealth, memory, and nostalgia.
The exhibition space has two functions: First, in front of the viewer is a long plaster tile floor, laid to mimic a rug, that spans the length of space, and second, on the window ledge, are pots of ornamental grass under grow lights. To view grass up close, the audience must enter the space and walk across the tiles floor, and by doing so, break, crack and undo the foundation. This installation requires audience participation.

Due to the Covid19 pandemic, the nature of the installation changed, and the actions it required changed, and so the meaning of the piece has changed. I became the audience and the caretaker for the grass, which was never planned; I alone experienced that which I set out for the audience— I walked across this subfloor and heard it crack under my own weight, and I privately experienced the metaphors of hurt and grief of a racialized subject and the complex history of colonialism.

When I walked on the subfloor installation for the first time to care for the grass, it broke my heart. Feelings of longing for a familiar past, amidst this cold and empty gallery, all sat together. The satisfaction of experiencing the sound of tiles cracking and of my body moving across the floor came and went. I was left with contradictory feelings, brought to me by my singular experience of my own artwork. In other words, I had made a space, and I didn’t know how to move in it.

I acknowledge that some might view my floor installation as problematic in terms of recreating the colonial familiar, perhaps even upholding it. I do not fully disagree with these criticisms. Although I would like to use Homi Bhabha’s concept of colonial mimicry, which
“conceives of the racialized subject as a process of subjection imposed by the colonizer, a kind of collusion with the colonizer in the attempt by the colonies to be affirmed and valued.”

In examining postcolonial critique of, “how the voice outside becomes the voice inside,” Cheng offers a rethinking of mimicry not as negative, but as foundational to the very process of subject formation...detaching the idea of race from the reductive notion of interpellation that treats the oppressed as duped victims of ideology, oversimplifying the complex process of racialization to coercion.” Her conceptualization of the self is generous and provides room for understanding of, “various stages of melancholia, assimilation, identification, or love are either identified as stuck in grievance or open to grief.”

“Self-love comes not from grieving, which actually is an expression of hatred for the other that the self needs to exist, but from expressions of grief (195). We must accept paradoxes as preconditions for social relations, then think about the task of responding, ethically, to racial injustice without hatred or competition (193). Cheng concludes her hopes for love as the potential by-product of critical examination of racial melancholia with an ironic turn of phrase that is characteristic of The Melancholy of Race, "Love looks away in order not to look away" (194).”

At the beginning of the process of tile making, I wasn’t able to articulate my pain and hurt other than to express it as grief. I didn’t understand why my grief felt so inconsolable. My goal was to weave this state of grievance seamlessly in and out of world history while paralleling it to personal narrative, which forced me to reexamine my own colonial mentality which is both convoluted and full of contradictions. This installation has gone through so many iterations and adopted so many different means and representations during a span of six months. But the most

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38Kearly, review, The Melancholy of Race
39Kearly, review, The Melancholy of Race
40Cheng, Melancholy of Race
41Kearly, review, The Melancholy of Race

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important revelation during the process of making is that it provided me with a new language in
my artistic practice to speak about history, grief, and hope in a way where I place my audience
and myself at the center of this dialogue through a simple invitation of walking and
breaking/undoing the tiled floor. On the other end of breakage is a space for healing where
empathy is at the forefront of experience and participation.
Figure 1. Installation of *Floor* by Xuan Pham. Photography by the artist, May 3, 2020
Figure 2. Detail, installation of *Floor* by Xuan Pham. Photography by the artist, May 3, 2020
Figure 3. Video Still Installation of *Floor* by Xuan Pham. Photography by the artist, May 3, 2020
CHAPTER 5
PLANTS / MIGRATION / IMMIGRATION

Pennisetum purpureum, also known as Napier grass, elephant grass, or Uganda grass, is a species of perennial tropical grass native to the African grasslands. It has low water and nutrient requirements and, therefore, can make use of otherwise uncultivated lands. Historically, this wild species has been used primarily for grazing and improving soil fertility and protecting arid land from soil erosion. There are many different species of Napier grass, and depending on their species, its functionality and utilization ranges, but in general, it is used for firebreaks, windbreaks, paper pulp production, bio-oil, biogas, charcoal, and in weavings.

During the Vietnam War, Pennisetum purpureum, also known as elephant grass, became a blanket, camouflaging the opposing sides. It also was used by the native people for temporary roofs and basket weavings and to feed livestock. It was my intention to use elephant grass to speak about its multiple functions, both its domestic use and embedded war history.

