Gốc Rễ as Craft: Notes on Survival and Knowing

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Abstract

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There is one thing I hold dear is the notion that narrative desire, in any circumstances, arises most strongly once historical erasure takes place, a local, personal reckoning naturally forming against the global, sweeping forces. After the American War in Vietnam, after generations lost to and were displaced by violence, the search for an identity in each individual becomes more sacred, symbolic and urgent, but as quiet as it can be. This critical essay is an amalgamation of autobiographical and critical writing on craft, survival, and language through a transnational lens informed by Vietnamese and Vietnamese American experiences. I look at the notion of *mất gốc* as a personal trauma and a generative space for craft. I look at the gaps and silences within the literary and historical canon. The works by Ocean Vuong, Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai, Aimee Phan are relevant here as they facilitate my inquiries into the queer, diasporic, and transnational magnitudes of Vietnamese and Vietnamese American narrative works. I imagine a future for a novel that resists the assimilationist gaze and places the fragmented, haunted lives of Vietnamese

Amerasians at the center stage. Ultimately, I argue for a literature and storytelling as an embodied act that sees the "art of staying afloat" as craft.

Gốc Rễ as Craft: Notes on Survival and Knowing

"Writers spend their entire lifetime to minimize, if not eliminate, the gap between language and thought."

Arundhati Roy

I have been away from my roots. I write and breathe in spaces far from my roots. I relocated from Vietnam to Houston and Seattle, thinking and writing in English and reading the works of writers I had never met. After over five years of reading and studying literature at two colleges in Houston, I had to reckon that I'd never come across a book written by a Vietnamese author. I read the American literary canon insouciant with my existence, let alone the subjects I care deeply about. The World Literature course was the closest to what I could have: some experiential relatability. I have moved across spaces, sites of memory, jobs, and institutions to create new memories and constantly find alternative routes with equal parts of conviction and dejection.

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Although I am habitually, if not methodically, thinking about Vietnam and the works and projects I want to undertake, the divorce from the physicality of the place—a spatiotemporal dissonance—fundamentally determines who I am as a writer.

I realized I have been floating.

I'm not talking about my disconnection from my roots to romanticize myself as a harbinger of motivation or an inspiring model to sell my writing. I am intensely aware that my presence here is a privilege and also an explanation of survival, be that literary or literal—one that has been afforded to me, undeniably, by circumstances and people—family, friends,

teachers, and the ghosts—I am indebted to. That floating-away has a word in Vietnamese: mất gốc.

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A few months ago, Seattle summer's night still bright outside my office's window, I was reading two books on the genocide of the Seyfo (or the Assyrian genocide)—the mass killing and displacement of the Assyrian/Syriac Christians carried out by the Ottoman Empire. I returned the books to the library without finishing them. I gave up, but I was compelled to ponder life's meaning as if I had entered a state of numbness: Even though we might only have one shared strand of protein in our DNA, the voices of the dead reached out to my ears hundreds of years before I was born. Instead of completely giving up on that subject, I was thinking about the wars in Vietnam.

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The term mất gốc (lost root) can describe the quality (of a person) who has relocated to a different place, be it involving crossing the borders or not, grounded in/assimilated the culture, partially or impartially, intentionally or unintentionally, and as a result, lost the cultural heritage he grew up with. Etymologically, this term comes from the literal concept of uprooting in the agricultural and/or gardening lexicon. It connotes a done deal, an imposition, a dead end, a cul-de-sac, a position of certainty that doesn't leave room for choice or alternative, but rather a force to fight back. There is always a chance of peril when uprooting a plant or a tree. Mất gốc can be used in many forms, but usually takes the form of a reprimand or even an insult to remind or condemn someone that they have lost their cultural roots, as if it is a duty that everyone must act on, calling out the "rootless.” It is a one-way ticket to self-destruction.

I've heard these two words countless times from Vietnamese American parents behind their children's backs. They wanted them to embrace cultural practices to reconnect with their roots. Those complaints tend to fall on deaf ears. Those children remain silent. And I don't blame them; I sympathize with their dilemma: they call themselves Vietnamese, but on the other side of the ocean, a Vietnam exists. I thought about this, comparing the experience to plunging into a reality crisis. Those children, naturally, measure their existence historiographically.

There is no need to place the burden of cultural preservation on the children's shoulders, but a return route should be open for exploration. I observe that there has been a drift, aided and marketed by the power of social media and technology, where young Vietnamese Americans travel to Vietnam without their parents; many permanently stay in the country. They reclaim the responsibility of finding their roots in their own hands. They can go back to America and hate Vietnam if the worst happens. There is always an alternative there. Thinking through this movement, those young Vietnamese Americans and I travel on two opposite parallel roads or vectors, ever extending to infinity. For my part, it has been a conundrum to find out who I am and what I want to do in a foreign place, whereas they are heading to exactly where I came from. Recognizing this contradiction, I deliberated on why I was reading Vietnamese American writers to learn more about myself—my roots. Vietnamese American writers are a mirror to me: I find bits and pieces of myself in their reflections, but there is also a flash of gnarled distortion.

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Not long before writing this essay, in an attempt to narrow down my research scope, I was on a material-hunting mission in the library another time. The International Military Tribunal for the Far East, the 1946 Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, or the Tokyo Trials for short, was my target. All I was doing was building a hypothetical case alleging that the US had, in

essence, committed genocide in Vietnam. My curiosity was about the rhetoric surrounding the court's verdict and the conflicts of interest and ideologies among the presiding representatives. Modeled after the Nuremberg trials, the trials in Tokyo produced the sentencing for the Japanese fascist apparatus, a situation I found dangerously complex and precarious, one where I became more confused and nonplussed.

