

Lê Thị Huệ:
Writing between Exilic Homelessness and Situated Nomadism

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ABSTRACT

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Over the past three decades, more than 300 Vietnamese American authors have produced at least 550 novels, 200 collections of short stories and poetry in addition to over 100 volumes of informal reflective and formal commentary essays in their native language. Nonetheless, a majority of this literature remains in utter obscurity, both within and beyond the borders of Vietnamese America. My dissertation focuses on the body of work of the feminist writer Lê Thị Huệ whose expansive breadth and constantly evolving aesthetics render her an appropriate representative and a singular phenomenon among her contemporaries in the Vietnamese diaspora. I propose the double concept *exilic homelessness* and *situated nomadism* as the theoretical framework to read Lê's body of work and as a means through which to understand Lê's ethics and aesthetics. I demonstrate that, if multiple historical displacements underlie Lê's experience as a refugee, woman, and writer, *exilic homelessness* and *situated nomadism* reveal the vicissitudes of Lê's subjectivity as an exile, feminist, and Asian American cyborg and cultural producer. Combining the ethico-critical force of poststructuralist theories (including nomadology, cyborg theory, and *écriture féminine*) and politico-aesthetic strength of critical theories (including women-of-color feminism and critical denationalization), I demonstrate how Lê's work offers a meaningful opportunity to re-imagine Asian American subjectivity and politics of resistance in the contemporary diasporic moment. Ultimately I reveal how reading Lê's work requires a critical paradigm that incorporates both indigenizing and diasporic modes of Asian American subjectivity and that, not only is such paradigm theoretically and politically productive, it is also desirable.

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To NAT, for believing

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**Writing between Exilic Homelessness and Situated Nomadism:
Vietnamese American Literary Praxis in the Age of Diaspora**

*Since 1975 I have dodged all homelands
I feel at ease and empowered by this choice
O lush green freedom
I am ready to die without a homeland
I need freedom more than a home country
More than blind attachment to any one location
– Lê Thị Huệ, “Live Between, Die Betwixt”*

*I am woman writer
In search of a homeland
Writing and living between and betwixt
No matter if rocks and knives fall from the sky
I bow down to kiss the earth
And look for a bloom in the darkness of humanity
– Lê Thị Huệ, “An Old Lover, An Old Song”*

Over the past three decades, Vietnamese Americans have produced a diverse and sizable body of literature in their native language. Among the 1.5 million Vietnamese residing in the United States, more than 300 authors have produced at least 550 novels, 200 collections of short stories and poetry in addition to over 100 volumes of informal reflective and formal commentary essays.¹ But this is only a conservative figure, for it neither includes individual works published in more than 150 literary anthologies and in at least 500 literary journal issues by *Văn*, *Văn Học*, *Hợp Lưu*, etc.² nor does it account for writings appeared in *Gio-O*, *Damau* and *Tienvé*, diasporic literary e-magazines that in recent years have become a staple of intellectual life for Vietnamese in the diaspora and, to a lesser extent, in post-war Vietnam.³

Despite this voluminous presence, the majority of this literature remains in utter obscurity, both within and beyond the borders of Vietnamese America. Here in the United States, home to the largest diasporic Vietnamese population in the world,⁴ literary consumption has been confined to a small though highly active intellectual circle comprised mostly of writers themselves. This ongoing reality of a limited readership, coupled with the growing lack of interest among the younger generation, has positioned this literature in the peripheries of diasporic Vietnamese cultural landscapes. In the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, home of its creators, diasporic literature continues to be met with official and critical resistance, overwhelmingly banned from publication⁵ and, when reluctantly taken up by critics, trivialized as “stagnant,” “frozen in time” or “paralytic.”⁶ In the United States, its homeland in the most literal sense, its “neither-hook-nor-fish” status has prevented it from showing up on any “conceptual radar screens,” exacerbating its invisibility and effectively securing its radical marginality in all cultural and literary discourses.⁷ In the face of such compounding forces of erasure, the continued vivacity of diasporic Vietnamese literature indeed appears at once

phenomenal and spectral, defiant and intriguing, outlandish and puzzling, rendering at once inadequate and troubling the paucity of scholarship that has, for more than three decades, [under-] accompanied its existence.⁸

As the border of Asian America continues to fluctuate, the tenacious existence of this body of literature cries out for more critical attention.⁹ For more than two decades now, Asian Americanists have advocated the belief that Asian American critical praxis should encompass Asian-language works. As early as 1982, Elaine Kim already noted the importance of Asian-language works and expressed her confidence that “they will be presented” as part of the Asian American literary experience.¹⁰ Echoing Kim, critics throughout the 1990s sustained the call for more attention to Asian-language works in Asian American critical praxis, citing both political expediency and theoretical innovativeness as incentives for studying this body of literature.¹¹ Unfortunately, as these critics have also pointed out, the lack of Asian-language proficiency and, to some extent, institutional constraints have continued to account for the shortage of scholarship on this body of literature.¹²

If this paucity provides a direct impetus for my study, it also underlies my goal to recuperate and incorporate this body of literature under the umbrella of Asian American literature. My insistence to include it as a part of Asian American literature is guided by the conviction that (1) its development intimately reflects the many paradigmatic and historical forces that traverse and inspire Asian American literature, and that (2) its interstitiality offers a productive site for a meaningful engagement with the continually shifting boundaries of Asian America. Informed by Sau-ling C. Wong’s advocacy of a denationalizing critical praxis that does not lose sight of the historical importance of the Asian American anti-Orientalist origin and U.S.-claiming agenda, my study takes as a point of departure Shirley Geok-Lin Lim et al’s definition of Asian American writing as “located and locatable in U.S. territory, sited on a discourse of nation, whether immigrant or citizen, and integrated into the dominant forms, genres, and aesthetic traditions of U.S. literature.”¹³ This definition proves conceptually and politically compelling for two reasons: (1) its emphasis on the U.S. location/locatability requires our attentiveness to the politico-conceptual boundaries of Asian America; and (2) its emphasis on the dialectical nature of Asian American writing affords a critical approach both politically grounded and yet theoretically expansive enough to accommodate the sinuous turnings that have characterized Vietnamese and Asian American historical trajectories and literary imaginations.

As suggested by the title of this introductory chapter, “Writing between Exilic Homelessness and Situated Nomadism: Vietnamese American Literary Praxis in the Age of Diaspora,” I consider theoretically appropriate and politically productive the use of a diasporic perspective for conceptualizing this body of literature. I adopt in particular Johnathan Y. Okamura’s view of diaspora “not merely as a global dispersal of people” but also as “consisting of the transnational relations that connect an immigrant/ethnic minority with its homeland (or cultural center) and its counterpart communities in other host societies.”¹⁴ Not unlike the diasporic Filipinos who formed the focus of Okamura’s studies, I propose that the Vietnamese Americans’ significant and complex affective and economic linkages with the land of their birth, as well as their robust ties with other Vietnamese communities in the diaspora,¹⁵ render inadequate a U.S.-centered approach to analyzing their historical formation and cultural production. Moreover, because a domestic approach in Asian American Studies (AAS) has traditionally, if only partly, contributed to the elision of non-English works, I argue that a diasporic framework could provide this body of literature with a much needed discursive space

and the field with an appropriate analytic tool to assess, and thus mobilize, the diversity that is Asian America.

I particularly locate Vietnamese American literary praxis in the interstitial area between *exilic homelessness* and *situated nomadism*. Overlapping and at times self-contradictory, both concepts suggest a certain *disidentification* of the notion of home. I draw on Michel Pecheux to define disidentification as a strategy of resistance against dominant ideology by working within and against it.¹⁶ In contrast to (1) counteridentification which attempts to overthrow dominant logic or (2) assimilation which fully identifies with it, disidentification seeks to transform it from within. José Esteban Muñoz's helpful elucidation of this concept merits a quote at length here:

Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this "on working on and against" is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggle.¹⁷

I define *exilic homelessness* as the impossibility of return to the land of origin, both as a result of historical upheaval and as a matter of political conviction. The erasure of South Vietnam from the world map following the communist victory in 1975 serves as the immediate historical backdrop for this permanent and irreversible loss of home. *Exilic homelessness* is further defined as a historically produced condition that demands and resists closure, exacerbated by the simultaneous longing for the motherland and rejection of the fatherland. I explore the fictive distinction between motherland and fatherland to further demonstrate the complex identificatory politics in the Vietnamese diaspora.

Building on Deleuze and Guattari's nomadology, I define nomadism as the simultaneous desire to put down roots and yet to transcend them. If Asian Americans, as David L. Eng reminds us, are perpetually "suspended between departure and arrival," remaining "disenfranchised from home, relegated to a nostalgic sense of its loss or to an optative sense of its unattainability," then nomadism can be described as a consequence of and a response to the impossibility of arrival. I deploy the modifier "situated" to emphasize the attentiveness of nomadism to the material implications and political dimensions of conceptual and discursive spaces. In doing so, I advocate against a reading of nomadism as a call for endless border crossing, that which runs the risk of de-materializing and de-politicizing the social space. Nomadism does not seek a third space outside of Statism (striated space) and Statelessness (smooth space). Instead, it seeks "passages from one to the other, transformation of one within the other, [and] reversals," and, in doing so, destabilizes both distinctions and reconstitutes them as new loci. I argue that, like the nomads for whom "the land ceases to be land, tending only to become simply ground or support," Vietnamese American literary praxis insists upon deterritorialization, or a refusal to fully identify with any one national, fixed identity. Yet, this refusal does not mean a disregard for location and locatability, but an acute awareness of "specific locations" as "relays along a trajectory" and an intense desire to "inhabit these places," to "remain in them" and "make them grow."¹⁸ Indeed, as Rosi Braidotti reminds us, "Nomadism is about critical relocation, it is about becoming situated, speaking from somewhere specific and hence well aware of and accountable for particular locations."¹⁹

Given the specific historical context of the Vietnamese migration to the United States, which came after two decades of a civil war followed by the American intervention, and given the continued marginalization of ethnic-/diasporic subjects in the United States, I argue that the spatio-temporal area between *exilic homelessness* and *situated nomadism* provides a useful frame of reference for conceptualizing Vietnamese American literary praxis and cultural politics in the age of diaspora. Despite its genealogical connections to poststructuralism (whose deeply Eurocentric origins and rejection of epistemological certitude demand critical vigilance), *situated nomadism* presents a viable alternative to, on the one hand, exclusivist cultural nationalist framings of Asian American identity and, on the other, dehistoricized diasporic articulations of that very identity. Writing in “Denationalization Reconsidered,” Sau-ling C. Wong argues that both denationalized diasporic and cultural nationalist constructions of Asian American identity dangerously “forget” the historical specificity and political necessity that informed the emergence of the Asian American movement. Wong provocatively declares that “the contrast between the narrow-minded, essentialist 1960s and 1970s and the more enlightened, deconstructivist and internationalist 1980s is, in many ways, an overdrawn and dehistoricized dichotomy, one based on a ‘forgetting’ of the inherently coalitional spirit of the pan-Asian American movement.” She warns us against the depoliticizing consequences of treating as teleological culmination a dehistoricized diasporic paradigm in Asian American studies by stressing the continued need to recognize Asian America as a political collectivity, one that “will dissolve... as soon as one leaves the American borders behind.”²⁰

Wong is specifically concerned with the underlying poststructuralist influence that often accompanies denational diasporic identity constructions. Questioning what she calls the “allure” of poststructuralism, particularly its insistence on subjective instability, Wong asserts:

Theoretically, I could ascribe a great deal of power to interstitiality and subjectivity-shuttling, which may be wonderful prompters of denationalizing insights, in practical political terms, however, I can’t see how an interstitial, shuttling exercise of power is done... As ideals [poststructuralist notions such as “world citizenship”] are unimpeachable in their generosity of spirit, their expressed desire to abolish all divisions, all oppositions; as points of purchase for political action they are severely limited in utility, often disappointingly irrelevant.²¹

In many ways, Wong’s dismissal of the ethico-political force of poststructuralism is reflective of the increasingly ossified dissension between poststructuralist and critical theorists, an intractable and often crippling antagonism that results, following Beatrice Hanssen’s meticulously-supported line of arguments, as much from their mutually hostile methods of engagement as from the conceptual imprecisions that have historically infiltrated both schools. Hanssen shows how the charge against poststructuralism as relativist and apolitical has been fueled by the disproportionate emphasis on poststructuralists’ engagement with Nietzschean nihilism and the near-complete lack of attention to the fact that it also promotes a vision of ethics grounded in specific historical genealogies. Hanssen calls instead for a model of betweenness, or attention to the conceptual space between poststructuralism and critical theory, one that draws “on both traditions, not in an effort to side conclusively with the one or the other, or to remain suspended in indecision, but to expose their fundamental differences as well as the terms on which they might agree.”²² It is particularly this vision of betweenness, both as a discursive approach “structured by noncoercive rules of debate rather than a demand for consensus”²³ and as a theoretical praxis informed by a critical engagement with existing methodologies, that shapes my own usage of *situated nomadism*. Thus, while my project is unequivocally influenced by Wong’s

advocacy of a historicized diasporic paradigm, it also seeks to include poststructuralist methodology as one approach to critical denationalization. Given the historically, discursively, and increasingly vexed relations between Asian America and notions of “home,” *situated nomadism* can work to interrogate what Jean Amato calls “place-bound narratives of national belonging,”²⁴ by confronting, rather than eliding, the very histories and power relations that induced Asian American yearning for “the kind of containing boundaries and contained site enjoyed by the dominant society” in the first place.²⁵

My project focuses specifically on the writing of the Vietnamese American feminist writer Lê Thị Huệ whose expansive thematic breadth and constantly evolving aesthetics render her an appropriate representative and a singular phenomenon among her contemporaries in the Vietnamese diaspora. A novelist, poet, essayist, and e-magazine founder/editor, Lê is inarguably one of the most prominent literary figures in the Vietnamese diaspora. Within the diasporic literary circle, Lê is best known for her advocacy of women’s writing and opposition to the Vietnamese communist regime. Within the Vietnamese American community in San Jose, California, Lê is best known for her mobilization of the community to elect Madison Nguyễn to the San Jose City Council in 2005, making Nguyễn the first woman to serve on the San Jose City Council and the first Vietnamese American woman to serve on the council of any major city in the United States.²⁶ Lê’s literary praxis merits special attention because it complicates national, political, and linguistic boundaries while reflecting the various thematic concerns that have defined the collective body of Asian American literature. That *many* and yet *no* single theoretical framework in American minority discourse, i.e. postcolonial, transnational, immigrant, diasporic, etc., can neatly account for Lê’s writing further attests to its place in Asian American critical discourse.²⁷ I will show that Lê claims multiple subject positions though her writing is intimately bound to a critique of the nation-state. Her consistent search for alternatives to masculinist nationalist articulations of subjectivity undergirds her disidentification with the nation-state and aptly renders her, in my view, a situated nomad.

Indeed, *exilic homelessness* and *situated nomadism* serve as an appropriate conceptual framework for reading Lê’s body of work and provide a window through which to understand Lê’s ethics and aesthetics. Whereas multiple historical displacements underlie Lê’s experience as a refugee, woman, and writer, *exilic homelessness* and *situated nomadism* reveal the vicissitudes of Lê’s subjectivity as an exile, feminist, diasporic Vietnamese, and Asian American cultural producer. For Lê, exile is both a historical tragedy and a political conviction, a consequence of war as much as a rejection of nationalism and patriarchy. Time and again, Lê refuses to participate in what Katherine Sugg calls “the now-familiar postcolonial plots of cultural reconnection and return,” the masculinist cultural nationalist constructions of return as the “teleological endpoint” of the exile’s intellectual journey.²⁸ Lê emphasizes that even if the literal act of going “home” is increasingly possible, there is *no* homecoming for the female exile except in the realm of *Lũng*, an in-between alterity that is also the state of having no homeland.²⁹ In more ways than one, *Lũng* resembles what Alarcón et al theorize, via Derrida, as the space “between woman and nation,” a deconstructive zone that is “a peculiar form of temporality, ‘a suspended moment,’ a moment of simultaneity and mutual inclusiveness,” the very quality that destabilizes the presumed coherence of the nation-state.³⁰ Nonetheless, Lê’s embrace of exilic homelessness is a far cry from nostalgic melancholia, a condition Edward Said describes as “mak[ing] a fetish of exile, a practice that distances [the exile] from all connections and commitments. To live as if everything around were temporary and perhaps trivial... to fall prey to petulant cynicism as well as querulous lovelessness.”³¹ Instead, as my project seeks to

demonstrate, Lê's fictive enactment of *exilic homelessness* reveals her commitment to *situated nomadism*, further defined as a literary and sociopolitical praxis that (1) rejects compulsory masculinist nationalist naturalization and essentialization of identities; (2) emphasizes heterogeneity and multiplicity as constituents of experience; and (3) insists upon a politics of resistance that neither reproduces the exclusivist nature of the State apparatus nor negates practices of resistance deployed from strategically fixed fronts and centers, both within and beyond the geographical enclosures of the State.

Lê was born on 3 March 1953 in a small fishing village in the northern central city of Hà Tĩnh just one year before the 1954 Geneva Accords partitioned Vietnam in half at the seventeenth parallel. Lê was two years old when her family evacuated to southern Vietnam, a historical tribulation shared by nearly nine hundred thousand other northern refugees, many of whom Catholics who were fleeing religious persecution under communism.³² Lê's childhood continued to be marked by multiple relocation attempts, first to Đà Nẵng, then to Nha Trang, and then eventually to Qui Nhon where Lê spent her teenage years. In 1971 Lê left Qui Nhon for the central highlands to attend the University of Đà Lạt. Her graduating year was brought to an abrupt end by the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam on April 30th, 1975. On the eve of the communist takeover Lê fled to the capital city from Đà Lạt and, less than a month after Sài Gòn was captured, made her way to Phước Tinh, Vũng Tàu where she joined the earliest waves of boatpeople escaping Vietnam *en mass*. Lê's boat journey landed her in Songkla Refugee Camp, Thailand, where she remained for three months until her arrival to the United States *en route* Camp Pendleton in August 1975. During her first five years in America, Lê wandered around the country and took up brief residence in several metropolises, among them Houston, San Francisco and New York City, locations that later made way into a handful of her short stories.³³ Lê eventually settled in San Jose, California, where she attended graduate school and obtained her master's degree in Psychology. Lê has worked as a community college counselor since the late 1980s, a career Lê chose in hope that it would also allow her to pursue writing.

If exile has always accompanied Lê's existence, it has also intimately informed her writing. Her 1984 debut collection of short stories, *Dust of the World*, focuses on the lives of newly-arrived Vietnamese refugees and conveys with penetrating insight the dizzying impact of physical and psychical displacement. Drawn from Lê's own experience as a boatperson, the characters in *Dust* are narratologically linked by their forced departure from Vietnam following the events of "biên cố tháng Tư," which leave them intensely vulnerable and profoundly despondent. Lê deftly captures the complex emotional landscape inhabited by the refugees as they struggle to adjust to a new life in America while trying to cope with the severity of their sudden homelandlessness. Lê's refugees, as the critic Nguyễn Hoàng Thư keenly observes, are geographically, temporally and psychologically estranged, disconcertingly suspended "between body and mind, between existence and non-existence, between consciousness and reality, between life and death, between the past and the present, between suffering and happiness, between innocence and hatred, between desire and history, between fate and resistance, between contradictions and determination, between dreaming and waking, between homeland and exile, between destruction and survival."³⁴

If *Dust* was written in part as a tribute to the hundreds of thousands of nationals displaced from Vietnam in the wake of the communist takeover, Lê's next two novels, *Memories of My Anh* (1987) and *Dragons and Snakes* (1989), were written in response to another kind of displacement faced by South Vietnamese following the fall of Saigon, that of official historiography. Published in the period that witnessed the debate over the meaning of the

American intervention in Vietnam continuously escalate to new levels of intensity, Lê's controlled and self-reflexive novels complicate the war victor's narrativizations of inevitable triumph and the subsequent appropriations of these very narratives by American scholars and cultural commentators on both ends of the American political spectrum. By critically engaging the painfully complex historical realities of Vietnam during wartime, her novels present what Foucault calls counter-histories, or narratives that seek to disrupt and undermine the silencing unity and continuity upon which official historiographies insist.³⁵

Lê's latest novel, *The Sulking Body* (2007), returns once again to the theme of displacement and illuminates her pervasive concern with location, gender, and writing. In many ways, the novel's treatment of home can be said to be a follow-up to her debut collection. If the characters in *Dust* seem hopeful against hope about the prospect of a future return, those in *Sulking* appear certain that, even if the literal act of return is possible, going "home" is decidedly not. Lê's rejection of her birthplace as homeland is both a rejection of the contemporary ruling regime in Vietnam and of Vietnamese patriarchy, a rejection that, contrary to the American master narrative of assimilation, neither results from nor translates into an unquestioned allegiance to the United States. The protagonist's re-discovery of her mother tongue and subsequent embrace of poetic language as a site of belonging demonstrates not only Lê's refusal of the nation-state(s) as the locus of identity but also her privileging of writing, specifically *écriture féminine*, as a site of reinvention and resistance. Moreover, Lê's portrayal of motherhood in the novel reveals her insistence on the interconnected multiplicity that characterizes female identity and subjecthood. Her deployment of what Adrienne Rich describes as outlaw mothering demonstrates her rejection of patriarchal essentialization of motherhood and masculinist individualist construction of subjectivity as distinct from embodiment.

In addition to the works mentioned above, Lê has also published two collections of reflective commentaries and more than one hundred poems, on top of some three dozen essays on *Gió-O* (literally, the Women's Wind), an electronic literary magazine Lê founded in 2001, and has since served as its editor. In a number of important ways, Lê's poetry and essays echo the themes, interests, and concerns found in her prose works, including but not limited to the dialectics of exile and identity, subjectivity and embodiment, as well as writing and historiography. Lê often cites the experience of being uprooted from Vietnam as *the* direct impetus for writing, and describes the latter as an impulse awakened by "a historical experience. A national experience. That of a young girl growing up during wartime, fleeing her homeland, and becoming a writer seeking to understand her own journey and her country's externally decided fate."³⁶ But it has turned out to be much more than an impulse triggered by a "national tragedy."³⁷ Writing, Lê says, has given her a "space of dwelling," an "instrument" of resistance and reconstruction, as well as a "position from which to critique and re-present."³⁸ Lê elaborates on the latter as follows:

In an effort to understand the truth, I have chosen writing as my instrument of choice...

In creating a work of fiction, I can reconstruct life from my own point of view. I am well aware of the indescribably large distance between me.... and a calculating politician. But I refuse to be a victim waiting to be rescued. I insist on standing on an equal footing with everyone else, using all that I have been given to present my work.³⁹

Writing, in other words, enables Lê to enact *situated nomadism*. In their "Treatise on Nomadology – The War Machine" (Plateau 12), Deleuze and Guattari compare nomadic thought to the configuration of rhizomes, botanical formations that can extend in all directions and grow on any surface. Unlike "arborescences," or vertical root-tree structures, rhizomes are horizontal

formations with no center, no privileged locus of growth. The inner workings of rhizomes inspire the six principles that characterize nomad thought,⁴⁰ all of which point to an interpretation of reality that stresses complexity, dynamism, and heterogeneity as well as a way of thinking about identity that emphasizes difference, interconnection and multiplicity.

If nomad thought underscores multiplicity and interconnectedness as constituents of identity, then nomadic subjectivity expresses an understanding of identity – one such as “woman,” “writer,” or “Asian American” – as a *local absolute*, a provisional site for launching toward unlimited horizons. Specifically relevant to my project of claiming Lê as an Asian American writer is the idea that one can enact nomadic subjectivity from a strategically fixed locale. This idea is made explicit in Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of interiority and exteriority. The State apparatus with its disciplinary powers and regulations, bears the ultimate form of interiority and is always confronted by two measures of exteriority: (1) a literal exterior beyond its geographical boundaries comprised of gridded spaces such as “commercial organizations of the ‘multinational type, or industrial complexes, or even religious formations like Christianity, Islam, certain prophetic or messianic movements, etc.,” and (2) an essential exteriority within its structure, represented by “local mechanisms of bands, margins, minorities, which continue to affirm the rights of segmentary societies against the organs of power of the State.”⁴¹ That these exteriors “are equally present in every social field, and in all periods” suggests the nomad seeks to transgress State borders and logic from the very location she inhabits.⁴² *Situated nomadism*, in short, refers to a consciously enacted process of becoming that occurs at the intersection of experience, subjectivity, and power relations, including practices and articulations that participate in the creation and expansion of the open Whole against the totalizing nature of the State.

Furthermore, whereas nomadic thought refers to a species of logic, nomadism suggests a set of ethics based on that logic. Deleuze and Guattari develop nomadism through a discussion of two specific concepts: smooth space and the war machine. Smooth space is the space of nomad, which is distinct from spaces instituted by the State apparatus, which Deleuze and Guattari designate as sedentary space.⁴³ From the smooth surface of nomad space, Lisa Lowe succinctly summarizes, “one can travel to any other point, through a variety of routes, by a variety of means; its mode of operation is the *nomos*, extending forward in an open space, rather than the *logos* of entrenching in a closed, discrete space.”⁴⁴ The war machine, on the other hand, “tends to be revolutionary, or artistic, much more so than military” and functions as a smooth-space multiplying force, a means of escape and a source of transformation.⁴⁵ Ronald Bogue’s helpful elucidation of the relationship between nomadism, the war machine and smooth space merits a quote at length here:

We must envision the nomadic tribe and flock as a dynamic, ever changing flux, but we must also see the land they traverse as dynamic, ever changing flux. The nomads and their flocks constitute a rhizome of interconnected elements, and their movements in turn convert the space they inhabit into a rhizome of interconnected elements. Smooth space, finally, is less a thing than an active process. The war machine in this sense is a dynamic force immanent to the productive engendering of space – or perhaps we should say, it is a force of smooth-spacing and this ongoing metamorphic activity of smooth-spacing is nomadism.⁴⁶

As an ongoing metaphoric activity of smooth-spacing, nomadism must be understood not so much as advocacy of aimless wandering but as rejection of nationalist and global capitalist hold on identity. The “lines of flight” of which Deleuze and Guattari frequently speak are precisely

the lines of becoming-other, of identity [trans]formations that resist, on the one hand, the parameters imposed by dominant modes of thought and behavior, and on the other, “micro-fascist” articulations of subjectivity that end up reproducing the very abhorrent logic that nomadic-becoming seeks to challenge.

The war machine, as Deleuze reminds us, “tends to be revolutionary, or artistic, rather than military” because it constructs itself on “lines of flight,” or routes of escape that take it beyond any established order, fixed boundary, or stable identity. Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) directly associates writing with the smooth-spacing activities of the nomadic war machine when she states: “To write is to become. Not to become a writer (or a poet), but to become, intransitively. Not when writing adopts established keynotes or policy, but when it traces for itself lines of evasion.”⁴⁷ In a similar manner, writing has enabled Lê to escape established categories and take refuge in be[com]ing fluid and multiple: “I have gotten away. I am no longer that girl who cried miserably into her pillows over a broken heart, conflating love with woman and woman love. I refuse labels. I seek freedom from the shackles of convention. I puncture the walls of intellectual enslavement. I reject the velvety soft voile that is ‘saintly womanhood’ and head into this life an equal.”⁴⁸ Lê’s refusal of labels yet privileging of female embodiment is less a sign of intellectual overindulgence than of critical feminist nomadic praxis, for being feminist nomad, as Rosi Braidotti reminds us in *Nomadic Subjects*, “does not mean that one cannot or is not willing to create those necessarily stable and reassuring bases for identity that allows one to function in a community. Nomadic consciousness rather consists in not taking any kind of identity as permanent”⁴⁹ In practice, *situated nomadism* is inextricably tied to an awareness of one’s positionality because it entails “becoming situated, speaking from somewhere specific and hence well aware of and accountable for particular locations.”⁵⁰ That Lê grounds her subjectivity in being an exile, woman, mother, and writer reveals Lê’s attempt to bring about what Julia Kristeva calls “multiple sublations of the unnameable, the unrepresentable, the void,” or identities that are stable rather than static and polymorphous rather than indeterminate, by continually seeking to transgress borders by interrogating the very power relations that induced the desire to transgress in the first place.⁵¹

Given Deleuze and Guattari’s intense preoccupation with, to borrow Fanon’s expression, “pursu[ing] the slightest traces of fascism in the body,” their collaborations have often been described as works of ethics.⁵² *Situated nomadism* constitutes an ethical praxis not only because it refuses to identify with nationalisms of all stripes, but also because it seeks to foster a horizontal multiplicity, a nomadic flock, a collectivity not organized hierarchically but brought together through intense interconnections. The nomad’s line of becoming-other identifies the other as an indispensable part of the self and the relationship between the nomad and the other as one of mutual constitution, a position that directly contradicts the Hegelian notion of individual subjectivity.⁵³ Whereas the boundary between the self and the other for Hegel is unequivocal and unambiguous, it is much blurrier in Deleuze and Guattari’s vision. “The Other,” Deleuze declares in *Difference and Repetition*, “cannot be separated from the expressivity which constitutes it,” an expressivity whose comprehensibility depends upon and, in turn, determines the relation between it and the self.⁵⁴ As such, the formation of a horizontal multiplicity depends in large part on what David Bogue calls a “duty to the other,” which is a willingness “to affect and to be affected, to suspend, as much as one can, the categorization and comprehension of the other, and then to open oneself to the underdetermined, hidden possible worlds that are expressed in the affective signs of the other.”⁵⁵ This is what Fanon characterizes, via Deleuze and Guattari, as the de-individualization of the individual “by means of multiplication and displacement,” an

ethical approach necessary for a productive encounter with the other and, thus, for a successful expansion of the nomadic flock into the open Whole.⁵⁶

My dissertation is comprised of four chapters, each detailing how *exilic homelessness* and *situated nomadism* illuminate and inform Lê's writing. Chapter one, "Amnesia, Interrupted: Locating South Vietnam in the U.S. Vietnam War Memoryscape," focuses on Lê's first two novels, *Memories of My Anh* and *Dragons and Snakes*, to demonstrate Lê's participation in the production of nomadic consciousness. Rosi Braidotti likens nomadic consciousness to what Foucault calls counter-memory and describes it as "a rebellion of subjugated knowledges."⁵⁷ Chapter one argues that Lê's discursive restoration of the southern experience presents a corporeal and political challenge to Vietnamese and American mainstream and official historiographical acts of disappearance. It begins with a literature review of American studies of representations of the Vietnamese subjects in American mainstream and official narratives and emphasizes that, while these works document the rampant distortion of the Vietnamese war figures, they neglect the particular trivialization and/or exclusion of the South Vietnamese. It contends that studies that do incorporate the South Vietnamese experience tend to perpetuate rather than complicate mainstream constructions of South Vietnamese incompetence and culpability. Chapter one proceeds with a discussion of Lê's deployment of the theme of fraternal conflict in both novels to reveal Lê's strategy of appropriation. By appropriating one of America's most dominant figurations of the war – the idea that Americans fought only themselves and that they were victims of their own ideals, practices and beliefs – Lê successfully turns American literary and literal narcissism on its head. For she reminds us, the war that took place in Vietnam and cost no less than two million Vietnamese lives, was first and foremost a Vietnamese affair, an actual civil war, another bloody chapter in the long and painful history of Vietnamese internal conflict. I end chapter one by discussing Lê's strategy of inversion. I argue that by redeploying some of the most damaging stereotypes associated with the South Vietnamese, particularly those concerning South Vietnamese lack of ideological direction, political commitment, and collective conviction to win the war, Lê's works invert these stereotypes and, in doing so, shed new light into the ideological and political predicament that confronted South Vietnam. Together, Lê's strategies of representation not only compel us to be reflective, rather than reductive, of the extremely complex ideological and political realities of South Vietnam during the war but also interrogate anew the social regimes and political apparatuses that have normalized such reductive understandings.

Chapter two, "Exilic *Sexts*: Writing Identity in the Vietnamese Diaspora," examines Lê's treatment of exilic homelessness and exploration of exilic writing in the novel *The Sulking Body* (2007). In her fictive rendering of exile, Lê simultaneously exposes the ideological and theoretical limits of postcolonial cultural nationalist fantasies of return, or the idea that the alienating experience of exile necessitates a celebration of return, and challenges patterns in Euro-American modernist literary criticism that see much "grandeur" in the "sorrow" of exile, deeming it not only a welcome source of artistic inspiration but also a condition of creative privilege.⁵⁸ The complex narratological layerings found in Lê's novel render these rhetorical constructions, if generous and uplifting in spirit, ultimately ahistorical and depoliticizing. For Lê exile is a condition of irreversible and irreplaceable loss, a loss particularly acute for those forcibly uprooted from the land of their birth. While writing provides a powerful, and ameliorative, means with which to communicate exilic melancholia, no gain in creative energy can compensate for the "vast emptiness"⁵⁹ and "numbing despair"⁶⁰ produced by the experience of exile. Lê argues that, for Vietnamese Americans, exilic homelessness may not just be a

historical tragedy, it may also be an ideological conviction. Diasporic Vietnamese resentment towards the current regime ensures both the impossibility of and the refusal to return.

Chapter two also demonstrates that, by exhibiting remarkable self-awareness of its own linguistic and political marginality, *The Sulking Body* offers a compelling examination of the potential and limitations of writing in and about exile. Lê's privileging of the mother tongue as the language of creativity brings to bear the linguistic, cultural, and historical conundrum confronting the exile writer. In "Exile as an Aesthetic Category," the Vietnamese-Australian critic Nguyễn Hưng Quốc likens the act of writing in exile to that of "making love to a corpse." Vietnamese exile writers, Quốc argues, pay a hefty price for their creative passion, but the heftiest price of all is that of utter loneliness. This is because "the readership is limited, decentralized, scattered and indifferent. Writing is like screaming into a well; the only sounds you hear are your own echoes coming back at you."⁶¹ In an earlier article on the same topic, Quốc displays an even greater pessimism toward writing in exile: "In the past, writing bestowed status; a little later, it became both status- and career-bestowing. In the diaspora, writing bestows neither. Writing feels more like the futility of a sexual impotent trying to masturbate."⁶² The radical marginalization of diasporic Vietnamese writing provides an immediate context for reading Lê's body of work as nomadic writing, that which seeks to push through historical silencing while at the same time insisting upon its "strong connection to radical nonbelonging, the asceticism of the desert and outsiderness."⁶³

I will also show that, while the novel's fragmented and, at times, very difficult language of narration contributes to its radical nonbelonging, it also functions as a site of subjective reconstruction and resistance. Lê's invention and deployment of a language of narration rooted in the mother tongue registers Lê's inscription of a diasporic Vietnamese subjectivity. And yet, Lê's careful delineation of the difference between *mother* tongue and *father* tongue reveals the complex affective, linguistic, cultural, and political allegiances undergirding the Vietnamese diasporic subject's identity [trans]formation. Moreover, Lê's juxtaposition of a highly polished poetic language with a fractured vernacular language of narration reveals the direct influence of French feminisms, particularly the latter's advocacy of *écriture féminine* and concomitant critique of phallogocentrism, on Lê's oeuvre and reveals Lê's privileging of poetic language as a site of resistance. Lê's deployment of feminine speech in the Vietnamese language reveals her active and careful negotiation with colonial/Western genealogies. If Lê openly embraces *écriture féminine* as a critique of Vietnamese and Western patriarchies, her choice of Vietnamese as the language of creativity makes clear her rejection of colonial/Western language hegemony. In Lê's novel, feminist diasporic subjectivity is not a historical accident but a political response against multiple sources of silencing, one that entails careful and deliberate negotiations with the motherland and with the legacies of war, patriarchy, and colonialism.

Chapter three, "Un-Deifying Motherhood: Towards a Vietnamese American Feminist Maternal Subjectivity," explores Lê's articulation of the interconnected multiplicity that characterizes female subjectivity. Through an examination of Lê's attitudes towards motherhood in the essay "While Creating Humans" (1995) and the novel *The Sulking Body*, I argue that while Lê unequivocally privileges the transformational experience of being a mother, she is also deeply and emphatically critical of patriarchal, including Western and Confucian, constructions of motherhood. Reflecting the tremendous and direct influence of Adrienne Rich's trailblazing work *Of Woman Born* (1976), Lê makes the distinction between motherhood and mothering, emphasizing the former as a patriarchal institution while stressing the latter, defined as maternal practices that defy male-imposed ethics of motherhood, as a potential site for personal and

intellectual empowerment. If nomad thought emphasizes subjectivity as capable of and insistent upon multiple connections with the others, Lê's practice of feminist mothering and declaration that "[her] children are [her] homeland" provide an insight into the concrete and operational aspect of *situated nomadism*. Lê embraces exilic homelessness only to lay claim to other kinds of cartographies as homelands, among them writing and motherhood, neither of which determined by the geographical enclosures of the State.

Chapter three begins with Lê's critique of Vietnamese patriarchal deification of motherhood, zooming in on her analysis of Confucianism-influenced construction of ideal femininity to shed light on the ideology of Vietnamese Motherhood. Lê argues that the deification of the Vietnamese Mother functions to confine women to the domestic sphere and provide the ultimate rationale for the social exploitation of maternal labor. Lê shows that "the cloak of maternal saintliness" has been forced upon mothers to prevent them from questioning patriarchal conventions of motherhood and compel them to seek social validation and personal fulfillment in motherhood. The idealization of maternal sacrifice, a central component of deified motherhood, is especially oppressive because it demands no less than complete maternal self-erasure. Chapter three proceeds with an analysis of the trope of motherhood in the *The Sulking Body* to demonstrate Lê's rejection of maternal sacrifice. It shows that the protagonist Lan Huong's simultaneous embrace of her role as writer and mother suggests a refusal to become erased, sacrificed, and consumed by motherhood. Through this portrayal, Lê argues that only when women assume the contumacious identity of an outlaw, or refuse "the cloak of maternal saintliness," can they be emancipated from the institution of patriarchal motherhood. Feminist maternal agency, Lê insists, requires women to occupy the male-accused position of "maternal selfishness" by insisting on a practice of mothering that situates the mother at the heart of mothering.

Last but not least, chapter three illuminates Lê's formulation of a feminist maternal subjectivity by calling into question individualism's key assumption about consciousness and embodiment. Lê posits that because the maternal self has a fluid, equivocal and ambiguous relationship with the other, or *tha nhân*, maternal subjectivity necessarily defies the individualist notion of the autonomous subject as self-contained, univocal, coherent, and stable. Instead, Lê argues that to be a mother is to be a subject-in-relation, an identity that, by material necessity and political conviction, renders untenable and undesirable individualism's account of subjectivity. Lê's theorization of the maternal self as a relational subject relies on the assumption of a mutual permeability between maternal embodiment and maternal consciousness, which signals Lê's privileging of female difference and female experience. While this privileging runs the risk of recuperating elements of gender essentialism, Lê's exposure of the realities of patriarchal motherhood, rather than any feminine essence, as factors shaping maternal praxis reveals Lê's historically informed and materialist understanding of feminist maternal subjectivity.

Situated nomadism pertains not only to Lê's maternal and literary praxis but also her cyborgian embrace of cyberspace as yet another alterity of belonging. Chapter four focuses on Lê's creation of one of the first and most prominent literary webzines in the Vietnamese diaspora, her digital brainchild *Gió-O*, to demonstrate how Lê's critical participation in cyberspace complements her nomadic journey. It situates *Gió-O* at the intersection of nomadology, cyborg and cyberspace theories to provide the discursive contexts for reading *Gió O* as a nomadic project. It proceeds with a discussion of Donna Haraway's theorization of cyborg politics to further describe Lê's politics via *Gió O*. It argues that, if a cyborg is a "hybrid of machine and organism" who embraces "machine skills" to undermine and subvert the structure

of domination, then Lê's engagement with cybernetic technology to push against historical silencing renders her a cyborg. And if cyborg politics is "the struggle for language... against the central dogma of phallogocentrism," then *Gió O*'s explicit struggle against linguistic hegemonies effectively renders it a cyborgian project. As a cyborg, Lê seeks to mine the potential of the Internet by emphasizing the *Gió O*'s two-fold mission, which includes (1) promoting women's writing and (2) making more visible diasporic Vietnamese literary presence.⁶⁴ Chapter four also contrasts Lê's utopian view of the Internet as presented in the 1999 essay "Fanciful Imaginings @ Words" with her much more complex rendering of the emancipatory potential of virtual reality in the short story "Sexual Love" (2003). It does so to argue that Lê ultimately perceives cyberspace as a web of interlocking power relations rather than a zone of liberation but that, while vulnerable to "cyberimperialist domination," Lê insists that it is also possible of resistance. This chapter reiterates that, not unlike the activity of writing, *Gió O* makes possible for Lê "những chân trời viễn mộng hoang đàng,"⁶⁵ or phantasmagoric horizons that provide Lê with a space of belonging. Through *Gió O* as through her writing, Lê invents what she calls Vương Quốc Tiếng Việt Hải Ngoại, or the Commonwealth of Diasporic Vietnamese Language, a space in digital reality that functions as a "virtual house" (ngôi nhà ảo) for diasporic Vietnamese speakers and a tool of resistance against both English language hegemony as well as the ongoing effort by the ruling regime in contemporary Vietnam to deny diasporic Vietnamese literary and cultural existence.⁶⁶ Ten years after its 2001 debut, Lê continues to take pride in what she justifiably considers "no less a historic feat," the fact that *Gió-O* continues to be "100% managed, edited, and designed by a woman."⁶⁷ I argue that Lê's critical cyberspatial participation, as manifest in her attention to women's empowerment and her commitment to recuperating voices from the [linguistic and racial] margins, makes *Gió-O* a decidedly nomad-cyborgian project.