As a metaphor for and physical representation of elephant grass, in October 2019, I’d purchased 19 pots of ornamental grass in the same family as Napier grass. It turns out that elephant grass with a one-inch blade is extremely hard to grow in New England as it needs full sunlight and a tropical climate to thrive, so I got the next best thing I could find, which was ornamental grass found in the region. I tried my best to create a climate where the grass would

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42 Farell, Simons, Hillocks, *Napier grass in Kenya*
43 Strezov, Vladimir, Tim J, Hayman, *Thermal conversion of elephant grass*
44 Khan, *Evaluation of Napier grass*
45 Farell, Simons, Hillocks, *Napier grass in Kenya*
thrive and grow, placing them under grow lights and by windows, watering, and rotating them. These pots of grasses became a part of my studio and a part of my daily ritual over the next six months. No matter what I did to care for them, it was not working. My anticipation for them to grow tall came short. They were not thriving; on the contrary, they were dying. I grieved over their death in my care and was frustrated; I could not stop their dying. All I could see in my studio was failure, failure in having been unable to sustain the greenness of the grass, failure in providing an environment for growth, failure to protect them from harm. I failed so accurately in every way that I lost hope in the grass and what it represented in my mind, which was hope for new beginnings, for a new tomorrow. And all while, during the span of six months, it was actually revealing itself to me. I had forgotten its simple message. When you transplant something, it doesn't always take. One could take it a step farther and apply the concept of assimilation within a melancholic framework, “mourning describes a finite process that might be reasonably aligned with the popular American myth of immigration, assimilation, and the melting pot for dominant white ethnic groups. In contrast, melancholia delineates an unresolved process that might usefully describe the unstable immigration and suspended assimilation of Asian Americans into the national fabric. This suspended assimilation—this inability to blend into the "melting pot" of America—suggests that, for Asian Americans, ideals of whiteness are continually estranged. They remain at an unattainable distance, at once a compelling fantasy and a lost ideal.”

The symbolism of the grass became so complex in my mind, as it shifted between multiple identities such as my father’s voice, my own self, my studio practice, the indescribable

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46Eng and Han, *A dialogue on Racial Melancholia*
intersectionality of a racialized subject, to motifs of wartime and profound grief, and ultimately to migration and immigration. The placement of the pots of grasses on the window ledge in the gallery was strategic as the window provided direct sunlight while growing lights provided a symbol for a double prayer. The window provided the best condition to promote growth for the grass in the installation (Fig. 8) while also articulating a more genuine and perhaps honest depiction of my failure to recreate an environment of growth in my studio. Surprisingly when the grasses migrated from my studio into the gallery under these new conditions and environment, they started to slowly turn green and come back to life, and so hope lives on. I acknowledge these complex feelings and phases I’ve placed on the grasses are not easily accessible to the audience, as they haven't spent months laboring over the grass both physically and emotionally. The audience and my relationship to the grass are different, and that needs to be clear. What I am articulating is when a mundane thing such as grass becomes a motif tied to wartime as well as symbols of migration and immigration, these complex relationships cannot be seen in singularity, they are no longer distinct from one another. It is important to take histories and symbolism of an object into account to fully understand its multiple representations and to be able to empathize with all of the nuances. As the grass came to represent migration and immigration, I relied on it as a metaphor to speak about different moments in world history while also paralleling it with personal history.

Bắc 54 is something I have vaguely heard about at family holidays and gatherings. I knew my dad’s side of the family was from the north (bắc), and I knew that I was half northern Vietnamese and half southern (Nam) but never learned the story of how and why my fraternal grandparents migrated to southern Vietnam and eventually made Saigon their home.
Bắc 54 or Operation Passage to Freedom, was authorized by the Geneva Accords of 1954, ending the First Indochina War.\textsuperscript{47} This agreement allowed the two Vietnamese regimes 300 days to resettle civilians who wished to leave their native regions.\textsuperscript{48} During this period naval and MSTS ships of the French military helped in assisting transportation of Vietnamese civilians, soldiers and non-Vietnamese members of the French Army from communist North Vietnam (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) to South Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam) with the border officially sealed on May 18, 1955. The dogma of Catholicism played a major role in the decision by 60\% of northerners (roughly 1 million people) to migrate to the south.\textsuperscript{49} The northern Catholics were known for their intense anti-communist tendencies; their complex relationship with Catholicism stems back to century-old missionary work under western colonialism. The northern Catholics identify themselves strongly, proudly, and without question to their faith; this devotion lead to the campaigns and propaganda on behalf of South Vietnam’s Roman Catholic Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem. Northern Catholic priests preached about Ho Chi Minh (Viet Cong) power as an end to freedom of worship. This campaign was not only used to grow support for Diem’s rule in South Vietnam, as a majority of Catholics were now in the south of Vietnam after the migration of 54’. It also set the stage for religion/faith vs. communism. For example, an anti-communist campaign during the time reads, “Christ has gone South” and the “Virgin Mary has departed from the North.”\textsuperscript{50} The entanglement of “faith” and “the teaching of love and kindness” under the umbrella of religion, became muddied with hatred and discrimination. The idea of “us” versus “them” played out in the war from 1955-1975 and continues to do so in