Much to my surprise, a group of people had confirmed that conviction. Yes, it did. I thought about my roots even more. Was the US government, with its military might, trying to erase them, most of them being peasants? Erase me?

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I am a different kind of mất gốc. My gốc was supposed to be poisoned with herbicides and defoliants trickling down from the treetops. I wasn't meant to survive to see another day.

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Though wars may be sparked by legal conflicts—conflicts that, in my view, primarily serve the interests of the declaring nation(s), often holding little to no significance for the nation(s) they are waged against—tribunals for war crimes, composed of legal representatives appointed by the "victors," whose ideologies and cultural perspectives are often alien, if not antagonistic, to those of the accused, can become mired in profound questions of fairness, ethics, impartiality, and legitimacy. These proceedings, ultimately, are seldom about seeking true justice but are rather enveloped in a singular, clear, and unwavering intention: the imposition of punishment, often to satisfy the political and ideological motives of the prevailing powers. Consequently, the line between justice and vengeance becomes incredibly blurred. After the Tokyo Tribunal weeded out the war criminals, packed their things, and left, the Japanese people were left to talk to themselves, confronting a reality crisis. But I also asked myself: what else

could they do? Losers can only speak to themselves?! The U.S.'s involvement in the tribunals, in particular, highlights its pretext to be the inherent issue of impartiality: one cannot terrorize and deport or forcibly displace Japanese people on one side of the world and simultaneously expect the global public to accept a fair and unbiased commitment on the other.

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If Roy says that writers spend their lifetime bridging the gap between language and thought, it is precisely within that liminal space where I have seen and found myself, floating, perhaps for as long as I can remember. It is as much about preserving that suspension as it is about writing itself.

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It took me years to know and love what the Vietnamese language does with sound. It is also a vessel with which I can inherit my ancestral knowledges, cultural memories, and experiences. I grew up in Vietnam and have spoken the southern tongue all my life, one that is so free and colorful. Even the insults and swear words are poetic. But my formative education was alien to me. I call the Vietnamese language my mother tongue, but it seems so foreign to me. During the national university entrance exam, I threw out all the notes and analyses my high school teachers had forced me to learn by heart. I began to write my feelings about Xuân Quỳnh's poem "Waves." And I got in while those who followed the script didn't. I was then wholly engrossed in Korean Studies, the major I wished to study in the first place. Then I had to read and memorize ineffably incomprehensible texts about Karl Marx and socioeconomic theories, a linguistic disaster. I later transferred to an American-curricular college in rural Long An, where I studied English literature for a year. I got a full scholarship to study in Finland, but that plan also fell through. Each wasted year felt like a tsunami. Soon after, I moved to the US,

officially reshaping my life since. Narrating this part of my life could help me see the distance between myself and languages and understand the gap that Roy might allude to.

Before Seattle, my mentor in Houston advised me to write "like an American"—that is, writing the language of the white, cis-heteropatriarchal, middle-class. In a way, I suppose he meant to say that if I mimicked the canonical or dominant voice, I would have a chance; that I should tone down my Vietnamese-ness and align my statement of purpose with the vision that speaks to the great writers of American literature. Still, not so dim that it wouldn't be appealing enough. So, I needed to step into that repertoire and collect models to mold my own after. Because the white, cis-heteropatriarchal, middle-class repertoire comes with a voice, the models I collected don't sound like me. Simultaneously, I realized that repertoire suppressed my own, like how I switched between English and Vietnamese when speaking.

Not sure what it looks like now, but in my time, students in Vietnam studied literature only in one mode: valorizing the texts and the authors. No criticism was allowed. Praising the Communist Party in the essays always bumped up the grades. No alternative, no diverse interpretations. It was a dead zone for differences, let alone queerness, a graveyard where students were sitting dead, a gas chamber for the rebellious and belligerent. And being queer, being different, being myself were a manifestation of resistance, but was ignored most of the time. The power got pissed off when you broke the slanted scale of power. It has been very odd to me to work through this enigma: a country with a history of resistance fills its classrooms with knowledge lieutenants, vigilantes for preconceived truth and conformity.

I knew a story about a girl whose grandfather was a veteran writer, and she happened to have to write an essay about a short story or poem written by him. The author helped the girl write the essay. A few days later, the girl got the essay back, as I remember now, which got a bad

grade for poor demonstration of the author's intent. The author was in shock. The essay about his own text, written by himself, betrayed him. His true intentions for the text were categorically divorced from the teacher's interpretation. So, had I wanted to score a passing grade, I would have, at least, removed myself from the equation and replaced it with what the teacher wanted. It was a death sentence for creativity. It taught me that I should cower to the teacher, a power figure, to prove I was a good student. My literary education demanded only one thing from me: obedience. Looking back, my existence was constantly erased and replaced by the Vietnamese nation-state's interests. I ran away from that literary education and legacy as a hater of literature, a headless chicken devoid of humanity. Now, I am a writer trying to scratch something out of the sand.

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I was and have been at a cross-current between abandonment and rejection. My best hope now is that I can translate my Vietnamese thoughts into the English language. And since Vietnamese characters or those who embody Vietnamese spirits populate my writings, getting the voice right comes with immense responsibility and risk.

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But what if I can't get it right? What if the U-turn has been too damaged to drive on? What if the landmarks have been bombed and flattened? What is this anxiety about getting it right? The storytelling voice is still mine, a voice that came later in life, living through trauma and power struggles. It bears in itself an ontology of survival. It is markedly different from the voice I speak or write in Vietnamese, but it's mine. I don't even know what that is, but I don't think it's less authentic, powerful, cutting, or valuable, or less *me*.