In her recent essay "My Own Words" (2012), Lê extracts the following lines from James Baldwin's "A Letter to My Nephew" for her epigraph: "If the word 'integration' means anything, this is what it means, that we with love shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it." Lê's choice of quotation presages her criticism of the Vietnamese "desire for white validation" and advocacy for concrete social change. More importantly, the essay reveals that, if *exilic homelessness* conditions much of Lê's writing, it is *situated nomadism* that influences her political activism. Lê's divestment from the State apparatus leads not to political indifference, but to a desire to become what Foucault calls a counterforce. In her capacity as an academic counselor, for instance, Lê has been an avid advocate of student rights and cultural diversity at Evergreen Valley College, an advocacy that has placed her at the forefront of numerous organized campaigns to advance the interests of minority and underprivileged students. As a Vietnamese American political subject, Lê endeavors for social change by engaging, rather remaining on the outside of, the American political system. For instance, fueled by the brutal shooting of an unarmed Vietnamese American young mother of two in her own apartment by the San Jose police in July 2003, Lê became instrumental to election of Madison Nguyen to the San Jose City Council in 2005, making the latter the first Vietnamese American to serve on the city council of any major metropolitan city in the United States.⁶⁸ Since then, Lê has continued to mobilize the Vietnamese American electorate and served as a mentor in the areas of political and educational leadership development for Vietnamese American candidates in San Jose. Further demonstrating her intention to be a counterforce, Lê recently co-founded the nonprofit Vietnamese Americans for

Education & Community Leadership (VAECL) with the stated goals to “strengthen Vietnamese American participation in and contribution to the well-being of the community through education, civic, and community leadership building.”⁶⁹ I argue Lê’s commitment to minority rights positions her squarely within tradition of Asian American political activism and that, taken together, her social and literary endeavors demonstrate the pragmatic and productive potential of *situated nomadism*. In the chapters that follow, I will show that even though Lê writes exclusively in the Vietnamese language, she is in a number of important ways an Asian American writer. Lê’s Asian Americanness is embodied not by the sheer fact of her ethnic background, but by her commitment to Asian American empowerment and contribution to the “total image and identity of America by... defining [Asian American] humanity as part of the composite image of the American people.”⁷⁰ More specifically, Lê’s fierce critique of American hegemony and nuanced rendering of American racial realities reflect her thoughtful engagement with the coalitional politics of resistance that has continued to define Asian America. Most importantly, I seek to reveal that reading Lê’s work requires a critical diasporic paradigm of Asian American subjectivity rather than a domestic approach and that, not only is such paradigm theoretically and politically productive, it is also desirable.

Notes

¹ I generate this estimate by tabulating the number and types of literary works produced by *United States-based* authors and published in the United States *after* 1975. It does *not* include works a) produced before 1975 and republished after 1975; b) without clearly specified dates of publication; c) written by authors who once did but no longer reside in the United States. The tabulation was made using two of the following sources, both are electronic journals devoted exclusively to the introduction and preservation of Vietnamese-language literature by diasporic Vietnamese writers: a) The Florida-based *The Writers Post* was founded in 1999 by the writer Nguyen Sao Mai. Its main goal is “to introduce to English-speaking readers some writings of non-English speaking writers, among their considerable literary works written in a language other than English, of common or of lesser currency yet worthy of notice, published in their countries and abroad.” *The Writers Post* provides arguably the most comprehensive and updated biographical information on more than 400 Vietnamese diasporic writers; b) *Thoi Van* was founded in 2003; its stated goal is to collect and house diasporic writings. I used these two sources complementarily to extract information on first-generation, U.S.-based writers and their Vietnamese-language publications.

² *Văn Học* formerly *Văn Học Nghệ Thuật*) is the first major literary journal in the Vietnamese overseas community. To date, *Văn Học* has released 123 issues. *Văn* was launched in 1982 and has since issued 280+ issues. *Hop Luu* was founded in 1999 and is currently issuing its 115th issue. For a detailed discussion on these and other literary journals in the overseas Vietnamese communities in various parts of the world, see *Thu Mục 1999* (Literary Catalogue 1999) by Văn Nghệ Publishing House.

³ San Jose-based *Gió-O*, founded in 2001, features new work weekly while Australia’s *Tiền Vệ*, launched in 2002, and Southern California’s *Da Màu*, launched in 2006, update daily.

⁴ A 2006 survey by the American Community Survey, a project of the U.S. Census Bureau, estimates Vietnamese American population at 1.6 million. Meanwhile, official Vietnamese sources in 2004 estimate the size of the diaspora at 2.7million residing in over 90 countries. For a more complete discussion of diasporic Vietnamese population, see Carruthers, “Saigon from the Diaspora.”

⁵ Diasporic literature was banned in its entirety until well after 1994. Since then, an extremely small number of works, typically those whose contents do not present a direct challenge to the regime, has been allowed to publish in Vietnam. The continued ban of almost all diasporic literary writing is both a reflection of the ruling regime’s ongoing hostility toward intellectuals and a continuation of postwar persecution and ostracization of southern cultural output. In the years following the war, southern cultural artifacts were forcefully rooted out by the emergent regime, literally set aflame and officially banned from [re-]circulation.

⁶ In 2006, the whistleblower Vietnamese critic Nguyễn Thanh Sơn goes on record to say that diasporic Vietnamese literature is “in many ways, an extension of South Vietnamese literary tradition” which “lacks major aesthetic and philosophical breakthroughs.” Sơn suggests that diasporic Vietnamese literature is on the verge of extinction because it is faced with two very unlikely options: (1) to continue the South Vietnamese literary tradition which risks alienating the readership inside Vietnam, or (2) to assimilate into the literary traditions of the host countries by writing in languages other than Vietnamese. So unlikely are these choices that Sơn goes on to propose third alternative, which is for overseas Vietnamese writers “to return to the cultural environment [of Vietnam], to engage with Vietnamese literary concerns but still maintain an ‘outsider’s perspective’ with all of its negatives and positives.” Sơn’s seriously ill-informed and gravely flawed assessment both of South and diasporic Vietnamese literary achievements is in no small part a byproduct of the Vietnamese government’s ongoing smear campaign against the southern regime’s cultural legacy and puts in perspective diasporic Vietnamese continued demand for recognition and need for self-legitimation. See, Lê Lâm Hồng, “Văn Học VN Hải Ngoại: Một Cách Nhìn Gắn Gũ Hòn.” Addendum: As recent as August 2011, Sơn goes on record blaming the lack of talents rather than state censorship for Vietnam’s literary underdevelopment. Sơn defines his points of contrast by noting cavalierly: “Everyone keeps blaming the lack of creative freedom, artistic freedom, but that’s not necessarily true. Look at diasporic Vietnamese literature: After all those years of having complete freedom, how come there has been no noteworthy works?” See, Nguyễn Trâm Anh, “Nhà phê bình Nguyễn Thanh Sơn: ‘Văn học Việt Nam đang phải trả giá.’”

⁷ Schafer 8.

⁸ The number of scholarship in English on Vietnamese American literature in the Vietnamese can be counted on one hand, including: 1/ Three articles on the writer Tran Dieu Hang by Quy-Phiet Tran a) “Exiles in the Land of the Free: Vietnamese Artists and Writers in America, from 1975 to Present,” *Journal of American Studies Association of Texas* 20, pp. 101-10; b) “From Isolation to Integration: Vietnamese Americans in Tran Dieu Hang’s Fictions,” in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Asian American Writers* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1999), pp. 125-36; c) “Contemporary

Vietnamese American Feminine Writing: Exile and Home,” in *Amerasia Journal* 19:3 (1993), pp. 71-83. 2/ Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo’s “History Interrupted: Life after Material Death in South Vietnamese and Diasporic Works of Fiction,” in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1:1 (2005); and 3/ most recently, see John C. Schafer’s book-length study on the Vietnamese exile writer Vo Phien, *Vo Phien and the Sadness of Exile* (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006).

⁹ The only scholarships in English on Vietnamese American literature in the Vietnamese include: 1/ Quy-Phiet Tran’s essays a) “Exiles in the Land of the Free: Vietnamese Artists and Writers in America, from 1975 to Present,” *Journal of American Studies Association of Texas* 20, pp. 101-10; b) “From Isolation to Integration: Vietnamese Americans in Tran Dieu Hang’s Fictions,” in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Asian American Writers* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1999), pp. 125-36; c) “Contemporary Vietnamese American Feminine Writing: Exile and Home,” in *Amerasia Journal* 19:3 (1993), pp. 71-83. 2/ Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo’s “History Interrupted: Life after Material Death in South Vietnamese and Diasporic Works of Fiction,” in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1:1 (2005); and 3/ most recently, see John C. Schafer’s book-length study on the Vietnamese exile writer Vo Phien, *Vo Phien and the Sadness of Exile* (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ See Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s essay “Immigration and Diaspora” in King-kok Cheung, ed., *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Sau-ling C. Wong’s essay “What’s in a name? Defining Chinese American Literature of the Immigrant Generation” in Gail M. Nomura, Russell Endo, Stephen H. Sumida, and Russell C. Leong (eds.), *Frontiers in Asian American Studies: Writing, Research, and Commentary* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1989); articles by Kent A. Ono, L. Ling-Chi Wang, and Sau-Ling Wong in *Amerasia Journal* 22. 1-2 (1995): *Double Issue on Thinking Theory in Asian American Studies*; or the anthologies *Asian Americans: Comparative and Global Perspectives*, ed. Shirley Hune et al., (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1991) and *Ideas of Home: Literature of Asian Migration*, ed. Geoffhy Kain, (East Lansing : Michigan State University Press, 1997).

¹¹ In “What’s in the Name? Defining Chinese American Literature of the Immigrant Generation,” Sauling Wong suggests that studying Chinese-language literature can help integrate immigrant writers into Chinese American literary canon and in doing so, helps foster Chinese American community solidarity.

In the only book-length study of Chinese-language texts to date, Sheng-mei Ma points out convincingly the ways in which overseas Taiwanese student literature written in the Chinese traverses several theoretical disciplinary boundaries (Chinese, Postcolonial and Chinese American) and insists that an analysis of this literature requires a multidisciplinary approach. See chapter 6 in *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures*.

¹² According to Sauling Wong, the urgent political project of claiming America in the formative years of the Asian American literary studies meant that priority was given to English-language works. She also points to linguistic inadequacy as a primary cause of the shortage of scholarship on Asian-language works.

For a brief musing on the institutional constraints of conducting works on non-English language works, refer to Shengmei Ma’s *Immigrant Subjectivities*, pps. 107-108.

In addition to those listed for footnote 5, a handful of scholarships on Asian-language literatures by Asian Americanists include: 1) *Songs of Gold Mountain: Cantonese Rhymes from San Francisco Chinatown* edited by Marlon K. Hom and *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*, edited by Him Lai, Jenny Lim and Judy Yung; 2) Sau-ling C. Wong’s essays: a) “Ethnicizing Gender: An Exploration of Sexuality as Sign in Chinese Literature,” in Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling (eds.), *Reading the Literatures of Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 111-29; b) “The Stakes of Textual Border Crossing: Hualing Nieh’s Mulberry and Peach in Sinocentric, Asian American, and Feminist Critical Practices,” in Kandice Chu and Karen Shimakawa (eds.), *Orientations: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 130-72. Wong is also a practitioner of teaching Chinese immigrant literature, see “Teaching Chinese Immigrant Literature: Some Principles of Syllabus Design,” in Gary Y. Okihiro, Shirley Hune, Arthur A. Hansen, and John M. Liu (eds.), *Reflections on Shattered Windows: Promises and Prospects for Asian American Studies* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1988), pp. 126-34. 3) See also Jean Amato’s article, “Relocating Notions of National and Ethnic Authenticity in Chinese American and Chinese Literary Theory Through Nieh Hualing’s Overseas Chinese Novel, ‘Mulberry and Peach’” in *Pacific Coast Philosophy*, Vol. 34, No. 1. (1999), pp 32-52.

¹³ Lim et al, *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits*, 5.

¹⁴ Okamura, 177

¹⁵ See Valverde, *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora*.

¹⁶ See Pêcheaux, *Language, Semantics, Ideology*, 150-165.

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- ¹⁷ Munoz, *Disidentifications: Queers Of Color and the Performance Of Politics*, 11.
- ¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 383, 382, 380.
- ¹⁹ Braidotti, 15.
- ²⁰ Wong, "Denationalization," 12, 13.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 19.
- ²² Hanssen, *Critique of Violence*, 14.
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Amato, 36.
- ²⁵ Wong, 4.
- ²⁶ Together with Lê, Gấm Vũ Nguyễn and Trữ Trần, faculty members at Evergreen Community College, contributed significantly to the task of helping Madison Nguyen secure the deeply divisive Vietnamese American electorate. Lê provides a glimpse of their involvement in "Gio O. 10 Years. Random Notes."
- ²⁷ Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 53, 40.
- ²⁸ Suggs, "I Would Rather Be Dead," 1
- ²⁹ Lê makes this notion explicit in the essay "Live in Between, Die in Betwixt" where she also claims to "need freedom more than a homeland." See also Hà Cẩm Tâm's elaboration of Lê's idea in an essay of the same name.
- ³⁰ Alarcón et al, Introduction to *Between Woman and Nation*, 12, 14.
- ³¹ Said, "The Mind of Winter" 54.
- ³² Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation*, 41-42.
- ³³ See, for example, "A Folk Song about A.," "Merlot Hair," "A Petal in the Wind."
- ³⁴ Lê, *Dust of the World*, "Afterword," 141.
- ³⁵ Foucault elaborates extensively on the idea of counter-history in a series of lectures given at the Collège de France, "*Society Must Be Defended*," 1975-1976. He argues in lecture IV that counter-history establishes itself in opposition to official history, and in doing so, reflects and produces disunity. Counter-history also brings to bear "the discourse of those who have no glory, or of those who have lost it and who now find themselves, perhaps for a time – but probably for a long time – in darkness and silence." Foucault, 70.
- ³⁶ Lê, "Journey from Innocence to Near Truth," 110.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ Lê, "Journey," 120, 121.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.
- ⁴⁰ There are six principles associated with nomadic thought. First is the principle of multiplicity, which describe the rhizome as comprised of a proliferating multiplicity of lines, rather than "of points or positions," and conceive of the nomadic flock as an irreducible multiplicity distributed in an open space (8). Second is the principle of asignifying rupture, the idea that because a rhizome possesses no privileged center of growth, it "may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines"(9). This means that movements and flows in a rhizome can always be re-routed and resumed anew upon disruptions, much like the ongoing process of nomadic distribution across an open space. Third and fourth are the principles of connection and heterogeneity, which posit that "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be" (7). A rhizomatic network contains a maximal number of proliferating circuits, all of which simultaneously connected to one another, creating an undivided and unlimited smooth space. The smooth surface of the rhizome resembles that of the nomad space and the rhizomatic routes precisely the "lines of flight" through which the nomad escapes. The final two are the principles of cartography and decalomania, both of which underscore the amorphous and metamorphic structure of the rhizomatic network, the idea that it "is not amenable to any structural or generative model" (12). The rhizome is "a map and not a tracing," insist Deleuze and Guattari, which is "open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted, to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation" (12). Similar to mapping, nomadic movement entails constant experimentation and invention, not appropriation or reproduction of existing lines. See, Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 8-12.
- Deleuze and Guattari, 360.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 413-5.
- ⁴⁴ Lowe, "Literary Nomadics in Francophone Allegories of Postcolonialism," 46-7
- ⁴⁵ Qdt.in David Bogue, *Deluzian Ways*, 127.
- ⁴⁶ Bogue, 130-1.
- ⁴⁷ Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other*, 18-19.

⁴⁸ Lê, "Journey," 127.

⁴⁹ Braidotti, 60.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵¹ Kristeva, 298.

⁵² Franz Fanon, for example, calls *Anti-Oedipus* "a manual or guide to everyday life" (Preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, xiii). Peta Malins describes the ethics presented in *A Thousand Plateaus* as "pragmatic, embodied ethics that distinguishes itself from Morality by its immanence, its immediacy, and its refusal to privilege the mind (rationality, reason, free will) over the body" (97).

⁵³ For Hegel, individual consciousness is fundamentally opposed to and is non-existent without a projection of the other, a position that Deleuze and Guattari sternly reject. Deleuze's lifelong disdain for Hegelian dialectics is also described in Paul Patton's Introduction to *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, in which he cites the philosopher's pithy declaration: "What I most detest is Hegelianism and its dialectics" (3).

⁵⁴ Qdt. in James Williams, *Gilles Deleuze's Difference and Repetition*, 208.

⁵⁵ Boque, 13.

⁵⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, xiv.

⁵⁷ Braidotti, 60.

⁵⁸ Wittlin, "The Sorrow and Grandeur of Exile," 99-112.

⁵⁹ Lê, *Sulking*, 99.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶¹ Nguyễn, "Luu Vong Như Một Phạm Trù Mỹ Học."

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Braidotti, 44-45.

⁶⁴ Đoàn, Văn Nhã. "Ten Years ,2001-2011: An Interview with Lê Thị Huệ, Editor-in-Chief."

⁶⁵ Lê, "About Fanciful Imaginings @ Words." Hereafter, "Fanciful."

⁶⁶ Lê, "Fanciful."

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Together with Lê, Gấm Vũ Nguyễn and Trị Trần, faculty members at Evergreen Community College, contributed significantly to the task of helping Madison Nguyen secure the deeply divisive Vietnamese American electorate. Lê provides a glimpse of their involvement in "Gio O. 10 Years. Random Notes."

⁶⁹ VAECL Mission Statement.

⁷⁰ Kim, *Asian American Literature*, 22.

**Amnesia, Interrupted:
Locating South Vietnam in the U.S. Vietnam War Memoryscape**

*All alone this afternoon
I can't help but think of all the Vietnamese whose lives were cut short
And of the Nam War that stripped us of our youth, our loves, and our friends
I am the only Vietnamese left
Drifting from one continent to the next
A wanderer, a woman without a country¹*
– Lê Thị Huệ, “In Teramachi Remembering Those Who Have Died”

*[Warmongers] have left us these blockhouses
Buffalo-shaped tumors that sprang up in my uterus after the war
I still don't quite know what happened
Except I know they are vestiges of war*
– Lê Thị Huệ, “Blockhouses”

As one of the most chronicled, debated, and narrated historical events in American history, the Vietnam War has also inspired a plethora of writings by the people of Vietnamese descent both in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and elsewhere in the Vietnamese diaspora. While academic studies in the United States have more than managed to accompany the inexhaustible production of American war narratives,² very little continues to be known about the diverse and sizable body of literature produced by Vietnamese Americans, many of whom came directly out of the now-defunct Republic of Vietnam following the collapse of Saigon on 30 April 1975. The miserly attention given to the South Vietnamese perspectives in the United States is becoming awkward given the remarkable momentum with which the intellectual critique against American solipsistic reconstructions of Vietnam has acquired during the past two decades. As early as 1985, the noted writer James Webb already called on Americans to acknowledge and engage with the diversity of writings about the Vietnam experience. He warned against our propensity to be “too self-absorbed” given the reality that “Vietnam was many things” which “varied year by year, place by place, unit by unit.” Webb challenged us to turn our attention outward, to “ask ourselves about the literature that is still waiting in the wings for its proper recognition,” and to question whether an exclusive focus on American perspectives can “fully represent the dynamics of [Vietnam’s] complex and painful experience.”³ An exposure to different perspectives, Webb further insists, has the potential to heal America and the refusal to do so would amount to no less than a violation of American democratic and intellectual integrity:

We as artists are like blind men stroking the elephant, calling out our impressions to our readers so that they can compile them and come up with a larger picture. But it would do no good to deny one man the right, for instance, to report that the elephant had tusks. If one position is filtered, or diluted, or denied legitimacy before it reaches the public, then not only is the debate false but the damage is greater than if the debate had not occurred at all, since we have provided a false illusion that the debate did take place.⁴

Webb’s reminder remains pertinent today as it was twenty three years ago in light of the fact that a majority of South Vietnamese narratives continues to be denied existence and, in

many cases, legitimacy before reaching the public. And given the unabated contentiousness as well as the obsessive frequency with which the Vietnam War is evoked in contemporary American foreign policy debates,⁵ it seems at best an epistemological shortcoming and at worst offense to continue eliding this body of literature. And even though it should go without saying that the war and war-inflected stories told by the South Vietnamese are anything but homogenous, the demonstrably induced hypervisibility of certain narratives in the United States - those confirming the Leftist rhetoric of Third-World liberation and the Rightist belief in American rescue missions - undergirds the need for a reification and serves as an immediate impetus for the subsequent chapter.

In the pages that follow, I will focus on Lê Thị Huệ's two novels, *Memories of My Anh* (1987) and *Dragons and Snakes* (1989), both written and published in the period that witnessed the debate over the meaning and nature of the American intervention in Vietnam continuously and precipitously escalate to new levels of intensity. Lê's works merit special attention because they reflexively engage the extremely complex historical realities of Vietnam during wartime and critically reflect the social milieu that informed their production. While this is a widely shared feature among South Vietnamese narratives to varying degrees, I contend that Lê's particular strategy of representation allows for a radical critique both of Vietnamese history and of American dominant characterizations of the war. In an essay published in 1994, Lê explains the impetus behind her decision to write about the war, revealing in no uncertain terms the range of political erasure and historiographical silencing that she seeks to challenge, from the war victor's narrativizations of legitimacy to the subsequent appropriations of these narratives by American scholars and cultural commentators on both ends of the American political spectrum:

I have always been an extremely curious person. It is precisely this extreme curiosity that often causes me to be critical even of surfaces that appear sturdiest. Let alone living in a historical moment where all that's left are vestiges of the victor [North Vietnam]. But when curiosity led me to seek understanding about the war from the perspective of the Americans, those who came to my country to intervene in the war, I experienced for first time the feeling of shock - that of a victim being choked by the torrents of the perpetrator's historiography. There it is, all those pages among thousands and thousands of pages written about the Vietnam War, housed in the most wonderful libraries in America... I was shocked upon discovering how Americans wrote about the Vietnam War as if it had been a war between the Communists and the United States. But what about us? Us, the people of South Vietnam, the people in the name of legitimacy [America] vowed to protect and defend? Just take a look at the American body of works about the Vietnam War. How many of them address the people or culture of Vietnam? Or are they only about Hồ Chí Minh and combat history in Vietnam?⁶

Yet, as this chapter demonstrates, Lê's discursive restoration of the southern experience shows little concern with validating South Vietnam's ideological and national[ist] aspirations, a narrative move that deviates significantly from the prevailing thematic representation found in narratives produced by former South Vietnamese officials and soldiers. Indeed no counter-propagandistic casuistry makes its way into Lê's works. No solipsistic depiction of South Vietnamese heroism to compete with the victor's epic narratives of selfless sacrifice and inevitable victory. No nostalgic references to various southern military victories to dispel American notions of South Vietnamese cowardice and incompetence. No celebratory recuperation of any non-communist nationalist tradition to destabilize postwar claims of

communism's unrivaled primacy in South Vietnam. Rather than offsetting prevailing records via positive characterizations, Lê takes as the point of departure the very stereotypes that have come to dominate existing narrativizations of South Vietnam. Lê's approach to these stereotypes can best be understood as narrative strategy of inversion, one that entails both palpable risks and uncanny potential for producing an uneasiness that compels the readers to be inquisitive rather than dismissive, reflective rather than reductive, of the complex historical conditions confronted southern Vietnam. Lê's inversion of stereotypes intensifies her portrayal of a southern society deeply torn between the ideological and the ethical, the political and the moral, the personal and the familial, all of which simultaneously reaffirms aspects of "truthiness" inherent in stereotypes while exposing the latter's limitations in informing our historical knowledge about South Vietnam. It is precisely the tensions generated by these narrative strategies that enable the crystallization of a multifaceted critique, one whose socio-critical and certainly existential dimensions demand us to critically interrogate the connection between the present and the past, not just to satiate our intellectual curiosity but to assert a political demand that our future not be remade in the false image of history.

This chapter seeks to illuminate key components in Lê's multilayered critique by exploring dominant thematic preoccupations and narrative strategies in *Memories of My Anh* and *Dragons and Snakes*. I aim to make evident the author's critical meditation on Vietnamese cultural identity, forceful denunciation of the erasure of South Vietnam in Vietnamese official historiography, and biting commentary on the irony of American polysemantic yet exclusivist narrativizations of the war. The chapter is divided into four parts. Part one provides the historical and discursive contexts for reading Lê's works. It begins with a literature review of American studies of representations of the Vietnamese subjects in American mainstream and official narratives. It argues that while these works document with persuasion the rampant distortion of the Vietnamese war figures, they neglect the particular trivialization and/or exclusion of the South Vietnamese. It contends that progressive efforts to address the complexity of the Vietnamese experience have not been extended to South Vietnam, by way of sidestepping or subsuming the latter under a homogenizing rubric of the former (read North Vietnam). Even more troubling, the few studies that do make the distinction and incorporate the South Vietnamese experience tend to perpetuate, rather than complicate, mainstream constructions of South Vietnamese incompetence and culpability. While these constructions are certainly not without some merit, the disproportionate and emphatic attention given to them reveals certain political imperatives undergirding such constructions. Part one will elucidate these imperatives and explain their influence on Lê's works. Regarding the contexts of postwar Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic politics, part one will demonstrate how *Memories of My Anh* and *Dragons and Snakes* present a corporeal and political challenge to official historiographical acts of disappearance, a prominent preoccupation in many of Lê's works.

Part two focuses on the theme of fraternal conflict, which is central to both *Memories* and *Dragons*, to reveal Lê's strategy of appropriation. I argue that by appropriating one of American most dominant figurations of the war – the idea that Americans fought only themselves and that they were victims of their own ideals, practices and beliefs – Lê successfully turns American literary and literal narcissism on its head. For she reminds us, the war what which took place in Vietnam and cost no less than two million Vietnamese lives, was first and foremost a Vietnamese affair, a literal civil war, another bloody chapter in the long and painful history of Vietnamese internal conflict. Part two also segues into an analysis of Lê's critique of Vietnamese history itself. Through a discussion of the novels' allusions to two of the most popular cultural

legends and myths, I will show how and why Lê is deeply suspicious of the Vietnamese penchant for bloodshed. Lê's critical stance towards modern nationalisms, which she sees as responsible for exacerbating the Vietnamese tendency "to plunge recklessly into the making of history" will also be discussed at length in this part.

Part three focuses on Lê's strategy of inversion. I argue that by redeploying some of the most damaging stereotypes associated with the South Vietnamese, particularly those concerning South Vietnamese lack of ideological direction, political commitment, and collective conviction to win the war, Lê's works invert these stereotypes and, in doing so, shed new light into the ideological and political predicament that confronted South Vietnam. Together, these overlapping and mutually constitutive strategies allow us to interrogate anew multiple dimensions of the personal and political whirlwind that shaped much of the southern experience. Part four concludes this chapter with a brief discussion of the novels' deeply ambivalent endings, an indication of Lê's intensely pessimistic outlook on the future of Vietnam. For our author, this hot war may be over, but the Vietnamese cultural penchant for bloodshed, coupled with its tendency to romanticize heroism, points to a future indeed ever more darkly.

Part 1: Contexts

The Vietnamese: Disremembered

On 27 April 2003, just days before the 28th anniversary of the collapse of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Vietnamese American community in Orange County, home to the largest Vietnamese diasporic population, inaugurated the Westminster Vietnam War Memorial to commemorate and honor South Vietnamese and American soldiers who fought during the war. Constructed on public property, this memorial constitutes the *only* official memorial in the world built after the fall of Saigon that recognizes the travails of the South Vietnamese soldiers and veterans.⁷ In the United States where there are at least five hundred state and regional memorials dedicated to honoring Vietnam veterans and soldiers, none reference the South Vietnamese fighters, whom were American allies during the war and many of whom have since become American citizens and permanent residents. In all respects, the exclusion of the South Vietnamese veterans from American memorialization practices mirrors the near-complete absence of the South Vietnamese perspectives in American debates about the war.

Admittedly, this neglect is only part of the overall neglect of the Vietnamese experience in American narrativizations of the war, an issue that American intellectuals and scholars across disciplines have since the early 1990s begun to address. In 1991, the artist Chris Burden created a sculpture entitled *The Other Vietnam Memorial* to commemorate some three million Vietnamese people who died during the war. Burden designed this sculpture as a response to the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* which was constructed in 1982 in Washington D.C. to pay tribute to Americans who lost their lives in Vietnam. Burden revealed that despite his deep sympathy for the sacrifices made by American servicemen and women, he felt "repulsed" by the American refusal to acknowledge the devastating effects of the war on the Vietnamese people.⁸ In *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, Marita Sturken examines the controversy surrounding the construction of the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* and concludes that one way in which American memory of the war has been made possible has been by "screening out" the Vietnamese subjects from American collective consciousness.⁹ The process of healing for America, Sturken asserts, rests upon a deliberate erasure of Vietnamese historical realities from American collective memory of the war. In her

1994 award-winning study of American representations of the war, Renny Christopher forcefully supports Burden's and Sturken's critical stance:

Ethnocentrism and nationalism have marked American discourse about the war in Viet Nam, causing America to turn hermetically around and around about itself so that the same notes – a few notes from the Right, a few notes from the Left – are sounded repeatedly and no new understanding can be reached. These polarized positions share an ethnocentrism that conceives of the war as an American “experience.”¹⁰

When the Vietnamese are *not* wholly invisible, their minimized presence reveals little about their own history and experience, a pattern time and again documented in the impressive body of scholarships on American cultural and literary representations of the war. The limited inclusion of the Vietnamese has been determined to illuminate primarily American experience and function variously – impending shifts in ideological and political demands – to highlight American noble mission, justify American withdrawal, mourn American loss, vindicate American defeat and finally, “kick the [American] Vietnam syndrome.”¹¹ In the 1998 introduction to *The Vietnam Reader*, the self-attributed first and definitive collection of American fiction and non-fiction about the war, Stewart O’nan acknowledges the trivialized role of the Vietnamese in American war narratives and rationalizes his concomitant exclusion of non-American perspectives from this otherwise comprehensive anthology as follows:

An important point to keep in mind is that this anthology isn’t concerned with the Vietnamese or French points of view, which have produced an equal if not greater number of insightful and important works. Instead, this volume is restricted to American views of the war. One remarkable aspect of the America’s involvement is that its literature focuses solely on the war’s effect on the American soldier and American culture at large. In work after work, Vietnam and the Vietnamese are merely a backdrop for the drama of America confronting itself. To balance Americans’ views with others’ here – in retrospect – would be to rewrite history and to present a false portrait of America’s true concerns.¹²

In a modest number of literary works where the Vietnamese do occupy more than minimal narrative space, their portrayal often follows prescriptive patterns of American racist representational practices. Renny Christopher shows that representations of the Vietnamese are remarkably similar to those of Asian Americans in American dominant cultural discourse. As such, Vietnamese men are portrayed as effeminate yet evil while Vietnamese women alluring yet helpless sexual despots.¹³ Timothy Lomperis adds to Christopher’s observations by noting the overt infantilization of the Vietnamese subjects.¹⁴ Michael Bibby’s 1993 survey of American anti-war poetry confirms characterizations of the Vietnamese as sub-human and barbaric.¹⁵ Jason Philip’s study of American canon fiction and Eliot Gruners’ analysis of POW narratives demonstrate the de-masculinization of the Vietnamese male figures.¹⁶ Susan Jeffords’ reading of American veterans’ accounts of the war reveals efforts to re-masculinize America by way of constructing the Vietnamese as the racial and sexual other. She shows how characteristics typically attributed to the Vietnamese are coined in feminine terms, effectively conflating and relegating the Vietnamese and femininity outside the margins of racial and gender normativity.¹⁷

While the sophisticated body of scholarships on American representations illuminates with penetrating insight the cultural matrix from which American narrativizations generate comprehensibility, the continual focus on American narrativizations as the frame of reference by default replicates and reinforces the absence of the Vietnamese, revealing little about the war as

experienced and remembered from the Vietnamese perspectives. This problem is further complicated by a persistent failure to discern the different representational modes ascribed to North and South Vietnamese subjects, a failure undoubtedly facilitated by a historical understanding of Vietnamese history and reinforced by the official erasure of South Vietnam in post-war narrativizations of Vietnamese national history. I argue that there are key differences in the ways North and South Vietnamese are portrayed in American narratives, differences shaped as much by American perception of war realities as by the historical outcome of the war. I contend that North Vietnamese soldiers are typically depicted as killing machines, barbaric and subhuman while the South Vietnamese are largely portrayed as effeminate, childlike and cowardly. These seemingly diametrically opposed characterizations in fact share a common denominator that is the dehumanization of the Vietnamese subjects, one that works to undermine North Vietnam's victory, accentuate South Vietnam's incapability and ultimately absolve American culpability. Thus, in spite of the well-placed critique of the distortion and trivialization of the Vietnamese subjects, existing scholarship on American representations simultaneously excludes and naturalizes the existence of a historically undifferentiated population called "the Vietnamese," thereby collapsing any tangible ideological and experiential differences between North and South Vietnam.

It was not until mid- to-late-1990s - almost three decades after the American withdrawal from Vietnam - that deliberate attempts to give voice to the Vietnamese subjects began to emerge, a development that coincides with the beginning of American normalizations with Vietnam after two decades of economic embargo. Before turning to them, I should note that these works continue to be extremely modest in quantity, constituting a virtually negligible percentage of the overall number of works produced about the war.¹⁸ Published in 1995, the anthology *The Other Side of Heaven: Post War Fiction by Vietnamese and American Writers* edited by Wayne Karlin, Lê Minh Khuê and Trùng Vũ merits special consideration for its relatively substantial inclusion of both North and South Vietnamese literary perspectives. While American voices continue to dominate over half of the anthology – the palpable presence of acclaimed Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic writers is both unprecedented and refreshing.¹⁹ David Chanoff's 1996 *Vietnam: A Portrait of its People at War* is noteworthy for offering invaluable insight into the lives and struggles of the people in North Vietnam during and after the war. Chanoff's compilation of a wide variety of perspectives, including military generals', students', monks', peasants', and professionals', enables us to see that "in the spectrum of human emotions that spring from war, the Vietnamese are as varied as Americans." Far from being "mere killing machines," hearing them speak allows us to recognize that we have more in common with them than we have been willing to believe.²⁰ Karen Gottschang Turner's 1998 *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories from North Vietnam* is remarkable for insisting on the stories of North Vietnamese women fighters in order to (1) challenge American male-dominated media depictions of Vietnamese women as prostitutes, war brides and frantic refugees; (2) take a stand against the standard male story which often denies women's active roles in the war and (3) revive the forgotten contributions of Vietnamese women in the struggle for national liberation.²¹ Similarly, Sandra Taylor's 1999 *Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution* documents the roles and experiences of women in the National Liberation Front and reaches the conclusion that far from being passive victims, Vietnamese women proved to be formidable participants in one of the most transformative historical events in the 20th century.²²

While necessary and significant in many ways, works that generally aim at recovering the Vietnamese perspectives tend to privilege stories and experiences of the war victor, in sheer

quantity and in tone. With the exception of the anthology *The Other Side of Heaven*, the works discussed in the paragraph above are representative of this tendency.²³ Although there is general consensus among Vietnam War scholars that the marginalization of the Vietnamese perspectives must be amended, few have been openly critical of the stubborn absence of South Vietnam and fewer have attempted to bring to light the complexity of the South Vietnamese experience. Casual references to South Vietnam, as evident in the works above, relish without fail the premise of South Vietnamese puppetry, incompetence and inevitable defeat. When South Vietnamese perspectives are specifically discussed, it is done for the purpose of inclusivity rather than critical investigation, legitimating rather than complicating existing notions about South Vietnam. Renny Christopher's treatment of South Vietnamese texts in the aforementioned *The Vietnam War/The American War* fits this bill rather well. Despite Christopher's passionate denunciation of both "Rightist" and "Leftist" approaches to Vietnam War literature, her critical stance exhibits a decidedly "Leftist" overtone, one that maintains, in fact, insists on the role of South Vietnam as puppet of American imperialist expansionism. This position in all likelihood accounts for Christopher's indiscriminate condemnation of works produced by writers with ties to the Southern regime, particularly those with pronounced noncommunist orientations. Via arbitrary reasoning and false manipulation of textual evidence, Christopher largely succeeds in portraying South Vietnamese writers as "pro-bourgeois" and "pro-American" whose works are therefore "apolitical" or "lack[ing] in complex biculturality" and ultimately "not very compelling." Since *The Vietnam War/The American War* is one of the few critical works that incorporate South Vietnamese narratives, Christopher's mistreatment of Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn's 1980 *The Will of Heaven* and Minh Đức Hoài Trinh's 1980 *This Side, the Other Side* necessitates an extended discussion here.

The Vietnamese: Misremembered

One of the most serious problems Christopher finds in Trinh's work is its "pro-bourgeois" stance. She begins the discussion of the novel with a summary of the author's biographical information, drawing significant emphasis to the latter's background: daughter of a mandarin, educated in France, worked as a journalist covering the peace negotiations from 1968 to 1974 and taught at Buddhist University Van Hanh until the end of war. While Christopher does little to persuade the reader of the usefulness and/or suitability of a class analysis (and even less of the complex notions of class as presented in the novel), she launches one attack after another on Trinh's "class attitudes." However, as I will demonstrate, the charge against the novel's pro-bourgeois tendency is less a literary assessment than a Marxist-inspired political indictment, one that seeks to undermine the author's artistic merit and political legitimacy to speak about the war.

Christopher's reading of *This Side, the Other Side* is plagued with careless oversight. The critic mistakenly categorizes Minh Đức Hoài Trinh as a "refugee writer," one who was not a writer before she was a refugee and whose "experience of exile itself" made her into a writer.²⁴ This observation is fully misinformed. Trinh had authored at least six works of fictions as well as a handful of poetry and short-story collections long before she became a political exile in 1975.²⁵ *This Side* was translated into English and published almost a decade after its 1972 debut in the journal *Nguyệt San Ngày Nay*. Due to the sudden fall of Saigon, the complete manuscript of *Bên Ni, Bên Tê* – its Vietnamese title – never made it into book form until well after the war, in 1980 in English and 1981 in Vietnamese. The novel, inspired by events of the 1968 Tết Offensive, centers on the struggles of a peasant family who are divided on both sides of the war. The Trần

initially live in the village Hương Thủy on the outskirts of Huế in central Vietnam. Thung, the eldest brother, is initially conscripted to fight for the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) but eventually becomes a firm believer in the communist cause. Shortly after his conscription, the father suffers a gruesome death stepping on a bomb trap, leaving his wife and their five children to fend for themselves. In her brother's and father's absence, Bui, the eldest daughter, is forced to take on the role of breadwinner. Despite Bui's and her mother's back-breaking work from dawn to dusk, the family barely manages to scrape by. Lured by the prospects of a better future, Bui willingly allows herself to be seduced by Binh, the son of a wealthy family in her village. As Bui expected, Binh eventually parts ways with her, though only reluctantly, to appease his mother's disapproving anger. Bui leaves for Saigon on Binh's recommendation and sets out to achieve her six-month goal: Bring her family to Saigon. Beautiful, ambitious and extremely disciplined, Bui deliberately becomes a bar girl but steers clear of prostitution. Her beauty and charm quickly make her a sensation. Coupled with being frugal, Bui eventually earns enough to buy a house and send for her family. Only a few months later, just before Tết, Bui's mother and younger brother leave for Hương Thủy to build the father's tomb. They are killed in the Offensive in Huế at presumably about the same time Thung is shot to death in a battle on the outskirts of Saigon.