\textsuperscript{47}Frankum,\textit{Operation Passage to Freedom}  
\textsuperscript{48}Allard, \textit{Operation Passage to Freedom}  
\textsuperscript{49}Tran, \textit{The Catholic Question in North Vietnam}  
\textsuperscript{50}Jacob, \textit{Cold war marndarin}
homes and in the minds of the exile, refugees, and immigrants. They are forever haunted by the
grievance of “loss,” loss of their country, loss of their language, loss of culture, loss of loved
ones, loss of identity. Seemingly unable to let go of the past, forever stuck, and frozen in time.
This grief transpires through generations, which David L. Eng and Shinhee Han refer to as
“racial disassociation.”

In Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation professor David L. Eng and psychotherapist
Shinhee Han, recapture melancholia not as a dysfunction of an individual but as a consequence
of what it means to be a racialized subject in the United States. Like Cheng, both Eng and Han
use literature to articulate the experience of melancholia and how it becomes dissociation. By
exploring the social and psychic impact of racial dissociation of Asian Americans from
Generation X to Generation Y to understand how trauma and grief get passed down through
generations, the authors articulate the cost of what it means to be Asian American, “Generation
X born between 1960-1980 are seen as part of the survivor generation, where being an immigrant
they had to make it in this country. Whereas Generation Y are part of the meaning generation.
Their task is to live in the wake of the survivors who came before them and to produce some
kind of meaning from the wreckage.”51 Placing Generation Y with the burden and tasks of
constant negotiating between Generation X indebted sacrifices and finding their own freedom
and footing from family history. Eng and Han relate the dynamic of the two generations by
categorizing Generation X with racial melancholia, which they examine with the theory for
depression and Generation Y with racial dissociation, which they examine with the theory for
anxiety and panic attacks.

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51 Eng and Han, lecture Asian American Melancholia and Disassociation
“There is a real split between how it transitions from depression to anxiety between these two generations. They are distinct but overlapping mechanism by which Asian American students process the problems of discrimination, exclusion, loss, and grief in relation to their immigration, racialization and assimilation. We refer to Melancholia as the histories of racial loss. That condensed so you can place it into a forfeited object whose significance must be deciphered for its social meaning, where racial dissociation is referred to as histories of racial loss that are dispersed across wide social terrain. The histories whose social origins and implications remain insistently diffuse and obscure.”

Han uses the analogy of condensation to better understand the difference between racial Melancholia and racial disassociation “condensation for racial melancholia whereas dispersion is for the dissociation. Another way of thinking about dissociation is through anxiety being everywhere. There is no subject but it's dispersed everywhere.” Borrowing Eng and Han’s examination of racial Melancholia and racial dissociation between Generation X and Generation Y, I will use personal narrative, accounts of migration and immigration stories by my extended family, to thoroughly reflect all sides of grief and its impact on generations to come.

My Uncle Told Me The First Time He Saw Death

My uncle Phát who is in his 70s is the only living person left on my fraternal side of the family who could recall memories prior to 1955. My fraternal grandparents lived in Ninh Bình, a province of Vietnam in the Red River Delta, right on the outskirts of Hanoi. My grandparents had a total of nine children, with two passing away from smallpox as toddlers. At this past New Year’s family gathering, uncle Phat shared memories of his childhood and told me the first time he saw death.

52Eng and Han, lecture Asian American Melancholia and Disassociation
53Eng and Han, lecture Asian American Melancholia and Disassociation
Uncle Phát:
It was 1951. I was seven or eight years old. Before mother left the house to go to the rice fields, she told me to tend to the water buffalo. I did as I was told and took the water buffalo out into a nearby field. I half tended the buffalo while playing a game of slingshots with my cousin. We were having a good time until we heard a loud engine noise from above and then there was smoke and fire. One after another, the bombs keep coming. I was scared and all I saw was fire and smoke. I got up to run to a nearby house that was still standing, but before I ran, I looked over to find my cousin. But he was gone. His body curled up in the fetal position. I shook him and called his name, but he did not move.

Xuan:
What did you do? Did you know what death was at this time?