So, I am interested in, or more precisely, more aware of the repertoire from which my voice comes about and how capacious it is. It is a repertoire of abandonment, emptiness, and absence. How big is this emptiness? How long is the abandonment? If stories come out of that emptiness, I must tend to it. Paying attention to emptiness is also an act of care and a way of craft. You can't breathe in a space without emptiness. I am compelled to examine that emptiness. If storytelling emerges as a way of survival and living a present of constant abandonment, erasure, and negation, it is necessarily and inherently queer.

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When the name Ocean Vuong rings in my head, the impulse and/or desire to see myself in his image is almost irresistible. He is a poet, an essayist, and a novelist all at once. Vuong was the first artist to embody queerness in a way I could relate to. He inhabits each genre with care and luminosity. In a conversation with Cathy Park Hong, he said that the definition of genre is "still up for grabs," and so is English grammar. How legitimate is the punctuation, he asked, when the language is attached to a military, a court system, and a navy? ("Ocean Vuong in Conversation with Cathy Park Hong" 00:10:55 – 00:11:34). Genre, he thinks, is a tendency which is as fluid as gender. I tend to agree with Vuong. And a relevant analogy I immediately had: if you look at how people ride their motorcycles and live in Hồ Chí Minh City, staying in one lane is the last thing they would do.

I think the main force powering my craft and work is the mentality that there is always a space for me in the arts. And my life has had a lot of influence on my craft. I imagine and remember so many times I found shortcuts in Hồ Chí Minh City and rode through alleys as wide as the width of my motorbike, to avoid the traffic and heat. And in those alleys, you'd find diverse communities and voices. My intuition tells me that whenever I face impossibility, there's

always a possibility. The world works that way in how I see it. I dwelled in a queer space and it follows—America is now always a queer space I inherited from those who walked before me—that I took for granted. I don't know what I'm doing most of the time, but I keep doing it.

Like Vuong carrying his mother and grandmother through spatial and temporal realms to include them in his writing, to let them haunt the pages, and ultimately heal, I am here, not only writing for myself, but also because of the people whose lives have touched my soul, even once, and only because of them.

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Since moving to the US, I have been compelled to close up the repertoire of voice(s) within myself. As a bilingual, speaking and thinking in English sometimes silences one language and yields space for the other. I have written essays, in an utterly self-alienated voice, for literature classes only to confront the "canonical greatness" of American voices. I felt obligated to switch to a mode of thinking and writing that was off-based from my repertoire. The professor would grade my papers on how much I conformed to the authors' literary greatness, leaving me a meager room to express my opinion on how far I could go with my daring to question their legitimacy. We didn't talk about Walt Whitman's racist poetic rhetoric in his poetry. We didn't touch on Jim in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. What if someone picked these under-discussed topics and turned them into something cynical, filling the silences with what we didn't want to discuss and legitimizing them? There are lessons to learn from and critical reflection in those classes, but I keep wondering about the American obsession with grandeur in literary pedagogy and ignore the pitfalls. I went to those classes with a sense of obedience.

I realized that the learning space wasn't that much of a difference from that in Vietnam.

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Vietnamese folk have a saying "Trâu bò đánh nhau, ruồi muỗi chết." It means the bovines fight, but the insects die. War crimes tribunals, like the Tokyo trials, are a mere display of the imperialist clashes where power and perhaps land were changed hands. These empires fought for political, economic, historical, and ethnographical interests after World War II. The consequences in colonized and plundered countries were ignored. Geoffrey Gunn, in his piece titled "The Great Vietnamese Famine 1944-45 Revisited," estimated that the Japanese occupation forces, especially their plunder, resulted in millions of Vietnamese deaths from starvation within one year (Gunn). And that number was before the US army and its allies arrived, before killing millions more. Six years before the trials, the Japanese fascists took over Indochinese Vietnam from the French empire. They pillaged every house and rice field to feed their army, fighting in the losing World War II. Did anybody in the world mourn them? We could only mourn ourselves.

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In 1966, the International War Crimes Tribunal, also known as the Russell Tribunal, comprising philosophers, writers, scholars, journalists, poets, activists, and historians, with Jean-Paul Sartre as executive president, held two sessions in Stockholm to examine whether American military interventions and foreign policies in Vietnam constituted war crimes. The tribunal concluded with Sartre's contribution, "On Genocide," as part of its findings. In his essay, the word extermination appears eight times, and genocide forty-six times.

Reading Jean Paul-Sartre's arguments, I had to stop breathing. Every cell in my body seemed to cease its resolute self-awareness. I thought *It's like a miracle that I'm still alive*—the sensation when you dodged a bullet. The notion of *liquidation* of people haunts me. Could you believe someone traveled thousands of miles across the ocean to show up at your door and scorch your bodies? What kind of human beings would do that?

Sartre argues that the US, to overcome the guerrilla tactics, has to annihilate the entire Vietnamese population, erasing them from the map. The goal was not only to deter the Chinese communist influence, but also to show the other oppressed colonies "that guerrilla war does not pay: they want to show all the oppressed and exploited nations that might be tempted to shake off the American yoke by launching a people's war, at first against their own pseudo-governments, the compradors and the army, then against the United States Special Forces, and finally against the GIs" (Sartre 70).