Taking on the critical stance of a communist cadre rather than a literary scholar, Christopher claims that “[a]lthough Trinh has made the main characters of her novel peasants, she presents their opportunity to move into the middle class a positive event that makes the war almost worthwhile.”²⁶ This claim, which is largely unsubstantiated, reflects Christopher's suspicion towards Trinh's class background more than her engagement with the text. She also [mis]labels Trinh's characterization of peasant life “positive... but still romantic,”²⁷ gesturing towards Trinh's inability to accurately depict the peasantry due to her privileged upbringing. Specifically, she points to Trinh's depiction of “strong, tireless peasants working cheerfully”²⁸ at Mme Cai's fish pond as evidence of the latter's being out of touch with the severity of peasant life. But this observation is a serious misread. I argue while the peasants are portrayed as cheerful, their cheerfulness is less a reflection of the author's romantic view than a deliberate narrative detail designed to enhance the overall plot. In this scene, the peasants have every reason to be “working cheerfully.” Against the narratological context of wartime poverty, being employed by Mme Cai is reason enough for celebration. The workers are well aware that one day of work at the fish pond can help feed a family of six for up to a whole week.²⁹ Moreover, Mme Cai knows just exactly how to manipulate her workers. Not only does she promise to treat them to her famous fish rice porridge all-you-can-eat style after work, she also hints at rewarding them with fresh fish and “a little something extra” to take home at the end of the day.³⁰ The workers' palpable excitement highlights, rather than trivializes, the struggles and hardships of peasant life during wartime. I further maintain that this scene provides the *only* moment in the entire novel where peasant life is depicted on a relatively lighter note. The novel's depiction of Bui's and her mother's daily routines leaves very little room for interpreting peasant life as romantic. It is also important to note that my insistence on providing an alternative reading for this scene should not be understood as a rejection of a class-based analysis, it is only to underscore that Christopher's labeling of the novel as pro-bourgeois has little to do with text itself.

Previously, in making a case for reading Vietnamese exilic texts, Christopher notes that in addition to opening up the debate about the war, Vietnamese exilic works “are worth reading

for their own sakes as literature and as history and politics.”³¹ Yet Christopher concludes the following about *This Side*:

Judged by Western standards, *This Side, the Other Side* is not a very compelling novel. The characters are flat, point of view shifts appear out of nowhere, and the writing seems to be simplistic... Nonetheless, it is interesting for the apolitical way it addresses the subject of the war – in this way it is an exception to the usual, politicized, method of Vietnamese exile authors use to describe their subjects.³²

This assessment, in addition to being cavalier in tone, is problematic in a number of ways. Thus Christopher’s continued reliance on “Western standards” seems to contradict her project almost in its entirety. And as a result of Christopher’s inability to detach from so-called Western standards, it becomes easy to see why her remarks are flawed on almost every count. While an exhaustive discussion of the novel is beyond the scope of this chapter, I would like to note two of the most poignant– and potentially radical– aspects about Trinh’s work. Firstly, I argue that far from being apolitical, the novel is heavily preoccupied with some of the most politically salient issues of the time. Written immediately after and in response to the momentous events of the Tết Offensive, the novel attempts to articulate South Vietnam’s ideological juncture and political predicament. If the novel appears critical of communism, it is also deeply ambivalent towards American capitalism. Reflecting on the Vietnamese penchant for bloodshed, it ponders whether permanent division might be the ideal solution for the Vietnamese people. Moreover, by examining the war from the perspectives of society’s poorest, it seeks to reveal the inner workings of ideology. In asking us to consider what republicanism means to Bội or what ultimately explains the appeal of communism to Thương or Lộc, Trinh highlights the intangibility yet palpable danger of ideology, how real lives are lost in service of seemingly abstract notions. While it can be said that Bội’s and her mother’s articulations of ideology are largely non-political, I argue that – contrary to Christopher’s observation – there is nothing “apolitical about the way [the novel] addresses the war.”³³ I should also note that even though the novel ends on a “starry”³⁴ note – perhaps reflecting the outcome of the Offensive where the Northern forces suffered heavy losses and forced into retreat – the future of all the remaining characters continues to be uncertain, gesturing towards the uncertainty of war and of the political fate of Vietnam.

Secondly, I argue that Trinh’s work is decidedly radical in its representation of Vietnamese women. While “judged by Western standards” the female characters may indeed appear “flat,” an examination of these characters within the context of Vietnamese literary tradition proves otherwise. I argue that *This Side* is a feminist response to Nguyễn Du’s *The Tale of Kieu*, an early 19th century epic poem generally recognized as Vietnamese literature’s greatest classic, and reinterprets its central tenets regarding the notion of ideal femininity. The *Tale*’s female protagonist, Kiều, is an exceptionally intelligent, beautiful, talented and virtuous daughter of a scholar-gentry family. To save her father from false accusations of dishonesty and impending imprisonment, Kiều sells herself into marriage to Mã Giám Sinh whom, as it turns out, actually bought her to work in a brothel. After a failed suicide attempt to preserve her honor, Kiều has no choice but to work for years as a prostitute. She is temporarily rescued through her marriage to Thúc Sinh whose jealous first wife subsequently sells her into servitude. Through a series of misfortunes, Kiều is led back into prostitution. Again, she finds temporary reprieve through her marriage to the rebel leader Từ Hải who, in their fifth year of marriage, dies a heroic, if tragic, death on the battlefield. Kiều is then taken to be the wife of a dignitary. In response, she attempts another suicide but is rescued by a Buddhist nun who predicts that her trials and

tribulations have come to an end. True to the nun's prediction, shortly after Kiều is reunited with her family and her first love, Kim Trong. Kiều and Trong maintain a platonic relationship because she feels unworthy of Trong's love. Kiều's equally beautiful sister, Thúy Vân, fulfills her sister's wish by marrying Kim Trọng and bears his children. The poem ends on the gentle note as Kiều, at last, is able to achieve some measure of peace and serenity in her life.³⁵

This Side's Bụi shares many of Kiều's personal attributes and struggles. Like Kiều, the exceptionally beautiful and intelligent Bụi also sacrifices her chastity for the betterment of her family. However, unlike Kiều, Bụi is no victim of life's circumstance. At every turn of events, Bụi insists upon making her own choices, even if the choices available to her are greatly constrained. She chooses to run away with Bình knowing exactly what is at stake (her chastity and family honor) and what is to be gained (a chance to bring her family out of poverty).³⁶ Once in Saigon, Bụi decides to become a bar girl, the only job she believes provides the means necessary to achieve her goal. Bụi explains her decision to Madame Lâm, her friend/benefactress in Saigon, with remarkable self-awareness, practicality and clarity:

It's a job that calls neither for education nor learning. It is also the only one that would permit me to carry out my plan within the [six-month] time limit I have set for myself... You know, love with a bowl of rice... that may be okay with me, by my family, my brothers need a more decent life. Only I would stay in the mud. And this won't be the first of its kind. It is enough to take a look around us.³⁷

Thus, Bụi accepts with dignity the consequences accompanying her life choices, blaming neither fate nor society for the stigma and derision directed at her. Moreover, the men in Bụi's life, unlike those in Kiều's, are *never* her rescuers, even as they help fulfill many of her needs. If Bình exposes her to the possibilities and limitations of the wider world, Francois provides her with unconditional friendship. If Jim presents her with meaningful companionship at one of the loneliest periods in her life, it is Lộc who unhesitatingly offers her love and full acceptance. Bụi's journey is generally enhanced by men whose lives, in turn, are significantly enriched by her presence. While time and again Kiều needs to be rescued by men, it is unmistakable that Trinh's female protagonist takes charge of her own life and stands on equal footing with the men with whom she encounters. It is not only Trinh's emphasis on female agency that marks Trinh's work a radical departure from traditional depictions of ideal femininity, it is also her treatment of female sexual desires that makes *This Side*, in my view, a decidedly feminist work. For instance, even though Bụi shuns marriage (knowing the impossibility of balancing marriage with her line of work), she does reach out for companionship and physical intimacy. And far from striving for chastity, Bụi openly enters into mutually consensual relationships with the men above.

If Trinh's description of Bụi's dalliance with men stresses the latter's insistence on mutuality, her depiction of Mme Lâm humanizes and makes explicit the [culturally considered tabooed] dimensions of female sexual desires. As a widow, Mme Lâm endures not only emotional loneliness but also intense urges for physical intimacy. She feels torn by her continued devotion to her late husband on the one hand and her stubborn sexual needs on the other. She confides in Bụi: "I dream sometimes of a man's arms, any man's, a simple soldier, low-ranking officer, an engineer... as long as he is a man, solid, strong, sufficiently male to protect me. I was feeling lonely, abandoned. But despite war, our society still sequesters women."³⁸ Mme Lâm eventually defies the walls of cultural expectations and decides to have sex with a married man whom she despises. Despite her feelings of repulsion towards the man and guilt towards her late husband, Mme Lâm cannot deny the tremendous pleasure the encounter brings her. As the narrator informs us: "She had never loved this man, on the contrary, she even despised him. Why

had she given in? Why and how could she have felt pleasure? She refused all this, she did not understand anything anymore. A question began to torment her, would there be a next time? Would she be able to oppose this desire of the body that which reason rejected?"³⁹ Viewed within the context of Vietnamese literary tradition, Trinh's explicit articulation of female sexual desires indeed becomes radical. Nonetheless, it is important to note that, far from being unique, Trinh's emphasis on female sexuality was only part of a larger phenomenon in the development of literature in the South, one dominated by women writers and informed in no small part by the American sexual politics of the 1960s.⁴⁰ Thus, as I have shown, one must necessarily deviate from Western standards in order to accurately assess the merits of Trinh's work.

If Christopher's discussion of *This Side* is inundated with casual oversight, her analysis of *The Will of Heaven* is an exercise in textual distortion. And if Christopher dismisses *This Side* on the basis of the author's class background, her demonization of *The Will* clearly stems from her disapproval of Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn's political background. Prior to the collapse of Saigon, Nguyễn fought for the ARVN and served as a lieutenant. After the war ended, like most ARVN affiliates, Nguyễn spent three years in various so-called reeducation camps his ties to the southern regime. *The Will of Heaven*, written with E.E. Richey, provides Nguyễn's perspective of the war and of the reeducation camp experience. The 341-page memoir is divided into four parts. Part one weaves together the personal and the national contexts of the war, focusing heavily on the ideological and political predicaments of South Vietnam. Nguyễn unequivocally condemns the U.S. and the corrupted southern leadership for South Vietnam's ultimate defeat. Part two covers the chaotic period immediately after the war, from June 1975 to early 1976, and discusses the communist strategies for handling people with ties to the southern regime. Chapters three and four are devoted to the reeducation camp experience which ends with the author's release and subsequent escape by boat from Vietnam.

Christopher labels Nguyễn's deeply engaging ruminations of the war an attempt "to meet the expectations of the American audience and curry American favor through his doctrinaire anticommunism and his cloying pro-Americanism." She bends textual evidence out of whack to prove his "bourgeois attitudes," "smugness," and "full ignorance of the peasantry." She renders his attitudes towards the Montagnard "racist" and his observations about the Moi tribe women "prurient." Of his portrayal of the reeducation camp experience, Christopher wishes "for a less self-pitying rendition" even if she "cannot dismiss his sufferings." Last but not least, she finds his "unintentional self-elevation" – which she leaves unelaborated – not only to be "the most disturbing aspect of the book" but also "almost completely lacking in integrity."⁴¹ While an in-depth discussion of Nguyễn's insightful memoir is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is necessary to revisit and revise some of Christopher's most troubling arguments.

Christopher jumpstarts the discussion of *The Will* with a series of sweeping accusations: "Ngan's narrative is firmly rooted in his bourgeois attitudes. He devotes the bulk of his book to his time in the reeducation camp, although he spent an equal amount of time fighting in the delta with the ARVN. He focuses on the corruption of the Communists and consistently portrays himself as pro-American from his high school onwards."⁴² In addition to being irrational (regarding how Nguyễn chooses to focus his work), Christopher's observations are gravely inaccurate and highly misleading. In few, if any, places in the memoir does Nguyễn portray himself as pro-American. His attitudes towards the U.S. are best described as a combination of anger and disappointment. I argue that Nguyễn conveys these attitudes in the most unambiguous way. For instance, in the first paragraph of the opening chapter, Nguyễn lays out the early signs of resentment:

Like most of the other cadets at the Infantry Office Training Academy, I brought with me the anti-Americanism that seemed to be a universal campus phenomenon in the 1960s. It was from our professors that we learned to distrust the Americans in Vietnam, and to blame them for almost all that was wrong with our country.⁴³

What Nguyễn learns from the classroom soon becomes reinforced through his own observations about the presence of the Americans in Vietnam (the PX system which keeps the back market in business or the presence of the GIs which partly explains the moral breakdown of the southern society). Nguyễn becomes even more critical of the U.S. as his involvement in the war deepens. He is clearly embittered by the American eagerness to abandon South Vietnam, an eagerness the U.S. made all too transparent during the Paris peace talks after the 1972 Tet Offensive:

Instead of capitalizing militarily on our surprising victory over the North Vietnamese Army [in the Battle of An Loc during the 1972 Offensive], the United States began to negotiate with our enemy again. And at the negotiating table, much to our chagrin, they behave more like the vanquished than the victor.⁴⁴

Ultimately Nguyễn perceives the American withdrawal from South Vietnam no less an act of betrayal:

On January 27, 1973, the United States and three other parties involved in the Paris peace talks signed an accord with spelled doomed for my country. When I learned of its terms, I shook myself in disbelief.... The Nixon-Kissinger “peace” was unjust. What kind of fairness was there in an agreement which required the withdrawal of all U.S. forces, but which permitted vast numbers of NVA troops to remain in South Vietnam?⁴⁵

It is indeed troubling that Christopher would ignore the above to launch charges against Nguyễn’s “cloying pro-Americanism.” Christopher also relies heavily on strategic exclusion and willful distortion of evidence to advance her arguments. For example, Christopher calls Nguyễn a racist for his depiction of the Moi highlanders of the village of Bombo, arguing that Nguyễn portrays them as “rude and exotic savages who are childlike in their simplicity.”⁴⁶ While Nguyễn does depict the Moies as good-natured and their way of life simple, his overall depiction of them is far more complex than that. People of the Moi tribe, like ethnic Vietnamese, are divided into two distinct groups: those sympathetic to the communist cause and those supportive of the republican struggles. Because the pro-communist elements of Soc Bombo are off in the mountains building roads, Nguyễn’s encounters with the pro-republican elements turn out, perhaps understandably, quite positively. Nguyễn finds them “quite easy to get along with” and, after having “ample time” to observe, “[comes] to respect and admire their way of life.”⁴⁷ Moreover, it is unclear how Christopher arrives at the conclusion that Nguyễn “has a prurient interest in the Montagnard women.” His attitudes towards the latter are best described as curious and friendly:

The Moies were generally an attractive group, especially the women, with their good features and large, gentle, widely-spaced eyes... One of the most interesting customs that made the Moi women interesting to us was their practice of going about innocently bare-breasted while on their lower bodies they wore a loose sarong like garb. In repose the girls were attractive, but the first time I saw one of them smile, I was shocked to discover all of her front teeth were filed down evenly, almost to her gum.⁴⁸

Christopher berates Nguyễn for using the term “Moi” to describe the highlanders. While the Vietnamese word *mọi* carries a derogatory connotation, it is important to note that Nguyễn refers specifically to the ethnic group Moi itself. Although the name *Moi* is now archaic, it used

to describe one of the six racial categories in Vietnam (Tôi, Mọi, Thầy, Đày, Tay, and Thai).⁴⁹ And even though both usages (mọi / Mọi) are offensive from a contemporary perspective, it is important to distinguish the difference in order to decipher Nguyễn's original intention. (Christopher is gravely mistaken in noting that "there is no polite term in general use to refer to the hill-dwelling ethnic groups in Viet Nam, so the French term Montagnard is now commonly used."⁵⁰ In actuality the term Montagnard has long vanished from popular usage, being replaced by "người thượng," "người dân tộc." Current official designations include "dân tộc thiểu số," or "dân tộc miền núi.")

In Christopher's eye, Nguyễn can do no right. If he accepts favors from the guards to protect other prisoners, "he [violates] the prisoners' code of ethics," which makes him no less a "collaborator" of the camp system. If he craves for coffee produced from "the fine former French plantations of Ban Me Thuot," he is "nostalgic for the French." If he likes Simon and Grafunkle's song *The Sound of Silence*, he is displaying his "superior pro-American" stance. He always should have done more to prove his integrity. Nguyễn already risks grave consequences to care for and conceal the severely wounded Dr. Van, an escapee who has no choice but turn himself in, but his utter inability to protect Dr. Van from two wandering guards prompts her to question his character:

Ngan promises to get a sympathetic guard to bring [Dr. Van] in, so he will not be shot. It takes Ngan awhile to make contact with the guard, and before the guard can leave to get Dr. Van, Ngan see two other guards heading into the jungle where Dr. Van is hiding. He watches them go and does nothing, although it seems he might have found a way to distract the guards.⁵¹

Rather than try to explain why Nguyễn feels that "there was absolutely nothing [he] could do but wait," Christopher latches on to his severely curtailed ability to act to suggest Nguyễn's cowardice or lack of integrity. Here, literary assessment becomes personal judgment. Having painted Nguyễn's work in the least favorable light possible, Christopher pursues her line of ill-reasoning to its [il]logical end. It is concluded that Nguyễn "has written a story that most Americans would expect to hear" and that he "displays the same shortsightedness of the majority of Euro-American writers, rather than the complex biculturalism of other exile writers."⁵² The latest is perhaps the only justifiable observation of the entire analysis, if only because Nguyễn's main objective is to draw attention to the South Vietnamese quandary during and immediately after the war, not to the process of crafting a "bicultural identity."⁵³ As we can see, Christopher's readings of Minh Đức Hoài Trinh's and Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn's works provide rather apt examples of the trivialization and distortion of South Vietnamese narratives even by progressive scholars. *The Vietnamese: Selectively Remembered*

The near absence and, when present, trivialization of the South Vietnamese experience also inundates American Vietnam War scholarship. While it is part of the general under-representation of the Vietnamese voices, the particular and extreme neglect of the South Vietnamese has remained largely unamended. Critical examination of southern historical predicament continues to be impoverished in quantity and drearily functionalistic in quality. Excepting the remarkably nuanced scholarships of a few mavericks such as Mark Bradley and Philip Catton⁵⁴, discussions of South Vietnam continue to rely on heavily worn stereotypes about South Vietnamese incompetence and cowardice. Peter Zinoman's astute observation of this tendency in American Vietnam War scholarship merits a quote at length here:

For obvious reasons, American commentators partially excuse the failings of the United States in Vietnam by attributing the defeat of the American effort to the myriad

shortcomings of the southern regime. Memoirs by American leaders, such as Robert McNamara, are especially egregious in this regard. However, the relentless characterization of southern fecklessness may be found in virtually all secondary scholarship on the war. Based on one-sided U.S. government records and deeply self-serving, first person American memoirs – and without consulting with either the RVN archives or the raft of Vietnamese language memoirs written in exile by southern government officials – American scholars charge the southern regime with rampant corruption and mismanagement, and depict the military as incompetent and cowardly. While not without some merit, such claims serve to draw attention away from the incompetence, counterproductivity and sheer criminality of the American intervention.⁵⁵

As a consequence of scholarly marginalization, in spite of the enormous (and constantly replenished) corpus of Vietnam War scholarship, much too little is actually revealed of the struggles and aspirations of the very people in whose name America once sought to “protect and defend.”

The bias against South Vietnam inundates not only Vietnam War scholarship but also other areas of knowledge production. Holdings of Vietnamese-language sources in virtually all major American libraries reveal an emphatic focus on North Vietnamese sources (a reality that deeply troubles the author studied in this chapter); the number of South Vietnamese literary and historical writings is decidedly, disproportionately fewer compared to that of the Northern counterparts. Americans have also been more interested in translating and publishing works by writers from the North as opposed to exilic writers, a “puzzling” phenomenon carefully documented in John Schafer’s most recent study.⁵⁶ Perhaps no other discursive space reflects the marginal status of South Vietnam more clearly than the field of Vietnam Studies. Scholars of modern Vietnamese history, until very recently, have focused primarily on [myriad aspects of] Vietnamese communism. Pioneering works on Vietnam, generally produced by scholars with direct ties to the war or had been connected to the antiwar movement, have been said to legitimate the continuity thesis, a historiographical interpretation that renders the eventual triumph of communism inevitable.⁵⁷ The superiority of the communist historical vision, posits the continuity thesis, lies in its ability to resonate with traditional indigenous values more substantially than any other nationalist visions asserted during Vietnam’s struggle for national independence. But such interpretation has uncanny resemblance to official Vietnamese historiographical narrativization of legitimacy and would subsequently be brought under scrutiny by the subsequent generation of scholars. Coming of age in the period that witnessed both the christening and premature death of the state-sponsored Renovation policies in the late 1980s, second-generation Vietnam scholars challenge the continuity thesis on the grounds of historical hindsight and ideological exigency. These scholars tend to emphasize war strategies or political opportunities to explain the communist triumph in Vietnam, rejecting rather than replicating the cherished notion of inevitability.⁵⁸ While decidedly transformative, scholarly engagements with the historical development of communism continue to regard the South Vietnamese experience a matter irrelevant to or beyond their immediate scopes of inquiries. It was not until the last decade that saw the emergence of a handful of scholars interested in examining the role of South Vietnam in modern Vietnamese nationalist history.⁵⁹ These works, while decidedly revisionist, continue to be far and few in between, constituting notable exceptions rather than the trend in the field of Vietnam Studies.

The South Vietnamese: Dismembered

If South Vietnamese memory of the war has been elided in the United States, in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam amnesia has been total and complete. Immediately after the takeover in 1975, literary and aesthetic artifacts produced or procured by South Vietnamese were sought out and burned to the ground. Memorials and national cemeteries dedicated to the South Vietnamese war dead were demolished or over time plowed under to make room for factory development. Saigon and its streets were given new names, mostly in honor of pro-/communist nationalist heroes. In a country with almost two-thirds of the population born after the war, the “Republic of Vietnam” is but an esoteric historical fact whose existence is summoned to be dismissed as illegitimate (fake). The Vietnam War, that which continues to provoke intense reactions among Americans – including Vietnamese Americans, is simply constructed as another event in the long and proud history of Vietnamese resistance to foreign domination.

The political and historiographical act of disappearing continues well into the present day. The current government continues to suppress and ban almost all of South Vietnam’s former literary output. Almost all diasporic intellectuals with ties to the southern regime continue to be denied publishing activities in Vietnam. While tales of the North’s triumphant battles continue to dominate Vietnamese war accounts, almost no account of the war from a southern perspective makes it to the average reader in Vietnam, at least not through the official channel. Currently, the government prohibits any critical discussion of the violent and discriminatory policies enacted against South Vietnamese immediately after the war. There has been no official synthesis of the impact of the forced relocation project called the New Economic Zones, which displaced thousands of South Vietnamese to the countryside or the frontier. There is no official account of the inner workings of the so-called reeducation prison system, to which thousands of [mostly] men and women with direct involvement with the southern regime were ruthlessly subject in the years following the war. It is also this particular context that informs the works of Lê Thị Huệ’s as well as those of the majority of Vietnamese diasporic writers. In many ways, the continued production and existence of Vietnamese diasporic literature against seemingly implacable odds (an aging and highly scattered readership, a steady decline in the number of writers, the lack of criticism...) present the ultimate challenge – corporeal, ethical and political – to the systematic erasures of the South Vietnamese experience.

Part two: “This Country Does It to Itself!”

In *Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War*, Katherine Kinney demonstrates that the thematics of fraternal conflict, typically configured as the trope of friendly fire, organizes the plot of American war narratives to the point of being “virtually the only story that has been told by Americans about the war.”⁶⁰ The trope of friendly fire features the death of one American at the hand of another and points towards the perceived reality and the symbolic expressions of what Vietnam means: an elusive and exotic backdrop of an American civil war. *Memories of My Anh* and *Dragons and Snakes* take up this thematics and, in the process of doing so, turn American narcissism on its head. In both works fraternal conflict figures as an intergenerational phenomenon that plagues almost every Vietnamese household.

In *Memories*, the main conflict revolves around Quang and Thắng, who are first cousins. Thắng is the illegitimate son of Quang’s youngest uncle’s. He is “taller than the tallest pupils”⁶¹ in their class but always ranks bottom in school performance. Thắng’s looks and charm compensate for his intellectual shortcomings and make him extremely popular among girls. The

cousins exhibit a mutual love interest in My Ánh (who functions as an unambiguous symbol of Vietnamese history in the novel). My Ánh is initially more interested in Quang, but latter's hesitation to act opens up the opportunity for Thắng to get closer and ultimately win My Ánh over. Long before Thắng "steals" My Ánh from Quang, he already stole from Quang's oldest brother, Anh Hai, his first love. Anh Hai was committed to his childhood friend and neighbor, Hiền, and had every intention of marrying her, but during his time away to college, Thắng managed to capture Hiền's interest. Soon they were seen together everywhere, taking bike rides "out in the open streets, clinging tightly onto each other."⁶² Similar conflicts took place in the previous generation. Thắng's mother, Monique, was initially married to his fourth uncle, Chú Tư, who was assassinated for his participation in an anti-communist nationalist organization, an assassination allegedly facilitated by Monique. After Chú Tư's death, Monique took up with Chú Bảy and gave birth to Thắng. Chú Bảy subsequently joined the communist forces while the rest of his family, including his own father, Thắng and Quang's grandfather, remained fervently anticommunist. Similarly, Thắng follows his parents' footsteps while his first cousins, Quang and Anh Hai, continue to regard communism with suspicion.

If fraternal conflict is configured largely as love triangles in *Memories*, in *Dragons* it seems far more literal, encompassing both familial and political dimensions. Thời, Quảng, Hưng, Phương are biological brothers who find themselves on opposite sides of the war. Thời, the eldest brother, inherits from his uncle-in-law a French education as well as the latter's intense resistance to communism. Always dressed in the latest Parisian fashion and passionate about politics, Thời harbors an ambition for public office but is actually quite shielded from the realities of war. Quảng is emphatically idealistic and deeply devoted to the communist cause. He is weary of Thời's lifestyle, which he believes to be out of touch with the common folks. He abhors what he considers to be his uncle's selfish indifference to the poor. Quảng finds in communism not only "a way out" but also the means to social equality.⁶³ Hưng, the youngest and brightest of the four, much like Quảng, is also searching for a way out. Hưng joins the republican forces because he wants to "disappear from [home] immediately." Hưng observes with frustration people's palpable fear of communism and wants to find out "why on earth should [people] fear [the communists] so much?"⁶⁴ Phương, unlike his three brothers, chooses to remain on the sidelines of the debate. He stays close to home to take care of the family rather than following his brothers' footsteps. Nonetheless, like his mother, Phương feels deeply torn by his brothers' irreconcilable political commitments.

The tension within the household is further exacerbated by Phương's older sister, Thanh's, marriage to Châu, a devoted ARVN officer. Châu is caught in a moral double-bind because his duty is to monitor and arrest people like Quảng. The latter is fully aware of Châu's dilemma and takes full advantage of it. Under the pretext of visiting Mrs. Hòa, their mom, Quảng stays for weeks at a time, conducting his own activities and trying to convince Phương to join the communists. Quảng's presence puts a lot of strain on Thanh and Châu's relationship and eventually forces Châu to consider transferring out of Hội An (leaving his wife and their children behind). Thanh tries her best to reason with her mother (not to let Quảng come), then her brother (not to come) and her husband (not to transfer). But at every turn, she is greeted with resistance. The pressure becomes so unbearable at one point that Thanh almost breaks down: "I can't take it anymore! My husband, my mother and my brother. This whole family is stupid! What the shit is Communism or Republicanism? Why is everyone in this family fighting over it? If this keeps up, this house is going to explode!"⁶⁵

If being pulled in multiple directions causes Thanh anger, frustration and resentment, it only fortifies her mother's maternal instincts. While Mrs. Hòa has every reason to be critical of Quảng's decision to join the communists, she chooses to protect rather than turn him in. Even though her husband had joined and become disillusioned with the Revolution and was forced to flee to the South where he died just a few months later, and in spite of the facts that many of her family members were victims of the brutal Land Reform policies, Mrs. Hòa reasons to herself that "not every cadre is tainted by communism."⁶⁶ Mrs. Hòa attempts repeatedly, and fails repeatedly, to get her children to sit down and talk to one another. In spite of the tension Quảng brings to the family, she continues to love and see the best in him. At one point, to assuage his mother, Phương agrees to talk to Quảng. After the brothers' conversation, she rushes over to Phương, unable to contain her happiness, and asks him:

What do you think about your brother? Doesn't he have great ideals? Nobody listened to him, but even in his tender years, he already paid close attention to our nation's problems. I am truly happy that you are able to talk to your brother at last. I know that you are the only one who can understand his goals. I love you the most of all my children and I place all of my trust in you.⁶⁷

It is important to note that Mrs. Hòa's praises for Quảng in this passage is less a reflection of her admiration of Quảng's ideals than her desire to get Phương to accept his brother, for she persists in hoping to convince Quảng to *chiêu hồi*, or defect, to the South Vietnamese side.⁶⁸ When her attempts prove a little more than futile, she channels her energy into accepting her son: "Your brother is who he is, you know, and I can not forsake him. We can only try to be true to one another. Buddha teaches us that we reap what we sow. Nothing is absolute in this life. There is always something good in the bad, unreal in the real. No one can be sure that the good is all good and the bad is all bad."⁶⁹ In spite of increasing pressure from her neighbors and family, Mrs. Hòa is encouraged by maternal love to shield Quảng from harm at all costs. She ignores her brother-in-law's repeated warnings that "the communists are masters of manipulating and taking advantage of family ties" and holds on to the hope that her son is inherently a good man. But her determination to stand by Quảng and her unyielding efforts to defend his actions come at a tremendous cost to her physical and emotional wellbeing. Phương observes the pain and guilt that haunt his mother:

When she looks at me with tears flooding in her eyes, I know how much pain she has had to endure. I know that guilt has eaten away at her soul and that she has fallen, no longer able to stand up. Her eyes have pleaded with me: "No, no, it is not my fault, my dear son." And each time when this happens, I would walk away, unable to say a single word of comfort to her.⁷⁰

Mrs. Hòa's unameliorable pain attest powerfully to moral perversity that is the legacy of civil wars: What is a nation to gain when her children destroy one another in her own name? For a mother, emotional injury is both an immediate consequence as well as a lasting legacy. There is no easy way to come to terms with defeat as there is no easy way to cope with victory. In the "end," fraternal differences are resolved at the cost of irretrievable losses and separation. The war has yet to end but Châu is already dead and both Hung and Quảng MIA. But there is no redemption in death. Blood gets shed and history eventually settled, but personal victory remains at best an ambiguous and elusive reality.

As we can see in both works the figuration of siblings belonging to mortally oppositional fronts of the war - whether by choice or by circumstance - is at once literal and allegorical, gesturing towards the moral and the political dilemmas characteristic of civil wars. Lê's

deployment of this thematics becomes especially poignant given the fact that it has deep roots in the historical realities of Vietnam. For the war wasn't fought among Vietnamese-speaking strangers living in two geographically isolated regions neatly designated as North and South Vietnam. It was brothers, sisters, cousins or neighbors who fought against one another. I argue that it is precisely this mutually constitutive relationship between the literal and the allegorical, the literary and the historical, that enables and attests to the novels' most subversive power. Lê's figuration of fraternal conflict effectively reminds us that the war that has come to be known as the Vietnam War was first and foremost a Vietnamese civil war, a visceral extension of the Vietnamese affair, a[nother] bloody episode in the repeated history of infighting among the Vietnamese people. And even though the scarring legacy of the war on American society cannot, must not, be denied, the stubbornly held perception of the war "as something Americans did to each other"⁷¹ proves at best an ironic, if explicable, hyperbole and at worst an imperialistic habit of historical cooptation. In this way Lê's strategic appropriation of the trope of friendly fire presents a decisive disruption to what John Carlos Rowe calls "American recyclings of the Vietnam War"⁷² and a powerful challenge to the American erasure of the Vietnamese from their own history and from the American collective memory of the war.

Lê's insistence on restoring the Vietnamese to their own history goes well beyond her focus on the thematics above. In Lê's works the Vietnamese spring into life rather than merely serving as "a backdrop for the drama of America confronting itself."⁷³ Whether portrayed as reluctant participants or curious observers, scheming ideologues or deeply torn idealists, victors or losers, Lê's characters are historical subjects – never "shadows" – compelled by the torrents of circumstance to participate in the making of history. But this reclamation of subjectivity is far from an uncritical celebration of historical agency; instead I argue that it serves as the very basis for Lê's critique of Vietnamese cultural and historical identity. While both *Memories* and *Dragons* explicitly reference the international contexts that shape the war, Lê unfailingly brings the war back to the Vietnamese themselves. She asserts forcefully in *Memories* via Mr. Siêu, a retired college professor: "Surely this war has been shortchanged by the Geneva Accords... But believe me, only a small part of this country's dysfunctional history is the fault of foreigners. This nation does it to itself."⁷⁴ This sentiment is again echoed in *Dragons* via Bích Chi's father, also a deeply disillusioned intellectual: "The halving of this country was made possible by the foreigners and by our own incompetence... So don't just blame the foreigners; we must face the consequences of our own stupidity."⁷⁵

An integral part of Lê's projects involves the quest to explain what she perceives to be Vietnam's [seeming innate] penchant for bloodshed and perpetual infighting.⁷⁶ If history has demonstrated time and again the Vietnamese tendency towards self-violence, how can one make sense of its pre/disposition for doing so? At the psychological level, Lê suggests that the Vietnamese suffer from a "delusional" eagerness to make history and a chronic obsession with wars. But this eagerness is greatly complicated by almost a primal desire for peace. This simultaneous and necessarily contradictory obsession constitutes a fundamental aspect of Vietnamese cultural identity and dangerously informs its historical trajectory. This sentiment is expressed via Mr. Siêu, a retired college professor, in *Memories*:

We [believe we] are a brave people. We are descendants of proud and glorious history-makers. Our history has been written by countless wars – against foreign aggressors and against ourselves alike. We are eager to sacrifice. Eager to shed blood to settle history. Don't you see? It's not just individuals who are obsessed and delusional. It's the entire people, obsessed and delusional together... But surely no one can deny our dreams of

peace. Truly we are dreamers. We long for peace in the deepest recess of our subconscious. We are intoxicated by our own longing.⁷⁷

For Lê, the Vietnamese find wars at once repugnant and intriguing, peace at once alluring and elusive. As a consequence of this self-contradictory historical impulse, they “let history frolic recklessly alongside extravagant adventures into the unknown.” These “extravagant adventures,” what Lê points to as reckless pursuits of peace, turn Vietnamese into victims and perpetrators of their own desire.

No other character embodies this recklessness better than My Ánh, the female protagonist in *Memories*. Ánh enjoys risks and takes great pride in following her heart. Ánh muses to Quang often about “liv[ing] according to your feelings, [t]o your heart. If you love someone, tell them so. If you hate someone, make sure they know.”⁷⁸ She is an advocate for living in the moment and consistently disregards the potential consequences of her actions. For example, when a girl friend cautions Ánh against eating too many green guavas, Ánh answers glibly, “No matter. Eating is divine. I satiate my taste buds first and worry later!”⁷⁹ Or when Mr. Siêu tells Ánh to be extra careful when crossing a dangerous passage from Dalat to Saigon, Ánh responds nonchalantly, “Why worry now? I will find out when I get there.”⁸⁰ Ánh makes decisions recklessly and, from Quang’s perspective, “justifies things whichever way suits the moment.” When asked to lead part of a student music event, she insists upon bringing Điệp, Quang’s and Ánh’s mutual friend, a talentless singer with the dream of making it big, onstage. As Quang correctly predicted and rigorously protested, Điệp’s performance turns out to be a complete disaster. Quang leaves early because he cannot bear seeing Điệp make a fool of himself. Later, Ánh scolds Quang for leaving early and justifies her decision to invite Điệp as follows: “It wasn’t kind of you to leave like that. You should have given our friend a chance. I wanted him to find out for himself whether he could become a singer or put this dream away completely.”⁸¹ Not only does Ánh refuse to acknowledge partaking in Điệp’s humiliation, she manages to make her decision look almost noble.

Because Ánh lives for the moment, she is drawn to risks and refuses to see ahead. Her myopic approach to happiness has a serious impact on her own life. Ánh is initially taken by Quang’s quiet demeanor but when Thắng comes along, Quang proves to be no match. Ánh is drawn to Thắng not in the least because he is handsome, but because he seems “exotic.”⁸² Moreover, while Quang refuses to feed Ánh’s ego, Thắng finds every opportunity to make Ánh feel superb. He compliments her speech, which he finds “charmingly quaint,” her style and figure he consistently finds “beautiful.”⁸³ Despite Ánh’s feelings for Quang, she becomes pregnant with Thắng’s child instead. The two marry in haste to make the matter official. But their union, perhaps expectedly, turns out to be short-lived.

Both the name My Ánh and the character are an allusion to My Châu, a Vietnamese legendary figure infamously linked to treason. My Châu is the daughter of King An Dương Vương whose kingdom, Âu Lạc, the ancestral heartland of modern-day Vietnam, was blessed with the gift of a divine bow, one that can shoot with deadly accuracy thousands of arrows at a time, making Âu Lạc impervious to attempted foreign invasions. Triệu Đà, the ruler of nearby kingdom Nam Hải, is determined to conquer Âu Lạc. But first, he needs to find out the secrets to Âu Lạc’s military prowess. He sends his son Trọng Thủy to ask for My Châu’s hand under the guise of establishing permanent peace between the two kingdoms. While Trọng Thủy and My Châu are deeply in love, Trọng Thủy must still obey and carry out his father’s order to determine Âu Lạc’s points of vulnerability. Trọng Thủy coaxes My Châu into divulging the secret of Âu Lạc’s divine weapon. Trọng Thủy even succeeds in asking My Châu to let him see the bow.

Some time later, Trọng Thủy steals the bow for his father and replaces it with a man-made replica. Now in possession of the divine weapon, Triệu Đà conquers Âu Lạc quickly and easily. Upon discovering the source of his defeat, King An Dương Vương kills My Châu on their way to escape. After Trọng Thủy finds his wife's body, he commits suicide by drowning himself in the royal well inside Cổ Loa, the palace of Âu Lạc.

It is precisely the dramatic interplay between and among the competing forces of desire and betrayal, filial piety and personal happiness, individual love and patriotism, which explains the enduring resonance as well as contentiousness of the legend of Trọng Thủy-My Châu. Both figures provoke as much empathy as they do condemnation for their trials and tribulations.⁸⁴ Sympathizers of My Châu consider her a victim of love and, ultimately, of a rigid socio-cultural system to which women were subject.⁸⁵ Critics of My Châu, among whom is Lê Thị Huệ, blame her gullibility not only for Âu Lạc's downfall but also for My Châu's own tragedy. Lê's reference to this legend is explicit when My Ánh half-facetiously confesses to Quang that she feels herself to be a descendant of My Châu:

...My Ánh is My Châu's descendant. I am kidding a little, but, really. You can laugh but let me tell you something. Generation after generation, one My dies and her soul disappears into a new-born My. There are nights I see each and every one of my ancestors in my dream. Then I see myself return to the royal well where Trọng Thủy drowned himself. I look down but can't see my face reflected in the water. It's a strange well. I feel estranged from it. The feeling of estrangement shames me deeply. Self-inflicted shame. Self-inflicted humiliation. Every time I dream about the well, shame rises up inside me... This feeling has followed me [ever since I was a young girl] and still haunts me today... I would wake up from this dream drenched in sweat, scared out of my senses.⁸⁶

As abruptly as she begins the story, Ánh ends the story and switches to yet another story about her life, gesturing towards her reluctance to reflect on the implications of being a My. Without attempting to understand the source of her shame, My Ánh comes to possess the very gullibility that brought down My Châu. Like My Châu, she is deceived by love. Ánh falls for Thăng's sweet talk rather than Quang's unpleasant truthfulness and, as her premature divorce and single parenthood symbolically suggest, pays a hefty price for doing so.

If the Vietnamese propensity for "extravagant adventures" seems almost innate, it is modern nationalist ideology that moulds it to perfection. In the pages to follow, I will show that nationalism, and its particular rhetoric of revolution and resistance, becomes the very center of Lê's critique. Lê suggests, via Mr. Siêu, that the nationalisms exacerbate the Vietnamese chronic and reckless desire to make history:

Has the historical cloak adorned with pigments of revolution and resistance, indomitability and heroism, become a curse? Look and you will see wars are our karma, a curse as irresistible as the glitter on the royal robe of an enthralling throne. It is indeed shocking, indeed frightening to continue being delusional, to carelessly embark upon adventures, to plunge recklessly into the making of history.⁸⁷

Lê's weariness of modern nationalism, which she deems a major contributor to bloodshed, finds fuller expressions in *Dragons*. Writing from the perspective of a female communist cadre, Nguyễn Thị Thu Hồng, Lê unveils her condemnation of the power of nationalist ideology to manipulate the poorest and the least fortunate, those most eager to sacrifice for higher ideals:

Even if the word "Revolution" conveys a noble ideal, I often wonder to myself if humans have invented these notions to advance humankind or have they become victims of their

own inventions. Too many lives have been lost for an ideal. Is it really worth it?... I wonder why humans don't come up with ideals that serve and advance humanity, rather than experiment with notions that exploit the poor and the weak, especially when these notions require murderous destruction of fellow human beings.⁸⁸

Moreover, I contend that Lê's deft juxtaposition of characters with clearly defined ideological visions (Quảng or Mr. Sáu) alongside those who are inducted into the war by sheer circumstance (Hung) and, at times, against their own will (Nguyễn Thị Thu Hồng) serves as a powerful commentary against the intractable power, hence danger, of ideology. Lê, again, makes explicit this critical stance in "Journey from Innocence to Near Truth":

And what have I learned about the truth of this war? I have learned that people willingly choose to die for ideals they don't have any clear understanding. Northern and Southern people alike have died in the name of "legitimacy" and become no more than mature feeding a land perpetually war-hungry. When they die, the national anthems on both sides strike up, the sounds are but smoke hovering above the land and the souls underneath.⁸⁹

If the Vietnamese penchant for history-making is a curse, then "resistance" and "revolution" become no more than self-fulfilling prophecies. The formulation of history as a curse and war as karma is intimately connected to Lê's synthesis of the cultural imperatives underpinning the Vietnamese predisposition to internal conflicts. Lê argues that the Vietnamese suffer from a kind of cultural sadism, a romance of division if you will, a deep-seated *disbelief* in their own ability to make peace. The basis of civil wars, Lê further suggests, lies in the fact that the perceived cures for this condition are totally at odds with one another. Lê's elaboration of this idea can be found in *Dragons'* allusion to Vietnam's deeply cherished and frequently invoked myth of genesis.