Uncle Phát:
I was a kid. I was scared. I just ran. I knew nothing more than to run across the rice field to where there was no smoke or fire. Once I came to the other side of the field, I realized I was injured. I heard my mother was asking the neighbors if they had seen her son; they told her he is over there crying. Everything was decimated, family members dead, neighbors dead, houses burnt to the ground.

My fraternal grandparents' family were amongst the 60% Catholics who migrated in 1954 from north to south Vietnam. My grandparents' side of the family identify as extremely religious and proudly Catholic and, by that definition, were extremely anti-communist. With great encouragement from local Catholic priests and with their faith being questioned, the young men with or without family during the early rise of Ho Chi Minh in the north, joined in the fight against the Viet Cong. They left their family and home to join the French military. While in the military, they did make money. Some people definitely joined the military for a stable income and to support their loved ones. My grandpa was one amongst these soldiers. During the early days of the Indochina War, my grandpa was in the French military while my grandma raised young children back in Ninh Binh with the help of her in-laws. She would go visit her husband and collect a check every two weeks. In 1954 my grandma was around 30 years old- the same
age as I am currently. Under the instruction of her husband, she took their three children: Phát, 11; Ngân, 5; and Yên, 2, to migrate south.

Uncle Phát:
Mother told me and Ngân to stand at the mouth of the ship and to not move. She told us that they will let family members in the military enter first. So, the four of us stood right in front of the mouth of the ship. There were many people waiting to enter the ship. We were in front of the line and didn’t realize that people’s chaotic cry and push from the back was from an ambush by the Viet Cong. Once the ambush happened, the crowd pushed and crawled their way onto the ship. Ngan and I got separated from our mother in the chaos. Since we were small children, we ducked down and crawled on the ground and made our way onto the ship, where we found mother holding Yên.

When I was around six, I heard talk about immigrating to America from my parents. I did not understand what immigration meant or where America was. All I knew was that when "Vietnamese sojourner" or “Việt Kiều,” came back to Vietnam to visit their families, they brought many treats and presents for their loved ones. And if we were lucky and someone in the neighborhood had a Việt Kiều we too might get a piece of foreign candy. I remember being so happy to consume a piece of foreign snack. When my parents heard the news that their immigration status had been approved, I remember my mom was very torn. She never told us how she felt, but we knew her sadness. On one side, she loved her career as an early childhood educator. Her mother was still alive. Her whole world was in Vietnam. And on the other, she had two small children, my brother and myself, whose future depends on leaving her mother and giving up a career she was passionate about to immigrate to the United States. My brother and I live with this guilt, ever since we stepped foot on U.S. soil. No matter what we do, we cannot repay or give back our parents' sacrifices of youth, careers, language, family, mothers, and time.

The last six months we spent in Vietnam was highly stressful, my parents quickly got the house in order and withdrew my brother and me from school so we could be homeschooled in
English in preparation for America. The only thing my parents forgot to account for was that our Vietnamese tutor had a very strong Vietnamese accent when speaking English, so it didn’t fare well for us later on in America. On October 3, 1997, my family and I immigrated to the United States. Our family was the last family on my dad's side to leave Vietnam. My fraternal grandma had just passed away a year before we could reunite. I was excited to reunite with my extended family and to see my cousins again. The reason why and how my fraternal side of the family all ended up in America was because of uncle Bình. We, as an extended family, are forever indebted to his kindness and were taught this at a very young age. Uncle Bình left Vietnam before the fall of Saigon in 1975. Nineteen or twenty years old at that time with a very small amount of money his mother had given him and still dressed in his high school uniform while hanging out at fisherman’s dock, he was reminded of the state of his country. Street chatters and newspaper headlines predicted that Saigon would not come out alive. There and then he decided that he was going on that boat with the fisherman and his family, knowing the action and consequences of getting on the boat means that he will perhaps never get to see his mother or siblings again, and might become food for the sharks. And so he got on the boat, and this boat traveled for weeks at sea, and ran out of gas, and was picked up by the U.S. Navy and placed in Guam. While in Guam, Uncle Bình met his wife and sought asylum in the US. At first, he was placed somewhere on the East Coast, but afterward, he moved permanently to Nebraska, where there were more factories for laborers. He had a family and slowly worked to get his citizenship, and sponsoring, over time, his whole extended family from Vietnam to America. My family and I ended up in America because of chain migration, which is an expensive and very long process (10 plus years). Chain migration is what the Trump Administration is trying to eliminate as a legal path to
citizenship, even though his wife, Melania Trump, applied for chain migration to immigrate her Slovenia born parents to the U.S. in 2018.
Figure 4. Process photo of *Grass* in the studio by Xuan Pham. Photography by the artist, October 19, 2019
Figure 5. Process photo of Grass in the studio by Xuan Pham. Photography by the artist, October 19, 2019
Figure 6. Installation of Grass by Xuan Pham. Photography by Chaehee Yoon, April 17, 2020
Figure 7. Installation of *Grass (Caring for Grass, Night)* by Xuan Pham. Photography by Chaehee Yoon, April 17, 2020
Figure 8. Video Still Installation of *Grass (Caring for Grass, Day)* by Xuan Pham. Photography by Chaehee Yoon, May 3, 2020
Figure 9. Installation of *Grass (Night)* by Xuan Pham. Photography by Chahee Yoon, April 17, 2020
In 2018, Chaehee Yoon of Korean descent and Xuan Pham of Vietnamese descent, the only Asian female graduate students in their department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, were mistaken for one another for a span of one year. In analyzing racial grief not only as the result of racism but also as foundation for racial identity and formation of subjectivity, fellow graduate students, Chaehee Yoon, and I, felt assumptions and stereotypes looming over us as our identities became intertwined and exchangeable on campus. As we both became subject and objects to notions of stereotypes, our lived experience is not far from many other people of color's experiences when speaking about identity and the multiple ways in which racial grief presents itself.