The US's aggressions, he concludes, were calculated, premeditated, and on course toward the total annihilation of the Vietnamese race. Sartre also seems to imply there is a different form of enormity, even more insidious, surpassing the conventional genocide: the racist policies and white supremacist world rulers' mentality. That enormity is a convoluting delusion that eats one's sense of morality inside out, an absolute divorce from any ethical grounding. The war didn't end until 1975, but in this 1968 text, Sartre had offered an astute observation, almost a prophecy that, "This crime, carried out every day before the eyes of the world, renders all who do not denounce it accomplices of those who commit it, so that we are being degraded today for our future enslavement" (84-85).

The US government ignored this tribunal, as was the political apparatus of South Vietnam, and many Vietnamese American contemporary scholars.

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Storytelling has been and continues to be an art in the making and erasing in my family. I observed my mother's struggles with toxic masculinity and intergenerational traumas like a fragmented arc. Growing up, I realized those arcs were everywhere, haunting each family meal and the children. Everyone, including the men, was touched by the ghost of war. The war

language plagued the lives of these men and women, shaping their mouths and ears, and, thus, the language I produce. They didn't want to bring up that heinous war. Their avoidant tendencies bleed into my writing style. Those people tend to look to the bright side of the story and often dream. As someone who could see the destruction from the outside or at least at its borders, I feel compelled to recognize and name it and resist the erasure of dreams.

The discovery of the man who had crucially helped my aunt and her husband immigrate to the US in 1996 marked the beginning of my desire to devote my time and energy to writing my creative manuscript. This story must be told and written, and my dream is to inaugurate his stories in the Vietnamese American canon.

This Black Vietnamese Amerasian man held me in his arms when I was little. The memory I have been seeking only exists through witnesses, in the others' perspectives and memories. In that tenderness and warmth beg for reconnection and reengagement with violence. Taking off the bandage and confronting the scars of history. The American Dream stories that were flaunted in households in Vietnam became a canonical narrative: you must abandon Vietnam and move to America, and that is your ultimate destiny. The relatives and families in Vietnam listen to the return-for-vacation now-Vietnamese Americans with obedience, absorbing the greatness and grandeur they brought back from the other shore of the ocean. At the same time, with the same sharp blade of narrative, my aunt and her husband had chopped off the hands and the face of the person who helped them move to the US to achieve their American Dream. They charted their story of coming to "civilization and freedom," fleeing the country and poverty, and self-fulfillment as though they made it all by themselves.

And I do not condone that.

That has led me to build a manuscript that calls for a novelistic form. First, I feel it is a form worth pursuing because it is something I've never done before, something new and challenging. After more than five years of working exclusively with short stories, I have long desired to explore the novel. Second, the novel is a wonderful vessel to carry a cast of characters while giving the space to develop and engage with a community of secondary characters whose lives intersect and are rooted in fragmented and/or connected memories. I see it as a powerful technology to sustain memory.

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The generations of Vietnamese Amerasians, fathered by American service members during the war in Vietnam, have only been documented by a few scholars, and the effort to give aid to them was extremely challenging. According to Trin Yarborough, a few American activists devoted to the reconciliation efforts during the late 1980s were federally persecuted because they assisted the recovery projects in Vietnam, primarily helping the Amerasians living on the streets, invisible to and neglected by both American and Vietnamese authorities, by organizing traveling trips (100-01). After the fall of the last Republic of Vietnam in 1975, the American response to those children was slow and aloof. Yarborough informs us that the US government-sponsored programs to help move Vietnamese Amerasians in Vietnam have long been viewed as disastrous by experts. John McAuliff, mentioned in Yaborough's book, said that "In the U.S., it became a hullabaloo [to take them to America]. If the U.S. had only put one-tenth of the money into training programs in Vietnam [that it spent on the Homecoming Act program]...Well, the act was a disaster from the beginning, and had to do with U.S. guilt as much as anything else." (98). The disrupted aid and bureaucratic nightmares only prolonged their precarious situations. These children carried on their skin the indelible marks like children of the enemies, an unwanted past,

and/or the ghost of war. They inhabited a diplomatic limbo: American or Vietnamese? Are you a refugee or an immigrant? while their lives were often subject to alienation from post-war Vietnamese society. They were the applicants who wanted to leave Vietnam more than anybody else for whatever reason they wanted: finding their American father, searching for a more stable diplomatic place, economic opportunities, or simply an alternative life. Without access to wealth, when opportunities to relocate to the US were available, not all Vietnamese Amerasians had the chance and means to apply, both in terms of finances and application materials. Vietnamese Amerasians were among the poorest. Many children lived in a public park waiting to be interviewed in Sài Gòn. The romantic, happy-ending stories between American soldiers and Vietnamese women might sometimes result in birth certificates or other entails, but in case of rape and prostitution, nothing was recorded, everything destroyed. Most mothers burned everything related to the father, like photos or letters, when the war was over. They feared that their past relationships could turn against them and frame them as traitors.

Toward the end of the 1980s, the increasing number of interview rejections reflected a drastic change in how the US government had tightened the eligibility rules for Vietnamese Amerasians to immigrate. When the Amerasian Homecoming Act was first introduced in 1988, physical features were considered sufficient grounds for eligibility. The program began to expand its restrictions on the eligibility rules after the US government investigated and found that many family members of the Vietnamese American applicants were "bought" relatives. Steven DeBonis informs us that Vietnamese strangers, desperate but with means to flee Vietnam, forged fake papers, often through a broker for a fee, with a Vietnamese Amerasian to claim a legitimate family to immigrate to the US on his or her status. They were considered "gold cases" (12).

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I am unequivocally certain that I want to write a novel that can rise to the effect that can endure the brutal spontaneity of randomly opening it without a clue of the plot or where you are in the story, and still devastatingly fall in love with the voice.