According to this myth, Vietnamese are children of the beautiful fairy Âu Cơ and the heroic dragon-origin King Lạc Long Quân. Âu Cơ and Lạc Long Quân fall in love, get married and bear one hundred children. However, they are unable to put down roots together because neither can adapt to the living habitat of the other. Lạc Long Quân longs for the open seas while Âu Cơ for the high mountains. So they decide to part, each taking 50 children with them. From then on, the Vietnamese populate both the mountains and the seas, but no matter where they are, they take great pride in sharing a noble and heroic ancestry.⁹⁰ Historically, Vietnamese children on both sides of the political divide were taught this story. Today, children in the diaspora as well as those in Vietnam continue to imbibe the reminder of being *con rồng cháu tiên*, literally children and grandchildren of dragon and fairy.

The singular consensus as well as the continued insistence on the myth of genesis is foundational to authentic Vietnamese cultural identity undergird Lê's notion of the romance of division. It is precisely the exploitability and manipulability of the romance of division that explain its cultural and political prevalence [particularly to the projects of nationalisms]. Proponents of unification draw on the basis of a common ancestry to suggest a consolidation of all Vietnamese-speaking peoples while supporters of division insist on the Vietnamese "innate" differences to uphold visions of separate political entities. But the simultaneous perversity that is also the power of the myth means that no matter which way the story goes, there can be no happy ending. Unification results in, as it has, violent subsumptions of difference while permanent division, or severance, presages a level of cultural injury not unlike the emotional and psychological scars left by a divorce. Thus, both the dream of unification and acceptance of division entail certain tensions, generated through either forced cohabitation or painful separation, gesturing towards the impossibility of reconciliation as well as underscoring the

“cursed” dimension of Vietnamese history. Lê’s invocation of the myth of genesis and the legend of My Châu - Trọng Thủy generates a tremendous measure of self-reflexivity in so far as it focuses our attention on the Vietnamese cultural and historical psyche rather than the international dimensions which have been overemphasized as factors dictating the outcome of the war. In interrogating the war within the larger context of Vietnamese history, Lê’s works allow us to see the Vietnamese as active agents participating in the making of their own historical destinies, rather than passive victims of the international political powers that be.

Even though the war ends decisively in both *Memories* and *Dragons*, the novels’ endings remain deeply ambivalent, gesturing towards what I believe to be Lê’s ultimate critique of Vietnamese history. While My Ánh divorces Thắng at the end of *Memories*, she shows no signs of having learned from the experience. Ánh continues to wear her heart on her sleeves and reflects on life ever so blithely: “You’ve got to joke around a little. You’ve got to play with life to be able to laugh at its contradictions, to forgive yourself and to be forgiving towards life. It’s really no big deal! As long as I can breathe, I can find a way out, my friend!”⁹¹ Ánh’s unjustified confidence and self-deceiving attitude belie a stubborn refusal to admit responsibility and learn from the past. The reader is left deeply suspicious of Ánh’s ability to change. Similarly, Phuong remains at the end of *Dragons* an even more passive, if deeply burdened, onlooker of history. For both characters, no real change is in sight. Coupled with Lê’s formulation of Vietnamese cultural identity and the impact of modern nationalist ideology, the endings of the novels point definitively to author’s pessimism about the future trajectory of Vietnam. For, if war is Vietnam’s karma, then peace is only an interlude, not the end result.

Part 3: To Plunge or Not to Plunge?

One of most prominent features that distinguishes Lê’s works from the majority of war narratives produced in Vietnam and elsewhere in the diaspora lies in Lê’s radical departure from the focus on wartime heroism. According to the prominent critic Nguyễn Ngọc, Vietnamese writers in the years remained loyal to the “the old war epic style” in the years following the war. By “epic style,” Nguyễn Ngọc refers to socialist realism, the literary genre that characterizes much of North Vietnam’s wartime literature. As a result, Vietnamese postwar literature – especially prior to the Renovation period – echoes “the same loud heroic song” sung during the war, teleologically promoting and celebrating heroism rather than critically dissecting the realities and impact of the war.⁹²

In the Vietnamese diaspora, war literature continues to be dominated by male memoirists, most of whom had direct involvement in the war.⁹³ Since 1976 former military officers and government officials of South Vietnam have produced a noteworthy number of memoirs, an overwhelming majority of them attempting to explain the fall of South Vietnam.⁹⁴ That these memoirs illuminate for us aspects of the past as well as conditions of their own production is hardly a matter of contestation. As my own reading of six English-language memoirs written by high-profile members of the southern regime confirms, the sudden collapse of South Vietnam, the emasculating conditions of defeat and the agony of historical erasure inform to varying degrees the production of many South Vietnam war narratives.⁹⁵ In spite of the authors’ diverse experience, their works collectively merge towards what I have identified as the project of political intervention and personal reinvention, characterized by a shared effort to challenge American mis/perceptions of South Vietnam and by a personal imperative for self-image restoration. For if, as Foucault asserts, autobiography is a project where “one writes in order to

become other than what one is,” then self-writing allows the writers to seize control of their own images and present themselves as they want to be remembered. To such end, many of the memoirs deploy a similar framework for writing about the war. Firstly, they situate the Vietnam War within the larger context of Vietnamese anti-colonial struggles and postcolonial politics and, in doing so, paints a hauntingly complex portrait of Vietnamese nationalisms. By alluding to multiple visions of Vietnamese postcolonial nation-state(s), they suggest that any contemporary construction of any one historical vision as inherently more organic or patriotic than others is a reflection of political expediency, not historical reality. Secondly, they present and discuss specific social and military achievements accomplished under the southern regime to dispel the notions of South Vietnamese cowardice and incompetence. Finally, by deploying brutal criticisms against the southern regime itself (partly as a strategic move to increase narrative credibility), they ultimately seek to highlight the decisive role of the U.S. in facilitating the fall of South Vietnam.

While responding to drastically different social and political contexts, and despite having almost diametrically opposed *modus operandi* (offensive vs. defensive), war literature produced in Vietnam and in the diaspora nonetheless indulges in the theme of wartime heroism. Interestingly, as this section will demonstrate, this very feature is decidedly absent from *Memories* and *Dragons*. I argue that the lack of emphasis on heroism is part and parcel to Lê’s narrative strategy of inversion, one that challenges misconceptions about South Vietnam by way of inverting the very stereotypes that have come to dominate American popular imagination. Instead of legitimating South Vietnam’s political struggles and ideological aspirations, Lê takes as point of departure popularly held notions of South Vietnam’s lack of political commitment and collective conviction to win the war. This seemingly counter-intuitive characterization of the southern experience, I argue, generates its own dialectically complex echo and reverberates into a deeply destabilizing set of tensions, forcing us to become inquisitive, rather than dismissive, of the southern predicament. Moreover, by focusing on the tumultuous moral, ideological and political whirlwinds that plagued South Vietnam, Lê asks us to reflect upon the acute limitations of stereotypes in informing our generalized perceptions about the war. Most of all, by exposing the hauntingly conflicted characteristic of the southern society, Lê condemns the senselessness, destructiveness and especially moral unjustifiability of [civil] wars.

One of the most popular constructions of South Vietnam, particularly at the height of the American anti-war movement, involves the notions that South Vietnamese were upholders of the [colonial] status quo, radically lacking revolutionary impulses and as a consequence, political legitimacy. It was believed that even if South Vietnam was genuinely interested in establishing an independent non-communist nation-state, unlike its communist counterpart, it suffered an ideological deficiency and was mired deep in the political uncertainty of its own making. This particular construction resonated with both the American Left and Right and came to shape both sides’ diametrically opposed responses to the war. Advocates of American involvement argued that South Vietnam’s uncertainty called for further tutelage while opponents of the war interpreted it to mean that communism was Vietnam’s rightful heir. Rather than resuscitating any one of South Vietnam’s diverse ideological articulations or nation-building visions, Lê situates the former at this precise ideological crossroad, in a frustrating state of limbo, a move that echoes the very misconception Lê seeks to challenge.

In both *Memories* and *Dragons*, there exists no discernible ideological vision of a South Vietnamese postcolonial nation-state. Lê’s is a society deeply uncertain of its own trajectory. Nowhere is this idea more apparent than in Lê’s depiction of the protagonists, Quang in

Memories and *Phuong* in *Dragons*. In stark contrast to the novels' pro-communist antagonists, *Thắng* and particularly *Quảng*, who can express their commitment to communism with clarity and passion, *Quang* and *Phuong* are at best inarticulate about their positions and at worst, have no such positions of which to articulate. Likewise, if *Thắng* represents the invincible force of communism, then *Quang's* attitude towards him can only be described as passive curiosity and flaccid resentment. Growing up, *Quang* never thought much of *Thắng*, which is why when he discovers that *Thắng* has won over his brother's girlfriend, *Quang* becomes "increasingly curious about *Thắng*." Still, the more he tries to make sense of how it happened, the more he becomes perplexed, unable to comprehend the turn of events. *Quang* tells us:

For me, *Anh Hai* is the smartest one of us, and people respect him. But somehow *Thắng* has surpassed even him. When I was young, I thought of *Thắng* as no more than a bastard. A wandering bastard who wouldn't amount to anything. But look at *Thắng* now, pockets full of money, always dresses sharply and looks handsome. People call him "mister," greeting him heartily and shaking his hand every where.⁹⁶

The more *Quang* observes *Thắng*, the more he feels inadequate. When *Quang* joins *Thắng* and his friends at the beach, he cannot help but notice *Thắng's* "magnificent," "luminous" and "statue-like" physique. Even *Thắng's* beach attire makes *Quang's* feel awkward in comparison. While *Quang* wears a boxer-like swimming trunk "made of domestic fabric sewn en masse by his mother," *Thắng* chooses a fashionable American-made "tight fitting swim brief" for the occasion. *Thắng* challenges *Quang* to a swim meet but duly warns the latter: "You might have beat me when we were young. But now that we have grown, I am pretty sure I will beat you. I am real good now." The competition never takes place because *Thắng* decides to take a walk along the beach with his friends instead. *Quang* stays behind to swim alone. His resentment becomes palpable as he "violently kick[s] against the crashing waves and drown[s] [him]self in the muffled rhythm of the ocean." There, he imagines "*Anh Hai* adjusting his glasses, [s]ilent and anxious" against "*Thắng's* magnificent body, laughing and talking." These images, "at times merged together, distorted and broken," would taunt and haunt *Quang* a long time to come.⁹⁷ Out of both spite and curiosity, *Quang* remains largely passive in dealing with *Thắng*. *Quang* does not shun *Thắng* the way his family and relatives do, resulting in their relatively closer, even if equally skin-deep, relationship. Although *Quang* is bothered by *Thắng's* uncouth behavior towards *Anh Hai*, he keeps it to himself. Even when *Thắng* half-heartedly apologizes to *Quang* for having impregnated *My Anh*, *Quang* only "manages a fake smile," offers a feeble note of congratulations, "shakes *Thắng's* hand and pats his shoulder," then quietly watches *Thắng* leave.⁹⁸ *Quang* clearly resents *Thắng* but chooses to remain utterly, perplexingly non-confrontational.

Whereas *Quang's* attitude towards *Thắng* is characterized by muted resentment, his actions towards *My Anh* are marked by a distinct sense of [self-imposed] futility. While *Quang* is clearly in love with *My Anh*, he does not fight for her. *Quang* knows that *Anh* likes to be complimented, but he refuses to stroke her ego. For example, *Anh* takes great pride in her beautiful long dark hair but *Quang* tells her that it is too long, "long to the point of making [her] look too primped." In fact, *Quang* does not quite know what to do with *Anh*. He confesses that he "feel[s] more relaxed when [he is] away from *Anh*, but it doesn't mean that [he is] not excited to be with her." *Quang* is drawn to *Anh* partly because she is beautiful, partly because she "helps [him] discover the surrounding world." Nonetheless, *Quang* finds it difficult to tolerate *Anh's* impulsiveness and vanity. *Quang* does not woo *Anh* the way *Thắng* does because he wants her to be able to "decide for [her]self." These conflicting emotions become the source for *Quang's*

reservations and, consequently, reluctance to fight for Ánh.⁹⁹ This in turn causes the latter to feel utterly rejected. After a disagreement with Quang, Ánh says:

How come nothing I say ever satisfies you? How come you never give me any compliments? You don't like to, I know. You have rejected me from the beginning. I have always known it. The rejection is obvious in the way you complain, the way you treat me. I am not who you are looking for. I am not the woman of your dreams. I am not lucky enough to be anybody's dream...¹⁰⁰

That Ánh feels rejected by Quang is, of course, only part of the story, for she, too, rejects his advances a number of times out of sheer impulses. Nonetheless, it is certain that Quang's deeply ambivalent feeling and actions towards Ánh contribute to her eventual turn to Thắng. Prior to fleeing to Sagon with Thắng in the days preceding the communist takeover, Ánh leaves Quang the following note: "Yesterday I asked you over and over again if you wanted to come with me but you wouldn't answer. You were quiet as you are always quiet. You make me really sad. You always act like it's a struggle to be around me." In spite of what Ánh says in the note, the reader feels Quang's genuine confusion and palpable hurt over Ánh's unannounced departure, as if he had never been asked to come along. When mutual friends ask why Ánh "has left with someone else," he offers the same version of the answer, "I don't know. I genuinely don't know."¹⁰¹

Quang's inability to grasp hold of the situation, his unwillingness to stand up to Thắng and ambivalence towards Ánh point decidedly to Quang's deep feeling of uncertainty. While he resents all that Thắng stands for, he is unable to assert, on the one hand, his resentment towards the latter and, on the other, his own identity vis-à-vis Thắng. Similarly, he seems utterly lost in his relationship with Ánh, unable to decide exactly what to do with his conflicting emotions for her. Quang's dilemma functions as an allegorical gesture towards South Vietnam's ideological predicament, one that regards communism with intense anxiety and apprehension, rhetorically defines itself in opposition to communism, but fails utterly to offer its own vision of a post-colonial non-communist nation-state.

The portrayal of a southern society acutely uncertain of its own trajectory is once again reinforced in *Dragons* and finds fullest expression in the character Phuong. While Lê's characterizations of Hung and Thời also emphasize a general sense of indirection, it is Phuong who viscerally embodies the notion of ideological paralysis. In sharp contrast to the novel's communist antagonist, Quảng, who can lucidly and passionately explain his commitment to the revolution, Thời, Phuong, and Hung are as unconvinced as they are unconvincing of their own positions. Thời represents a class of young Western-educated southerners who are severely out of touch with the political plight and realities of South Vietnam. Thời has an observable knack for "talking politics," a knack driven by the desire to appear *en vogue* rather than intellectual curiosity. His interest in Quảng, for example, reflects not only his impressionability but also his skin-deep passion for politics: "I want to find and talk to Quảng. I am impressed that he's joined the other side. In the West, it's quite a trend now to lean Left. They admire Hồ Chí Minh a lot. We should at least try to find out what communism is all about." Thời's big dream is to become a politician, a dream even his youngest sister finds ludicrous: "Who is he kidding! He's done nothing but moon after the Mademoiselles while in France. Now he wants to become Mr. Politician. A fool trying to do politics. This country, if ran by people like Thời and Quảng, is bound to doom!"¹⁰² Despite this big dream, Thời continues to spend almost all of his time in France, coming home only once a year to visit his family, suggesting further his shallow commitment to the southern struggles.

Hung represents a class of young people who are compelled by the tumults of the moment to participate in the making of history. Hung is the youngest and the most intelligent of the four brothers. He passes the highly challenging college entrance exam with relative ease but chooses to enlist with the ARVN instead. Hung joins the republican forces in part out of curiosity, but mostly because he refuses to remain on the peripheries of the war. Like Quảng, Hung desires something greater than himself, although, unlike Quảng, he cannot imagine what that greater something might be. As Hung's involvement in the war deepens, his disillusionment grows more intense, his frustration more tangible, his uncertainty increasingly insidious. While Hung is committed to the goal of defending South Vietnam against the northern forces, he finds the war excruciatingly ironic and senseless: "Soldiers like us, fuck, there is someone in everyone's family who is a communist. What the fuck is a communist or republican? This war is fuckin' messed up!" Hung's lamentation of the war as being "messed up" is less an admission of confusion but of his own inability to reconcile and fulfill the contradictory moral and political obligations entailed in a civil war.

Although Hung is quite aware that he is fighting against communism, but unlike Quảng, he sees himself acting in self-defense, not in pursuit of any particular ideological vision: "The communists kill in the name of liberation... But soldiers like us, from the commanding officer to the infantryman, kill because we have no choice. We fight with our hearts still soft, still vulnerable... We are not marching North to liberate anyone."¹⁰³ The un-ideological dimension of Hung's motivation to fight the war becomes even more apparent in Hung's letter to his wife written just days before a complete communist takeover: "No matter what happens or wherever I might end up, I believe and tell myself that I fight this war because of you and for you."¹⁰⁴ While it can certainly be argued that Bích Chi represents the southern nation-state and that Hung is fighting in her defense, it continues to be the case that Hung does not see his participation in the war as an assertion of any ideological position vis-à-vis communism. I argue that unlike Quảng who joins the war in clear hopes to unify his country and bring an end to American imperialism, Hung understands his experience in the most visceral terms: fighting as an assertion of manhood, an act of self-defense, and ultimately, a struggle for self-preservation. Nonetheless Hung discovers that he is fighting a losing battle, and that the imminent death facing South Vietnam is facilitated as much by the Paris Peace Accords as the communists' determination: "We cannot outdo [the communist] cruelty. We refuse to deify suicide bombers who believe their martyrdom will liberate the South... We don't even have the heart to go after our enemies who are our own family members. We are forced to go on the defense... So defense is our only strategy. But let me ask you this, what victory can come of mere defense?"¹⁰⁵ Here, Hung alludes to the crippling conditions of the 1973 peace treaty which severely crippled the South Vietnamese ability to act by subjecting the southern regime to unprecedented military and political constraints.¹⁰⁶ By restricting South Vietnam only to token measures of self-defense, the peace treaty effectively preempts the death of South Vietnam. In spite of this bitter realization, Hung remains devoted to the southern struggle as he tells his wife: "We must keep on fighting. We must try, or else we will falter irretrievably." Hung's fear of faltering indicates the belief that failures lie not in military defeat, but in succumbing to fear, itself.¹⁰⁷ His desire to keep fighting reveals not so much Hung's hope in an unlikely southern victory, but Hung's own desire to keep intact his integrity. But Hung's idealism is hardly a *cause célèbre*. As the ending suggests, Hung fighting himself into oblivion is a gesture neither of heroism nor martyrdom, but ultimately, of hapless suicide.

If Thời and Hung represent South Vietnam's lack of political direction, it is Phương who embodies the deeply conflicted and futile character of the southern society. Phương is Mrs. Hòa's third son; he is "kind," "sensitive," never one to "raise his voice even when he is most distressed," and according to the love of his life, Bích Chi, "a man whose shoulders every girl wants to lean on for warmth and protection." He is a thinker, literally a poet, someone who displays little passion for the "thrill" of war. Few deny Phương's many talents and great potential but none comprehend how he can "manage to do nothing [with his life] and maintain [his] sanity."¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Phương's characteristic trademark is typified by a debilitating sense of inaction. Unlike his three brothers, Phương does his best to remain on the sidelines, seeming unable and unwilling to associate with any one position on the war. Phương envies Quảng's passion but finds little appeal in his brother's "rehearsed" and "empty" political rhetoric. Phương would endure "hours" of Quảng's "parrot-like" lectures about communism and feel saturated, but "for reasons beyond [his] own comprehension, never utter a word of protest."¹⁰⁹ Phương rejects communism but his rejection is at once muted and repressed. He does not, for instance, join the ARVN, as Hung does, to thwart the communist infiltration and expansion in southern Vietnam. Phương's inaction is exacerbated by his passive acquiescence to life's struggles, which he accepts as acts of fate. He longs for peace but accepts war as an inescapable human reality.¹¹⁰

Nonetheless, Phương's "perpetual pessimism," or his quiet acceptance of war as an inevitable human experience, neither makes him indifferent to human sufferings nor diminishes his intense longing for peace.¹¹¹ Phương is afraid of conflicts and deeply susceptible to others' pain, which explains why he marries Cẩm Sa instead of competing with Hung for Bích Chi's affection. He both despises and empathizes with his mother's willingness to allow Quảng to take advantage of her. He identifies with his mother's torn emotions and sees in her dilemma his own. Like Mrs. Hòa, Phương "accepts life and all of its complexities. Its ying and yang, kindness and cruelty, nobleness and cowardice, perfection and flaws, positives and negatives." Like Mrs. Hòa, Phương is unable to overcome personal ties to aspire towards higher ideals. In claiming to accept life's complexities, Phương is able to believe "less adamantly that only the good has the right to exist" and, as a consequence, feel "less compelled by the desire to root out evil." Even though Phương recognizes this attitude as a marker of "cowardice" and is "horrified" by it, he "surrenders" to rather than attempts to overcome it. This surrender, in turn, appalls and torments Phương, causing him tremendous pain. As he admits to his friend: "I am horrified by my own cowardice and compassion. It's easy to accept these traces in others, but horrifying to see in oneself. You know, people praise only the suffering of the brave, never the pain of the weak. But how can people value one suffering over another? Someone surrendering to his own weakness also suffers a great deal."¹¹²

Phương's inability to take a stance and the attendant feeling of helplessness enervate him to the point of paralysis. Phương is often seen wandering the streets by himself, struggling to make sense of his own existence. The more Phương tries to understand life, the more he finds it "elusive, [m]eaningless, and [n]ever-ending." One late night while taking a stroll through the largely abandoned city roads, Phương wonders to himself: "Is this what my life has become? I live day in and day out without leaving a trace on earth. Life keeps passing by steadily... [but] all is a foggy, fuzzy gray." Occasionally Phương feels inspired to "stop accepting," to "explode," but this inspiration, like "tiny little waves," visits only for a moment and then just as quickly, "vanishes."¹¹³ It is perhaps of little surprise that Phương constantly admits to feeling *bất lực*, a word that conveys helplessness or futility. This feeling manifests itself literally in Phương's

sexual impotence, culminating in an episode where Phuong is “unable to get an erection” even though “he really tries to” and “genuinely wants to please his wife.”¹¹⁴

Like Tù Thúc, a character in his own play, Phuong dreams of a world where “there is only peace. No suffering. No killing. No crying. No tears. No bloodshed.” Also like Tù Thúc, Phuong feels helpless and chooses to withdraw from life altogether rather than, as Tù Thúc’s wife once suggests to him, “try to make this world full of flaws and problems a better place.” Phuong’s retreat, much in the same way as Tù Thúc’s, is a negation of responsibility as much as of war and human cruelty. Nonetheless, it is a negation borne of compassion rather than indifference, a refusal to recklessly venture into the unknown. Very similar to Quang in *Memories*, Phuong finds himself at the crossroads and seems utterly lost, at once unwilling and unable to assert himself in any one direction. He is weary of communism, but finds little appeal in American-style democracy. Phuong’s failure to carve out his own path ultimately places him in a limbo, which in turns, subjects him to a permanent state of self-pity.

If Phuong and Quang embody the intellectual and political paralysis that plagued South Vietnam, then Lê’s portrayal of the South in this particular light functions forcefully to legitimate South Vietnam’s rejection of communism and negate the charges that South Vietnamese were eager upholders of the [colonial] status quo. In both works, Lê shows us the crisis that which brought down South Vietnam has little to do with the latter’s lack of desire or commitment, and everything to do with its refusal to succumb to the options available to it. South Vietnam fails, first and foremost, because it dares reject the paths carved out on its behalf and, as history has demonstrated, pays a hefty price for doing so. If South Vietnam appears futile in Lê’s work, it is a futility borne of the reluctance to “plunge recklessly into the making of history.” Nonetheless, amidst the political whirlwind that grips the southern society, reluctance results in deep uncertainty and paves way for South Vietnam’s final defeat.

I have shown how Lê’s novels fiercely challenge popular and official narratives seeking to dismiss and/or erase the southern war experience. If the absence of conventional heroism defines Lê’s key representational strategy, it is her antiheroes, Phuong and Quang, who enable Lê’s project of critical self-/interrogation to fully develop. I have demonstrated that the novels’ ruthlessly anti-romantic yet sensitive treatment of the southern experience unsettles official and popular characterizations of South Vietnamese as colonial reactionaries radically devoid of the desire for independent statehood. By contrast, I assert that Lê’s portrayal of a profoundly disillusioned South Vietnam, one that regards both communism and American presence with equal anxiety and apprehension, generates the deep sense of ambiguity that compels us to be reflective, rather than reductive, of the extremely complex ideological and political realities facing South Vietnam. By shifting between pathos and spite, sympathy and condemnation, Lê’s characterization gives rise to powerful critique both of Vietnamese history and of the official historiographical trivializations of the southern dilemma.

Notes

¹ Italics in original

² Jeffords, "Whose Points Is It Anyway?" 162.

³ Webb, "Artistic Resolution, Societal Resolution," 19.

⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁵ John Carlos Rowe reminds us in *The New American Studies* that despite being "the most chronicled, documented, reported, filmed, taped, and – in all likelihood – narrated war in history... [t]he war remains radically ambiguous, undecidable, and indeterminate to the American public, and the heterogeneity of what [is] name[d] either "Vietnam" or the "Vietnam War"... seems to grow even more explicit and tangled with every new effort to "heal" the wounds, every new monument and parade, movie and book." 197.

⁶ Lê, "Khởi Đi Từ Ngày Thơ Đề Đến Gần Sự Thật," 120-121.

⁷ Even though South Vietnamese exiles have also installed their own shrines and memorials in various community spaces to commemorate their dead (one example is the memorial at the Community Center built by Committee for the Protection of the Legitimacy of the RVN and its People in Orange County), the Westminster memorial is officially the only memorial sponsored in part by a local government of the host country. In Vietnam, following the Communist takeover, many South Vietnamese military cemeteries and memorials were vandalized and, over the years, continued to be demolished to make room for factory and housing development. For a fuller discussion of Vietnamese American commemoration politics, see Khuyen Vu Nguyen's article, "Memorializing Vietnam: Transfiguring the Living Pasts" in "What's Going On?" *California and the Vietnam Era*, ed. Marcia A. Eymann and Charles Wollenberg, 152–63.

⁸ Quoted in Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: the Vietnam War, the AIDS epidemic, and the politics of remembering*, 83.

⁹ Sturken, 83.

¹⁰ Christopher, *The Vietnam War/The American War*, 2.

¹¹ As the United States emerged victorious from the shadow of the Gulf War, President George Bush declared in the 1991 State of the Union Address how this victory effectively restored American place in the "New World Order" and redeemed itself from the fiasco that is the Vietnam War.

¹² O'nan, *The Vietnam Reader*, 3.

¹³ Christopher, introduction to *The Vietnam War/The American War*, 1-23.

¹⁴ See Lomperis, "Reading the Asian Wind," 72-84.

¹⁵ See Bibby, "Where is Vietnam? Antiwar Poetry and the Canon." 158-178.

¹⁶ See Jason, "Vision and Tradition in Vietnam War Fiction," 75-86, and Gruner, *Prisoners of Culture*.

¹⁷ Jeffords, introduction to *The Remasculinization of America*.

¹⁸ My own perusal of over four thousand detailed abstracts of critical works produced about the experience of the Vietnam War from the mid-1990s to early-2000s reveals only fifteen works that include and present the experience of the Vietnamese in their own voices. Most of them are discussed and/or mentioned here in this chapter.

¹⁹ Although not directly discussed in this chapter, it is important to mention *Amerasia* 2005 special issue *30 Years AfterWARD: Vietnamese Americans and the U.S. Empire* which pays particular attention to Vietnamese American cultural production. Mark Heberle's 2009 *Thirty Years After: New Essays on Vietnam War Literature, Film, and Art* is also commendable for its inclusion of myriad critical perspectives examining artistic reconstructions of the war from many sides of the war.

²⁰ Chanoff, xv.

²¹ Turner, introduction to *Even the Women Must Fight*.

²² Taylor, introduction to *Vietnamese Women at War*.

²³ Christian Appy 2003 *Patriots: The Vietnam War as Remembered from All Sides* provides an egregious example of the disproportionate privileging of American and Northern Vietnamese perspectives. Of the one hundred forty "stories" featured, less than forty provide the Vietnamese perspectives. Of these forty, less than five feature the South Vietnamese experience. When asked about the lack of balance in number during Q&A session at UC Berkeley (2004), Appy responded that he was not able to find more the South Vietnamese voices. This response seems deliberately forced, given the sheer population of Vietnamese émigrés in the United States at the time of Appy's research.

²⁴ Christopher, 34.

²⁵ Trinh's pre-1975 publications include several volumes of poetry and short story collections as well as book-length novels. The back jacket of the Vietnamese version of *This Side, the Other Side* lists the following works: *Lang Thang*

(poetry collection - 1960), *Thư Sinh* (musical - 1961), *Bơ Vơ* (novella - 1964), *Hán* (short story collection - 1964), *Mơ* (poetry collection - 1965), *Thiên Nga* (novella - 1965), *Hai Góc Cây* (novella - 1966), *Sám Hối* (novella adapted into film - 1966), *Bức Thành Biên Giới* (novella - 1967), *Đàn Bà Đàn Ông* (essays - 1967), *Tử Địa* (novella - 1973), *Bài Thơ Cho Ai* (poetry collection - 1974), *Trà Thắt* (novella - 1974). As early as 1976, only one year after the collapse of Saigon, Trinh began to publish again in France: *Giông Mưa Trích Lịch* (1976), *Chiếm Lại Quê Hương* (musical - 1976), *Bài Thơ Cho Quê Hương* (poetry collection - 1976).

²⁶ Christopher, 95.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 96.

²⁹ Trinh, *Bên Ni Bên Tê*, 8.

³⁰ Ibid., 33.

³¹ Christopher, 28.

³² Ibid., 97.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ The novel ends literally with the Bui and Lộc looking out at the starry night sky. Lộc tells her, “Look at the all the stars out there. Each star is another reason to hope.” Trinh, *Bên Ni Bên Tê*, 304.

³⁵ Nguyễn Du, *The Tale of Kieu*, translated by Huynh Sanh Thong.

³⁶ Trinh, *Bên Ni Bên Tê*, 51

³⁷ Ibid., 104-5.

³⁸ Ibid., 102.

³⁹ Ibid., 146.

⁴⁰ See Nguyễn Thị Hoàng, *Vòng Tay Học Trò* (1964), Trùng Dương, *Vừa Đi Vừa Ngược Nhìn* (1964), Túy Hồng, *Những Sợi Sắc Không* (1969) Nhã Ca, *Giải Khăn Sô Cho Huế* (1965), Nguyễn Thị Thụy Vũ, *Khung Rêu* (1970).

⁴¹ Christopher 70, 65, 66, 67, 69.

⁴² Ibid., 65

⁴³ Nguyen, *The Will of Heaven*, 9.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁵ Ibid.,

⁴⁶ Christopher, 67.

⁴⁷ Nguyen, *The Will of Heaven*, 282

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ See Pelly, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past*, chapter 2.

⁵⁰ Christopher 67.

⁵¹ Ibid., 69.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 70

⁵⁴ Mark Bradley’s project traces Vietnamese and American cultural imaginings of each other to demonstrate that these perceptions shape Vietnamese and American policies (or the lack thereof) towards each other. By situating his discussion of the US attitudes towards Vietnam within the larger discourse of Orientalism, Bradley insists that it is not only the international dynamics of the Cold War that shaped US policies towards Vietnam, but it is also the American imperialist/racist ideology that continued to dictate US-Vietnam relations. Explicit in Bradley’s work is a critique of the US capitalist imperialist practices that seek to re-make US-dominated countries in its own image and perhaps to explain why America “lost” Vietnam to communism (implicitly attempting to single out the U.S. Orientalist ideology as an explanation). Particularly important is Bradley’s thoughtful attention to the South Vietnamese perception of the United States, showing them not as passive puppets, but as historical agents with their own distinct post-colonial vision. Philip Catton’s 2003 *Diem’s Final Failure* is by far the only book-length study that closely examines South Vietnam’s nation-building struggles and ideological aspirations. Catton takes great care in situating the Vietnam War within the context of Vietnam’s post-colonial politics *predating* the arrival of the Americans. He successfully demonstrates that far from being passive puppets of the Americans, South Vietnamese leaders, the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in particular, often clashed with American advisors especially when the quondam asserted their own ideas and visions regarding the future directions for South Vietnam.

⁵⁵ Zinoman, “Vietnamese-Americans and the Future of Vietnamese Studies in the United States,” 295.

⁵⁶ John Schafer laments in *Vo Phien and the Sadness of Exile*, the only book-length study devoted to the works of a single South Vietnamese writer, as follows: “Extremely few works written in Vietnamese by Vietnamese exiles have been translated into English, a fact I discovered when I compiled *Vietnamese Perspectives on the War in Vietnam*:

An Annotated Bibliography of Works in English in 1997... Most works that have been translated are by northerners who fought against the South Vietnamese regime and its American allies... These are fascinating works and one can only applaud the translators and publishers who have made them available for English-language readers. Still, the almost exclusive focus by American publishers on works by writers from the North is puzzling.” See introduction to *Vo Phien* for detailed discussion.

⁵⁷ This pattern is relatively transparent in first-generation Vietnam scholarships. See, for examples, Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (1976) proposes that Leninism triumphed in Vietnam because it provided the necessary virtue, or remedies, necessary to solve the problems of regionalism in Vietnamese life. John K. Whitmore, “Foreign Influences and the Vietnamese Cultural Core: A Discussion of the Pre-Modern Period,” concludes that “perhaps the Viet Minh and the communists hewed closer to the cultural core” of the Vietnamese people. Keith K. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (1982), sees also an intimate relationship between Vietnamese cultural values and the tenets of communism. For more in-depth discussion of the prevalence of the continuity thesis, see Kim Ninh, introduction to *A World Transformed*.

⁵⁸ See David Mar, *Vietnam, 1945: The Quest for Power* (1995); Hue Ho Tam Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (1992); Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed* (2000); Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940*.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*. Newer scholarships by budding scholars Nu Anh Tran?

⁶⁰ Kinney, *Friendly Fire*, 4.

⁶¹ Lê, *Memories*, 20

⁶² *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 84

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 215

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 229

⁶⁸ It is also important to note that Mrs. Hoa's hope to convince Quang to defect is an expression of her desire to minimize the ideological differences, thus tension, among her children, not an expression of her identification with the southern regime.

⁶⁹ Lê, *Dragons*, 215

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁷¹ Kinney, 5.

⁷² Rowe, 6.

⁷³ O'nan, 3.

⁷⁴ Lê, *Memories*, 78.

⁷⁵ Lê, *Dragons*, 257.

⁷⁶ Indeed, the historical formation of the modern Vietnamese nation-state has been characterized by repeated civil wars (defined here as military conflicts among Vietnamese-speaking peoples). The fifteen century was marked by Thanh Nghe's repeated conquests of Dong Kinh which led to three generations of warfare, now referred to as the Le-Mac civil wars, throughout the next century between Thanh Nghe and Dong Kinh. The seventeenth century saw over fifty years of military conflicts starting in the 1620s between the rulers of the regions Dang Trong and Dang Ngoai. The 1770s saw the emergence of the Tay Son uprisings which eventually resulted in two decades of fraternal conflicts among the Tay Son brothers for control of Quy Nhon. Much of eighteenth century witnessed Nguyen Anh's sweeping attempts at territorial consolidation of what is now the modern Vietnamese nation-state. French colonization of Indochina throughout the 1800s temporarily punctuated centuries of Vietnamese infighting, but the Vietnamese struggles for independence at the turn of the twentieth century subsequently transpired into decades of civil war in what eventually became known as the Vietnam War.

⁷⁷ Lê, *Memores*, 79.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 35

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 58

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 36, 57-58.

⁸⁴ The Legend of My Châu - Trùng Thủy was taught in South Vietnam before 1975 as it is now in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam as part of high school literary curriculum. As such, it continues to receive attention, popular

and otherwise. See, for example, Trần, "Thử Góp Thêm Một Cách Nhìn về Truyền Thuyết An Dương Vương và Mị Châu-Trọng Thủy Dưới Góc Độ Thi Pháp Xã Hội."

⁸⁵ See Thái Vũ, *Tình Sử Mỵ Châu* and Chu Trinh, *Thiên Tình Sử Mỵ Châu - Trọng Thủy*, modern interpretations of the legend that are remarkably sympathetic to the couple.

⁸⁶ Lê, *Memories*, 40.

⁸⁷ Lê, *Dragons*, 204.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Lê, "Journey," 124.

⁹⁰ Lê alludes to this myth through her direct invocation of a highly popular children poem, aptly entitled "Dragons and Snakes," in the opening of the novel of the same name. This poem is usually accompanied by a game which typically goes like this: The children-players form a single line (the longer the line, the more exciting the game), each puts his/her hands on the hips of the person in front. A "parent" is chosen to lead the line. Another player is chosen for the role of the medicine man. The parent takes the children (who must remain in line) to ask for medicine from the medicine man. In exchange for the medicine, the parent must give up a part of the family – the head, the body, or the tail. The medicine man makes his selection and chase begins. He must physically touch any one person in the body part of his choice in order to win. The game repeats and is only over when the family is completely broken up and all the "children" captured

⁹¹ Lê, *Memories*, 94.

⁹² Nguyễn Ngọc, "An Exciting Period for Vietnamese Prose," 199.

⁹³ The category "war literature" here refers only to works that explicitly and primarily deal with the war, not narratives whose main focus is on the re-education camp and/or boat escape experience. In addition, it is important to stress that memoirs are not the only genre constituting diasporic war literature, even if they have a dominant presence.

⁹⁴ See Trần Văn Đôn, *Việt Nam Nhân Chứng* (1989), Phan Nhật Nam, *Những Chuyện Cần Được Kể Lại* (1995), Nguyễn Bá Cẩn, *Đất Nước Tôi* (2003), Trần Ngọc Nhuận, *Đời Quân Ngũ* (1992), Lý Tông Bá, *Hồi Kí 25 Năm Khói Lửa* (1996), Trương Dưỡng, *Hồi Kí Một Cảnh Hoa Dù* (), Đỗ Mậu, *Việt Nam Máu Lửa Quê Hương Tôi* (1987) and *Tâm Thư* (1995), Phạm Văn Liễu, *Trở Về Sông Núi* (2002), Lê Xuân Nhuận, *Về Cùng Chiến Tuyến* (1996), Vũ Ngọc Bích, *Vui Buồn Đời Quân Ngũ* (2004), Lê Nguyên Bình, *Ngày Tàn Của Cuộc Chiến* (2008), Lê Đình Châu, *Đôi Mắt Người Tù Binh* (2008).

⁹⁵ In "Personal Invention/Political Intervention: South Vietnamese Political Memoirs," I examine the following English-language memoirs produced by former South Vietnamese politicians and military leaders: Trần Văn Đôn, *Our Endless War* (1982), Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, *Twenty Years and Twenty Days* (1976), *How We Lost the Vietnam War* (1979) and *Budha's Child: My Fight to Save Vietnam* (2002), Bùi Diễm, *In the Jaws of History* (1999), Lâm Quang Thi, *Autopsy: The Death of South Vietnam* (1986) and *The Twenty-Five Year Century* (2001).

⁹⁶ Lê, *Memories*, 25-26.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 27

⁹⁸ Ibid., 88-89

⁹⁹ Ibid., 45, 65, 60.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 46

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 81, 80.

¹⁰² Lê, *Dragons*, 230-231.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 243

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 260

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 242-446.

¹⁰⁶ There is little contestation among Vietnam War historians that the Paris Peace Accords of 1973 marked the beginning of the end of South Vietnam. Among South Vietnamese, the treaty was and continues to be viewed as the ultimate betrayal of South Vietnam by the United States.