Our shared experiences sparked dialogue on and a passionate investigation into the sense of belonging, displacement, migration and hybridity. Eventually, we formed a bond that we both longed for in our individual lives and became a sisterhood. With long conversations about our shared experience as Asian and Asian American in this nation, we were annoyed yet not surprised by the stereotypes of “Asian look-alikes” and the invisibility of Asian minority groups in the larger dialogue of race between white and black oppositions. In this next section, I will address my collaboration with Chaehee under our collective name, Hy-Bi. The tonality of Hy-Bi is distinctly different from how we, as individual artists, would speak in our own practices. Therefore, as the reader, you will experience, as well, a shift in how the collaborative addresses

54Dienst, *Deepening the discourse on racial dynamics*
issues of race, gender and subjectivity. Paralleling this third voice, I will speak to the joy and agency of working within a collective as a strategic way to be seen, and, I will also address the spectrum of emotion available to Hy-Bi, where confronting grief and failure is undertaken in a humorous way, a mode my individual practice could not provide.

Hy-Bi uses Chaehee and Xuan’s bodies, as subject and object, to challenge stereotypes and critique systems of representation framed by the binary division between the Orient and the Occident. “Hy” refers to hybrid and “Bi” refers to binary: The name is also a gesture of greeting. Hy-Bi came out of our need to be seen as individuals, as well as our need for more direct action-based practice. The collective gave us tools and permission to be transparent about our shared experiences of racial discrimination in the US, while also providing us with a platform for storytelling. While vulnerability and empathy are at the center of Hy-Bi’s conversations—no longer are we ashamed to share our hurt with each other—for us, Hy-Bi addresses the mentality of “us versus the world” in a sassy and humorous way.

Born from the psyche of a racialized subject, the complexities of identity politics are personified in Chuan, Hy-Bi’s third member; Chuan’s name and identity are made of the overlapping faces and bodies of Chaehee Yoon and Xuan Pham. She exists in the group as a tactical tool for Chaehee and Xuan to critique their own Asian heritage, family structure and the female roles that are played within cultural patriarchy. Chuan, is off-limits to outsiders and is predominantly only for the duo to use as a vehicle to talk about the complexities of agency. Referring back to Cheng, *Melancholia of Race*, rethinking the term “agency” in relation to forms of racial grief, “when it comes to facing discrimination, we need to understand subjective agency as convoluted, ongoing, generative, and at times self-contradicting negotiation with pain.”
At times, visible and invisible, Chuan critiques the subjectivity of Asian patriarchy as well as female roles within Asian cultures. Chuan is not for the Western lens, she is not available to criticize, nor to appropriate, instead, she is an agent solely for Hy-Bi. Chuan facilitates Hy-Bi’s discussions on the complexities of identity and agency, and generates a unique approach to discussions on “stereotype” and the myth of “model minority.” And while some might view Chuan as a crutch, perhaps jeopardizing the collective’s efforts to illustrate the harm of stereotypes, we suggest a more nuanced and complex articulation of racial subjectivity that cannot be so easily defined, particularly when agency is at times so deeply tied to the narrative of stereotypes. When we talk about belonging through the lens of migration and immigration, what we are really articulating is what “belonging” encompasses; it is the nuances of citizenship, assimilation, fantasy, trauma and performance, all of which are tied to the notion of agency. As a subject of racial grief, the negotiation of these nuances, allows hybrid identities to form and claim space. And, so for us, while Hy-Bi occupies a joyous space, one in which humor is used to demand visibility and accountability, Chuan, on the other hand, at times occupies a melancholic framework, as seen through the lens of psychoanalysis. Chuan, fantastical, imaginary, and real— is always present in Hy-Bi. If you cannot see her, it is because you choose to not see her.