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I want to wrestle with Ocean Vuong's debut novel a little more, to look at the queerness of a Vietnamese body in America. How does it move through the post-memory of the women in his family? How does it stand on its way to experiencing and living queerness? Through *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Ocean Vuong addresses the aftermath of war, its effects and affects, without putting us against a gun's muzzle, and without pestering us to memorize how many times a Vietnamese corpse has been punctured. Vuong's novel has one thing I want to learn to apply in my project: the way he uses fragmented memories, broken up by the section breaks. Through his poetic prose, Vuong confronts the pain of intergenerational traumas trickling down from the protagonist/narrator's grandmother, Lan, to his mother and himself. But notice the disjuncture within the narrator: he experiences the effects of war through the bodies and language of his grandmother and mother. I am interested in how bodies affected and displaced by and after the war move through spaces and time, and how they interact with the body from a younger generation with little to no firsthand experience of its horrors.

Bodies are sites of knowledge. Chó Con receiving his inheritance through kinship epitomizes Vuong's humane treatment of intergenerational trauma in the novel as a form of retaining and sustaining knowledge through the letter form. The novel does not step onto a stage and announce its conclusion about who wins or who loses in the war, a commonality in narratives in Vietnam War fiction in which, more often than not, the victory always belongs to

the individualist American soldier or serves the interests, masculinity or morality of the agent of war, a rite of passage for manhood.

On Earth recenters the experiential ownership, or in other words, reclaims the whole package of a person's experiences of the war aftermath as a refugee, the good and the bad, shifting the centrality of the book off the hook of what so many Vietnam War novels did: the toxic masculinist obsession of violence – guns, grenades, killings, torturing. Instead, it is queer bodies and family's bodies the protagonist cares about. But more importantly, *On Earth* shows me how a queer person and body dwell in a space of inherited violence, how we read the intergenerational traumas confronting the desire for intimate affection and love, how to move through liminal spaces with grace and respect, how to remove myself from the white gaze, how to hone and harness the language at once estranges and holds me with the Vietnamese poet's eyes, and how to love. *On Earth*'s form, which is in letters for the mother who cannot read, offers a reflexive and explorative space of the interiority of Vietnamese American queer minds and bodies, and son of a working class refugee mother, and at the same time, opens an alternative passage to talk about fragmented generational memories with his mother as the result of displacement and violence, alienation and silences in America.

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People in Vietnam, or at least those I know, hold a deep belief in dreams. For them, mộng/chiêm bao/mơ (dream) is a medium where the past and the future intermingle. They treat dreams as text and foretelling. They would sit down and parse what they saw and remembered from their dreams. What did you see? I couldn't tell how often people have told me they saw their loved ones, who had already passed, in their dreams and couldn't wait to wake up to tell others. We interpret dreams to get closer to each other, to the dead, as though they never left, no

longer mourning them but accepting the reality that part of them is living among us. I see these moments as poetic and worth telling. While the crippling post-war economy bore a toll on their shoulders and plucked their hair off, they would always find a way in life to celebrate as a community, staying together. So, that left me to think about those who had left for America.

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In my novel, the protagonist, Hiếu (Hugo), a Black Vietnamese Amerasian born from a union of a Black American service member and a Vietnamese woman during the war, goes to Vietnam after years of living in the US to find his roots. He immigrated to the US in 1996. He married Vi (Vivian), a Vietnamese woman with whom he has a daughter, Cathy. When in Vietnam, he re-examines his past, present, and many things he has internalized in the US. It is a story of manipulation, displacement, abandonment, poverty, queerness, love, post-war, and family.

I took a true story that has long been buried within my family, and ran away with it.

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In 2023, Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai published *Dust Child*, a novel that weaves three narratives representing three groups of characters: Phong and his family, Dan and Linda, and the sisters Quynh and Trang. These three narratives spin separately, which seem jarring and disorienting, but toward the end, they collide and overlap to reveal their connected relationships. They move through time and space, from pre-war to post-war, and past each other, confronting and retelling memories. They all follow their own agencies. For this section of the essay, I want to focus on the portrayal of Phong as an Amerasian character in Vietnam.

Nguyễn portrays Phong as an outcast in the Vietnamese post-war society spanning from the 1970s through 2016. He waits for months for his immigration interview, and the US consulate rejects his lineage with an American soldier due to his lack of documentation.

Nguyễn's depiction of Phong reflects how a Vietnamese Amerasian navigates the treacherous diplomatic limbo. To depict Phong's alienating experience in Vietnam, Nguyễn uses skin color and bodily features as the signifier of rejection. Phong still believes he can prove himself as a mixed race person by rejecting the American officer's ignorant accusation that he might be of Khmer origin, saying, "Sir, the color of my skin….Since I was little, I was called Black American…I'm an Amerasian, Sir. Khmer people are short. I'm one meter eighty. And my beard…Sir…Khmer men don't have beards like this" (6). Phong's existence still lives outside of any stereotypically political, diplomatic, and cultural frameworks that deny multiplicity and the inherent burdens Amerasians have to carry. He seems to live in a past period of history, unmoved by the race of time and social changes that are beyond his or literally anyone's control. Without records, nothing about Phong is legitimate to the racist power structure that rigidly relies on archival evidence, something people like Phong's mother had sought to destroy in fear of the communist persecution.

Before Phong eventually gives in to his fate, Nguyễn's construction of his narrative seemingly serves as a counter-narrative that decenters America as the savior and demythologizes the many narratives of America as the end goal, that America is not the ultimate solution to Phong's past, present, and future. I argue that this signifies a serious reorientation to roots. However, this realization doesn't come into existence without a fervent desire to survive and change his life. Phong, for most of his time in the novel, is absolute and determined, yearning for America even after being defrauded by a wealthy family who exploited him for immigration

purposes. Therefore, I contend that though Nguyễn's narrative design points to an interesting turn in stripping America of its ultimate savior trope, his story, on the character level, fails to affirm that, because Phong, toward the end, still wants to immigrate to America.