¹⁰⁷ This is even more prevalent considering Hung's motivation for enlisting in the military in the first place. Hung's inclination to adventures here is also part and parcel to Lê's overall critique of the Vietnamese cultural inclination to "plunge recklessly in the making of history."

¹⁰⁸ Lê, *Dragons*, 222-223.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 228.

¹¹⁰ When Bich Chi asks him why he thinks humans are prone to war, Phuong answers pessimistically: "Each generation wants to experience conflict for itself. War is a pubescent rite of passage, so that those who survive it can consider themselves to have lived. This is why no one should be fooled into thinking that the longer mankind

populates this earth, the less inclined we are to kill one another, or that civilization will necessarily make us less hateful.” See *Dragons*, 32.

¹¹¹ Lê, *Dragons*, 135. Hung uses this phrase to describe his brother’s worldview

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 237-238.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 218

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 234.

**Exilic Sexts:
Writing Identity in the Vietnamese Diaspora**

*I have swum against the current my whole life in search of an origin
And stumbled upon a future that never arrived
– Lê Thị Huệ, “Handsome Man”*

*The fierce flow of the mother tongue leaves me breathless
It is my only place of belonging on earth
My homeland, my final resting place
– Lê Thị Huệ, “A Fierce River of Words”*

In an essay written in 1999, Lê Thị Huệ makes explicit her rejection of any *terra firma* as homeland and declares language as her place of belonging: “Having been uprooted from Vietnam for more than twenty years and, despite having lived in the United States over a quarter of a century, I don’t feel that I belong to either place. There is, however, one homeland that I belong to, that of language. One day, after numerous visits to Vietnam... I came to this conclusion.”¹ This chapter demonstrates that the privileging of language as homeland informs Lê’s key works throughout the 1990s and substantially lays the framework for her 2007 novel *The Sulking Body*. Published more than three decades after the collapse of Saigon, the novel remains one of the most thought-provoking and complex literary theses on exile in the Vietnamese diaspora. Set in late 1990s, *The Sulking Body* follows a sexually promiscuous thirty-year-old Vietnamese American woman, Lan Hương’s, first journey to Vietnam to confront her philandering father, a high-ranking government official and poet of national repute. While the much anticipated rendezvous between father and daughter eventually takes place, only an eerily shallow chitchat, rather than any cathartic confrontation, follows. During this brief encounter, Lan Hương comes to accept what she has known all along, that reconciliation is as impossible as it is meaningless to her quest for “answers,” her desires for “cội nguồn” (origin) and, ultimately, her search for identity.² Lan Hương’s emotionally tumultuous journey is exacerbated by her equally intense longing and contempt for the land of her birth. While being in Vietnam at times enables Lan Hương to feel “vừa khít” (perfectly fit in) and “yên bình” (at peace), measures of belonging never before has she experienced, it also heightens her sense of alienation, a feeling of estrangement so acute that, at one point, propels Lan Hương to contemplate suicide as a way out. Such intense and intensely conflicting emotions attest to the depth of Lan Hương’s anguish and gestures towards the permanence of her homelessness. As a thesis on exile, the novel suggests in no uncertain terms that there is no homecoming for Lan Hương in Vietnam any more than in America, a predicament exacerbated by Lan Hương’s literal homelessness, as evidenced by her lack of possession of the key to the very house she shares with her soon-to-be-divorced husband in America. Nonetheless, that the novel begins, is punctuated by, and ends with free-verse poetry suggests the centrality of language, particularly poetic language, to the [trans]formation of Lan Hương’s identity. If Lan Hương’s geographically defined homeland is irretrievably lost, it is language that makes intelligible this loss and, ultimately, possible a space of dwelling.

The Sulking Body makes for a compelling critical project not simply because of its denunciatory attitudes towards exile but because of its stubborn refusal to participate in what Katherine Sugg calls the trope of return.³ An attention to the specific historical conditions

undergirding Lan Hương's exile, a mode of reading advocated by critics such as Edward Said and Caren Kaplan, illuminates the impetus behind Lê's careful avoidance of such "seductive plots."⁴ Lê's text problematizes the very notion of return by demonstrating that, even if the literal act of "going home" is possible, repatriation - defined here as a restoration of national origin, allegiance and citizenship⁵ - is decidedly not. As we will see, Lan Hương's rejection of her father is both a rejection of the corrupt political regime in contemporary Vietnam and of Vietnamese patriarchy, a rejection that would make "return" and "reconnection" aesthetically, ideologically and psychically impossible.

Lê's novel also merits attention also because it complicates patterns in Euro-American modernist literary criticism that see much "grandeur" in the "sorrow" of exile, deeming it not only a necessary source of artistic inspiration but also a condition of creative privilege.⁶ It has been presented time and again that exilic displacement - in spite of the sorrow it creates - offers the writer a fertile ground upon which flourish and a "proper distance" from which to contemplate the human condition.⁷ Michael Sidel's 1986 influential study, for instance, embraces the notion of exile as aesthetic recompense and goes as far as positing a mutually constitutive relationship between exile and the novel form itself: "It is precisely the metaphoric lines that exile plots along both a temporal and a spatial axis that make it so dominant a condition in narrative and so prominent an emblem for the narrative imagination."⁸ Nonetheless, the complex narratological layerings found in Lê's novel render such theoretical constructions, if generous and uplifting in spirit, ultimately reductive and problematic. For Lê exile is a condition of irreplaceable loss, a loss particularly acute for those forcibly uprooted from the land of their birth. While writing provides a powerful means with which to communicate this loss, no gain in creative energy seems able to compensate for the "vast emptiness"⁹ and "numbing despair"¹⁰ produced by the experience of exile.

Moreover, in exhibiting remarkable self-awareness of its own linguistic and political marginality, *The Sulking Body* offers a compelling examination of the potential and limitations of writing in and about exile. Lê's work indeed captures poetically and exactly what Nico Israel refers to as "the predicament of [writing] displacement." In *Outlandish: Writing between Exile and Diaspora*, Israel argues that the experience of displacement and its metaphorical constructions necessitate "a kind of tension without resolution" in that, even though *exile* denotes banishment by force, its etymological root *ex salire* "expresses a sense of 'leaping out' [...], implying a matter of will." Likewise, the Greek root *speirein* in *diaspora* connotes both the act of scattering as well as "an anticipation of root-taking and eventual growth." Displacement, therefore, should best be conceptualized in terms of *exilic emplacement* and *diasporic self-fashioning*, mutually constitutive categories that demand us to confront displacement as a lived historical condition and as a condition of representing displacement itself. If *exilic emplacement* gestures towards the "double movement of standing and unsecuring - of setting-up and upsetting," a perpetual restlessness inextricably linked to the process of emplacement, *diasporic self-fashioning* directs our attention to the restlessly emplaced subject's desire for an "imagined alterity" and her attempt to fashion out a diasporic subjectivity in a space that is "outside, extranational and peripheral": The place of language itself.¹¹ For we will see, the activity of writing makes possible for Lê "những chân trời viễn mộng hoang đàng,"¹² phantasmagoric horizons that become for the exile a space of dwelling. But in this imaginary place, the writing subject finds not so much the comfort of "home," but only the grotesque uncertainty of a "garish, unrestful hotel"¹³ from which she must craft her existence. The disorienting experience of exile might be conducive to a particular kind of writing; and writing, in turn, might make tolerable

what Edward Said calls “the crippling sorrow of estrangement;”¹⁴ but exile, as a historically produced condition “of unprecedented intensity and dimension in the twentieth century,”¹⁵ continues to demand and resist closures, aptly rendering the act of representing displacement, to borrow Sauling C. Wong’s formulation, both Extravagance and Necessity.¹⁶

The subsequent chapter is comprised of three parts. Part one focuses on Lê’s examination of the dilemma of [going] home. It shows that returning to Vietnam only makes tangible, rather than helps recover, what Lan Hương had lost. It argues that this thematic setup functions not only to underscore the depth and irreversibility of Lan Hương’s homelessness but also to expose the ideological and theoretical limits in postcolonial cultural nationalist fantasies of return and reconnection. By revealing the socio-historical pulsions undergirding Lê’s resistance to such fantasies, I will show that Lan Hương’s repulsion for her father and rejection of the political regime in contemporary Vietnam are one and the same. If Lan Hương’s chronic longing for her dead mother/motherland demonstrates the irremediability of her homesickness, her willful *disidentification* with the father/fatherland gestures towards an acknowledgement of permanent homelessness, a willingness to accept that “There will never be a homeland to which to return/ A river in which to glide and float/ All that’s left are shadows, bobbing feebly.”¹⁷ Seen in this light, exilic homelessness becomes both historical tragedy and ideological conviction, both fait accompli and evolving process, both circumscribing and, as the subsequent sections will show, hauntingly liberating.

Part two focuses on Lê’s rigorous delineation of the relationship between exile and writing. It begins with a demonstration that Lan Hương’s trip to Vietnam ultimately relieves her of what Freud would describe as melancholia, an obsessive preoccupation with the past that had deeply wounded her sense of self, resulting not only in her incapacity for love but also in her proclivity towards self-destructive behaviors. Being in Vietnam compels Lan Hương to write, and the act of writing, transposed here as the ability to speak, proves not only therapeutic but also anchoring. Indeed, writing enables Lan Hương to overcome what Kristeva calls “polymorphic mutism,”¹⁸ a self-imposed muteness, the “refusal to speak, to explain,” the “desire to shut down, [t]o go silent,” a childhood trait morphed into defense mechanism made second nature by the marginalizing experience of exile.¹⁹ But if writing gives Lan Hương clarity and comfort, it does not resolve her lack of home. The novel’s abrupt and somber ending makes evident Lê’s insistence on the difference between writing-as-aesthetic-gain and writing-as-creative-imperative, and, in doing so, reveals the limits of modernist literary criticism’s elision of the questions of privilege and the plight of those whose exile and return are determined precisely by the absence of such privilege.²⁰ By refusing to succumb to various modernist constructions of displacement as both “original sin and means to expiate that sin,”²¹ Lê’s fiercely anti-romantic treatment of exile poses a direct challenge to what Caren Kaplan sees as the dehistoricization of displacement, romanticization of homelessness, and abstraction of exile.²²

Part three examines Lê’s characterization of the condition of exile, particularly her emphasis on language loss as one of the gravest and most violent losses induced by exile. If *The Sulking Body*’s fragmented and, at times, rather difficult language of narration gestures towards the brokenness of the subject-in-exile, it also constitutes a site for reconstruction and resistance. Part three also proposes that Lê’s invention and deployment of a distinct language of narration represents Lê’s linguistic inscription of a diasporic Vietnamese subjectivity, one firmly rooted in the *mother* tongue but grows into a dialect of its own. Lê’s juxtaposition of a highly polished poetic language with a fractured vernacular language of narration reveals the influence of French feminisms, particularly the latter’s advocacy of *écriture féminine* and concomitant critique of

phallogocentrism, and attests to Lê's privileging of poetic language as a site of resistance. Indeed, even though Lan Hương finds much consolation in writing [free-verse] poetry, her repulsion for her father's *lục bát* poetry, a highly structured form of traditional Vietnamese poetry historically dominated by male writers, reaffirms Lê's critical stance against the silencing and exclusionary nature of Vietnamese patriarchy and communist nationalist rhetoric. Lê's development of a diasporic Vietnamese dialect must also be understood as a response against the penetrating pressures of linguistic hegemony emanating from both her home and host countries, namely the stubborn tendency in contemporary Vietnamese literary criticism to elide the presence and contribution of Vietnamese diasporic literature on the one hand and, on the other, the intense pressure exerted upon the American ethnic subjects to succumb to, among other things, English as the language of [viable] creativity. Finally, I will note that Lê's declaration of language as homeland is part and parcel to her praxis of *situated nomadism*. While Lê rejects all physical homelands, her politics is anchored on strategically fixed fronts. I will show that Lê does not divest from her role as an Asian American subject by discussing her nuanced and racially conscious rendering of American social relations in this novel. The chapter ends with a brief recapitulation of the novel's careful delineation of the difference between *mother tongue* and *father tongue* to reveal complex personal, linguistic, cultural and political allegiances undergirding the Vietnamese diasporic subject's identity [trans]formation, and in doing so, gestures towards writing as a garishly liberating space for the exilic writer.

The Permanence of Exilic Homelessness

Through a depiction of the female protagonist's journey back to the land of her birth, Lê makes explicit her rejection of what Katherine Sugg calls "the now-familiar postcolonial plots of cultural reconnection and return."²³ In her study of Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, Sugg makes a compelling critique against the assumption in postcolonial literary and critical praxis that "the alienating experience of 'exile' leads inevitably to celebrations of 'return.'"²⁴ Sugg argues that this "ideological narrative of return" is not only "a function of colonial history" but also a manifestation of patriarchal cultural nationalist fantasies. Female exile, she proposes, "generate[s] a radically different relation to home and homeland" and as such, "alternatives to masculinist models... outside of those prescribed by nationalist nostalgia"²⁵ must be found to enhance our understanding of the gendered experiences of exile. Like *Lucy*, *The Sulking Body* defies the trope of return. But, unlike Lucy who "had come to view with horror [her] mother's love" and "would rather be dead than become just an echo of [her mother]," Lan Hương's rejection of return results from her insistence to disaffiliate with the father(land) without severing affective ties to the lost mother(land). Lê's deliberate delineation of the difference between fatherland and motherland attests to the complexity of the dilemma of going home, one that requires a confrontation with the historical realities that lie at the source of Lan Hương's exile.

Early in the novel, Lan Hương's impulse to return to Vietnam after twenty years of living in exile seems to bear all traces of [postcolonial cultural nationalist] nostalgic desires for belonging and origins: "Out of the blue, she dragged herself back here. Here, in the country whose name her face conveys but about which she knows too little. Still, she figures all the secrets she wishes to discover about herself are contained in those two words: Viet Nam."²⁶ But it quickly becomes apparent that Lan Hương's decision to return is motivated less by the desire to reclaim a lost home than a desperate effort to come face to face with the immensity of her homelessness. Being uprooted as a result of war, a fate Lan Hương shared with hundreds of

thousands of southern Vietnamese nationals, Lan Huong had had to accept the physical death of what she would come to imagine as her motherland. The completeness and finality of the communist sequester of southern Vietnam and the subsequent eradication of the southern nation-state from the world map would secure the permanence of Lan Huong's homelessness and, given her opposition to the communist regime, preclude any possibility of a celebratory homecoming.

At the tender age of ten, while being evacuated to Camp Pendleton, Lan Huong already experienced "a vast emptiness that invaded her soul," an emptiness so unyielding that, at thirty, Lan Huong still finds herself stumbling through life "as if to fill a void, . . . to kill time while passing over the earth."²⁷ But the magnitude of exilic disorientation did not, in contrary to any postcolonial cultural nationalist assumption, bring Lan Huong back to Vietnam, at least not any sooner. As we will learn, Lan Huong's belated return has little to do with the materially and psychologically circumscribing conditions of exile and everything to do with her repulsion for the father(land). Lan Huong's contempt for her father's philandering nature, which she blames for her mother's lifelong unhappiness and eventual death, and her discomfort toward his intimate involvement with the communist regime during and after the war specifically informed her refusal to return. As a child growing up alongside the Vietnamese émigrés community in the United States, it did not take Lan Huong long to begin hearing about various atrocious acts orchestrated by her father against southern intellectuals during the war. At first she was not satisfied with rumors, justifying her father's ruthlessness as "part of war behavior." Still, she grew increasingly "curious" about him, enough to begin taking weekly miles-long trips to the archives of the Southeast Asian Library at "the most prestigious university in California" to find out for herself.²⁸ What she discovered about her father deeply traumatized her, made her fearful and ashamed of being his daughter, and cemented her resentment against him and the regime of which he is a part.²⁹

Despite her strong conviction, Lan Huong eventually makes her way back to Vietnam. But her return is less a quest for home than a confrontation with loss, less what Sugg calls "a teleological endpoint of a successful . . . intellectual journey" than an expression of conflicting allegiances integral to the life of the exile.³⁰ Lan Huong's impulse to return is couched largely in affective terms, stressing a longing for familial reconnection rather than political reconciliation: "She yearns to return home at least once to see her parents and siblings. To find out where she came from. To know whom she takes after and why she is who she is."³¹ Even then, Lan Huong confesses to feeling deeply ambivalent about returning:

I am not entirely sure [if I want to go back]. It's really half-half. Sometimes I want to cut off the past for good, stay in the U.S. forever and forget all about Vietnam. But other times I feel this need to know who brought me into this life. Sure, I want to see my mom, my dad and my siblings. But I fear I am a stranger in Vietnam. . . . How I hate the powers that brought war and destruction and uprooted me from my homeland. But, whatever! What do I know about my homeland? I call it such, but what do I know? Of course I am excited at the thought of seeing my family again. But then again, I don't really care. . . . I don't really know what I want. . . .³²

Even when the affective aspect of Lan Huong's desire seems assuaged, even when her longing for personal reconnection seems fulfilled, even when she admits to feeling somehow "vừa khít" among family members, the ominous void which had taken hold of her as a ten-year-old refuses to secede: "Here, her daughter [May] is spoiled beyond hope. May's aunties adore her as if she were their new doll. . . . The girl, too, has been inseparable from [her aunties]. But it's different for Lan Huong, who only finds herself falling deeper into the abyss, embrangled in the

same conundrum that for so long, even in places far away, she has tried to understand but has failed to grasp.”³³ The “conundrum” is the simultaneous desire to maintain and “cut off for good” all bonds, to refuse resolutely and permanently the idea of return. Once returned, however, Lan Huong discovers that maintenance of affective ties does not in itself restore or reinvigorate her sense of belonging. More importantly, as the subsequent part will show, Lan Huong discovers that resistance to the father(land) does not in itself obviate the [nostalgic] desire for the maternal bonds and that disaffiliation from the father(land) need not entail a severance of affective ties to the mother(land).³⁴

Throughout the novel, Le emphasizes again and again the idea that one can go home but can never be *at* home. Being in Vietnam only makes tangible, rather than restores, what Lan Huong had lost. Lan Huong’s [visceral and cerebral] experience with the landscape of Vietnam repeatedly reinforces her feeling “as though a plant someone had uprooted and planted some place else.”³⁵ For instance, the moment Lan Huong sets foot on Tân Sơn Nhất Airport, she immediately feels “terrorized” by the galloping heat of Saigon, realizing for the first time how physically debilitating it must be for those who live here. But more than the confrontational heat itself, it is the impoverished living condition, which makes even more intolerable the warm humidity, which seems foreign and almost incomprehensible to Lan Huong:

Here, in her parents’ homeland, the earth is perennially gobbled up by tons of fire... She thought that if California were this hot, one could easily swipe one’s credit card to bring home at least twenty electric fans from Kmart. But the fact the only ceiling fan on each level of her [old] house must be turned off most of the time to keep down the cost of electricity makes her wonder how so much wealth disparity can happen in the world.³⁶

Lan Huong’s feeling of disorientation further intensifies as she continues her journey across Vietnam. In Huế, her parents’ hometown and father’s current city of residence, Lan Huong is taunted by an [almost] irrational fear of being infected by boils and warts. So much so that she decides to hide in her hotel all day and renege on her promise to visit old relatives on behalf of her siblings in Saigon. There, she also succumbs to temptation and partakes in a one-night-stand with Thiệu, her father’s protégé and younger sister’s fiancé. After the sexual encounter, which lasts “just under two minutes,” she melancholically whispers to a half-listening Thiệu:

Loss. Separation. Hatred. Abuse. Petty cleverness. Amputation. Brokenness. I hate Vietnam. I hate this place. I hate returning to this place of ignorance. Of backwardness. Of blindness. Here, everyone holds everyone back out of hatred. Everyone hurts everyone out of love. ‘The more you love someone, the more you inflict pain on them.’ This idiom sums up the Vietnamese predicament!

Lan Huong’s allusion to the Vietnamese penchant for self-wound and implication of her own behavior in the process attest to the complexity of rejection and identification.³⁷ If being in Hue reminds Lan Huong of the pain her adulterous father had again and again inflicted upon her mother, then Lan Huong’s commission of adultery with her sister’s fiancé reveals a level of complicity of which Lan Huong is deeply cognizant and towards which she is equally contemptuous. So rather than condemning Lan Huong’s characterization of Vietnam as elitist as one might be tempted to, it would be more productive to understand her “hatred” for Vietnam as an extension of her own self-hatred, a malaise made all the more severe by the realities of “home” and disorientation of being homeless.

The irreversibility of Lan Huong’s homelessness becomes even more apparent when Lan Huong visits Qui Nhơn, a city in which she spent two years during childhood. En route to Đà

Lạt from Hà Nội, Lan Hương suddenly feels overwhelmed by the desire to visit her old house in Qui Nhơn. The impulse is so strong that, “like a cancer patient... seeking papaya leaves [for treatment], she embarks eagerly for Qui Nhơn in search of the past.” There, she hopes to “rediscover the seaside roads where tender memories about her mother came into being.” And once in Qui Nhơn, Lan Hương wants to give in to the urge to walk: “She wants to find safety standing on the ground under her feet.... She truly misses the soil in Qui Nhơn.” But her rather simple desire to walk is quickly thwarted by the harassing presence of “[f]ifteen cyclos. Fifteen men. No, thirty men, including those standing in front of the Qui Nhơn Police Department” staring her down, offering to take her for a tour of the city. And, just as futile as her urge to “touch down” in Qui Nhơn, her desire to see glimpses of the past soon proves equally futile. The city had changed beyond Lan Hương’s wildest expectations, so much so that even with “eyes open wide, she is not at all able to recognize any traces of the past,” which causes her to feel like “a dead man strolling through an unreal city.” And it is the experience with and in Qui Nhơn that forces Lan Hương to accept the permanence of her loss: “I wonder and wonder/Why I could not touch the land I have for so long wanted to touch/ Why those faces reflected not the color of home/... Why my beleaguered heart no longer feels any sense of attachment.” Lan Hương’s emotionally tumultuous experience in Qui Nhơn attests not only to the elusiveness of the past but also to the impossibility of return. That her “beleaguered heart no longer feels any sense of attachment” to Qui Nhơn, a place once filled with tender memories of the past, is a mournful acknowledgement of the fact that one can return, but one cannot go home.³⁸

In cities where Lan Hương does feel a sense of connection, it is a connection borne of human empathy rather than any fulfilled expectations of home. In Nha Trang, a city where Lan Hương has never before set foot, she is made to feel “extremely comfortable, [e]xtremely at ease.” For the first time since her return to Vietnam, Lan Hương “feels invited to [happiness].” Right there on the beach of Nha Trang, “she feels connected to the sky, the sun, the wind and the people around her.” But Lan Hương quickly confesses that her reason for feeling “an tâm” is “all thanks to the receptionist... at Hotel Nha Thành” whom, from the very start, appears uninterested in deceiving her. His kind face, his open-mindedness and his honest way of speaking enable her to feel safe from the chaotic surrounding and put her at ease with herself. Likewise, in Đà Lạt Lan Hương experiences a similar feeling of relief and elation, this time, due to an encounter with a pair of kind and honest street peddlers. The encounter rejuvenates Lan Hương and alleviates her feeling of isolation, helping her feel connected both to the city and to humanity: “Amidst the disheveled chaos that is the city, she actually feels grateful for one thing. That is the security and intimacy given her by the grass on the side of the roads, by the welcoming smiles of Đà Lạt residents, by the butterflies following the night fragrance and the cool breezes. Her wandering feet feel safe here.” Lan Hương’s attraction to nature and to strangers’ kindness, rather than to the landscape itself, is further revealed in a poem written during her time in Đà Lạt: “I walk toward the night/ Following the wind of honesty/ And the kind smiles of the peddlers/ Waving to the children playing on the street/ The city is made fragrant with the scent of our skins.../ Here I smell the fragrance of angels/ Fluttering their wings in the night.” Lan Hương’s relatively more positive experience in Nha Trang and Đà Lạt underscores the complexity of Lan Hương’s relationship to the homeland, revealing how the formation of exilic subjectivity entails constant reconfigurations and realignments, rendering the experience of exile and return fluid rather than formulaic, unpredictable rather than predetermined.³⁹ This, as the subsequent section will show, would have implications on Lan Hương’s choice of home and render her homelessness not only an exilic consequence but also a political conviction.

Throughout the novel, Lê repeatedly contrasts tender memories of the mother/land against repulsive attributes of the father/land, bringing into sharp focus the critical difference between nostalgic desires for maternal bonds and ideological rejection of masculinist communist patriarchy. If the enticing scent of honey locust pods makes Lan Hương long for her mother, seeing her father only makes Lan Hương “want to vomit, . . . to confront him about the smelly things he’s done, to [a]sk him why he reeks so badly.” Her mother’s sweet-smelling, natural black hair is contrasted against his “shimmering” black dye, a few shades too dark that it looks “artificial;” her “slender” frame against his unsightly “stubbiness;” her “shapely,” “delicate” eyebrows against “the heavy sags of fat hanging under his bulging eyes.”⁴⁰ Whereas Lan Hương associates qualities of “tenderness,” “gentility” and “peacefulness” with her mother, she actually finds “the concept of the father [to be] the most painful concept in all of humanity.”⁴¹ If memories of the mother inspire Lan Hương to write the warmest of poetry, the thought of the father triggers in Lan Hương a feeling of resentment so intense that it borders on disgust. Lan Hương cannot help but “bad-mouth” her father to every stranger she has ever slept with: “She would tell them about how cruel he was for abandoning her mother and siblings. How he was an intimate part of the war machine. How he murdered other people. How he contributed to making this world an uglier, crueller, more depressing place.”⁴² Nonetheless, in spite of her intense resentment, a part of Lan Hương still wants to see him again, gesturing toward both the desire to confront loss and the conundrum of longing that is [pre-]determined by biological ties. Upon speaking tête-à-tête with her father for the first time since she was a child, perhaps against better judgment, Lan Hương admits to hoping to see her father embrace her with open arms, “[r]ecounting memories of her growing up, [t]elling her how he had missed her so and that he really wanted her to see her come back.” Instead, all he does is “brag” about his achievements, “justify[ing] his actions and let[ting] her see all over again how reprehensible he truly is.”⁴³

As the passages above also suggest, Lan Hương’s resistance to the father encompasses both a repulsion for the regime and a resentment toward the Vietnamese patriarchal oppression of women. Just as she cannot comprehend how her mother and [paternal] auntie, O Thê, could have sacrificed their entire lives to “shield,” “tolerate, accept and forgive” all of her father’s “weaknesses and wrongdoings,” she cannot explain why, upon seeing him at last, she “doesn’t have the courage to say a word about it to him.”⁴⁴ While in all of her rational might, Lan Hương concludes that her father is only “a child-boss in the family,” in reality Lan Hương dreads confronting him to the point of admitting “she should just submit to him already.” Yet, despite Lan Hương’s initial disappointment in and subsequent laceration of herself for her failure to confront her father, Lan Hương soon realizes that she did not care enough to “scream and yell at the complete stranger sitting across from her.”⁴⁵ After the long-awaited yet anti-climatic nonversation, Lan Hương comes to accept the unbridgeable distance between them:

The afternoon conversation took place surprisingly uneventfully. It is only now, deep in the night, that she feels immensely hurt. She wishes she had slandered her father. She wishes she had caught him off guard with her anger and resentment. Instead, she had felt no such need. Now she realizes the outsize distance between them is simply unbridgeable.⁴⁶

With this acceptance comes Lan Hương’s acknowledgment of the finality and permanence of her homelessness, of the fact that “for the rest of her life, there will never be another dream of finding a home full of laughter and embrace, a place to rest and peace of mind.” But this acknowledgment does not free Lan Hương as much as it deepens her wound and feeling of dislocation: “I am a shadow drifting through an immense and unfamiliar earth/ Not

knowing where to end up or when to perish.” Lan Huong’s predicament points incontestably to Lê’s vision of exile as a condition of irreversible loss. A juxtaposition of Lan Huong’s forced separation from the mother(land) at the age of ten with her willful severance from the father(land) at the age of thirty renders Lan Huong’s homelessness both a historical tragedy and an ideological position, a predicament that suspends the exile in the state of *Lũng*, a discursive space best described as “in-between-and-between” where freedom and strictures co-exist in hauntingly equal measures.⁴⁷

Before bringing part one to a close, it must be addressed that, on the surface, Lê’s portrayal of the mother figure seems dangerously close to replicating masculinist nationalist prescription of the female body as an emblem of the nation or homeland. Contemporary feminist critics have reminded us that nationalism’s naturalization and essentialization of the female body provide the discursive constructs necessary for the modern nation-states to institutionalize women’s subordination: “The ‘essential woman’ becomes the national iconic signifier for the material, the passive, and the corporal, to be worshipped, protected, and controlled by those with power to remember, to forget, to guard, to define and to redefine.”⁴⁸ Nonetheless, I argue that Lê’s portrayal of the mother(land) can best be thought as an extension of what Spivak calls strategic essentialism, not an uncritical reinscription of masculinist nationalist construction of the female subject. Lê’s rendering of what Lauren Berlant calls “maternal-beloved feminine imagery” coupled with her characterization of maternal passive victimhood must be read in conjunction with her depiction of Lan Huong’s proclivity toward resistance and disaffiliative agency.⁴⁹ I argue that the helpless mother figure functions to highlight the father’s corruptness, and in doing so, brings to bear his betrayal of the mother/land. Lan Huong’s exile and disaffiliation from the father/land are a result of the father’s betrayal; they are acts of escape from, rather than betrayal of, the nation itself. Lê’s implication of the father as well as Lan Huong’s refusal to reconnect indeed turn “patriarchal insistence on female rootedness in the home and homeland”⁵⁰ on its head, complicating postcolonial cultural nationalist fantasies on the one hand and, on the other, presenting a direct challenge to communist nationalist patriarchal realities in contemporary Vietnam.

Exilic Sexes: Overcoming Melancholia through Writing

As a woman-of-color writer and an exile, Lê is particularly critical of patterns in Euro-American modernist literary criticism that romanticizes exile, deeming it not only a necessary source of artistic inspiration but also a condition of creative privilege. For instance, in *Strangers to Ourselves* (a work that Lê acknowledges to have influenced her oeuvre)⁵¹, Julia Kristeva suggests that self-estrangement is foundational to the life of the intellectual and the activity of writing, as both demand an acceptance that there is never a *chez soi*, or fixed home, in which to take comfort.⁵² Kristeva takes up this idea again in “A New Type of Intellectual: the Dissident,” emphasizing that exile and creativity are inextricably interdependent: “Our present age is one of exile. How can one avoid the mire of common sense if not becoming a stranger to one’s own country, language, sex and identity? Writing is impossible without some kind of ‘exile.’” But the kind of exile Kristeva has in mind carries with it connotations of choice, a sublation of any self-binding allegiance to any one fixed identity, rather than of historical coercion: “Exile is already in itself a form of *dissidence*, since it involves uprooting oneself from a family, a country or a language. More importantly, it is an irreligious act that cuts all ties... The exile cuts all links, including those that bind him to the belief that the thing called life has A Meaning guaranteed by

the dead father.” The “real cutting edge of dissidence,” Kristeva further reminds us, is the ability to “bring about multiple sublations of the unnameable, the unrepresentable, the void,” or, to put it differently, the refusal to let singularity take hold of our imagination, our intellect, and ultimately, our subjectivity.⁵³

It can be said with certainty - notwithstanding the risk of interpreting our philosopher too literally⁵⁴ - that Kristeva’s privileging of the creative and critical potential of exile seems remarkably in sync with patterns found in Euro-American literary criticism of the mid-to-late 20th century. In his widely referenced 1957 article on exile and creativity, Joseph Wittlin begins with the premise that “almost every artist, writer and poet is an exile” and concludes that exile, whether forced or voluntary, offers the writer an ideal environment in which to create. Not unlike Kristeva, Wittlin sees self-isolation a necessary condition for creativity. He calls on the exile writer to embrace his isolation by way of refusing to succumb to the views either of the émigré community of which he is a part or of the dominant society: “[The exile writer] will do best if he isolates himself from his fellow émigrés and renounces popularity among them. Because, if in a normal society, each artist is threatened by the danger whose name is ‘desire to please,’ that danger is a hundred times greater in a restricted, ghetto-like society, condemned to rely on its own strength and resources.” Writers in exile, Wittlin insists, are “double exiles” whose “misfortune” actually affords them “the perfect distance or perspective” from which to study “la condition humaine.” Wittlin’s articulation of the “laws governing the life and death of literary creativity in exile” would come to represent the trend, rather than the exception, in modernist literary criticism throughout the twentieth century.⁵⁵

In “The Mind of Winter,”⁵⁶ Edward Said eloquently calls into question Western critical tendency to transform exilic alienation “into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture.”⁵⁷ This is as much a result of our experience with the alienating conditions of modern life as it is a consequence of our exposure to “stories portraying exile as a condition that produces heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in a person’s life.”⁵⁸ But, as Said emphatically reminds us, “these are only stories, efforts to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement.”⁵⁹ In reality, there is little to celebrate in “the tragic fate of homelessness in a necessarily heartless world,” such that, “to think of exile as beneficial, as a spur to humanism or creativity, is to belittle its mutilations.”⁶⁰ Said directs our attention to the historical conditions that inform the experience and writings in and about exile. If modern exile is “is irremediably secular and unbearably historical,” then exile and exilic literature must be viewed against the totality of “[n]egotiations, wars of national liberation, people bundled out of their homes and prodded, bussed, or walked to enclaves in other regions.”⁶¹ To pay attention to the historical specificity of exile is to regard with suspicion the idea that exile spurs, and is compensated by, creativity. Even if one should like to acknowledge, as does a reluctant Said, that “there are some positive things to be said for a few of its conditions,”⁶² exile is as much “a mind of winter” as aesthetic recompense is “nothing that is not there and nothing that is,” an outcome much too elusive, much too convenient, to be taken at face value.⁶³

Similarly, in *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*, Caren Kaplan critiques with insightful lucidity what she identifies as “a discourse of authorship that has come to be expressed in literary criticism as an imperative of displacement.” Euro-American critical perspective on displacement throughout the mid-to-late twentieth century has subsisted on the model of exile as creative recompense: “Exilic perspective becomes a vocation and a virtue, a reminder that writers with ‘great vision’ take us with them through the shoals of loss and, having paid a terrible price, will take us back to the safe harbor of reunion.” For Kaplan,

such model is not false as it is incomplete. The subsumption of all exilic experience under a homologizing narrative of aesthetic recompense erases the exile as a historically generated subject insofar as it “moves from a commentary on cultural production based on historically grounded experiences of displacement to the production of a *style* that emulates exile’s effects.” Such subsumption allows the privileged tourist to participate in exile without having to experience the often unglamorous realities of exile. By eliding the questions of privilege, by linking tourism with exile, Euro-American modernist dehistoricization of displacement, aestheticization of homelessness and universalization of exile power the very means through which Eurocentric forms of cultural domination are produced and sustained.⁶⁴

Although there is no denying that Lê fully understands the importance of resisting “the danger whose name is ‘desire to please’” as well as “the mire of common sense,” however – and quite similar to Said and Kaplan – Lê seems weary of the notion of exile as aesthetic recompense. Her painstaking delineation of the relationship between exile and creativity in several critical essays and in *The Sulking Body* reveals her refusal to participate in the chorus celebrating exile as conducive to creativity. In “While Creating Humans,” Lê acknowledges the intimate connection between exile and writing: “As a writer, I understand deeply the word ‘exile.’ ... The loneliness experienced by artists makes it very easy to relate to the state of being exiled... Growing up, I always sensed [exile] lurking underneath my skin.” This intrinsic sense of isolation, later fueled by Lê’s pursuit of creative and intellectual independence, was confounded by her forced expulsion from Vietnam following the collapse of Saigon.⁶⁵ But, as Lê makes explicit, there is little “grandeur” in the kinds of exile that she has experienced: Whether esoteric or exoteric,⁶⁶ exile is “a crippling state of being” which one “constantly struggles to overcome.”⁶⁷ There is neither confusion nor comparison in Lê’s mind about the gravity and severity of one form of exile versus another, for “to be banished from one’s country is the *most* profound social and psychological misfortune in the life of a human being.”⁶⁸ And, much like Said’s exiles who “*feel* their difference... as a kind of orphanhood,”⁶⁹ Lê tells us in “Fanciful Imaginings” that she sees herself “a bastard child who has severed all [home] ties.”⁷⁰ Nonetheless, as she informs us in yet another essay, for a child who “never wanted to leave home,” this severance ultimately proves “excruciating.”⁷¹ So that even when one is left with “only lonely but steady hands to write,” there can never be compensation for exile, for it has been and will always remain “a total loss.”⁷² Lê’s denunciation of exile and privileging of language would find fullest expression in *The Sulking Body*, a point to which we will now turn.

Lan Huong’s experience of loss in exile, especially prior to her discovery of writing, can best be described as melancholia. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud argues that mourning and melancholia are ways in which human beings respond to loss. In contrast to mourning where one can “rest assured that after a lapse of time it will be overcome,” in melancholia the grieving subject refuses to let go of the lost object, consumes it and, in the process of doing so, becomes consumed by that very loss.⁷³ Via Freud, Anne Cheng clarifies the pathological nature of the relationship between the grieving subject and the lost object as follows: “The [relationship] is now no longer just love or nostalgia but also profound resentment. The melancholic subject is not melancholic because he or she has lost something but because he or she has introjected that which he or she now reviles.”⁷⁴ As a result of this introjection, the subject inflicts upon himself or herself the very resentment, reproach, and distancing originally directed at the lost object.

If self-denigration and self-withdrawal are symptomatic of melancholia, they are also characteristic of Lan Huong’s behavior in exile. These symptoms manifest most clearly in her refusal to form and maintain any meaningful social and emotional ties. At the mere age of

twelve, only two years after her “settlement” in the Houston, Texas, Lan Hương ran away from “home” soon after her aunt’s death. Thereafter, she engaged in a series of short-lived relationships, as a result of which underwent multiple abortions, before taking off to California with yet another boyfriend. By the time Lan Hương married her husband, Song, in her mid-twenties, she had already “lost count of the number of men she’d slept with.” Lan Hương’s resistance to social and emotional ties also becomes evident when she demanded Song to sever all family connection in order to marry her, a demand to which Song reluctantly but eventually gave in. And, despite Song’s best efforts to keep her happy, Lan Hương’s “flash, indecent love affairs” continue to plague their marriage, time and again putting it in jeopardy. But these affairs are less a result of Lan Hương’s disapproval of Song as a husband, whose forgiveness and kindness she appreciates, but of her own proclivity toward self-sabotage, which she seems unable to resist: “She really wants to give up once and for all those flash, indecent love affairs... [She] swears to herself under the moon and the stars that she wants a picture perfect family... And, for [the first] five years, there were only Song and their daughter. But only five years.” The rest of the time is marked by Song’s “pleading, begging” Lan Hương not to leave him: “Not only does Song lavish her with attention, he also submits to her. He surrenders to her silent unruliness, her clamorous coming-and-goings in exchange for their uninhabited love-making... No matter how unruly she gets. No matter how angry Song becomes..., one night back in bed with her... and their life goes on as if nothing had ever happened.” Lan Hương’s longing for a stable marital life is repeatedly threatened by her impulsive desire for sexual conquests, her self-condemned “unending depravity” which she “justifies as a result of growing up in a foreign land absolutely rootless, without any family ties.” Lan Hương’s sexual adventures, driven by her “addiction to physical pleasure” and lack of interest in emotional ties, seem indicative of what Freud describes as the “loss of capacity to love,” one of the key distinguishing features of melancholia.⁷⁵ If the loss of home[land] lies at the core of Lan Hương’s resentment and restlessness, her resistance to forming new ties is further evidence of a melancholic response to this loss, an obsessive preoccupation with loss that, to borrow Anna Cheng’s expression, turns the subject of grief into the object of grievance.⁷⁶

In melancholia, Freud also tells us, “the ego debases itself and rages against itself” as a response to loss.⁷⁷ This seems remarkably consistent with Lan Hương’s own behavior. Throughout the novel, Lan Hương frequently lacerates herself for her actions, even if such lacerations never succeed in preventing her from undertaking similar actions. After sleeping with her best friend’s lover in Hanoi, for example, Lan Hương disparages herself mercilessly: “You are beyond disgust. You are utterly lost. You are chasing after a formless shadow. You are sleeping around as if to take revenge.”⁷⁸ Or, when the temptation to seduce her sister’s boyfriend overwhelms her, Lan Hương berates herself as follows: “You are a beguiling vixen out to seduce anyone anywhere. This is your sister’s boyfriend. You’d better stop it!”⁷⁹ Lan Hương also repeatedly describes herself in self-derogatory terms, variously referring to herself as “*đu côn du đồ chuyên dụ đàn ông*”⁸⁰ (a roguish tramp), “*rụng rập không biên cương*” (sexually loose without end),⁸¹ “*cà giựt*”⁸² (untrustworthy), “*lang bang*”⁸³ (promiscuous), “*chăng tinh trên giường ngủ*”⁸⁴ (vixen in bed), “*tao lao*”⁸⁵ (frivolous), “*ầu tả bạt mạng*”⁸⁶ (reckless and irresponsible), “*ngu xuẩn, hèn yếu, du côn, hư hỏng, xa lạ, thiếu những giọt nước mắt*”⁸⁷ (stupid, cowardly, roguish, soiled, alien, tear-lacking), descriptions that point unequivocally to Lan Hương’s perception of self as morally reprehensible. Last but not least, her self-contempt becomes all the more evident when she confesses to have taken after her father, whom she deeply despises and resents:

For years I have hated my father. He is the source of my humiliation... But then I realize I resemble him so much. I look like my mother on the outside, but inside I am all him. Seeing him next to [that young singer] reminds me of my own lack of will and depravity. I see my own unruly blood below his quiet countenance. I resemble him so much I don't even want to meet him. I fear seeing him.⁸⁸

Again in "The Mind of Winter," Edward Said reminds us that, at the extreme, "[t]he exile can make a fetish of exile, a practice that distances him or her from all connections and commitments. To live as if everything around [him or her] were temporary and perhaps trivial... to fall prey to petulant cynicism as well as querulous lovelessness."⁸⁹ Said's characterization captures with precision Lan Hương's response to exile, a lived reality she describes as "intangible knots with no end and no beginning," a condition that Lan Hương later comes to accept "*only* she can untangle" (emphasis added).⁹⁰

If motherhood time and again motivates Lan Hương to overcome thoughts of suicide (a point further pursued in a different chapter), the discovery of writing enables Lan Hương to articulate, and thus, unravel the very source of her melancholia. For years, Lan Hương saw herself as "an untamed horse running wild without any sense of direction, never considering where it might end up" and, although she continually "wished to find a place of belonging, she didn't quite know how or where to find it." She tried marriage and motherhood, "hoping to find peace of mind, as everyone told her she would." But even marriage to a near-perfect husband could not alleviate the calamity that continued to pulverize her soul. Lan Hương's search for peace of mind would eventually take her back to Vietnam where she immediately encounters the impulse to write, as Lan Hương reveals to her best friend at the end of the novel: "For some reason, going back to Vietnam enabled me to write poetry. I've surprised even myself. I have written so many, many poems."⁹¹ The experience of return literally compels Lan Hương to write and, as the following pages will show, the activity of writing enables Lan Hương not only to come to terms with her loss and but also to overcome her own melancholia.