My personal understanding of Chuan is that she is born from agencies of citizenship, assimilation, fantasy, trauma, performance, and self-compartmentalization, where she is in constant negotiation between cultures and self-love. Whereas, if you ask Chaehee, her relationship to Chuan would be slightly different, while still echoing similar sentiments. Ultimately for both Chaehee and me, Chuan represents hope and love.
As Asian and Asian American women, Chaehee and Xuan have experienced invisibility countless times; this invisibility dictates our experiences. In America, for example, a notion of monoethnicity society exists. This perceived heterogeneity, as theorized by Cheng in *The Melancholy of Race*, often renders Asian Americans invisible in racial dialogue dominated by white/black oppositions.\(^{55}\) So too, the myth of “model minority” plays a big role in upholding both invisibility and hyper-visibility.

Especially important to the collaborative are two essays by two different Asian female scholars Mitsuye Yamada and Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, who focus on the notion of invisibility and visibility of Asian and Asian American women. Together we have explored the concept of Orientalism, specifically looking at Edward W. Said’s *Orientalism*, and examined the importance of literature in defining Orientalism, as spread by European literary works, aesthetics, and art. To better understand the complexities and issues of multiple forms of agency, we have discussed Kathleen Uno’s *Unlearning Orientalism, Locating Asian and Asian American Women in Family History*.

In *Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Women* and *This Bridge Called My Back* scholar Mitsuye Yamada examines the invisibility of Asian American women through her own personal experience. She emphasizes the importance of Asian and Asian American women's invisibility as situated within the notion of the visible minority while critiquing the stereotypical image of the Asian woman:

> I have been an Asian American woman working among non-Asians in an educational institution where most of the decision-makers were men...Even when what I considered a veiled racist remark was made in a casual social setting, I would "let it go" because it was pointless to argue with people who didn't even know her remark was racist.\(^{56}\)

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\(^{55}\)Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 11-13

\(^{56}\)Yamada, *Invisibility is an unnatural disaster*, 55
Her statements explain how institutional structures have been constructed and why Asian and Asian American women don't argue within institutions. Importantly, the author makes clear that she was practicing passive resistance while being stereotyped, but no one noticed. This resistance resembles our rug making in the ongoing performance work *Invisible made Visible*, in which the rug becomes a vehicle to critique the realities and issues of Asian and Asian American women in ways both passive and direct.

*Invisible made Visible* is also a metaphor for our experience, allowing us to talk about imposed boundaries and to highlight especially the issue of visibility versus invisibility as experienced by Asian and Asian American women. We are emphasizing Asian female's hyper-visibility through object-based work, using mark making and tactile materials, to depict our actual body images in a public space. While we acknowledge that depicting our bodies on the rugs can be problematized as a hyper-visible illustration of Asian females, we believe it is important to raise awareness of the notions of visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility of Asian and Asian American women, as they are undertheorized and underrepresented in Western scholarship.

For example, in the essay, *Asian American Feminisms and Women of Color Feminisms: Radicalism, Liberalism, and Invisibility in Asian American Feminisms and Women of Color Politics*, the author, Judy Tzu-Chun Wu examines the hypervisibility of Asian females. Focusing particularly on the problem of their political invisibility, she writes, "The hypervisibility of Asian
female revolutionaries helped Asian American women to create their own political subjectivity and to subvert their political invisibility."\(^5^7\)

Moreover, Wu emphasizes that U.S. society is unequally situated for Asians, and their position is marginalized.\(^5^8\) Pushed back, overlooked within culture, and under-examined in scholarship, clearly Asian and Asian American women have been invisible in US social structures. Wu also criticizes Women and Gender Studies, asserting, “Asian American women in Women of Color feminist politics has been underexamined in the scholarship."\(^5^9\)

Hy-Bi has also focused on systemic issues such as imperialism, militarism, colonialism, and Orientalism to comprehend how these have been transmitted in ways that are deeply hidden within structures. Cheng’s *Melancholia of Race* states, “the racialization of Asian Americans is some ways more apparently melancholic than that of African Americans in American history in the sense that the history of virulent racism directed against Asians and Asian Americans has been at once consistently upheld and denied through configurations such as the “yellow peril” and “model minority” stereotype."\(^6^0\) Although we agree with Cheng about Asian American racial grief as more a melancholic state (as explored in Section 2. Racial Melancholia), we do not believe that pain and grief can be quantified, especially when dealing with two different groups of people and their respective cultures. While this is not the point Cheng is making, it is, emphatically, not the point Hy-Bi or I wish to make. To stand in solidarity, grief should be drawn out and similarities of systemic oppression examined, but neither should become measurements used to compare and quantify people’s lived experience. Similarly, Cheng