Alongside his family, Phong navigates Hồ Chí Minh City as a working class man from the rural Mekong Delta to get to the US consulate, the municipal post office, and the shopping malls. He embodies an Amerasian body that moves through the quasi-capitalist space to search for an opportunity. He endures the racist behavior of a woman who discriminates against him because of his skin color in front of the Notre Dame Basilica of Saigon. As a devout Catholic, it seems to Phong that even his ultimate savior is ignoring his suffering, the statue of Our Lady of Peace nonchalant about his presence. After every door to immigrate to the US slams shut in his face, he begins to refocus and ground his life in his abilities and what he has. Despite many defeats, he is not defeated. The novel rewards Phong as an entrepreneur with a growing business and reunites him with his mother.

At the same time, *Dust Child* also disrupts the thinking that Vietnam is a forever hostile place, still deep in the destructive aftermath of war. Nguyễn's novel redefines the country as a changed place and a home to be rooted in or to find one's roots. A site of reconciliation and forgiveness. The last two chapters knit together two generations scattered by war.

Nguyễn's novel puts human connections front and center, highlighting the intricate threads that are fragile to violence, annihilation, and abandonment, as lives come together and separate through war and change. Phong finally meets his mother, Quỳnh, who gave him up at the orphanage in 1972, thinking he had been adopted by an American family through the Baby Lift Operation, and his children can see their grandmother. During a confession in the penultimate chapter, his mother convinces him that his father's name is Tim and that he died.

The final pages reveal a secret the whole book has kept hidden: Phong's father is an unknown American patron who paid Quỳnh for sex. Quỳnh fabricates the story to keep Phong from spiraling waywardly. The narrator lets us know that "she loved him. Out of that love, she had planted the story of Tim and grew it until its fruit tasted sweet in Phong's mouth. She'd heard Phong telling others about his father with such pride and knew that the sweetness of her fruit of deception was not only real, it was necessary" (330).

While reading these last pages, one question came to mind: How can a war survivor continue living with the untethered narratives after the war? To respond to the compounding effects of the war, Quỳnh relies on fiction and storytelling to stay alive. The narrator reveals, "In a way, making up stories had been the basis of her survival and success. Her lies had enabled her parents to go on living and now her lies would protect her sons, their families, her business and herself" (331). While praying for a better world, Quỳnh crafts and spins her stories, past and present, to look forward as a way of being and living with unresolvable narratives, but more importantly, as a survival skill.

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Primo Levi said in his famous line in *The Drowned and The Saved*, "We, the survivors, are not the true witnesses" (63). I witnessed a man on the operating table next to me, fully awake, while the technicians in green robes were about to anesthetize me. Although it felt frightening, my experience could not be universalized. If I promoted this story and the American Medical Association picked it up to teach about Vietnamese children's experience in surgery, that wouldn't fly. Yet, it is still within my right to write that story. To put it in perspective with the vượt biên (border crossing) stories, I think every story should be told, but context plays a vital role in seeing the whole picture. Decontextualization in re-telling the Vietnamese refugee and

immigrant narratives wouldn't do justice to their experience without informing the ways in which they could afford such escapes.

Access to these measures was a luxury. It wasn’t a small price to get out of Vietnam. Not everyone had enough gold bars and warm connections with the regime's officials, the (South Vietnamese) government, and the US embassy/consulate, or even buy a seat in the ocean-bound boats. The common narratives tend to portray a character who starts from a desperate point (on the boat, leaving the country, escaping), arrives in America, works hard (empty-handed), and becomes successful. This Freytag narrative utterly annihilates whatever comes before the desperate point, and eerily conforms to the rags-to-riches form—desperate-turn-successful.

The memory industry of the Vietnamese refugees and immigrants in America speaks to and through a limited view that could only acquire its successful capitalist Americaness with privilege and wealth, along with hatred of communism and whitewashed history as denominators. In the “Introduction: Critical Refugee Studies and Asian American Studies,” Yến Lê Espiritu, one of the leading scholars in Vietnamese refugee studies, laments the lack of scholarship and the challenges of telling the stories of Vietnamese refugees. She writes that she didn't know "how to highlight the ongoing cost of war without reducing us to mere victims, even if our losses have been significant?" (2) Mere victims? Who are the "victims" she is talking about? The implication bottlenecks the victim of American neocolonialist genocidal violence in Vietnam to a specific demographic: the ones who "escaped" from Vietnam, or the Vietnamese diaspora. What about the ones that stayed behind? Aren't those staying in Vietnam—enduring the violent political transition, the stricken poverty of "the cost of war," and the thirty-year economic embargo by the genocidal government they ran to—legitimate victims?

❁

I am a ghost stepping out of the genocidal dream.

❁

I was juggling between *Dust Child* and Aimee Phan's *We Should Never Meet*. Her linked short stories collection, in luminous prose, captures the pain of Vietnamese orphans abandoned during the war, many of them moving to the US through the Baby Lift Operation. The title story signals a possibility, a rather grim and unfortunate one, when it comes to the lives of Vietnamese Amerasians in the US. When I finished this story, while Phong in *Dust Child* was trying so hard to move to the US, there was a fear settling in me: if Phong successfully immigrated to the US, I dreaded what happens to Kim—the main character with "ambiguity of her racial makeup"—or possibly to any orphan, can happen to Phong and/or his family. The assimilationist promise is always incandescent and enticing, but it is never easy and fraught with violence and abandonment. Phan's character in this story struggles with her incompetent social workers and adoptive family. Her unreadable body in a world where she is only legible in a few ways, navigates desolate Little Saigon with an intense sense of disorientation. She works menial jobs and is nothing but a walking existential crisis, an uprooted plant being tussled in the tumultuous currents in a foreign land.