As soon as Lan Hương sets foot in Vietnam, poetry literally gushes out of her; in fact, "the more indignant she feels..., the more poetry spurts forth from her."⁹² This outpouring of words and emotions stands in sharp contrast to Lan Hương's [self-]imposed silence as an exile in America. This [self-]silence, which Lan Hương calls the "Lump of Muteness," came into being at the exact same time Lan Hương came to America. It "inexplicably" made her "allergic to words" and restricted her speech to a bare minimum, a condition considered so out of the ordinary that it was deemed a physical impairment, serious enough that school officials "decided to put her in with the students in Special Education." This Lump of Muteness simply "refused" to talk, desiring instead to "stay mum" and "shut down" despite all the emotions "bubbling in the deep crevices of its soul."⁹³ In time it would become Lan Hương's "muddled tunnel," the dark abyss that has "no shape, no name, no origin,"⁹⁴ that which is melancholia itself. Writing in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Kristeva specifies melancholia as a condition where the depressed subjects mourn not the lost Object but "the Thing," by which she means the real that "does not lend itself to signification, the center of attraction and repulsion, seat of sexuality from which object of desire become separated."⁹⁵ In those who are depressed, "the Thing like the self is a downfall that carries them along into the invisible and the unnameable,"⁹⁶ the dark abyss over which the melancholic mourn and into which they incorporate. However, one can "secure control" over the Thing and overcome melancholia by attempting sublimation "through melody, rhythm, semantic polyvalency, the so-called poetic form, which decomposes and recomposes sign." The decomposition and recombination of signs, which constitute the act of writing, enable

the melancholic to name the unnameable, to speak the “unspeakable anguishes,”⁹⁷ and, like Neville in Mary Shelby’s “The Mourner,” to make meaningful and inhabitable “a space between the shadowed netherworld of melancholia and the idealized world of the imaginary,” life itself.⁹⁸

If the experience of exile robs Lan Huong of the desire for speech, which diminishes her ability to articulate and cripples her sense of self, it is certain that the experience of return has a rehabilitative impact on Lan Huong insofar as it restores her willingness to speak, laying the foundation necessary for the work of sublimation. The act of writing enables Lan Huong to visualize the shape, ascribe a name, and identify the origin of the paralyzing abyss that which had been hauntingly “shapeless, nameless, originless,” and provides Lan Huong with a space of dwelling, a place of belonging, an extra-national alterity that is the Commonwealth of Words.⁹⁹ Indeed, the poetry that punctuates the novel grants us direct access to Lan Huong’s most intimate thoughts, revealing not only her inner turmoil but also her transformation. Through poetry, Lan Huong is able to speak of her anguish, her desperate pursuit of home: “...One day we find our homeland in Prozac/ Life became luscious green graves fragranced by Prozac/ Men and women curled up on Prozac/ All that’s left are pills of Prozac.”¹⁰⁰ Poetry also enables Lan Huong to identify the source of her disorientation, the violence of exile: “Mom and daughter are falling.../ Into a land that refuses to grow up/ Drifting/ Until we land into the lion’s den full of pain/... A placenta forced out of a homeland;”¹⁰¹ to confront her proclivity toward self-destruction, “...The world is what my body makes real/ I hide in it my futility, my darkness/... But how much more can it conceal/ O this bag of savage meat, filled with pleasure and pain;”¹⁰² to name that which had been unnameable, the confusing chaos and excruciating pain of homelessness, “Utter chaos/ The day I discover life is nothing but ignorance and chaos/ I have no more tears for anyone/ Or for myself/ I am drifting through the vast shadow of an unknown earth/ Not knowing where to end up or when to perish;”¹⁰³ and, last but not least, to come to terms with her homelessness and to accept the finality of this immense loss, “Loneliness/ Lingering Loneliness/ The earth is strewn with lonely fireballs/ There will never be a homeland for you to return/ A river in which to glide and float/... All that’s left are shadows/ Bobbing ever so feebly...”¹⁰⁴

But if the activity of writing enables Lan Huong to overcome the “death drive” which is constitutive of melancholia, it neither resolves her homelessness nor dissolves “the mind of winter” that is the destabilizing uncertainty of exile. The morose mindscape and lugubrious tone in *all* of the poems written by Lan Huong in the novel lend credence to Judith Butler’s suggestion that exilic displacement is utterly ungrievable, “loss that is not held to be loss,” a discourse foreclosed by the impossibility of return, and as such, will always remain “in a kind of ontologically shadowy domain.”¹⁰⁵ As much as writing produces an alleviative effect on the writing subject, it falls far short in its presumed function as compensation for exilic homelessness. The deeply somber and uncertain ending of *The Sulking Body* reveals Lê’s careful avoidance both of the postcolonial nationalist trope of return and Euro-American modernist critical celebration of exile as aesthetic recompense. Neither the actual return nor the “return of words” can restore “home” to the exile, for - to borrow once more from Said - “exile is life led outside habitual order: nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal. But no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew.”¹⁰⁶

Inventing a Diasporic Tongue

This section examines Lê’s use of language to articulate the violence of exile and, more substantially, assert a Vietnamese American subjectivity, one rooted in the mother tongue but

blossoms into an entity of its own. Lê's invention and deployment of a distinct Vietnamese American "dialect," characterized by a mixture of [bilingual] vernacular speech and poetic language, reveals language as a site of loss and reconstruction. Lê's simultaneous embrace of the mother tongue and dissociation from the father tongue reveals an active re-negotiation of the female subject's relation to the nation, one that challenges nationalist patriarchal conflation of femaleness with the home/land by devising its own framework for addressing the multifaceted dimensions of female exile and identificatory politics. By representing exile both as a historical condition and aesthetic predicament, and writing both as creative impulse and political conviction, Lê's novel insists upon a complex, dynamic, and mutually constitutive relationship between female authorship and cultural resistance in the diaspora. Lê's and Lan Hương's choice to write in the Vietnamese as well as their privileging of poetic language are unequivocal acts of defiance against, on the one hand, the phallogocentric Symbolic order of which the father is representative and, on the other, the linguistic hegemony exerted upon the exile subject from both the home and host countries. The section ends with a reification that novel's anti-assimilationist stance, coupled with the Lê's own ideological and political commitment to Asian American feminist and coalitional politics, incontestably positions this novel within the tradition of Asian American literature.

Writing in the afterward of *Lolita*, Nabokov defends the "American-ness" of his novel, rejecting the charge that *Lolita* is foreign in its portrayal of "philistine vulgarity," to the point of being anti-American: "I chose American motels instead of Swiss hotels or English inns only because I am trying to be an American writer and claim only the rights that other American writers enjoy." Nabokov's quest to become an American writer no doubt involves his choice to "abandon [his] natural idiom, [his] untrammelled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English," an abandonment he confesses would remain his "private tragedy," so personal that he does not expect it "to be [of] anybody's concern."¹⁰⁷ While Lê does not give up her "natural idiom," at least in her creative life, she does consider separation from it "the most painful loss in the life of the exile." Indeed, Lê asserts again and again in *The Sulking Body* that severance from the mother tongue, perhaps even more than physical separation from the motherland itself, is no less a "sadistic mental torture," the primary cause of the exile's endless anxiety and feeling of hopelessness.¹⁰⁸

In the chapter "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" in *Écrits*, Lacan argues that subjectivity is only an object in language, constructed and determined by the structure of language. Such that, not only does language define our reality, it also creates our subjectivity: "What constitutes me as subject is my question... I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object. What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming."¹⁰⁹ Whatever disagreements Lê may have with Lacan, as the influence of Kristeva and Cixous on Lê's work would insinuate, she does agree with his observation regarding the centrality of language in determining one's subjectivity. The source of Lan Hương's "hopeless anguish," which remains unnameable until her return to Vietnam, is inextricably tied to language loss, resulting in her immediate refusal of speech upon arrival in the United States, a self-imposed muteness that would pave way for her descent into melancholia. In "The Silence of Polyglots," Kristeva uses the notion of "polymorphic mutism" to describe the deadening consequence of not being able to speak one's mother tongue. Polymorphic mutism refers to the

feeling that there is “nothing to say, nothingness, no one on the horizon” or that “nothing needs to be said, nothing can be said.” Being “cut off from the maternal source of words” means that: Silence has not only been forced upon you, it is within you: a refusal to speak, a fitful sleep driven to an anguish that wants to remain mute, the private property of your proud and mortified discretion, that silence is a harsh light... It is not the silence of anger that jostles words at the edge of the idea and the mouth; rather, it is the silence that empties the mind and fills the brain with despondency, like the gaze of sorrowful women coiled up in some nonexistent eternity.¹¹⁰

Once in Vietnam, upon hearing her childhood name uttered for the first time in more than two decades, Lan Huong immediately begins to recognize the source of her numbing sorrow:

Language loss is no less a sadistic mental torture... The ominous pain she feels upon returning home is not so much this shabby old house which her father has left her sisters. Not quite the bloodsucking local authorities. Not even the heat and the sun. It's that discomfiting realization that someone had somehow uprooted her from her place... How can language be this menacing to her and her daughter?¹¹¹

Severance from the mother tongue devastates one's sense of self because it constantly reinforces one's feeling alienation and brokenness. One must be in possession of several native tongues, Lan Huong reasons, in order to live fully “in several worlds.” No “ordinary person,” i.e. those who possess only one “natural idiom,” can feel “whole” once separated from the mother tongue. And Lan Huong admits she is “only an ordinary person” who does not feel at all “ok” when “Vietnamese and English fight over her for influence.” Being forced to learn English half way through her life makes Lan Huong feel like “child dwarfed between two languages,” unlike her siblings who appear “strong” and “stalwart” due to their ability to complete their “[linguistic] cycle” of growth. Because “language is more powerful than life itself,” only the linguistically displaced can comprehend the precarious futility, the untenable discomfort, the numbing restlessness of such existence. Lan Huong likens the pain of language loss to “a feeling of self-pitying anger. A dark scar on an outcast umbilical cord. A gash on the anus. A deep hole in the crevice of the soul. A tear-inducing trap. Something that is not anything.” As the previous section has shown, Lan Huong's ability to identify and articulate, in thoughts and in poetry, the source of her anguish indeed makes possible her recovery from exilic melancholia. The ability to utter, literally and figuratively, that which had been “unspeakable” enables Lan Huong to confront loss rather than consume it, to accept loss rather than accede to it, to grieve loss rather than grudge it, to relinquish and transfer emotional ties from loss to the self, and, ultimately, to make tolerable life after loss.

Thus, in *The Sulking Body*, language reveals itself as a site of both exilic deracination and identity reconstruction. If the loss of the mother/tongue lies at the source of Lan Huong's *dis*-articulated identity, her own invention of a “new” tongue makes possible an emergence of a “new” subjectivity, one that attends to the “curious contradictions” and “discontinuities” of life in exile. This “new” tongue, which manifests in the form of poetry written in Lan Huong's native language, makes transparent her privileging of the mother/tongue and critical disposition toward the father/tongue, a representation the phallogocentric Symbolic order. As I will show, Lan Huong's choice of genre and language of creativity, coupled with her rejection of the father's poetry, suggests Lê's commitment to the Cixousian notion of feminine writing, which Lê posits as a site of political subversion and identity transformation.

In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Helene Cixous uses the phrase *écriture féminine* to describe the necessity for and attributes of feminine writing. While Cixous admits that “it is

impossible to define feminine practice of writing... for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed or coded,” it certainly exists. *Écriture féminine* is connected to the female bodies and “will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system.” By exposing the Symbolic as a phallogocentric structure, not an inevitable order immune to deconstruction, *écriture féminine* functions as a rupture, a site for personal and political change. The most apt illustration of *écriture féminine* is poetry because, in the latter, the boundaries between text and speech, order and chaos, sense and non-sense are blurred. Meaning in poetic language is liberated from stable structure and syntax. By defying formal structure, writers who practice *écriture féminine* participate in creating in a new system of signification and, in doing so, undermine and reject the Symbolic as an inherent and incontestable Truth. Women who write from their own bodies and men who occupy specific structural position within the Symbolic can produce “feminine sexts,” that which “cannot fail to be more than subversive” for it is written “in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institution, to blow up the law, to break up ‘truth’ with laughter.”¹¹²

In answering the question “Does feminine writing exist?” published in the anthology *Choosing the Proto-Mother* (2005), a project very much in line with establishing *l’écriture féminine* among Vietnamese women writers, spearheaded by none other than Lê herself, Lê suggests that there does, should, and must exist feminine writing. She defines feminine writing broadly as writing by women and for women. However, Lê is also quick to emphasize that not all women writers produce feminine writing, especially when their works seek to appease male-centered sexuality or fulfill male-defined artistic and literary standards: “In a world so long dominated by men, many women writers, critics and politicians imbibe erection enhancers to give birth to works full of male flavor. The passive audience, who has grown accustomed to this odor, believes that life has only male fragrance to offer them.”¹¹³ Lê references the eighteenth-century Vietnamese woman scholar, writer, and translator Đoàn Thị Điểm, one of the most important literary and historical figures in Vietnamese history, as embodiment of early Vietnamese feminism as well as feminine writing. Thus, if Lê privileges the role of writing in *The Sulking Body*, it is specifically feminine writing upon which she insists and towards which her protagonist strives. Like her father, Lan Hương also becomes a poet; but the kind of poetry she produces differs significantly from that of his. Tied to (1) Lan Hương’s recovery from melancholia and (2) transformation from crippled femininity to feminist subjectivity, the ubiquity of free-verse poetry throughout the novel also elucidates the authorial assertion of feminine writing. For Lê, it is writing that exposes the structure of gender oppression and struggles against the dominating influence, literally, of male “sex drive” on women’s literary activity.¹¹⁴

When Lan Hương first encountered the insuppressible desire to write, she could not help but be suspicious of it. Having already recognized aspects of her depravity in her father, Lan Hương dreaded the thought of taking after him intellectually and creatively, likening her poetic impulse to a biological inheritance to be overcome:

The more anger she feels toward her father and her homeland,... the more poetry spurts forth from her. Her father is her homeland. Her father is poetry. The more confused, the more angered she feels, the more poetry bursts forth... Never in her entire life had she thought she was capable of writing poetry. Genetic inheritance. Another inheritance she hadn’t conceived of until her return to Vietnam... Here, everything seems inextricably linked to her father. If she had to sketch the places she’s been [in Vietnam], it would resemble the face of her father.¹¹⁵

Since her father's success as a poet had taken a great toll on his wife, children, and other [female] family members, the idea of becoming a poet initially repulsed Lan Hương. Despite of her best effort to denigrate it, she finds the call to writing almost viscerally irresistible. And, being unable to deny its sublimating power, Lan Hương ultimately chooses to embrace her poetic desire rather than dismiss it. But she does so deliberately and calculatingly.

Indeed, the kind of poetry Lan Hương's father produces, and for which he gains national notoriety, differs significantly from that of Lan Hương. If his rigid *luc bat* poetry makes him a literary icon, hers is characterized by a deliberate lack of structure and rhyme. If his poems are accessible enough to be included as part of elementary school curriculum, hers are marked by a frustrating impenetrability, a relentless violation of grammar and syntax. If his are filled with bathetic observations (What knows how to crawl is an ant/What knows how fly is a falling leaf/What knows immenseness is the sky/ What knows how to drift in life are people), hers refuse common-sense interpretation, plunging instead into multiple abysses of meaning. In more ways than one, the father's poetry embodies what Helene Cixous calls "marked writing," defined as that which seeks to maintain the representational stability of the Symbolic and lends credence to the privileging of the phallus in the construction of meaning. For Cixous, marked writings are manifestations of the culture of phallogocentrism, which is particularly detrimental to women. As she tells us:

I maintain unequivocally that there is such thing as *marked* writing; that, until now, far more extensively and repressively and cultural – hence politically and typically masculine – economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, in manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with mystifying charms of fiction.¹¹⁶

Lan Hương's father's poetry, with its appeal to common sense, its emphasis on stable meaning and its reliance on formal structure, radically distinguishes it from Lan Hương's poetry. The latter, which prominently displays features associated with *écriture féminine*, enables Lan Hương to simultaneously dis-identify with the patriarch's speech while claiming a certain linguistic, political and historical allegiance to the mother/tongue. By drawing on the mother/tongue both as a site of nourishment and source of inspiration, Lê joins Cixous in complicating Lacan's paradigmatic pegging of maternal separation as indispensable to adulthood, and in doing so, re-emphasizes not only the unrepresentability of women within the phallogocentric Symbolic order but also the conviction that "in woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history." Thus, Lan Hương's identification with the mother/tongue is an assertion of a feminist subjectivity insofar as it connects the personal to the collective, rejects the rule of the father and insists upon its own entrance into [female] subjecthood.

Not only does *The Sulking Body* seek to articulate a Vietnamese feminist subjectivity, it also attempts to construct a Vietnamese diasporic identity. As with poetic language, Lê's deployment of text-speech as the language of narration reveals Lê's privileging of feminine writing as a site of identity construction. *The Sulking Body* differs significantly from Lê's previous two novels and short stories in that its narrative voice is deliberately fragmented, anti-syntactical, slang-infused, and at times, downright indecipherable. The following passage merits a quote at length for it contains all the features just described and is definitive of the novel's narrative strategy:

Bây giờ nó đang trở về cố quốc Việt Nam và nó chợt thấy thấp thoáng *một chút gân ni tê* *răng rứa* thì hai chút xa *the feeling is teh doublaged*. Một điều giống da bánh mật thì năm

bảy điều khác biệt *joo r the kooote*. Nó vẫn là nó. Một cối riềng bị vắt chanh linh hồn và sandwich thân xác. Đứa trẻ bị cắt đứt cuống nhau và bị vút vào đồng rác gọi nhớ của linh hồn.¹¹⁷ (Emphasis mine).

I argue that Lê's stubborn defiance of spelling and grammar and careful avoidance of conventional literary language function to reveal both the fragmentation of the subject in exile and the delicate process of subject reconstitution. In the above passage, the indecipherable syntax (*joo r the kooote*) enhances, rather than distracts from, the overall context that is linguistic and personal alienation. Lê's juxtaposition of syntactical transgressions, such as *the feeling is teh doublaged*, alongside metaphorically exacting characterizations, such as *một cối riềng bị vắt chanh linh hồn và sandwich thân xác*, gives the novel a cumulative literary and poetic effect. Lê describes her own narration in *The Sulking Body* as *lộn nhồn* (disorderly), clearly invoking the Cixousian notion of feminine speech, defined as that which seeks to traverse between order and chaos, speech and text, sense and non-sense. By resorting to feminine speech as the language of narration, Lê simultaneously addresses the potential and predicament of writing displacement, highlighting, on the one hand, the re-constructive power of writing and, on the other, the very epistemological limits of representing exile. The poetic disorderliness that lies at the heart of Lê's narrative strategy belies the work's remarkably coherent project: the establishment of a Vietnamese diasporic speech, one rooted in the mother tongue but grows into a "dialect" of its own. Lê's creative, cultural and political investment in the Vietnamese language, specifically in the "dialect" of her own invention, reveals Lê's specific vision of alterity, a space of belonging in defiance of linguistic hegemony and national[ist] imaginary.

In "About Fanciful Imaginings @ Words," Lê forcefully insists upon the presence of a tangible and viable diasporic Vietnamese language, one that shares a common ancestry with the lingua franca of the contemporary Socialist Republic of Vietnam but has also undergone its own trajectory within the past three decades. She argues that it must be considered a separate entity, a distinct dialect, not unlike Australian English from British English or Brazilian Portuguese from European Portuguese, whose development depends not on what is happening in Vietnam but in the multiple places to which diasporic Vietnamese have [been] dispersed:

Living in the diaspora means that I don't belong to any homeland. I write in Vietnamese even though the language I use daily is entirely different. [Vietnam] has undergone drastic changes in the past quarter of the century and I haven't participated in any of it... I and my community of Vietnamese speakers outside of Vietnam have established a new kingdom. The Commonwealth of Diasporic Vietnamese Language. We cling on to one another to survive: Vietnamese-language papers in Stuttgart, Vietnamese-language television programs in San Jose..., *Thuy Nga* in Australia, weekend get-togethers at *13 Paris*, Tet festivals in Tokyo. That's how we sustain Vietnamese in the diaspora. This is also why diasporic Vietnamese should not be forced to submit to the semantic rules and standards of... that which is spoken in Vietnam. Englishmen exported English to Australia, to Asia... We are exporting Vietnamese to various parts of the world.¹¹⁸

Before proceeding any further, it is important to point out how Lê problematically resorts to ahistorical blurring of the differences between colonial language imposition and diasporic Vietnamese struggle to resist language loss to assert her claim. While Lê's rhetorical strategy certainly risks romanticizing colonial legacies, given her intensely anti-colonial stance as presented elsewhere in this chapter, I interpret her comment as an attempt to valorize the presence of a previously colonized language in the physical spaces of former/neo-colonial powers. Interestingly, while Lê's insistence on writing in the Vietnamese aligns her more closely

with radical decolonial writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o¹¹⁹, her statement calls to mind Salman Rushdie's suggestion that perhaps conquering a colonial language by way of reworking it to reflect postcolonial struggles can be an act of resistance and emancipation.¹²⁰ Even though Lê and Rushdie appear to occupy different ends of the colonial language debate, Lê's notion of exporting and Rushdie's notion of conquering have in common a shared desire to disrupt rather than reinforce colonial language influence. Lê's insistence that diasporic Vietnamese language must be viewed as a distinct entity can be understood as a response against forces of linguistic erasures emanating from both her [former] home and host countries.

As a distinct entity, moreover, the Commonwealth of Diasporic Vietnamese Language as envisioned by Lê is both a dialect and a spatiality. If a dialect is linguistically defined as "a variety of a language that is distinguished from other varieties of the same language by features of phonology, grammar, and vocabulary, and by its use by a group of speakers who are set off from others geographically or socially,"¹²¹ then it's clear that Lê locates the origin of this Commonwealth in the physical displacement of diasporic Vietnamese directly as a result of the Vietnam War.¹²² Lê's refusal to adopt the rules and semantics of contemporary standardized Vietnamese reveals both her identification with South Vietnamese cultural legacies and insistence upon the independent historical trajectory of diasporic Vietnamese language outside Vietnam. While Lê does not systematically theorize the linguistic features of this Commonwealth, my subsequent discussion will show that this dialect is generally envisioned as anti-communist and anti-assimilationist, both of which by virtue of deployment. As such, this Commonwealth also constitutes space of belonging for Vietnamese speakers outside of Vietnam, particularly those who dis-identify with the current ruling regime.

Given the above, I argue that Lê's insistence that diasporic Vietnamese language "not be forced to submit to the semantic rules and standards" of the *lingua franca* of contemporary Vietnam constitutes as much an act of political severance as a claim to diasporic sovereignty. Yet, any assertion of sovereignty is in itself a demand for legitimacy and, given the reality that much of diasporic Vietnamese cultural production, particularly in the realm of literature, continues to be denied in contemporary Vietnam, diasporic Vietnamese claim to sovereignty is inextricably tied to, among other things, the struggle for recognition from the very political apparatus it seeks to dissociate and challenge. In a controversial interview published in *Hộp Lư*, a leading literary journal in the Vietnamese diaspora, Lê is asked about journal's advocacy for literary exchange with artists from Vietnam in the 1990s. To which Lê tersely answers: "I think *Hộp Lư* has accomplished only the easy half of the project, which is to introduce works published in Vietnam to the Vietnamese diaspora, but not the other way around. This is actually a failure for *Hộp Lư*."¹²³ Lê's critical assessment of *Hộp Lư* indicates not so much a resistance to the project of cultural exchange, for *Gió-O* also actively promotes works by Vietnamese writers, but rather a frustration towards the current regime's continued dismissal of diasporic Vietnamese literary contribution, even as it openly acknowledges the latter's indispensable contribution to the nation's economic well-being.

In an interview published in 2006, the Vietnamese critic Nguyễn Thanh Sơn proposes that diasporic Vietnamese literature is "in many ways, an extension of South Vietnamese literary tradition" which "lacks major aesthetic and philosophical breakthroughs." Sơn suggests that diasporic Vietnamese literature is on the verge of extinction because it is facing two very limiting options: (1) To continue the South Vietnamese literary tradition which risks alienating the readership inside Vietnam; or (2) To assimilate into the literary traditions of the host countries. Sơn also proposes an almost impossible third alternative, which is for overseas

Vietnamese writers “to return to the cultural environment [of Vietnam], to engage with Vietnamese literary concerns but still maintain an ‘outsider’s perspective’ with all of its negatives and positives.”¹²⁴ While not without *some* merit (i.e. the influence of Southern literary tradition on early diasporic works), Son’s seriously ill-informed and gravely flawed assessment both of Southern Vietnamese and diasporic Vietnamese literary achievements is in no small part a byproduct of the Vietnamese government’s ongoing smear campaign against the southern regime’s cultural contribution and puts in perspective diasporic Vietnamese continued demand for recognition and need for self-legitimation.¹²⁵

Lê’s insistence on the tangibility and viability of a diasporic Vietnamese language is really an insistence on the tangibility and viability of a diasporic subjectivity. The persistent and consistent disorderliness characteristic of *The Sulking Body* reveals Lê’s conscious effort to reconstruct a diasporic subjecthood in the space of language. By refusing to succumb to the semantic regulations of the father tongue in articulating a diasporic subjecthood, Lê rejects not only the overdetermined phallic structure of language but also the masculinist nationalist assumption of female embodiment of home. In *The Sulking Body*, feminist diasporic subjectivity is not a historical accident [of exile] but a political conviction, one that entails careful and deliberate negotiations with the mother/land, with war and patriarchal legacies. Lan Hương’s return to Vietnam to confront the magnitude of her loss, rather than to regain what was lost, suggests the centrality of history and the limited function of “return” in theorizing the experience of exile and the formation of exilic subjectivity. Lê’s deployment of feminine speech in the Vietnamese language in *The Sulking Body*, as well as her decision to take up writing in the Vietnamese language in the first place, also reveals Lê’s careful negotiation with colonial/western genealogies. If Lê openly embraces *l’écriture féminine*, her choice of Vietnamese as the language of creativity makes clear her rejection of colonial/western language hegemony. In an email communication, Lê reveals her “equal resentment towards Chinese, French and English,” neo-/colonial languages that have been forced on Vietnam throughout its history:

When I was younger, I dropped out of my French boarding school in Da Nang because I wanted to learn Vietnamese. In college, I majored in Vietnamese Literature but was required to take Chinese as part of the curriculum. So I made sure to memorize enough to pass the exams but never managed to remember more than the word ‘Chi.’ As soon as I came to America, I vowed never to take comfort in the English language. I feared that mastery of English would betray my own resentment. One of my primary goals in *The Sulking Body* is to denunciate colonial imposition of language and how exile further robs people of their voice.¹²⁶

Thus, one can conclude with accuracy that Lê’s choice to write in the Vietnamese is also a response against assimilation pressures exerted upon the ethnic subjects in the United State. Lan Hương’s “Lump of Muteness” is as much a result of historical trauma as a sign of resistance against the forced imposition of English. That Lan Hương managed to produce a single short story, aptly titled “The Lump of Muteness,” in all of her twenty years of living in the United States also suggests the limited role of an adopted tongue in the creative life of the exile. The new idiom remains for Lê, as it does for Lan Hương, the language of daily conversation, of civic participation, even of political activism, but never of *jouissance*.¹²⁷ By and large, this new idiom remains, to borrow once more from Kristeva, “an impervious fullness: cold diamond, secret treasury, carefully protected, out of reach,” a mere tool of survival, utterly incapable of lifting the exilic mute from the “despondency” that is the loss of the mother tongue.¹²⁸ Not unlike Lan

Huong's transformative reconnection with the mother tongue, Lê's emphasis in "Journey" that her quest for truth has entailed a return to Vietnamese language further suggests the importance of the mother tongue to our author's intellectual and creative journey.¹²⁹ If the activity of writing provides Lan Huong with the means to articulate her experience, the return to the "maternal source of words" anchors her from the very threat of exilic deracination.

As empowering as it may be for Lê, her privileging of the mother tongue brings to bear the linguistic, material and historical challenges confronted many writers in exile, particularly those who choose to write in the language of their homeland. In my view, what makes *The Sulking Body* a compelling narrative is its keen awareness and brazen embrace of its own marginality. In "Exile as an Aesthetic Category," the Vietnamese-Australian critic Nguyễn Hưng Quốc likens the act of writing in exile to that of "making love to a corpse." Vietnamese exile writers, Quốc argues, pay a hefty price for their creative passion, but the heftiest price of all is that of utter loneliness. This is because "the readership is limited, decentralized, scattered and indifferent. Writing is like screaming into a well; the only sounds you hear are your own echoes coming back at you."¹³⁰ In an earlier article on the same topic, Quốc displays an even greater pessimism towards writing in exile: "In the past, writing bestowed status; a little later, it became both status- and career-bestowing. In the diaspora, writing bestows neither. Writing feels like the futility of a sexual impotent trying to masturbate."¹³¹ If Quốc seems morbidly pessimistic, it is a pessimism borne of the experience and knowledge of being absolutely marginalized, of being cast to the peripheries of all mainstream literary activities:

In the United States, the field of Asian American Studies... covers only works written in English by American writers of Asian descent... The same fate goes to Vietnamese works in France... While in Vietnam, diasporic Vietnamese writers are particularly marginalized... Dominant literary praxis and criticism on diasporic works either distort or... plagiarize from the latter. Never have they been analyzed or mentioned in any serious manner... They are made absolutely invisible: People, especially the government, pretend they do not exist.¹³²

Amidst these setbacks, the continual growth of diasporic Vietnamese literature presents indeed an intriguing conundrum, gesturing towards, in a manner of speaking, the irrepressibility of the creative impulse. Vietnamese exilic writing, in the face of multiple challenges with which it is presented, reflects the fundamental human need to express and make sense of the world, including but not limited to the conditions of exile. Lê's brazen defiance of the circumscribing conditions facing exilic writers attests further to this truth. Lê once says that she writes "out of love for creativity, not for recognition" because "writing precedes all desires for recognition."¹³³ Elsewhere, Lê professes the indispensable importance of writing to her personal, intellectual and spiritual well-being:

I cannot explain my passionate affair with the world of words... Increasingly I feel that I would probably perish if it became impossible for me to freely express myself with words... Life would become utterly meaningless if you were to deny me the pleasures I derive from my mother tongue. I cling on to language as the source of my spiritual nourishment. I am overjoyed to have discovered it as my homeland.¹³⁴

It is important to note that Lê's declaration of language as homeland in no way suggests her divestment from her role as a political subject. Lê's ideological and political commitment to Asian American empowerment and coalitional politics positions Lê squarely within the tradition of Asian American activism. In her simultaneous profession as college counselor at Evergreen Community College in San Jose, California, Lê has organized numerous student protests against

budget cuts, petitioned to increase minority faculty, campaigned actively to elect progressive Vietnamese American legislators, and most recently, co-founded the Vietnamese American for Education and Leadership, an organization expressly aimed to empower Vietnamese American women.

In spite of the fact that *The Sulking Body* is written in the Vietnamese, or perhaps precisely because of it, I argue that the novel is quintessentially an Asian American text. In addition the Lê's critique of linguistic hegemony and pressures of assimilation, her politically conscious rendering of American racial realities via Lan Huong's relationship with Michelle, her African American friend, reflects a thoughtful engagement with the politics of representation and interracial coalition. That Lan Huong and Michelle have more in common with each other than with anyone else in their respective families or circles of friends underscores Lê's hope for a politics of feminism that simultaneously observes and transcends racial difference. That Michelle, rather than Lan Huong's estranged husband, who welcomes her back to the United States after months of wandering also suggests Lê's investment in the vision of a multiracial America, an[other] alterity where the oppressed see themselves not as nemesis, but one another's ultimate allies.

Although it is true that Lê took up writing only after her arrival to the United States and that the experience of displacement itself was the direct impetus behind many of her works, *The Sulking Body* displays an incontestably critical attitude toward the notion of exile as aesthetic recompense. The novel ends on a deeply somber note, indicating Lê's own uneasiness about and ambivalence toward the legacy of exile. For Lê, exile amounts to total, irretrievable, and uncompensable loss. If there is any freedom in exile, it is constantly undermined by the exile's simultaneous longing for and refusal of "home." And yet, against the tangible and ominous threat of personal, racial and political deracination induced by exilic melancholia, the displaced find in her creative endeavors an unexpected source of consolation. Writing, with its sublimating power, offers the exile not so much a new home but a sublime alterity, a willingness to imagine life with neither the comfort nor strictures of "home." It is only through this alterity, this Commonwealth of Diasporic Vietnamese Language, that her love of life finds nourishment, her hunger for belonging ameliorated, and her search for meaning becomes our own source of inspiration.

Notes

¹ Lê, “At Fanciful Imaginings about Words.” Hereafter, “Fanciful.”

² Lê, *The Sulking Body*, 65. Hereafter *Sulking*.

³ Sugg, “‘I Would Rather Be Dead,’” 156. Even though Suggs’s essay pertains particularly to Caribbean literary production, its applicability to Asian American, particularly Vietnamese American, literary situations is rather remarkable. Here, it is important to highlight the sharp divergence that exists within the extremely heterogeneous body of Vietnamese American literature itself. It can be generalized with reasonable accuracy that Vietnamese American writings in English are more prone to the trope of reconnection and return than are writings in the Vietnamese. This is as much a reflection of the generation gap as of the different ideological, historical and political environments from which the writings emerge. One-half and second generation Vietnamese American writers, for instance, are more influenced by cultural nationalism than their first generation counterparts.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁵ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. Entry: Repatriation.

⁶ Wittlin, “The Sorrow and Grandeur of Exile,” 99-112.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁸ Seidel, *Exile and Narrative Imagination*, 198.

⁹ Lê, *Sulking*, 99.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹¹ Nico, *Outlandish*, Introduction.

¹² Lê, “About Fanciful Imaginings @ Words.”

¹³ Conrad, *Victory*, cited in Israel, *Outlandish*, 7.

¹⁴ Said, “The Mind of Winter,” 49.

¹⁵ Lahiri, *Inhabiting the Other*, Introduction.

¹⁶ Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature*, Introduction.

¹⁷ Lê, *Sulking*, 185

¹⁸ Kristeva, *Strangers*, 16.

¹⁹ Lê, *Sulking*, 56

²⁰ Lê’s insistence should not be understood as an attempt to fuel a kind of glass-half-empty rhetoricity or, worse, an idle construction of permanent victimhood. It is to properly understand the role of writing in providing the displaced a space of belonging without uncritically inflating it to that of aesthetic recompense, an inflation that risks ignoring the many more artists and writers whose creative energy is precisely dwarfed by the alienating experience of exile itself. Lê makes evident that exile is a condition that demands and refuses solution. The act of representing such dilemma, however satiating, must not be interpreted as solution itself.

²¹ Israel, *Outlandish*, 59

²² Kaplan, *The Questions of Travel*, Introduction.

²³ Sugg, “‘I Would Rather Be Dead,’” 157

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁶ Lê, *Sulking*, 29.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 136. It is important to note here that, despite the weekly trips to the archives, Lan Huong actually found out about her father from a memoir written by a dissident monk whose organization was infiltrated by Lan Huong’s father. The monk escaped by boat to Thailand after being released from the re-education camps and later settled in the United States. That Lan Huong learned about her father’s crimes from a memoir, rather than from materials stored in American archives is indeed instructive. Here, Lê alludes to the reality in which southern Vietnamese historical narratives are absent from official historiography about the Vietnam War.

²⁹ Lê, *Sulking*, 135-138.

³⁰ Sugg, “‘I Would Rather Be Dead,’” 159.

³¹ Lê, *Sulking*, 162.

³² *Ibid.*, 15.

³³ *Ibid.*, 31

³⁴ This is particularly true of Vietnamese émigrés politics vis-à-vis Vietnam. While most overseas Vietnamese remain vehemently anti-communist and increasingly critical of the current regime, it continues to be the case that, for instance, overseas remittances to Vietnam, through the official channel alone, constitute 8-10% of the country’s

total GDP, according to a 2008 WorldBank [estimate](#). This poignantly attests to the conflicting allegiances that inform diasporic Vietnamese subjectivity and speaks volumes about the need to differentiate between the affective and the ideological, the way Lê does in this particular work.

³⁵ Lê, *Sulking*, 31

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 30

³⁷ Lê's view on the Vietnamese penchant for self-hurt echoes closely that which is presented in *Dragons and Snakes* as well as *Memories with My Anh*.

³⁸ Lê, *Sulking*, 104, 106-107, 113.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 112-113, 165, 168-170.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 34, 175.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 187

⁴² Lan Hương also tells us in the poem she writes to and about her father that very night: "I have talked about you to many strange men/ But I am also strange/ My life is sad and strange/ Your daughter is indeed strange/ Stranded in strange homeland," 97.

⁴³ Lê, *Sulking*, 180-181.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 189

⁴⁷ For Lê, *Lũng* is the state of having no homeland. It is both a condition of exile and a political conviction. In "Live in Between, Die in Betwixt," Lê claims she needs freedom more than a homeland and that Gio-O "belongs to those who have no homelands." See also Hà Cẩm Tâm's discussion of Lê's idea about *Lũng* in an essay of the same name.

⁴⁸ Kaplan et al., Introduction to *Between Woman and Nation*, 10.

⁴⁹ Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy*, cited in Kaplan et al., Introduction to *Between Woman and Nation*, 13.

⁵⁰ Sugg, "I Would Rather Die," 160.

⁵¹ Email Communication, January 23, 2010.

⁵² Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 250.

⁵³ Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, 298-300.

⁵⁴ This, Alice Jardin rightly reminds us: "Kristeva's thought is peculiar: it is transparent enough that it tends to be reduced very quickly to a set of bipolar opposites by her critics (and thereby criticized as being everything from ultraanarchistic to ultraconservative); but at the same time, it is opaque enough to be uncritically idealized by her most fervent admirers." 106.

⁵⁵ Wittlin, "The Sorrow and Grandeur of Exile.," 102, 107, 109, 101.

⁵⁶ This essay first appears in the September 1985 issue of *Harper's*. It was later revised and became the more widely referenced "Reflections on Exile" published in *Out There* in 1987. Both versions will be cited in this section. I am entirely indebted to Nico Israel for this footnote and for the discussion on Said in this chapter. See, *Outlandish* for additional insight and detail (180).

⁵⁷ Said, "A Mind," 49.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 49

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶¹ Said, "Reflections," qtd. in *Outlandish*, 7.

⁶² Said, "A Mind," 55.