\(^5^7\)Wu, *Asian American Feminisms and Women of Color Feminisms*, 45
\(^5^8\)Wu, *Asian American Feminisms and Women of Color Feminisms*
\(^5^9\)Wu, *Asian American Feminisms and Women of Color Feminisms*, 29
\(^6^0\)Cheng, *The Melancholia of Race*, 23
mentions that the failure of grievance takes place through clumping all racial grief as a singular experience heading for racial healing.

To understand the issues of Asian and Asian American women and their responses to *Invisible made Visible*, we surveyed critical investigations of Orientalism. Much of the geography of the world was shaped by European colonization. As European nations expanded to the East and later far East, they “found” civilization and cultures that were different and strange to their own. These newly “founded” civilizations, cultures and people were seen as “exotic” and “lesser” developed than the West.⁶¹ The East became the Orient and the West the Occident; and, the narrative of the uncivilized and the civilized was formed. To justify their colonization of the East; they fabricated an artificial boundary, one that existed not only in territories or land but in Western philosophy as well, engendering “us, their, and our” or “us-versus-them” or what we now know as “other” or “othering.” The early orientalists romanticized the East, not only as exotic and savage but as naive, innocent and pure, they defined the civilization as inferior and justified the need for colonization. Later, depictions gave way to pilgrimages to the East, where later orientalists, including poets and artists alike, came to live with the “orient” peoples.⁶²

French post-Impressionist painter, Paul Gauguin, was one example. Fed up with the social mores of Parisian life, he sought a more authentic subject unspoiled by modern life. Inspired by popular accounts of the “savage and free-spirited” ethos of the tropics, and seduced by the Tahiti exhibit at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris (where France was promoting its

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⁶¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 5
⁶² Said, *Orientalism*, 5
new colony to potential European settlers), Gauguin grew determined to set up a studio in the South Seas.\textsuperscript{63}

This notion of \textit{Orientalism} that was carved out by the West through forms such as literary works and works of art became part of the culture and power of the West. The depiction and understanding of \textit{Orientalism} lives on in the canon of Western history, as a generalization of vast geographical locations and cultures. Likewise, in Western art history, Orientalism still prevails, one can, for example, visit museum wings dedicated to “Art of the Orient.” These artifacts and images of the East, displayed in unexamined contexts, uphold the power relationship of the Occident and the Orient.\textsuperscript{64} Art remains, through its generalizing of vast regions and cultures, one of the categories playing a key role in representing and upholding the ideals of Orientalism.\textsuperscript{65}

Even globalization in the early 21st-century failed to challenge the representation and historical definitions of Orientalism nor its deeply rooted ideation in the Western psychology of the “other.” For Chaehee and I personally experienced the consequences of Orientalism, being the subject of stereotype, as our image and identities became interchangeable on campus.

\textsuperscript{63} In Meredith Mendelsohn’s “\textit{Why is the Art World Divided over Gauguin’s Legacy}” published by Artsy on August 3, 2017, she describes Gauguin’s arrival in Papeete in 1891 as disappointing, “French colonial rule and a century of missionary intervention had spoiled his utopian vision.” Mendelsohn adds, As he described in his Tahitian travelogue Noa Noa, a largely fictional, sexed-up account that was plagiarized, in part, from earlier tales of Pacific Island conquest—the island was nothing like he’d imagined.” Gauguin wrote, “It was the Tahiti of former times which I loved... That of the present filled me with horror...The girls weren’t naked; they were dressed in bulky high-necked gowns, courtesy of the church.” Mendelsohn describes Gauguin “leaving Tahitian capital for more remote, pre-colonial parts of the island but never quite found his exotic utopia of cultural difference.” Gauguin, as many art historians agree, had created his fantasy, in both his canvases and writings. His depiction of Tahitians as exotic, pure, sexualized and racialized fantasy reflects the colonialist power of Western philosophy and helps perpetuate “othering” as defined by Said in Orientalism.
\textsuperscript{64} Said, \textit{Orientalism}, 5, 7
\textsuperscript{65} Said, \textit{Orientalism}
Perhaps one can argue that the many instances in which our identities were interchanged over the span of one year were just simple mistakes done without malice. However, that argument allows for stereotypes to hold the ground which is steeped in racism and to erase a person of color’s individual agency and humanity. Our “interchangeable identities” cannot be read as a simple mistake. Even if the act of it was not malicious, the key point is that throughout history, representation of Asian and Asian American people proves that the underlying distortions of Orientalism is still ingrained in US culture, and is now translated via stereotypes, including, “all Asians look the same.” By latch hooking our full body and identities onto the rugs, we are not only placing ourselves in the line of women’s work; we are also borrowing the idea of ‘oriental rug’ as a point of critique and criticism. (Said 25,26)