The main narrator shows Kim being gifted with a bracelet by the jewelry store owner. She mistakes the owner's pity for kindness and confusion for a kind of kinship, perhaps motherhood. She returns and asks the woman for four hundred dollars for the deposit for a new place she intends to move into, and out of Vinh’s apartment, where she shares a twin-sized bed. The woman refuses, claiming Kim is a complete stranger. No money for her. Kim feels wronged. And "Kim hated being wrong" (50). She tells Vinh, her partner, foster sibling, a boat refugee, and a gang member in Little Saigon, nothing but the store's name, and Vinh knows what to do. Vinh

and his gang attack the woman's store while Kim waits in her apartment. "Waiting. Waiting" (54). Phan's character Kim seems to miss the reciprocal or circular politics of exchanging gifts: once a gift is given, the giver expects some form of compensation in return. Kim breaks this cycle.

JungHa Kim comments on this fissure or disruption in her essay “The Affects and Ethics of the Gift in Aimee Phan’s *We Should Never Meet,*” published in *Contemporary Literature*. She suggests that this phenomenon "reflects the characters' prolonged sense of loss after their arrival in the US, their unresolved yearning for intimacy, and the difficulty of assimilation, all of which indicate a fracture in the transformative logic of the desperate-turn-successful. The gifts in Phan's stories are not simple items of freedom but rather bespeak the failed promise of freedom" (63).

The ending of this story, like others', is unresolved. I read it as a gesture that Phan attempts to reflect on the ongoing effects of displacement within the Vietnamese American communities, especially the Amerasian orphans. It points to a sense of being left in the dark, in silence, in non-responsiveness, which thematically echoes the fates of many Vietnamese Amerasians in the US.

I can’t help but wonder about the similarities between *Dust Child* and “We Should Never Meet.” On two opposite sides of the ocean, of history, of war, untethered threads of narrative haunt the lives of the Vietnamese Amerasians. As both texts underscore the human connections, the relationships between the characters in *Dust Child* and *We Should Never Meet* are on two different planes. The former heads toward reunion while the latter scatters, yet all are touched by the war. I’m trying to demonstrate that these characters represent the unreadable by authority, untrackable by the archives, and finally, unsolvable by fiction. I’m not doubling down on their

traumas. Still, I hope for a more engaging, critical, and open-minded conversation about the lives of Vietnamese Amerasians and other Amerasians across Asia and the US.

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The American economist and social critic Edward S. Herman charts the indiscriminate atrocities committed by the cruel, cold-blooded South Vietnamese soldiers trained by the American military against the Vietnamese civilians in his book *Atrocities in Vietnam: Myths and Realities*. He provides insightful arguments and data, confirming Sartre's deliberation. Not a single Vietnamese critical refugee studies scholar cites Herman's book. I wonder if the young Vietnamese American generations have heard about these crimes committed by the American army and its partner-in-crime, the South Vietnamese government. Were the stories they heard complete? What would the Vietnamese American literary landscape look like if fiction written only by this group, this voice, had a publishing platform in America that homogeneously controlled the so-called Vietnamese narratives? The facade needs to be pulled down, and currently, I feel it has become a rather tall wall. I fervently hope the later generations of Vietnam scholars will take up this task.

What I see missing in literary criticism and critical refugee studies is a transnational class analysis that traces what came before. I think a thorough class analysis and an open-minded theoretical and practical forum on the US's genocide in Vietnam would reveal where the connections between Vietnamese refugees/immigrants' histories and extremist right-wing conservatism exist, where people killed their own struggles and got in bed with extremism.

I know it's difficult, but it's necessary.

To mourn the dead of that war is to remember all the dead. I echo Nguyen Vo Thu Huong's sharp words, urging for a multi-perspective approach to look at history, construct narratives, and look forward:

> "As mourners, we must be hospitable to all the dead of that war and its aftermath if we are to form our memory of that war without cannibalizing all of these histories into the single story that becomes us…In allowing a full remembrance formed in complex, and even contradictory histories, perhaps we can free ourselves to consider a full range of ethical and political options" (171).

I join Nguyen's advocacy to suggest collective mourning, where humanity is at the core. I suppose if we segregate the dead, the haunting would segregate us back. By being mindful of how we mourn the dead and by critically engaging with narratives, we can open up the conversation about possibility, alternatives, and even healing to a broader terrain.

*

Part of the narrative desire must come from the wraiths haunting my life. I press on the gas, moving on in this tortuous life on either shore of the Pacific Ocean, knowing that I live in the certainty of death and work/write on the portent of life. It is perpetually grabbing and clawing at a rippling, ethereal curtain on which I write stories, where the other side is reality. I must write about those that afforded me that curtain, that pen. I wrote in a sticky note in the back of a chapter called "Fantasy and Conversation" from Alexis Pauline Gumbs's *Survival Is A Promise: The Eternal Life of Audre Lorde*, a chapter that is laden with many deaths and closeness to death, "that death is not the end, not a completion because it'd go against the principle of revision if we think death signals ending; but it radiates, echoes, and re-emerges, continuing its resonance and incandescence against time and place linearity and one-dimensionality and darkness." So,

another day, I see the sun, another day I can revise my life stories. And those stories are meshed in a network of lives that have touched me.