⁶³ Said draws "a mind of winter" from Wallace Stevens' perspectivist poem, "The Snow Man," to suggest the unobtainability of home for the exile. Keeping with Said, I reference the last line of the poem to underscore both the elusiveness as well as the empty constructedness of notion of "aesthetic recompense." The "grandeur" of exile is but a matter of representational privilege/authority, not necessarily a historical outcome.

⁶⁴ Kaplan, *Questions of Travel*, 37, 39, 64.

⁶⁵ Lê references this explicitly in "While Creating Humans": "My search for independence has over time become a conviction and has made me an exile among loved ones, women, men, and a few friends that I do have." Pg. 41

⁶⁶ Bettina Knapp uses the term "esoteric exile" to describe the artist's intrinsic, private sense of isolation and distinguishes it from what she calls "exoteric exile," the sense of isolation caused by physical departure from one's homeland.

⁶⁷ Lê, "While Creating Humans," 41.

⁶⁸ Lê, "Journey," 113. My emphasis.

⁶⁹ Said, "A Mind," 53. Emphasis in original.

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- ⁷⁰ Lê, “Fanciful.”
- ⁷¹ Lê, “Woman on Wheel”
- ⁷² Lê, “Journey,” 127.
- ⁷³ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 165
- ⁷⁴ Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 9.
- ⁷⁵ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 165.
- ⁷⁶ Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 3.
- ⁷⁷ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 178
- ⁷⁸ Lê, *Sulking*, 97-98
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 65.
- ⁸² *Ibid.*, 29, 162.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*, 162.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.
- ⁸⁹ Said, “A Mind,” 54.
- ⁹⁰ Lê, *Sulking*, 163.
- ⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 198.
- ⁹² *Ibid.*, 143.
- ⁹³ *Ibid.*, 56.
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.
- ⁹⁵ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 13
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15
- ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14
- ⁹⁸ McKeever, “Writing and Melancholia.”
- ⁹⁹ Lê explicitly references this idea in “Phìn... Phậ...”: “I could be the queen of words. I could be a child of words. I could die in words or live forever with words.”
- ¹⁰⁰ Lê, *Sulking*, 196
- ¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 46
- ¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 142
- ¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 190
- ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 185
- ¹⁰⁵ Bell, “Interview with Judith Butler,” 8.
- ¹⁰⁶ Said, “A Mind,” 55.
- ¹⁰⁷ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 315, 318-9
- ¹⁰⁸ Lê, *Sulking*, 42-43
- ¹⁰⁹ Lacan, *Écrit* 64.
- ¹¹⁰ Kristeva, *Strangers*, 16.
- ¹¹¹ Lê, *Sulking*, 43.
- ¹¹² Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 888
- ¹¹³ Lê, “An Interview with Lê Thị Huệ” in *Choosing with the Proto-Mother*, 81-82.
- ¹¹⁴ Lê uses the phrase “sex drive” in English to translate her own Vietnamese phrase “dai lam,” used to talk about women writers who are eager to appeal to male sex drive and become victims in the process.
- ¹¹⁵ Lê, *Sulking*, 143
- ¹¹⁶ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 879.
- ¹¹⁷ Lê, *Sulking*, 163.
- ¹¹⁸ Lê, “Fanciful.”
- ¹¹⁹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is postcolonial theorist and writer of Kenyan descent who achieved a successful career writing in English before turning to write in Gĩkũyũ. In *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Ngũgĩ calls on African writers to write in their native languages, rather than European languages, as a way of renouncing colonial ties and thus decolonizing the mind.

¹²⁰ In his essay "Imaginary Homelands," Rushdie explains how Anglophone writers of Indian descent can remake English for their own purposes: "One of the changes has to do with attitudes towards the use of English. Many have referred to the argument about the appropriateness of this language to Indian themes. And I hope all of us share the opinion that we can't simply use the language the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes. Those of us who do use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it, or perhaps because of that, perhaps because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free." Rushdie, 17.

¹²¹ Oxford Dictionary. Entry: Dialect.

¹²² Lê, "My Own Language."

¹²³ Trần, Vũ. "Văn Hoá Rộng Rãi Trong Thời Điểm Đồi Mồi: Phỏng Vấn Lê Thị Huệ."

¹²⁴ Lê, Lâm Hồng, "Văn Học VN Hải Ngoại: Một Cách Nhìn Gần Gũi Hơn."

¹²⁵ For in-depth discussions of diasporic Vietnamese literary development and achievement, including various stages of experimentation, see Nguyễn, Hưng Quốc, "Mười Lăm Năm Văn Học Lưu Vong" (1990), "Hai Mươi Năm Văn Học Lưu Vong" (1995), and "Lưu Vong Như Một Phạm Trù Mỹ Học" (2004). See also Nguyễn's keynote speech at the 2006 Diasporic Vietnamese Literature Conference, "Bài Đề Dẫn của Hội Thảo."

¹²⁶ Email Communication, December 8, 2010.

¹²⁷ I particularly borrow Kristeva's appropriation of Lacan's notion of *jouissance* to refer to a state of complete joy and ecstasy. Kristeva sees feminine *jouissance* as related to the maternal body and art as "the flow of *jouissance* into language" (*Revolution*, 79). For both Lê and Lan Hương, poetic language is only possible in the mother tongue, making the activity of writing, in a manner of speaking, a double source of *jouissance*.

¹²⁸ Kristeva, *Strangers*, 6.

¹²⁹ Lê, "Journey," 127.

¹³⁰ Nguyễn, "Lưu Vong Như Một Phạm Trù Mỹ Học."

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Trần, "Văn Hoá Rộng Rãi Trong Thời Điểm Đồi Mồi: Phỏng Vấn Lê Thị Huệ."

¹³⁴ Lê, "Fanciful."

**Un-Deifying Motherhood:
Towards a Vietnamese American Feminist Maternal Subjectivity**

*My dear child, step by step
Please come to an understanding that
Your mother is not a saint
Don't strangle me with your glorifying wreaths of flowers
Don't praise me with empty words
Instead just give me your hand
Let us keep each other warm and
Together plunge into this unyielding life*
– Lê Thị Huệ, “A Poem for My Son on a Rainy Night”

*I will forever stand outside of what's called homeland
Writing swiftly
Child on the other arm*
– Lê Thị Huệ, “A Woman Writing Outside Her Homeland”

If the sudden demise of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1975 has been acknowledged as the most turbulent episode in Lê Thị Huệ's life as a political subject, the birth of her first son in 1989 has, time and again, been referred to as the single most significant event in Lê's formation as a woman intellectual. And, if the collapse of Saigon inspired many of Lê's key texts throughout the 1980s to early 1990s, the experience of motherhood has decisively and intimately informed Lê's oeuvre over the past two decades. The title of this chapter reflects another key preoccupation in Lê's works, outlining her living and theorizing motherhood, revealing her active negotiation of her subjectivity as woman, mother and writer. Through an examination of Lê's attitudes towards motherhood in the essay “While Creating Humans” (1995) and the novel *The Sulking Body* (2007), I argue that, while Lê unequivocally privileges the transformational experience of being a mother, she is also deeply and emphatically critical of patriarchal, including Western and Confucian, constructions of motherhood. Reflecting the tremendous and direct influence of Adrienne Rich's trailblazing work *Of Woman Born* (1976), Lê makes the distinction between motherhood and mothering, emphasizing the former as a patriarchal institution while stressing the latter, defined as maternal practices that defy male-imposed ethics of motherhood, as a potential site for personal and intellectual empowerment.

Vietnamese patriarchal naturalization and deification of motherhood, Lê insists, function to the detriment of women by subsuming all aspects of female subjectivity under an all-encompassing maternal identity and, while paying lip service to the demanding realities of maternal labor, radically denying women's contribution to the family and society at large. Nonetheless, contrary to the conviction held by some second-wave feminists, Lê's works suggest that women's liberation need not entail a rejection of maternity, and that the experience of childbirth and childrearing can be psychologically, epistemologically and creatively transformative to women mothers. In order to reclaim their own maternal experience and subjectivity, Lê further proposes, women must consciously reject “the cloak of maternal

saintliness” or, to borrow Adrienne Rich’s coinage, become “outlaws” from the very institution of motherhood. Lê theorizes a model of motherhood that contains many elements of what Andrea O’Reilly in 2008 describes as feminist mothering, or that which (1) refuses patriarchal parameters of what constitutes “good” motherhood, (2) recognizes that both children and mothers benefit when women practice mothering “from a position of agency, authority, authenticity and autonomy,” (3) acknowledges that a woman’s identity is tied neither singularly nor exclusively to her role as mother, and (4) regards motherhood *not* as a personal creed, but a social and political act.

The following chapter is comprised of three parts. Part one begins with Lê’s critique of Vietnamese patriarchal deification of motherhood, zooming in on her analysis of Confucianism-influenced construction of ideal femininity to bring to light the stifling ideology of Vietnamese Motherhood. Lê argues that the deification of the Vietnamese Mother functions to confine women to the domestic sphere and provide the ultimate rationale for the social exploitation of maternal labor. Lê shows that “the cloak of maternal saintliness” has been forced upon mothers to prevent them from questioning patriarchal conventions of motherhood and compel them to seek social validation and personal fulfillment in motherhood. The idealization of maternal sacrifice, a central component of deified motherhood, is especially oppressive because it demands no less than complete maternal self-erasure. Part one also situates Lê’s critique within the larger feminist critique of the insidious consequences of patriarchal motherhood, highlighting the global economic ramifications of maternal labor and exposing the continued devaluation of motherwork both at home and in the workplace.

Part two begins with Lê’s discussion of the transformational power of motherhood and proceeds with an analysis of her treatment the trope of motherhood in the novel *The Sulking Body*. It shows that both Lê and her protagonist Lan Huong experience motherhood as “a physical and spiritual transformation,” a life force that jolts her out of emotional and historical despair.¹ Part two also analyzes Lan Huong’s rejection of maternal sacrifice to demonstrate the authorial rejection of the conventions of “good” motherhood. It shows that Lan Huong attempts empowered motherhood by consciously striving to attend to her needs as well as those of her child’s. In particular, Lan Huong’s simultaneous embrace of her role as writer and mother suggests a refusal to become erased, sacrificed, and consumed by motherhood. Lan Huong’s simultaneous disidentification with both her self-serving father and self-sacrificing mother demonstrates her desire to practice motherhood from a feminist maternal standpoint, determining for herself how to best be a mother without becoming dissolved in the process. Part two ends with Lê’s reiteration that only when women assume the contumacious identity of an outlaw, or refuse “the cloak of maternal saintliness,” can they be emancipated from the institution of patriarchal motherhood. Feminist maternal agency, Lê insists, requires women to occupy the male-accused position of “maternal selfishness” by insisting on a practice of mothering that situates the mother at the heart of mothering.

Part three focuses on Lê’s formulation of a feminist maternal subjectivity by calling into question individualism’s key assumption about consciousness and embodiment. Lê posits that because the maternal self has a fluid, equivocal and ambiguous relationship with the other, or *tha nhân*, maternal subjectivity necessarily defies the individualist notion of the autonomous subject as self-contained, univocal, coherent, and stable. Instead, Lê argues that to be a mother is to be a subject-in-relation, an identity that, by material necessity and political conviction, renders untenable and undesirable individualism’s account of subjectivity. Lê’s theorization of the maternal self as a relational subject relies on the assumption of a mutual permeability between

maternal embodiment and maternal consciousness, which signals Lê's privileging of female difference and female experience. While this privileging runs the risk of recuperating elements of gender essentialism, it is important to note that time and again Lê emphasizes the realities of mothering, rather than any feminine essence, as factors shaping maternal praxis and consciousness. Part three ends with a reiteration of Lê's advocacy of a praxis of mothering that places mothers at the core of mothering. Lê remains convinced that only when women refuse "the cloak of maternal saintliness" can they become liberated from the institution of patriarchal motherhood.

The Price of Deified Motherhood

Whereas debates over motherhood have been fundamental to feminist movements throughout various stages in Western societies as well as in Japan, China and India, Vietnamese writers and intellectuals have not extensively dissected the relationship between motherhood and feminism. Likewise, whereas maternal figures and the tropes of motherhood continue to deluge Vietnamese-language cultural, political and literary discourses, Vietnamese feminists have paid rather scant attention to the overlapping connections between motherhood and gender oppression. Among her contemporaries both in Vietnam and Vietnamese diaspora, Lê has emerged as the singular authority on the subject, vocally and relentlessly drawing attention to the Vietnamese patriarchal construction of motherhood and its ramifications on gender equity.

In her seminal essay "While Creating Humans," written three years after Lê gave birth to her first son who was born with autism, Lê synthesizes various elements of the Vietnamese cultural construction of motherhood to unveil the particularities of Vietnamese patriarchy within the larger context of global gender oppression. If compulsory heterosexual patriarchal construction of femininity in the West has historically ascribed to women the dichotomous role of Madonna/whore, Lê maintains that traditional ideals prescribed to Vietnamese women have been unitary rather than binary, valorizing attributes that would compel women to conform to ideals of the Madonna.² Excepting a handful of legendary historical women such as Princess Huyền Trân and female warriors such as the Trưng sisters (themselves mothers and wives), Lê argues that the feminine ideal most valued by the Vietnamese involves the double notion of faithful wife and devoted mother. This feminine ideal inundates not only traditional folklores but also modern contemporary cultural production:

The culturally iconic figure of the Loyal Warrior's Wife raising her children while waiting for her husband has inspired countless praise songs. The [nineteenth century] playboy poet Tu Xuong penned a number of epic poems celebrating the Vietnamese Wife, which have become particularly popular among Vietnamese men who recite them to avoid talking about their own responsibilities as husbands and fathers... Phan Boi Chau's wife and Pham Duy's wife [of the twentieth century] have also appeared in their husbands' poems as phenomenally devoted, selfless wives.³

But if the Vietnamese valorize the institution of "wifedom," their attitudes towards motherhood, Lê emphasizes, border on deifying. Citing the historian Đặng Nghiêm Vạn, Lê observes that these attitudes have deep historical roots in the Vietnamese indigenous folk religion Đạo Mẫu which worships "yêu tổ Mẹ," or maternal elements. Once remnants of a prehistoric agrarian society's reliance on the forces of nature, Đạo Mẫu has grown to become one of the most widely-practiced folk religions in modern Vietnam, manifesting in multiple local

traditions of worshipping maternal deities such as Mẹ Đất (Earth Goddess), Mẹ Lúa (Rice Goddess) or Nữ Thần Thánh Mẫu (Mother Goddess).⁴ In “Worshipping the Mother Goddess: The Đạo Mẫu Movement in Northern Vietnam,” Tu Anh T. Vu summarizes the key attributes of Đạo Mẫu as follows:

Đạo Mẫu develop[s] the conception of human life based on the worship of real-life “mothers” of the living people and for the benefit of living people. Thus, every deity in Đạo Mẫu reflects qualities of a kind-hearted Vietnamese Mother *who is both a divinity and a normal woman at the same time*. Đạo Mẫu does not focus on the afterlife, or death. It cares about the present life and the question how people can gain a happy and fulfilling life during their time on Earth.⁵ (emphasis mine)

Consistent with previous scholarly findings, Vu elaborates on the unique development and prevalence of the worship of maternal deities in Vietnam, lending further credibility to Lê’s observation about the influence of Đạo Mẫu on the Vietnamese perception of maternity, specifically the assertion that the mother in Vietnamese culture assumes the role of a human deity:

... Đạo Mẫu is different from other folk beliefs because it was a universally held belief of all Vietnamese people and not a belief held only by people in one province or only by one ethnic group in Vietnam. The spirits of Đạo Mẫu were seen as existing everywhere, from the lowland and highland regions, from the country to urban areas, and among every ethnic group from majority to minorities.⁶

But if Đạo Mẫu deifies *yếu tố mẹ* as creator of the family and universe, Lê argues that it does not exclusively confine women to the role of mother/nurturer. That motherhood in Vietnamese culture comes to be regarded as the ultimate feminine virtue, an identity that “overshadows all other aspects of the Vietnamese womanhood,” is the result of another dominant ethico-religious influence in Vietnam: Chinese Confucianism.⁷ Indeed, if Đạo Mẫu’s privileging of the maternal ever suggested a potential site for women’s empowerment, such potential had been undercut by the Confucian prescription of female ethics. Most centrally, in its vision of “a happy order” Confucianism ascribes to women the role of subservient followers. Lê references the traditionally celebrated passage in *The Book of Rites* to highlight the subordinate status of women as constructed within the Confucian code of feminine propriety: “The woman follows (and obeys) the man: - In her youth, she follows her father and elder brother; when married she follows her husband; when her husband is dead, she follows her son.”⁸ The proper Confucian woman is strictly limited to the domestic sphere, her virtue is measured by her duty and submission to the family’s patriarch(s); never is she defined as an individual in her own right, but always in relation to those whom she follows and serves.⁹

After her visit to Confucius’s hometown Qufu in 2006, Lê penned the essay “As I Stand Looking at Slippery Moss @ the Confucian Entrance” as a record of her imaginary conversation with Confucius. The essay reflects Lê’s uncompromising disposition towards the Confucian prescription of ideal femininity. In their imaginary “exchange,” Lê reproaches Confucius’s denial of women’s humanity and situates Confucianism within the wider context of universal patriarchy. Eastern and Western heterosexual patriarchies, Lê insists, share in common a rejection of female subjecthood and demonization of female desires. Lê delivers her scathing remarks to Confucius as follows:

Why do you men attach to our bodies the most reprehensible concepts? Jesus created us as the snake that got expelled from paradise. You turned us into indentured servants to our husbands, and then to the children of our husbands when

they are dead. Shakyamuni Buddha abandoned his wife in pursuit of his own enlightenment. [Men] treat us as though we were “trouble-makers,” never as lovers, intellectual comrades or life partners.¹⁰

In addition to barring women from the public sphere and keeping them tightly under the control of the family’s patriarch(s), Lê argues that the Confucian Doctrine of the Mean exacerbates women’s subordination by seeking to uphold the status quo.¹¹ If, according to Confucian philosophy of governance, the family is the cornerstone of a stable polity, and if a stable polity depends upon the regulation of the proper place of its citizen subjects, it follows that any change in the position of the female members within the household would destabilize, and, thereby, present the ultimate threat of disintegration to the polity. Lê suggests that the Doctrine’s focus on achieving social order primarily encourages ethical stasis and is fundamentally opposed to social change. Lê castigates the Doctrine’s favored states of harmony and equilibrium as pretexts for social inaction and continued women’s oppression:

[Confucius] cast us women to the outside margins. [His] followers treat us as if we were men’s property. And yet [his] legacy continues to live on... [His] true fortune must really reside in those two words ‘Zhōng Yǒng.’ What gives [Confucius] immortality is [his] own non-committal faith in non-change, [his] Doctrine of the Mean. [He] lean[s] on the status quo to exist.¹²

Lê’s juxtaposition of the influences of Confucianism and Đạo Mẫu on the Vietnamese cultural psyche as seen above lays the context for understanding the role of the Vietnamese Mother and how such role is believed to account for the Vietnamese woman’s ultimate worth.¹³ As we will see, Đạo Mẫu’s conception of *yếu tố mẹ* as both human and divine and Confucianism’s construction of female virtue as exclusively maternal-domestic have portentously impacted the Vietnamese perception of ideal femininity, working in tandem to limit Vietnamese women strictly to realms of domesticity and maternity, deeming these roles their highest and most fundamental calling.¹⁴

As glorifying as it may seem in rhetoric, religious and cultural deification of the maternal does not bestow upon the Vietnamese Mother any political privilege or economic advantage. In reality, it robs her entirely of her personhood. To achieve a measure of human divinity or proper Confucian feminine virtue, the Vietnamese Mother must forego her own needs, living instead only for, and vicariously through, her children and husband:

The Vietnamese Mother is famously known for sacrificing her entire being for her family. Unquestioned, unconditional sacrifice... Complete self-effacement. The cultural ideal of the traditional woman giving herself endlessly in service of her children, her husband, and her husband’s family has painted the Vietnamese Mother in a color palette that denotes divinity rather than humanity. Vietnamese mothers are [expected] to be no less than living saints.¹⁵

Lê’s own rigid Catholic upbringing, which she has elsewhere denounced, lends evidence to my conclusion that her continual usage of the noun phrase “living saints” is also an allusion to the Judeo-Christian notion of sainthood, which carries with it connotations of moral purity and sexual chastity, the very qualities Lê also argues are demanded of the Vietnamese Mother. Even though, as Western feminists have time and again emphasized, Western patriarchal construction of motherhood has also rendered it a “sacred calling,”¹⁶ the degree of maternal sanctification in the West pales in comparison to that which takes place in Vietnamese culture: “Qualities expected of the Vietnamese Mother places Vietnamese women in a different situation compared

to American women [because] American cultural imperatives celebrate... but do not deify mothers.”¹⁷ A crucial point of divergence between Western and Vietnamese constructions of womanhood also involves the latter’s utter and complete denial of women’s sexuality. Lê highlights Western dichotomous construction of womanhood to reveal the desexualization of the female subject in the Vietnamese context:

... [T]he self-sacrificing Vietnamese Mother is idolized above all else, [which is] unlike in America where women also find a level of idolatry as “sex symbols” (translation appears in the original). The Queen of Sexuality Marilyn Monroe probably didn’t make history the same way the African American Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison or the prominent 1960s feminist Betty Friedan did, but she surely remains a “covert” American idol. American men lust after Marilyn’s body. American women long to look like her.¹⁸

Vietnamese women, by contrast, find themselves on the opposite and extreme end of the spectrum, achieving cultural and social validation primarily through their role as mothers, an identity that Lê argues “overshadows all other aspects of Vietnamese womanhood.”¹⁹ The denial of the Vietnamese female subjectivity and maternal sexuality is also an influence of the Confucian code of feminine ethics, as Lê again makes explicit in her imagined confrontation with Confucius:

Why didn’t you philosophize about sex?... Why didn’t you show us where to find peace and harmony when we look at our husbands hungrily devouring our breasts just after we nurse our babes?... You turned away from the body... You gave up on desire. The woman’s body is not a hiding place for sin and pain. I want to ask you, Mr. Confucius, why did you push us to the utter margins of existence? Why did you make us the embodiment of sinful lust?... We are desire. Embrace us. We are sexuality. Live with us. You have resisted us. But, I am telling you, it’s better late than never.²⁰

To underscore the specificity of the forces confronting Vietnamese womanhood, Lê highlights the tangible legacies of American feminist movements as cultural and historical factors that, noticeably absent in the Vietnamese context, have enabled American women a measure of success in resisting against the male-defined institution of motherhood. Lê further suggests that, whereas Vietnamese cultural emphasis on collectivism has made it far more challenging for Vietnamese women to impart a politics of gender and maternal empowerment, American privileging of individualism – no less the ideological foundation of American feminism – has made motherhood decidedly *less* circumscribing for American women: “[American] mothers are encouraged to take care of themselves in addition to others. Boys and girls from a young age are encouraged to come into their own sense of self... Women are taught not to sacrifice their lives for anyone. American values of independence further encourage people to strive to become equals, not to sacrifice for others.”²¹ Note that Lê’s rendering of the impact of feminism and individualism on American women’s maternal experience is appropriately meant to discern the different cultural and historical discourses within which Vietnamese and American patriarchies operate, not as criticism of Vietnamese patriarchy based on Euro-American feminist grids of intelligibilities.²² It is also important to note that Lê’s critique of Eastern/Vietnamese collectivism should not be construed as blind advocacy for Western individualism, for, as will be demonstrated, Lê’s theorizing of maternal subjectivity sternly rejects the individualist subject, suggesting that the act of mothering in itself is antithetical to individualism, and advocates the notion of the maternal subject in-relation, both to others *and* to the multiplicitous aspects of the feminine self.

If culturally specific ethico-religious ideals of maternity would render Vietnamese mothers profoundly inadequate, universally shared dimensions of patriarchal motherhood would further explain their utter disempowerment. Lê argues that universal patriarchal motherhood includes two mutually constitutive characteristics: (1) the naturalization of maternal experience and praxis, (2) the devaluation of maternal labor. Of these two attributes, Lê locates the essentialism of motherhood – the widely held belief that mothering is essential and natural to women – as the ultimate manifestation of patriarchal motherhood and the root cause of maternal disempowerment. Like many Western mother activists and maternity scholars, Lê is deeply critical of patriarchal conflation of motherhood and femininity, which she argues functions simultaneously to confine women to the domestic sphere and deny the socioeconomic fruits of their “dangerous labor.”²³ The essentialism of motherhood, particularly in the Vietnamese context, leads to what Lê calls “compulsory motherhood,” the assumption that the woman’s body is merely “a birth machine” capable of reproducing endlessly without serious consequences to her physical and psychical wellbeing.²⁴ Describing childbirth as “một kinh nghiệm máu” (a blood experience) or as “một kinh nghiệm sinh tử” (a mortal combat) and citing her own mother’s experience of undergoing childbirth a total number of ten times before her passing at age forty nine, Lê indicts patriarchal trivialization of childbirth for exacerbating what is already one of the most dangerous biological endeavors experienced by mammals.²⁵ Lê variously references the Vietnamese saying “Đàn ông vượt sông vượt biển có chúng bạn/ Đàn bà vượt cạn chỉ có một mình” (men tread the ocean with friends, women tread deep water all alone) both to underscore the extremely dangerous nature of childbirth and to stress the culturally condoned lack of emotional and institutional support for the birthing woman.²⁶

Lê specifically takes to task the stubbornly held, male-privileging notion that mothering is essentially innate to all women, and that hard-earned childrearing practices and skills come naturally to mothers simply because they are female:

Rather than viewing childbirth and childrearing as extremely unfamiliar tasks because no two children are alike in the way no human beings entirely resemble each other, ... [s]ociety instead sees them as activities so natural that any woman anywhere on earth would just know how to perform them. [...] In terms of human awareness, for thousands of years society seems to stay frozen when it comes to pregnancy and childbirth. As perhaps since the beginning of time, these activities continue to be viewed as women’s essential and exclusive business. Women are expected to shoulder the burden all by themselves.²⁷

As a result of the assumption that women “would just know,” society has systematically refused to equip young female adults with appropriate knowledge about the biological mechanisms of childbirth and social realities of childrearing as part of their formal education. Lê emphasizes that the institutional failure to educate and prepare young women for childbirth does not just occur in areas of the world where formal education has been inaccessible to women, whether by official decree or due to the lack of means, it continues to be a reality even in more progressive societies. Having attended both education systems in South Vietnam and the United States where Lê eventually obtained her B.A and M.A, Lê laments the fact neither curriculum equipped her with the knowledge about childbirth, even though she was required to pass classes in *Nữ Công Gia Chánh* or Home Economics presumably to prepare for a future role as homemaker:

Reflecting upon my own formal educational experience both in Vietnam and the United States, I don’t remember ever receiving a lesson about how to give birth and raise a

healthy child. Meanwhile, I spent years and years learning Math, History, and Foreign Languages in preparation for a career in my adulthood. Both education systems carefully sought to design curriculums that would prepare me to become a productive citizen. But when I experienced childbirth for the first time, I felt overly anxious and wished that those school curriculums had replaced a few of those hours in Home Economics or History with lessons in childbirth and childrearing.²⁸

What preparation Lê did not receive as a part of her formal education, she sought to gain on her own by reaching into the growing corpus of popular and scientific literature about childbirth of the early 1990s, claiming she “read up on hundreds of articles, from over-the-counter care guides to scientific studies about how to have a healthy baby.”²⁹ In contrast to the disproportionate attention to fetal and infant care, Lê recalls feeling deeply unsettled by the near complete lack of interest in maternal care across this literature. Lê observes that the singular privileging of the fetus and baby leaves the birthing woman largely out of the equation. Lê argues that, if both childbirth and childrearing are seen as natural to women, the conspicuously disproportionate emphasis on fetal rather than maternal care reveals a systemic disregard of women’s health, a disregard that is an unambiguous product of cultural misogyny: “The more I came across scientific endeavors... seeking to invent the best strategies to raise children and help them to become the highest-ability social beings possible, the more it became apparent to me that [science and society] view childbirth as less important than childrearing.”³⁰ Lê further suggests that misogyny, in the form of patriarchal presumption of childbirth as primal or instinctual to women, rationalizes and accounts for the shortage of medical and scientific investments to improve the experience of childbirth for women:

If one were to tabulate all of human inventions, it would be obvious that society has historically not invested very much in childbirth and childrearing as it has in other fields. For example, within only a few short decades, the airplane has been transformed from a primitive to an awe-inspiring machine that can transport people across continents in no time. In the mean time, one can probably count on the tips of one’s fingers the number of science projects currently taking place across [the world] that focus on improving the experience of birth for women.³¹

Lê is certainly not unique in her observation that, even though modern scientific inventions and discoveries have radically altered the course of human history, efforts to improve women’s health, particularly reproductive health, have remained stubbornly inadequate. Feminist scholars since the early 1980s have specifically identified androcentrism as the responsible factor for (1) the systematic exclusion of women from the field of science, (2) the decisive lack of scientific interests in women as subjects of inquiry, and, when women do form the primary focus, (3) the disproportionate interest in aspects of women’s conditions that prove beneficial to men. In her highly acclaimed 1987 analysis of the relationship between science and feminism, Sandra Harding discusses with remarkable insight how women have historically been excluded from the scientific establishment both as practitioners and beneficiaries. Male domination of science has rendered a woman scientist a mere “contradiction in terms” and explained the manifest evasion of problems and topics particularly relevant to women.³² Moreover, androcentric bias across the field of knowledge, most rampantly in biology and the social sciences, has served as “key culprits in promulgating... false and socially regressive understandings of women’s and men’s natures and ‘proper’ activities in social life,” further sanctioning and reinforcing women’s marginalization and disempowerment.³³ Similarly, in her exhaustive investigation of gender inequity in American health and clinical practices published

in 1994, Sue Rosser not only confirms Harding's findings but also adds that, even in medical specialties where women form the primary focus, the masculinist heterosexist bias is alive and well:

Clinical research in obstetrics and gynecology focuses on the female body and the topics and problems surrounding sexual activity and reproduction. This is not a specialty in which women's bodies are overlooked and their health issues ignored. Amazingly, though, androcentrism still influences the choice and definition for study in different but significant ways than in other specialties.³⁴

Rosser discovers that androcentric bias in obstetric and gynecological research results in an emphatic focus on aspects of women's health that reflect male interest and benefit men:

Androcentrism manifests itself somewhat differently in obstetrics/gynecology than it does in other medical specialties. Rather than excluding women as experimental subjects or overlooking or ignoring their diseases, it is reflected in excessive focus on issues directly related procreation and heterosexual activity and which provide men with opportunities to control women's bodies.³⁵

The development and prescription of female contraceptives and hormonal replacement therapy, for instance, have received "intense focus" not simply because they are important to women, but also because they satiate "men's interest in controlling aspects of [women's] sexuality and reproduction."³⁶ This selective rather than comprehensive clinical interest in women's health leads to an institutional neglect of other issues vital to women's wellbeing, directly explaining the lack of funding and research attention to problems considered tangentially related to procreation and heterosexual activity.³⁷

Although it must also be acknowledged that male bias in medical research and care, both inside and beyond the specialties of obstetrics and gynecology, has measurably decreased within the past decade, gender disparities in quality and outcome of care, by and large, continue to plague contemporary clinical practices. In a 2007 report to the WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, researchers show that gender inequity in healthcare continues to persist and that women remain the primary victims of "unfair, unequal, ineffective and inefficient" medical diagnosis and treatment worldwide. In separate study published in Germany as recent as 2010, researchers once again confirm the "critical lack" of gender analysis in contemporary clinical practices and research, which they show have led to "significant and potentially fatal imbalances in [treatment] outcomes."³⁸ Even though the incorporation of sex/gender, read women, as a distinct category of analysis has substantially increased since the 1990s, one feature that remains common to all medical disciplines is the "dramatic underrepresentation of investigation of sex and gender differences in clinical management."³⁹ In the face of overwhelming evidence suggesting that women's health continues to be of only secondary interest to the scientific establishment, Lê's 1994 observation regarding the culturally and institutionally embedded disregard of women's wellbeing remains remarkably relevant to today's feminist struggles and functions as a fresh reminder of the battles for gender equity *yet* to be won by and on behalf of women in many parts of the world.

Echoing feminist critiques of her time, Lê also argues that patriarchal essentialism of motherhood lends itself readily to the systematic devaluation of maternal labor. The die-hard assumption that birthing and mothering come naturally to women has led to a general dismissal of the substantial amount of work and skills it takes to raise children. Lê observes that, both in Vietnam where she was born and in the United States where she eventually became a mother, society seems only interested in lavishing mothers with rhetoric but very little else. Motherwork

is typically considered mundane labor, that which requires neither training nor intelligence, and, because it is performed in the service of love, requires no material compensation:

Singing to your baby, feeding her, putting her to sleep, changing her diapers, playing with her, crawling with her, teaching her how to walk... All these activities are incredibly important to the child's development. They may seem to be simple tasks but they are all extremely time and energy-consuming... Yet, they are seen by society as menial work, labor that does not require any brain capacity. They bring women neither economic rewards nor career advantages. Nothing to speed up the achievement ladder that society typically expects of an individual at certain stages in her life, whether she is twenty, or thirty, or forty years old.⁴⁰

The conflation of motherhood and femininity means that motherwork is expected to be an integral part of women's "nature" as mothers are expected to find fulfillment in the very act of performing these "simple tasks." And yet, because they are perceived as tasks that "any woman anywhere in the world would just know how to perform," motherwork all over the world has been seriously under-appraised. Lê specifically stresses that, even as "menial laborers," mothers are denied their substantive economic contribution to the family and economy at large. At home their endless responsibilities are taken for granted; out in the world their labor is seen as trivial, if noble, "natural" duties; in the workplace their hard-earned human development experience and skills are considered at best irrelevant, and at worst an impediment, to their career track:

Childrearing and caretaking of the elderly are activities that can concretely be appraised in economic terms. They have tangible and substantial economic value. Childcare centers and nursing homes are clearly job-creating economic enterprises. In that basic sense, a mother who has spent all that time taking care of children should be able to, in a more supportive society, list the experience on her career resume... But no society on earth currently rewards professional credit to a woman with maternal experience under her belt.⁴¹

For the career woman, the cost of motherhood is not just limited to the numerous unpaid hours she spends raising her child, it also includes several kinds of penalties accrued during her absence from the workforce:

If the woman wants to pursue her professional career, she will find herself unable to continuously sustain her record the way men can during their 20s, 30s, and 40s because these also happen to be her childrearing years... But if she becomes a mother after her career has taken off, upon returning to the workforce she will find herself not at all protected by her past achievements. She will feel utterly lost when her new identity and career performance no longer resemble what they once were.⁴²

If and when the maternal woman returns to her career life, she will discover that the time she took off to care for her newborn has already significantly undermined her ability to move up the career ladder. She will also live the vertiginous reality of having to juggle her recently returned professional responsibilities and her newly acquired parental duties, a balancing act so delicate, so exhaustingly difficult that she may soon find herself veered off the career track: "[Being a mother] will slow down a woman's intellectual output and career advancement. Time off for childbirths. Time off when the children are sick. Time off to pick them up and drop them off from school. Time off to take them on vacations... All these time-offs will result in a stunted career because a fast-track career requires consistent achievements and continuous output." And, with her life moving at the speed of light and her career staying in the slow

motion, the career-maternal woman will likely feel “mất tự tin và hoang mang,” inextricably entangled in the webs of tender anger and resentful confusion.⁴³

Informed by the feminist concerns of her time as well as by her own experience, Lê's observations regarding the cost of patriarchal motherhood are notable perhaps not for their originality but rather their continued relevance to contemporary understanding of women's experience of motherhood. Since the publication of Lê's essay in 1995, scholarly findings in various academic disciplines have again and again substantiated the fact that women as a group are economically disadvantaged and disproportionately penalized for being mothers. In economics, studies by Jane Waldfogel in 1997 and 1998 show that having one child reduces a woman's wages by about six percent and two by fifteen percent. Michelle Budig and Paula England's 2001 study arrives at a similar conclusion, approximating the wage reduction suffered by the working mother to be at seven percent per child. Most recently, a 2010 study by Elizabeth Wilde et al shows that earnings penalty appears especially severe for high-skill mother professionals whose wages are reduced by eight percent during the first five years of childrearing and up to a staggering twenty four percent after ten years. Accounts and imputations of the price of motherhood by journalists and social scientists have also yielded conclusions consistent with the findings presented above. Interdisciplinary investigations by Joan Williams (1999), Ann Crittenden (2001), Nancy Folbre (2001) and Sylvia Hewlett (2002) even look beyond wage reductions to assess the “true” cost of motherhood, contending emphatically that it also includes government-sanctioned, market-induced and culturally condoned acts of motherwork disappearance. By disappearing, or making invisible, maternal labor, both the family and the global economy “free ride” on the backs of mothers, unilaterally benefiting from their labor without contributing to their social and financial security. From the “mommy track” (Williams) to the “mommy tax” (Crittenden), government social and economic policies expose mothers to extreme financial vulnerabilities (Folbre) and make motherhood ironically out-of-reach for millions of high-career women (Hewlett). Against this backdrop of culturally and structurally embedded devaluation of maternal labor, a seemingly unbendable truth about motherhood emerges, and it starkly contradicts the glorious praises mothers frequently receive. Ann Crittenden sums up best when she declares:

The cumulative effect of [American government] policies is a heavy financial penalty on anyone who chooses to spend any serious amount of time with children. This is the hard truth behind all of the flowery tribute to Mom. American mothers may have their day, but for the rest of the year their values, their preferences, and their devotion to their children are short-changed. As the twenty first century begins, women may be approaching equality, but mothers still lag behind. Changing the status of mothers, by gaining real recognition for their work, is the great unfinished business of the women's movement.⁴⁴

It is precisely this “unfinished business” that I argue Lê seeks to take up in her 2007 novel *The Sulking Body*. Via an examination of Lê's treatment of the trope of motherhood in this work, the subsequent section demonstrates how Lê defies and rejects patriarchal, including Western and Confucian, models of maternity. By parting with conventional heterosexist masculinist prescriptions of what constitutes a good mother, like many feminist mothers, Lê seeks to become an “outlaw” from the institution of patriarchal motherhood. While clearly privileging the transformational experience of motherhood, Lê insists on practices of mothering that, informed by feminist consciousness, reflect both the mother's intense love for her children and need to be true to herself. For Lê, to be a mother is to be a subject-in-relation, an identity that

– by necessity and will – trumps the individualist claims to personhood and returns to mothers the power of agency long denied them by patriarchal motherhood.

Unlearning Maternal Selflessness

In *Of Woman Born*, a work Lê claims to have influenced to thinking on motherhood,⁴⁵ Adrienne Rich draws the distinction “between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution* -- which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control” (emphasis in original).⁴⁶ Building extensively on Rich’s work, Sandra O’Reilly identifies the denial of maternal personhood and agency as the key characteristic of this male-defined institution:

Patriarchal motherhood causes motherwork to be oppressive to women because it necessitates the repression or denial of the mother’s own selfhood; as well, it assigns mothers all the responsibility of mothering but gives them no real power. Such “powerless responsibility,” to borrow Rich’s term, denies the mother the authority and agency to determine her own experiences of mothering.⁴⁷

In order to be emancipated and find true fulfillment in being a mother, Rich suggests, women must become “outlaws from the institution of motherhood,” and that is “to act, to live in [themselves] and to love [children] for their separate selves.”⁴⁸ Thus, to engage in “outlaw motherhood” is to refuse male-imposed ethics of mothering and redefine maternal praxis and experience from the mother’s perspective.

Seen in this particular context, Lê’s depiction of motherhood in *The Sulking Body* is clearly an attempt to engage in outlaw motherhood. An examination of Lê’s protagonist, Lan Huong’s, search of identity reveals that, while her daughter, Bé May, literally motivates Lan Huong to live, motherhood far from fulfills all her needs – emotionally, aesthetically, and politically. Moreover, even though Lan Huong’s actions and behavior as a mother irrefutably violates patriarchal codes of feminine and maternal propriety, there can be no denying Lan Huong’s deep love for and intense devotion to her daughter’s wellbeing. By allowing Lan Huong to explore and respond to her own needs, both sexual and poetic, and even succumb to overtly self-destructive impulses, Lê emancipates her protagonist from the [male-erected] pedestal of motherhood. Nonetheless, rather than confusing Lê’s depiction of the “bad mother” as advocacy of “bad parenting,” Lê’s project must be understood as a feminist challenge to patriarchal motherhood and an effort to un-deify, or humanize, motherhood for Vietnamese women. Furthermore, as will be shown, despite Lan Huong’s empathy for her mother who was made a victim of Vietnamese Motherhood, Lan Huong chooses to “journey away from maternal sacrifice”⁴⁹ and towards maternal empowerment, determining for herself how to best be a mother to Bé May without being erased in the process. That Lan Huong’s diasporic identity is intimately and equally informed by both motherhood and writing is an affirmation that female subjectivity is not singularly defined by reproductive agency. Lan Huong’s refusal to relinquish her aesthetic impulse also demonstrates Lê’s refusal to allow maternity to overshadow all other aspects of the Vietnamese womanhood. By embracing both maternity and creativity, Lan Huong claims and practices a mother-writer inter-subjectivity, one that ultimately rescues her from the abyss of exilic melancholia and cultural deracination.