In contrast to Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, which focuses on the formation of the power of the Occident, Uno’s *Unlearning-Orientalism* looks at how *Orientalism* has marked notions of “Asian households, resulting in an exaggeration of both their patriarchal character and the subordination of women.”66 Our project, *Invisible made Visible*, consists of handmade latch hook rugs, performance, and community interaction. The two rugs measure 120” x 120” x 1” inches each, and depict a whole-body portrait of Chaehee Yoon and Xuan Pham, on a one to one ratio. During 2019-2020, we facilitated multiple workshops inviting the public to participate with us in latch hooking. This bodily experience seeing, touching, hearing and feeling offers context for our critique of notions of Asian invisibility.

We acknowledge that our strength could be our weakness in terms of transnational feminism. Two singular images of women on the rugs can be read differently through the lenses

66Uno, *Unlearning-Orientalism*, 43
of gender, race, and cultural identity. Therefore, our examination of invisibility, visibility, and hypervisibility of Asian and Asian American race might not come across. We wonder if our images are too limiting? Is placing our images within a singular perspective consequently “othering?” Will this project aid in breaking boundaries that are associated with gender normality, racialized identity, and social expectation?

With these questions in mind, we propose a new analysis, one which reorients Western perspective. The invention of linear perspective has greatly impacted Western depiction and presentation of information. Applying this understanding to how history has been categorized and taught in schools and academia in the West, the linear timeline is perhaps an easy way to teach students about cause and effect. Most of us are taught that time is linear, ordered into past, present and future. But there are other ways of thinking about time. Many schools of thought believe that the beginning and the end are and have always been the same because time is essentially cyclical.67 Taking this image of cyclical form and applying it to intersectional and transnational feminism, where lived experience is placed at the foreground, and everything is filtered through it first, can the notion of global “sisterhood” be more achievable? Can solidarity be activated in this way? We propose a cyclical form of presenting global history and lived experience. As we believe empathy, sincerity, and compassion cannot be achieved in a linear format but through only layers that intersect. Of course, no one project can tackle all of the complexity of intersectionality or un-do and unpack all of the psychological gains and losses of racialized subjectivity. Our hope is that our project can bring light to the nuances of identity politics through the examination of gender, race and sexuality that are structurally and

67Baggini, *Why Western Philosophy Can Only Teach Us So Much*

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systematically re-enforced and have been throughout Western history. Finally, our mission with this project is to challenge and break boundaries, both physical and mental, in order to communicate vulnerability, empathy, human relationships, and solidarity.

In conclusion, the notion of racial grief through the lens of psychoanalysis examines the psychological impact of trauma and grief as not only the result of racism but also as a foundation for racial identity and formation of subjectivity, especially in representations of race in the United States. As grief is layered differently depending on an individual racial subject, “the morphology of ghostliness” is much more complex than just rendering ghostliness as invisibility. As a subject of racial melancholia, one’s narrative and identity will always be a part of a much larger context of the problematic grievance, one the US fumbles in acknowledging and addressing, because at the core of racial grief is a real person with real lived experience that transpires in the political and psychical gains and losses of the complex social etiology of grievance. To better situate and understand the complexity and nuances of racial grief, I have shared my personal narratives of assimilation, mimicry, self-compartmentalization, renaming and immigration stories as a foundation to understanding racial identity. And I’ve applied agencies that are both rejecting and relying on stereotypes to critique and examine how a racialized subject can perhaps move forward and reclaim what is left of the self or perhaps create a new self through the process of art making and storytelling. As melancholia is a state of mind and the legislation of grief, the racialized melancholy psyche is full of inescapable emotional contradictions. As the process demands constant negotiations with pain that are both comforting and burdensome, racial grief is at times hard to deny and pinpoint; indelibly entangled with everyday life, racial grief demands profound study to yield an understanding of the layered
nuances of citizenship, assimilation, fantasy, trauma and performance under the umbrella of nation-making.
Figure 10. *Invisible made Visible* (working progress) by Hy-Bi. Photography by Hy-Bi, December 16, 2019


Eng, David L. and Shinhee Han. A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia Vanderbilt University.


ARTIST AT WORK