The desire for stories from my elders and family kept drawing me in. I asked for my maternal uncle's stories from his time serving in Cambodia during the Pol Pot apartheid, and my maternal grandmother's stories from when she was young and working as an indentured servant. I remember my uncle telling me, at my urging, on the Cambodian battlefield. I remember my mother retelling my father's family lore. I remember walking to the train platform in Houston, sobbing because my close friend in Tân Phú, Sài Gòn, had just died of tuberculosis. How can I write these stories? What does it also mean to write them in English? Where are they on the literary map?

*

When I first arrived in the US late in 2016, just as Trump was about to take office, I searched for familiar faces, specifically Vietnamese faces. A community of shared ancestry and heritage would assuage my homesickness. I was naive then. The reality defied my understanding of what it means to be a Vietnamese person in the US.

As I noticed everywhere I drove by in Houston, the defunct flag of the South Vietnamese regime was flown in restaurants, shops, grocery stores, churches, pagodas, and schools. It exuded a reality that the Vietnamese communities still recognized the bygone South Vietnam dictatorship. Nobody can take away their right to fly the flag. However, it embodies a false nostalgia for the "glorious days" when Jeeps full of American soldiers were still on the streets of Sài Gòn and the denial of the current Vietnamese government. First, the insistence on using that flag and its worship alone, I think, means a negation of the anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist resistance in Vietnam, a negation that the Vietnamese were being colonized–Vietnamese lands

not occupied and exploited. Second, it signifies a paradox: an in-group resistance against a global protest against imperialism and neo-colonialist reality during that time.

One night, as I was walking home, a Vietnamese woman outside a neighborhood Walmart stopped me. She asked if I was Vietnamese. To avoid further engagement with her, I said, No. She kept pushing me to confess the identity she suspected of me. She knew who I was and tried to make me confess my lie. Ultimately, I said I was a Chinese student. Instantly, she began to unleash her rage against the Chinese people. She likened my face to that of Mao Zedong. She berated me and called me a communist. If I confessed, she would have called me a communist anyway and a liar. I kept that identity. She finally released my shirt, and I ran to the Phillips gas station, where a few pickups were pumping their tanks. Her sentiments echoed those of Trump.

In retrospect, I could have said I was Vietnamese, and nothing serious would have happened. I could have faked I supported Trump so we could part ways in peace. We could have been neighbors or friends. She presented no physical threats to me. I could have been nicer. But I couldn't because that lie would have lain in me forever. I suppose the situation where I had to make quick decisions forced me to relinquish my own identity in order to protect my idealized dignity. But the situation didn't pass without any revelation.

The lie helped reveal a more profound anti-Communist sentiment propagandized right within the Vietnamese communities. The disinformation trickled down from Vietnamese-speaking channels on the Internet, broadcast by the right-wing extremist content on YouTube, and spread by Vietnamese pseudo-journalists daily. These channels were among the few news outlets where they could obtain information due to their limited English proficiency. The Vietnamese communities in Houston and many parts of the US have been radicalized to become supporters of rising neo-fascism, a potential streamlining scheme to whip the supposedly

suppressed into the shadows of the oppressors. However, it seems the scholars are content with it, which baffles me because they frequently discuss liberation, anti-colonization, and freedom, among other beautiful things. What happened to their own reckoning?

*

I was subconsciously writing for two types of audiences: general Americans and Vietnamese Americans.

My understanding of my audience has changed over the course of this program. I no longer consider Vietnamese Americans my audience.

I write for myself. And I said this after months of intense and ongoing reflection and learning from writers who haunt my bookcase, such as Toni Morrison, Ocean Vuong, Arundhati Roy, Clarice Lispector, Marguerite Duras, and Julie Otsuka. I revere these littérateurs as teachers. Some of them also started by writing for themselves. Toni Morrison penned T*he Bluest Eye* because it was the book she wanted to read, which never existed on the shelves. I want to be and write like them. I want to be a puzzle to myself. I want to write with them. In addition to these names, I want to carry the faces and the hands that helped grow me as a person and a writer, providing me with literary sustenance and inspiration.

Writing, in fiction or poetry, starts with one's own care. Writing for a specific audience is like seafaring in treacherous water. It sucks you into a vortex of either death, wonder, joy or total annihilation. Writing fiction, for me, demands a safeguard from streamlining the writer’s art into gratifying a group of readers.

Writing with is more interesting to me. Writing needs some absolute aloneness, and sometimes it feels lonely. The ghosts don’t always follow you around; they have their own places to go to, tending to their own wounds. The writer’s job is not to enslave these characters, but to

accompany them to offer them liberation. Sometimes, the writer must offer them solitude because the noise from the voices doesn't always mean freedom or true representation. The silence is not always ours to break.

*

I am always, as I have always been, considering myself odd, not special or gifted, but odded out, a form of fiber that could, from deep darkness, make its way to the water's surface, gasping for air. And I want to remain that way. Feel grateful about it. I am grateful for rescuing myself. I want my stories to have that quality.

I can link myself to a more familiar metaphor ubiquitous in my writing: a coconut palm. Their fruit clusters look like giant maces growing from the root of these mud-loving palms. To grow to its mace-like maturity, the seeds must first depart from those clusters themselves. The currents carry them away from their mother plants, and those seeds descend into the muddy riverbed, maybe miles from where they have dropped. They sprout out of the mud, like lotuses and water lilies, to reach the air and light. I was inducted into writing like that. Gasping for air. That is how I write, and that *style* finds its threads in each word, comma, and period. It breathes in my writing as I breathe with it. I write as if to save somebody's life. Probably myself.

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