For both Lê and Lan Huong, becoming a mother is transformative in a number of ways. Plagued by existential anxiety and suicidal impulses throughout their adulthood, both find the

experience of becoming a mother life-affirming. Lê admits that it was not until after she became a mother that she desires to “bám rễ,” or take roots, in life, a desire that had been entirely absent in her twenties and early thirties. The demanding tasks of motherhood reminded her that life, at the most carnal level, mattered and that her existence, in the most visceral sense, was meaningful: “My soul had endured multiple seismic shocks. But most consistent was the impulse to burn away life on deep doubts about the meaning of existence. Yet, that obligation to the child especially during the early months made me believe that my existence mattered, both to myself and my child.” Lê reports feeling physically replenished and renewed by pregnancy and childbirth, a phenomenon many women experience as a result of increased blood circulation and higher levels of estrogen: “Having given birth twice, I physically feel that my body has been transformed. My skin has become softer, a texture that I had tried to achieve without any success when I was my early 30s.” Lê credits the experience of childbirth with planting in her a renewed love of life: “The seed of love for life sprouted in me. The grey clouds in my soul have soul lifted. Looking at my healthy and beautiful sons sleeping, I saw Spring in each of their breaths and in my own sigh of relief: Ah yes, Spring is here. Spring is coming my way.”⁵⁰

Similarly, after deciding to carry Bé May to full term rather than opting for abortion as she had done in the past, Lan Hương experiences a fresh desire to start life over, a desire that had eluded her since her violent uproot from the land of her birth at ten years of age:

After moving in with Song, Lan Hương decided to keep the baby... Month seven, her belly balloons up. The fetus moves about inside of her. She felt the depth of the connection between the fetus and the carrying adult. She found it quite unfamiliar. But she liked the feeling. [...] Nervously bringing Bé May to life, she swore to herself never again to have an abortion... To stop being reckless. Looking at her beautiful newborn sleeping in her pink crib..., she promised herself to settle down at last in Song’s warm home.⁵¹

Motherhood gave Lan Hương “an indescribable happiness,” prompting her to glowingly confess to Song that “the best thing that has ever happened to [her] was giving birth to Bé May.”⁵² Not only does it inspire Lan Hương to begin life anew, it also motivates her to overcome thoughts of self-destruction. For instance, during her visit to her father’s city of residence Huế, Lan Hương experiences a feeling of estrangement so intense that she attempts to contemplate suicide as a way out. Buried in her hotel bed, Lan Hương tries to fight off the impulse “to perish instantly” by telling herself that it will pass, as it always has since Bé May’s arrival: “She reminds herself of those sullen Sunday afternoons during her girlhood when she wanted to disappear from life without a single regret. But ever since Bé May was born, she has had a reason to live. She must live to raise Bé May. [Her daughter] has helped her forget the desire to destroy her own life.”⁵³ In Qui Nhơn where Lê is paralyzed by loneliness and fear of being “killed for money,” the thoughts of Bé May embolden her to “thu hết can đảm” to get out of Qui Nhơn. To gather the strength to leave, Lan Hương tells herself that “[i]f she dies, Bé May will be left all alone. There will be no one to love her daughter. No one to take care of her the way she does. She cannot die. She must live to protect her daughter.”⁵⁴

Nonetheless, despite feeling renewed and empowered by the experience of childbirth, neither Lê nor Lan Hương feels complete in their identity as mother. Although a source of comfort for Lan Hương, Bé May’s presence does not placate the numbing pain of exile that lies at the core of her mother’s melancholia. That Lan Hương takes her daughter along for the journey back to Vietnam to “figure out why she is who she is” indicates how motherhood has not resolved Lan Hương’s lifelong identity crisis.⁵⁵ Being in Vietnam only heightens Lan Hương’s

perception of futility as a mother, as she fears passing on to Bé May her own condition of exilic homelessness. In a dream suggesting how Lan Huong's feelings of dislocation are intensified rather than compensated by motherhood, Lan Huong sees "mother and daughter drifting aimlessly into nothingness. There is nothing around them except boundless layers of clouds. Not even the possibility of finding a place to land."⁵⁶ Furthermore, while the newfound joy and endless tasks of early motherhood initially put a stop to Lan Huong's emotional restlessness, it returns as soon as Bé May grows past toddler years. Lan Huong's proclivity towards extramarital affairs, arguably a symptom of the melancholic "loss of capacity to love" and tendency for self-sabotage, resumes with merciless frequency just after five years of marriage to Song: "Lan Huong swore to herself under the sun and the moon that she wanted to [settle down]. And Lan Huong tried to build her marriage for three whole years. That's a total number of five years of not seeing other men. And, for those five years, there were only Song and their daughter. But only five years."⁵⁷

If the void of exile continues to fuel Lan Huong's feeling of incompleteness, it is sexual conquests, rather than motherhood, through which Lan Huong attempts to seek "answers" and enact "vengeance."⁵⁸ The carnal pleasure derived from sexual intimacy, however short-lived, seems to placate the vast emptiness inside of her: "Several times she wanted to stop lying to Song but she did not know where to stop and why she should stop. Being pampered and caressed during each torrid affair somehow satisfies and compensates for her lack of some unnamed affection."⁵⁹ But this feeling of recompense and gratification proves infinitesimally instant for Lan Huong, an instancy to be followed by a deeper hatred for her own self. For example, after her easy effort to seduce her sister's fiancé Thiệu to join her in Huế, Lan Huong harshly condemns herself for her "whorishness," a condemnation that reveals both the depth of her exilic melancholia and the limitation of maternity in resolving her identity crisis:

She thinks to herself whether or not she should stop. Another adventure with men. What in her blood explains her desire for sexual adventures. Why and why. Isn't she here this afternoon to find her origin. Did I not want to come back here to figure out the source of my whorishness... These are the very questions that have lurked in the back of my mind day after day, what for Lan Huong. I have blamed growing up in a foreign land without any family for my endless depravity. Yet, here I am again, frolicking with my sister's fiancé in the Perfume River of Huế.⁶⁰

Thus, contrary to patriarchal presumption that motherhood completes a woman's "essence" and satisfies all her biological and social needs, being a mother seems to fulfill only *some* aspects of Lan Huong's existence, leaving her longing for emotional wholeness utterly unsatisfied. Lan Huong's return to Vietnam to confront the permanence of her exilic homelessness and subsequent embrace of the mother tongue as homeland underscore the political and creative impulses that *also* define female subjecthood. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, it is only through the activity of writing and realm of language that Lan Huong's hunger for belonging finds some relief. Lan Huong's journey toward self-discovery conveys that, although empowering and transformational, motherhood constitutes only a part of the female experience and that to conflate and confuse motherhood with and for womanhood is to deny both the implications of maternal labor and female humanity itself. *The Sulking Body* ends on a deeply somber note, appropriately connoting the uncompensability of exilic displacement and irreversibility of exilic loss. Yet, in the face of such immense despair, motherhood and writing do have the potential to alleviate the burden of exilic *Weltschmerz*. Lan Huong's closing poem delivers this irrefutable message of hope: "All that's left are children/ Ultimately there are only

children/ Innocently crawling all over the earth/ Their unburdened laughter is all that's left."⁶¹ The children in Lan Hương's poem remind us that, even if the exile's past is forever lost, her future, no matter how uncertain, remains possible. And it is this very willingness to imagine a future that makes tolerable, even subliminal, life in the exile.

Like her protagonist, Lê finds in motherhood a great source of personal comfort and intellectual inspiration, an important – though by no means exclusive– component of her creative and political identity. Long before becoming a mother, Lê was already intent on practicing what Erika Horowitz almost a decade later identifies as praxis of empowered mothering, a set of practices which includes (1) recognizing the importance of mothers having their own needs; (2) accepting that motherhood does not fulfill all of a woman's needs; (3) involving others in the childrearing; (4) actively questioning patriarchal expectations placed on mothers; (5) challenging mainstream parenting practices; (6) not believing that mothers are solely responsible for how children turn out; (7) challenging the idea that the only emotion mothers ever feel toward their children is love.⁶² Sharing the conviction that childrearing should not be the mother's exclusive responsibility, Lê reveals that she "require[d] the man who cooperated with [her] in making children to cooperate with [her] in raising them."⁶³ Furthermore, addressing the traditionally expected ideal of maternal sacrifice, Lê makes clear that she did not wish to and could not sacrifice all her needs to be a mother:

[Maternal sacrifice] required things that I could not give up. I had already expended a great deal of time, energy, and intellectual strength in my quest for self-awareness. Quite frankly I questioned whether I could sacrifice myself for the good of my children. Competition emerged between my desire to live for myself and my devotion to the children... I could not deny the fact that certainly there was pleasure in living for oneself.⁶⁴

If Lê seems selfish, it is a selfishness borne of conviction. Throughout her essay, Lê emphasizes that the ideal of maternal sacrifice has been forced on women to their detriment. Patriarchal expectation of maternal sacrifice is harmful precisely because it demands no less than complete self-erasure: "Sacrifice surpasses even kindness and charity... It entails a radical decision. It cuts to the core of human needs. Sacrifice is ultimately giving up your essence for someone else... It is much more than love itself. In love, one can choose to give or receive passively. But sacrifice requires active giving without the expectation of receiving anything in return."⁶⁵ When this noble ideal, that which Lê believes "ranks highest among all human ideals," serves as the expected standard for motherly conduct, it becomes extremely oppressive to women. Andrea O'Reilly succinctly captures Lê's argument when she reminds us that "since no mother can achieve idealized motherhood, women bring to their lived experiences of mothering self-recrimination, anxiety, doubt, and guilt. In turn, mothers who do not seek idealized motherhood, either by choice or circumstance, are labeled 'unfit' mothers who will find themselves and their mothering under public scrutiny and surveillance."⁶⁶

Reflecting upon her mother's lifelong sacrifices, Lê acknowledges that her willingness to sacrifice for her own children "trails far, far behind that of [her] mother's." And while Lê remains "humbled by and grateful to [her] mother," she chose to reject the path to deified motherhood. Revealing her continued practices of feminist mothering, Lê declares that she is "nothing like [her] mother" because she is "extremely selfish," a declaration that is less a sign of self-recrimination than a gesture of rebellion against the stifling standards of patriarchal motherhood. By claiming maternal "selfishness," Lê particularly refuses "the cloak of maternal

saintliness” imposed upon the Vietnamese Mother and, in doing so, insists on being outlawed from the institution of motherhood.⁶⁷

Similarly, in spite of her deep longing for her late mother, Lan Huong both resents and is determined to avoid her mother’s tragic fate. Growing up, Lan Huong felt – even if she did not have the vocabulary to express it– the privilege conferred upon her father for no other reason than the pure accident of his maleness. It is precisely this privilege that Lan Huong now as an adult understands enabled her mother’s lifelong victimization. Not only did her mother shoulder all the responsibilities of childrearing, she also dutifully performed the role of submissive wife, turning a blind eye to her husband’s philandering nature and forsaking her own happiness to further his political ambitions. Lan Huong believes that her father’s “despicable” selfishness is a byproduct of male privilege and the primary cause behind her family’s deterioration, including her mother’s eventual suicide. Lan Huong confides these feelings in her paternal auntie O Thê, whose life she believes “has also been robbed” by her father:

My father has done too many wrongs. He has known only himself. You couldn’t marry then because you had to take on his responsibility of caring for Grandmother... My sisters can’t marry now because they have to take on his burden of caring of my crazy sister and brother. Perhaps if communism hadn’t triumphed and Father hadn’t returned, my sister Hai wouldn’t have become insane. My mother wouldn’t have killed herself. My brother Hiều wouldn’t have turned out mad. But what about Father? He got himself a rich, beautiful wife. He lives happily with someone else. And he has affairs with women even younger than me... I detest him badly. I never want to see him again.⁶⁸

Lan Huong also believes that her father’s participation in the communist revolution was at best an attempt to secure his own legacy at the expense of his loved ones and at worst an excuse to evade his duties as husband, father, brother and son. Growing up, Lan Huong recalls “being embraced by her father at most once or twice, for he was almost entirely absent during her childhood. She remembers the time he was hiding from the counter-insurgency police in their Phú Nhuận loft when her mother had to serve him in secrecy... He made life dreadful for his children. Her mom constantly feared that something bad would happen to them because of him.”⁶⁹ In lieu of their present ideological differences, it is entirely possible that Lan Huong would have resented her father significantly less if she had believed that his support for the communist cause originated from his genuine commitment to the communist vision of national liberation. But after hearing from her paternal uncle Bác Vy that her father’s “career as a revolutionary was an accidental result of his chasing after a woman,” Lan Huong feels even more justified in her profound contempt for him.⁷⁰ Moreover, what intensifies Lan Huong’s resentment towards her father is how the women in her family continue to “make excuses” for his lifelong neglect and merciless exploits of her mother. Lan Huong’s sisters, for instance, “blissfully obey” his commands and “completely surrender their lives in his hands.” Unlike her, they “never bother to question him why he did this or that.”⁷¹ And when Lan Huong wonders out loud why he has so much power over their existence,” one of them cluelessly snaps back, “We know you have a deep hatred towards him but that’s because you won’t agree to see him again.”⁷² Likewise, when Lan Huong confronts O Thê about her blind loyalty to her father, she receives from her aunt a “fierce, unblinking stare,” complete with the pained response, “What has he done to make you hate him so?”⁷³ These answers reveal both the depth of affective ties and the centrality of female complicity in sustaining male privilege. As we will soon see, Lan Huong’s ability to overcome her father’s psychological hold on her – a symbol of the weight of patriarchal control on the female psyche– necessarily entails a re-definition of paternal love and a

radical rejection of what has come to constitute and dominate our “common sense” understanding of it.

Throughout the novel, Lan Huong consistently juxtaposes tender memories of her mother against her father’s repulsive attributes, bringing into sharp focus the former’s victimization at the hands of the latter. While memories of her mother inspire Lan Huong to write the warmest of poems, the thought of her father triggers in Lan Huong only the most intense disgust. If the mild scent of honey locust pods makes Lan Huong long for her mother, seeing her father again for the first time in twenty years only makes her “want to vomit.”⁷⁴ And, whereas Lan Huong ascribes qualities of love and tenderness to her mother, she finds “the concept of father [to be] the most painful concept in all of humanity.”⁷⁵ Against this backdrop, Lan Huong’s mother’s commission of suicide to escape from her husband’s control and corruption reveals both the insidious destructiveness of patriarchy and the historically limited means of resistance available to Vietnamese women.⁷⁶ Lan Huong’s refusal to reconcile with the father indicates, on the one hand, her forceful rejection of patriarchal subordination of women and, on the other, her ability to engage in more productive acts of disaffiliative subversion. Unlike O Thê and her sisters who are willing to “tolerate, accept and forgive” all of his “weaknesses and wrongdoings,” Lan Huong departs from female “possessive investment” in maleness by claiming orphanhood, refusing paternal[istic] love as a pre-condition for gender emancipation.⁷⁷

Lan Huong’s divestment from male privilege also entails becoming an outlaw from the male-defined institution of motherhood. This is best demonstrated by Lan Huong’s refusal to justify for her father’s unwillingness to participate in parenting, both during and long after his involvement in the revolution. In response to O Thê who makes light of her complaint that her father has not done enough for his impoverished children by telling her that “[her] father truly loves all of his children. It’s just that as a man he can’t fulfill his parental obligations as well as women,” Lan Huong immediately challenges her aunt’s condonation of paternal privilege:

Please don’t use that logic with me, Auntie. Over there my husband also changes diapers and feeds his baby. He cooks. He drops off and picks up his child. He puts her to sleep. He does so happily and with great love for me and his child. My father hardly displays any gesture of love to us and deprives us of any positive fatherly impressions. Don’t talk to me anymore about male and female difference. No more. No more.

Lan Huong’s statement clearly reflects her belief in empowered mothering, specifically the tenets that parenting must not be assumed as the mother’s essential enterprise and that the father must also become an integral part of childrearing. That Lan Huong continues her search for identity while a mother further reveals that a woman’s life journey does not begin and end with motherhood. Her budding pursuit and eventual embrace of her creative passions ultimately testifies to her refusal to succumb to the cultural dictate of self-erasure as the standard of “good” mothering. And yet, as if obviating the patriarchal charge of her mothering approach as self-serving, Lan Huong delineates the difference between her and her father’s parental practices to reveal the follies of said charge. Indeed, while Lan Huong time and again underscores her resemblance to her father, she does so expressly for purpose of exposing their radical, and ultimately irreconcilable, differences. Like him, she seems possessed by the quest to discover herself. Like him, she practices poetry as her medium of expression. Like him, she appears consumed by her passions, sexual and creative. And also like him, she refuses to be singularly defined by parenthood. But these comparisons prove to be skin deep, for Lan Huong cannot be any more different from her father. If she seems possessed by the search to discover herself, it is a search empowered, not hindered, by her experience of motherhood. If she practices poetry as a

medium of expression, it is an expression that negates, not reinforces, patriarchal hold on common sense. If she seems consumed by passions, they are passions that make intelligible, not negligible, female subjecthood and humanity. And if she refuses to be defined by parenthood, it is a refusal motivated by the conviction to challenge patriarchal expectations of maternity, not by the desire to evade parental responsibilities.

Both Lê's and Lan Hương's practices of mothering underscore the importance of maternal empowerment, challenging both men and women to strive for a world where women are empowered, not dispossessed, by motherhood. Both insist that maternal empowerment necessarily entails our conscious refusal of "the cloak of maternal saintliness," or the very parameters of "good" mothering imposed upon women by patriarchy. Against "common sense" wisdom, both suggest that only when mothers learn to enact "maternal selfishness" can they become emancipated from the institution of motherhood. Indeed, as I will demonstrate in the subsequent section, Lê shares the conviction that autonomous maternal praxis and experience have the ability to transform thinking and affect change. Rather than viewing childbirth and childrearing as "merely something women do," Lê suggests that these activities bear not only tremendous socioeconomic impact but also significant epistemological implications. If the corporeality of pregnancy and childbirth makes undeniable women's difference, any politically appropriate and empowered assertion of maternal subjectivity would have to acknowledge the importance of women's experience of embodiment without mistaking it as a function of that very embodiment. For Lê, the fetal-maternal relationship in particular renders problematic individualism's claim to subjectivity and makes necessary a difference-based challenge to individualism's assertion of subjecthood. Ultimately Lê argues that maternal empowerment and subjectivity depend on the recognition of the maternal subject as an autonomous subject-in-relation, shaped but not contained by realities and embodied experiences of mothering.

Một Kinh Nghiệm Về Tha Nhân

There is little doubt that Lê's theoretical position on female subjectivity underwent a significant transformation as a result of her experience being a mother. Central to this transformation was Lê's re-examination of the relationship between individualist feminism and understanding of female embodiment. Prior to becoming pregnant, Lê's intellectual praxis and feminist consciousness reflected an uncomplicated embrace of individualism-inspired articulation of subjectivity, an investment in what Patrice DiQuinzio calls "rational autonomy," or a belief in an essential human capacity that, along with reason and consciousness, enables "rational, independent self-determination and action."⁷⁸ Lê recalls thinking her conscious and deliberate decision to become a mother an exercise of personal will, an assertion of agency central to individualism: "I was well aware that [becoming a mother] was entirely my choice. I chose when to become a mother. I chose whom to become the father of my children. I chose calculatingly, believing that this was as radical a decision as any other in life... I thoroughly prepared myself for the questions my children might one day ask about the circumstances of their births."⁷⁹ Part of Lê's thorough preparation included a ravenous consumption of "hundreds of books about the childbirth," convincing her that she was "perfectly knowledgeable" about and "perfectly prepared" for mothering.⁸⁰ Lê's belief in [scientific] literature as segue to truth reveals the influence of individualism-inspired theory of knowledge, the assumption that "the individualist subject can in principle know anything and everything" by virtue of possessing "reason" and "consciousness."⁸¹ And because consciousness is thought ontologically distinct

from embodiment, Lê reasoned that her exercise of choice, rather the embodied experience of birth, would ensure her ability “to grasp the true meaning of existence.”⁸² But if the thirst to “unlock” the mystery of life encouraged Lê to become a mother, the viscosity of pregnancy and childbirth quickly led Lê to the humbling realization that mothering is “starting from ground zero, is not knowing anything, is being born again.”⁸³ This realization in turn led Lê to re-examine her previously held belief about embodiment, the very individualist construction of it as merely “the ground of the accidental or particular attributes that distinguish human subjects from each other but do not define subjectivity itself.”⁸⁴ Lê argues that pregnancy and childbirth make evident and irrefutable the connection between female embodiment and subjectivity. Her observations regarding the relationship between the fetus and the pregnant woman specifically reveal Lê’s negotiation of the dilemma of difference, seeking to re-inscribe the significance of female embodiment on the one hand while maintaining her critical stance against patriarchal conflation of femininity and motherhood on the other.

One of the most epistemologically radical aspects of maternity, Lê posits, is that it challenges and liberates women from the individualist construction of subjectivity as constitutive of a stable, coherent, unified and distinct self. Lê observes from her own experience that the pregnant woman simultaneously perceives the fetus as both a part of herself and a separate being, noting that “[t]he fetus’s existence is [her] own existence. Yet it is not [her], but rather an entirely different human being.”⁸⁵ This perception makes problematic individualism’s claim of a clear distinction between subjectivity and embodiment as it reveals the inadequacy of individualism’s assumption of an unambiguous boundary between self and other. Lê confesses that, much to her “shocked amazement,” she discovered in pregnancy and the attendant realities of childbirth and childrearing a tremendous source of knowledge, an understanding about subjectivity that “does not arise from learning but from the body itself.”⁸⁶ This discovery is as much a negation of individualism’s privileging of the mind as the only source of knowledge as it is an insistence on the mutual permeability of embodiment and female subjectivity.

Furthermore, Lê argues that the absolute dependence on the mother of the fetus and later the infant “for at least the first three years of its life” necessitates a reconceptualization of subjectivity that takes into account social interrelations, including biological and affective ties, as factors shaping, enabling as well as restricting maternal agency: “When participating in creating a human being, the woman becomes tightly bound to the *other*. The other is no longer external, but internal. The woman experiences the other as herself, herself as other, child as self, self as child” (emphasis in original).⁸⁷ Describing motherhood first and foremost as “*một kinh nghiệm về tha nhân*” (an experience about the other), Lê suggests that maternal subjectivity is socially rather than self-constituting, porous rather self-contained, informed by embodiment as much as it informs embodiment:

The activities of childbirth and childrearing are not just a part of natural life; they are also a meaningful component of a woman’s subjectivity. These are not activities that occur in the abstract or from a distance. Rather, they are interactive and direct... Female subjectivity as embodied by the experience of childbirth and childrearing is not contained to the interior self but is inextricably tied to an exterior other.⁸⁸

Because of this inextricable tie to *tha nhân*, Lê argues that the maternal subject is necessarily a subject in-relation, a social positioning that renders untenable and undesirable the individualist notion of independent selfhood:

A child brought to life by a woman is a live spirit, a human being, not a theory or an intellectual property. While one can exert complete control over one’s intellectual

products, one cannot single-handedly create a human being. This is not an activity that begins with one person and ends with that same person. For it necessarily involves two human beings [mother and child]. The fundamentally interactive characteristic of this two-person relationship means that the woman does not have complete monopoly of her life and thoughts. For the mother, the search to understand maternal subjectivity or female existence entails a relational rather than individualist interpretation of life experience.⁸⁹

Thus, Lê's experience of maternal consciousness as relational rather than fixed challenged her to rethink the potential and limitations of individualism in informing feminist maternal praxis. Lê's reliance on the notion of *tha nhân* clearly signals a rejection of the autonomous ego as the foundation for feminist maternal subjectivity. Lê suggests that the maternal "ego" differs sharply from the individualist ego in that it approaches *tha nhân* with the purpose of establishing a relationship rather than dominion or opposition⁹⁰:

The helplessness of the other at the moment of birth gives the woman the feeling of having absolute power, the kind of power that men could only imagine if they were gods or kings. So in her interaction with this helpless other, the woman does not experience the impulse to compete, as men often would in the home (with brothers and sisters), in school (with classmates), or in the work place (with coworkers)... It is entirely possible that due to this difference in experience with the other that men identify with and measure themselves against the strengths and achievements of others while women often empathize with and seek cooperation to better others' weaknesses and shortcomings.⁹¹

Lê further suggests that men perceive *tha nhân* as unambiguously separate both because of their indirect experience with childbirth and traditionally limited involvement in childrearing: "When a man develops an awareness or interest in the other, his notion about the other is already fixed. The other is a separate being. The other is a goal or subject of interest... Even being a father is experienced as relative activity... The other is considered someone who exists in relation to him. Someone older, someone the same age, or someone older. The other is never himself."⁹² Lê underscores the importance of maternal embodiment by stating that "men and those who have not gone through childbirth cannot readily understand" this embodied experience about the other.⁹³ While this statement runs the risk of recuperating elements of patriarchal essentialism of motherhood, I argue that its ultimate goal is to confront directly the material aspects of maternity and the reciprocal relationship between maternal embodiment and subjectivity. Lê's formulation of the maternal subject as a subject in-relation challenges us to imagine a theory of maternal subjectivity that specifically takes into account women's embodied relationship with *tha nhân* and, by emphasizing maternal experience over essence, significantly resists reducing female difference to the body.

Yet, Lê's vision of relational maternal consciousness is neither a negation of maternal autonomy nor denial of maternal individual personhood. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, Lê practices and advocates a maternal praxis that emphasizes the importance of mothers meeting their own needs – social, political, sexual, and creative. Even though this chapter focuses exclusively on Lê's discussion of motherhood, it is important to be reminded that Lê's articulation of maternal empowerment is deeply informed by the politics of feminism, the desire to restore to mothers and women the power of agency and self-determination continually denied them. Lê's challenge of patriarchal motherhood is at core a critique of patriarchal essentialism itself. Lê's equally passionate embrace of her role as mother, writer and sexual being de-emphasizes the primacy of maternity as the essence of her womanhood. Lê's emphasis on the

multidimensionality of the maternal subject reveals her commitment to women's, not just mothers', empowerment. Whether or not a woman chooses to become a mother, and whether not a mother chooses fulltime motherwork, maternal autonomy refers precisely to the ability of women to determine for themselves how to best meet their children's needs while also staying true to their own. If patriarchy robs mothering of its transformational power and causes motherwork to be oppressive, maternal empowerment must first and foremost entail a conscious rejection of its impossible criteria.

If Lê once subscribed to the tenets of individualist feminism, it was a subscription quickly challenged by the embodied experience of motherhood. Being a mother not only rescues Lê from the abyss of existential despair, it also transforms her epistemological practice and intellectual outlook: "My worldview and my soul changed as a result of being a mother... I have extended nimble roots in life. I have grown wings to fly toward the future amidst life's hatred, cruelties, imperfections, and greed – things that once made me suspicious and fearful of living. In a way, my faith in life grows as a result of having children."⁹⁴ And if the embodied experience of childbirth and childrearing informs Lê's feminist maternal consciousness, it is her practice of and commitment to empowered motherhood that make possible, intelligible, gratifying, and transformational her identity as mother, woman and writer. Lê reaffirms that her conscious questioning of patriarchal motherhood has helped enhance, rather than lessen, her intense affection for her children: "If there were moments time when I, a thirty-six year-old intellectual professional woman, sat contemplating the socioeconomic price of motherhood on women, there were also moments when I, with children on both sides of my arms, improvised a sweet lullaby to put them to sleep, and while singing, feeling a sense of gratification and salvation flowing into my soul."⁹⁵ Finally, as Lê's living, writing and theorizing motherhood suggests, women need not reject maternity as a road to gender liberation. Rather, it is through consciously rejecting idealized motherhood and practicing mothering from a position of agency and self-determination that women can secure maternal emancipation.

In a poem published in 2003, Lê remarks passionately about the wonders of motherhood, describing her experience of childbirth as her own rebirth and referring to her children as "điều bất ngờ vĩ đại nhất" (life's greatest surprise). Lê's poem ends with a reiteration of motherhood as an intellectually transformational and emotionally anchoring experience:

In this terrifying shadow of life
When my hair trembles slightly against your forehead
I can see the milk of life branching into hundreds of directions
Overflowing with hope for the future
The greatness imbued on the skin of the innocents
Can be a woman's homeland⁹⁶

I have shown here and elsewhere that *The Sulking Body* is as much a thesis about exile as it is about motherhood. I maintain that Lê sees literature and motherhood as her *asons d'être*. As we have seen, Lan Hương's life-long search for a place of belonging takes her to two unexpected alterities: Language and Maternity. If writing provides Lan Hương with the means to articulate her existence, it is motherhood that solidifies her will to exist. If writing rescues her from exilic melancholia, it is motherhood that secures her life from the destruction of existential despair. And if writing makes endurable her present life in exile, it is motherhood that makes imaginable, if not hopeful, her future in the diaspora.

I have also shown that central to Lê's critique of patriarchal motherhood is an articulation of a feminist maternal subjectivity. Significantly, Lê's theorization of maternal consciousness relies on her lived observations that the corporeality of pregnancy and childbirth constitutes a source of knowledge only directly available to the birthing woman. I argue that Lê's reinscription of maternal embodiment as *a* context for subjectivity seeks to acknowledge female difference while at the same resists the hegemony of the individualist account of subjectivity. Lê's construction of the maternal subject as a subject-in-relation at once implies reconceptualizing maternal autonomy in terms of social relations or interactions with *tha nhân* and suggests rethinking maternity as but one facet of female experience and subjectivity. Lastly, I have shown that, even though Lê significantly cherishes her identity as mother, she remains deeply and emphatically critical of the institution of patriarchal motherhood as operated both in Vietnam and the West. Lê argues that universal idealization of motherhood, which manifests as deified motherhood in Vietnam and glorified motherhood in the West, function to the detriment of women by making trivial other aspects of female subjecthood. Lê calls on women, particularly Vietnamese mothers, to reject "the cloak of maternal saintliness" as the first step towards maternal liberation. Only when mothers un-learn the patriarchal dictates of maternal self-sacrifice can they begin to embrace motherhood in all of its complex splendor without becoming erased by the process. And it is precisely the ability to devote to parenting without becoming consumed and the determination to practice childrearing from a position of autonomous relationality that enable women to, as Adrienne Rich thoughtfully reminds us, "truly create new life, bringing forth not only children (if and as we choose) but the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, console and alter human existence – a new relationship to the universe. Sexuality, politics, motherhood, work, community, intimacy will develop new meanings; thinking itself will be transformed."⁹⁷

Notes

¹ Lê, “While Creating Humans,” 44.

² Even the prostitute heroine in Nguyễn Du’s nationally renowned *The Tale of Kiều* is imbued with saint-like attributes. Physically impeccable, multiply talented and wholly virtuous, Kiều’s willingness to sacrifice her life to save her family as well as her continued effort to remain morally, if not physically, untainted has made her a cultural feminine icon.

³ Lê, “While Creating Humans,” 29-30.

⁴ Even though Lê only mentions these three female deities in her essay, a more exhaustive list would invariably include Mẫu Cửu Trùng, Mẫu Thượng Ngàn, Bà Ngũ Hành, Tứ Thánh Nương, Bà Thủy Long, Bà Chúa Động, Ý Lan Nguyễn Phi, Bà Chúa Liễu Hạnh, Bà Chúa Kho, Bà Tô Cô, Bà Chúa Xứ, Bà Đen, Bà Chúa Ngọc, Bà Thiên Hậu, etc. These different goddesses embody the differing geographical and natural specificities of the regions with which they are associated.

⁵ Vu, “Worshipping the Mother Goddess: The Đạo Mẫu Movement in Northern Vietnam,” 31.

⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁷ Lê, “While Creating Human,” 31.

⁸ I use James Legge’s translation of the quote as appears in *Li Chi: Book of Rites* Part 1, 441.

⁹ While Lê’s interpretation is certainly not without historical merit, it is also important to understand Confucian understandings of gender relations in their own cultural and historical frame of reference. Without denying the subordinate role of women within the Confucian hierarchy, Patricia Ebrey contextualizes Confucian worldview as follows: “Conceptualizing the differences between men and women in terms of yin and yang stresses that these differences are part of the natural order of the universe, not part of the social institutions artificially created by men. Moreover, the natural basis of these distinctions is not limited to the differences in men’s and, women’s bodies. Chinese writers did not argue for women’s subordination based on women’s child-bearing capacity or men’s larger bodies and stronger muscles. They started instead with the fundamental polarity of yin and yang, which explained all sorts of other natural phenomena such as the alternation of day and night, the changes of the seasons, and the progress of diseases. In yin-yang theory the two forces complement each other but not in strictly equal ways. Most writers, especially those who can be labeled Confucian, tacitly accepted that yang is superior to yin, that action and initiation are more valued than endurance and completion. Virtually all who used yinyang ideas to discuss male-female differentiation used them to explain that the proper social role of men was to lead and of women to follow,” 203.

¹⁰ Lê, “As I Stand Looking at Slippery Moss @ the Confucian Entrance.” Hereafter, “Here I Stand.”

¹¹ *The Doctrine of the Mean* is the second book of *The Four Books* and *Five Classics*, estimated to have been compiled during the period 450-500 BCE by Confucius’s only grandson Zisi. The 33-chapter book emphasizes the centrality of harmony and equilibrium in demonstrating the golden way to attain perfect virtue.

¹² Lê, “As I Stand.”

¹³ Lê, “While Creating Humans,” 31.

¹⁴ While the subordinate status of women in Confucianism has been problematized by Eastern and Western feminists alike, it is important to note that non-Western feminists in recent years have begun to explore the possible usefulness of Confucianism to feminism, arguing, for instance, that the former’s ethics of Jen shares much in common with feminist ethics of care. Non-Western feminist calling for a re-examination of Confucian code of ethics signifies both a warning against “an uncritical acceptance of Eurocentric feminisms” as well as an earnest effort to seek out a feminist praxis that would take into account cultural and historical difference. See Yin, “Toward a Confucian Feminism: A Critique of Eurocentric Feminist Discourse” and Li, “The Confucian Ethics of Jen and the Feminist Ethics of Care.”

¹⁵ Lê, “While Creating Humans,” 31.

¹⁶ In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich devotes a whole chapter, aptly entitled “The ‘Sacred Calling,’” to discuss Western patriarchal conflation of motherhood and femininity. Various other second-wave feminist writers also refer to this idea to bring into questions patriarchal naturalization of motherhood.

¹⁷ Lê, “While Creating Humans,” 32

¹⁸ Ibid., 30

¹⁹ Ibid., 31.

²⁰ Lê, “While I Stand”

²¹ Lê, “While Creating Humans,” 32

²² In her article “Toward a Confucian Feminism: A Critique of Eurocentric Feminist Discourse,” Jing Yin cautions against non-Western feminist appropriation of Western feminist discourse that risks replacing “one form of oppression with another.” Yin calls instead for a feminist praxis that re-imagines the possibility of Confucian feminism based on the Confucian notion of humanness and ethics of care.

²³ Lê, “While Creating Humans,” 42.

Here, it is worthwhile to note Lê’s problematic deployment of what Evelyn Nakano Glenn would describe as “universalistic theory” of motherhood, or the assumption that all [Western] women face the same struggles and issues as mothers. Writing in the introductory chapter of the groundbreaking anthology *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency* (1993), which brings together for the first time a wide spectrum of disciplinary perspectives on women-of-color mothering experiences, Glenn draws our attention to the fact that [white] patriarchal expectations of motherhood have historically not been extended to women of color. Referencing Bonnie Thorton Dill’s work as well as her own, Glenn reminds us that, because their value as cheap labor has historically taken precedence over their value as mothers, women of color “were not expected or allowed to be full time mothers; nor did their circumstances allowed them even to harbor the illusion of a protected private haven.” Nakano-Glenn, 5-6.

²⁴ Throughout the essay, Lê repeatedly describes to the act of giving birth in the passive voice to emphasize the compulsory nature of reproductive labor in the Vietnamese context. For example, immediately after acknowledging the transformative power of childbirth, Lê quickly adds, “But if a woman is forced to give birth five or six times in a row, I am sure she won’t feel herself too transformed anymore. She would instead feel stripped of her barely there energy”(16). Referring to her mother’s experience in another part of the essay, Lê states, “If my mother hadn’t been ‘forced’ to give birth ten times and raise all seven of us, maybe she would have lived longer than forty nine years” (32).

²⁵ Note that, in fact, Lê’s mother’s experience was hardly the exception. Recent data compiled by WHO and UNICEF confirm the Total FertilityRate for Vietnam in 1970 at 7/woman. By 1990, five years before Lê’s published essay, the rate was reduced to 3.7/woman. Today, more than a decade after the 1997 government-implemented policy on birth reduction, the country reportedly holds the record at 2/woman.

²⁶ Here, the dangerous experience of giving birth is being compared to the dangerous business of ocean fishery. Fishermen often go to sea in groups whereas the act of birthing must be carried out by the birthing woman alone. The saying also alludes to the fact that, culturally, Vietnamese men are discouraged from witnessing or helping their wives give birth, which means women are left feeling even more alone without the support of their most intimate partners. See also Lê’s short story “A Folk Song about A.” where she explicitly references this saying to portray the pregnant protagonist’s seething lonesomeness (103).

²⁷ Lê, “While Creating Humans,” 16, 28.

²⁸ Ibid., 26-27.

²⁹ Ibid., 11-12

³⁰ Ibid., 27.

³¹ Ibid.,27.

³² Harding, 59.

³³ Ibid., 106.

³⁴ Rosser, 54

³⁵ Ibid., 57.

³⁶ Rosser, 55-56. Like Rosser, Lê questions the privileging of males in the development of contraceptives, bringing attention to the stark disparity between numbers of contraceptives available to men and women. The disproportionately larger number of contraceptive devices available to women reveals how, in some reproductive issues for which both men and women should be responsible, women are made to shoulder the burden significantly more than men.

³⁷ Rosser stresses how major problems such as breast cancer, dysmenorrhea, and eating disorder have attracted scant attention because they do not fall within the traditional boundaries of obstetrics/gynecology.

³⁸ Oertelt-Prigione, 8.

³⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁰ Lê, “While Creating Humans,” 17-18.

⁴¹ Ibid., 22.

⁴² Ibid., 25

⁴³ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁴ Crittenden, 6-7.

⁴⁵ Email Interview, 12 January, 2009.

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- ⁴⁶ Rich, 13.
- ⁴⁷ O'Reilly, "Outlaw(ing) Motherhood," 370.
- ⁴⁸ Rich, 195.
- ⁴⁹ Erika Horowitz coins this phrase in her 2003 essay to describe the primary tenet of resistant mothering, arguing that only when women reject patriarchal conflation of "mother" with "sacrifice" can they be empowered by motherhood. See Horowitz, "Resistance as a Site of Empowerment: The Journey Away from Maternal Sacrifice."
- ⁵⁰ Lê, "While Creating Humans," 44, 45.
- ⁵¹ Lê, *The Sulking Body*, 26. Hereafter, *Sulking*.
- ⁵² Ibid. 163.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 57.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 105.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 162.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 129.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 26.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 65, 81.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., 101.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., 65.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., 199.
- ⁶² Horowitz in O'Reilly, 270.
- ⁶³ Lê, "While Creating Humans," 35.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., 34.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 33.
- ⁶⁶ O'Reilly, 370.
- ⁶⁷ Lê, WCH, 34, 33, 32, 35.
- ⁶⁸ Lê, *Sulking*, 120-121.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 171.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., 121.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., 175.
- ⁷² Ibid., 157.
- ⁷³ Ibid., 121.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid., 175.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid., 187.
- ⁷⁶ Elsewhere I have argued that Lê's rendering of what Lauren Berlant calls "maternal-beloved feminine imagery" coupled with her characterization of maternal passive victimhood must be read in conjunction with her depiction of Lan Huong's willful resistance and disaffiliative agency, not simply as an uncritical reinscription of patriarchal construct of female helplessness. Both the mother's suicide and Lan Huong's exile from the father/land are a result of the father's betrayal; they are acts of escape from patriarchy itself. See Nguyen, "Exilic SEXTS."
- ⁷⁷ In his work about the entrenched realities of American racism, George Lipsitz points out the "possessive investment in whiteness" to explain how American racial subjects, Caucasian and people of color alike, participate obsessively in maintaining the structure of racial inequality. Non-white people participate in maintaining white privilege by "fight[ing] against one another, compet[ing] with each other for white approval, and seek[ing] the rewards and privileges whiteness for themselves at the expense of other racialized population" (3). In this novel and elsewhere, Lê criticizes female investment in male privilege by way of succumbing to male standards and currying male interest. See Lê, "Five Times a Victim" as well as Lê's interview with Van Moi in *Choosing with the Proto-Mother*.
- ⁷⁸ DiQuinzio, 7.
- ⁷⁹ Lê, "While Creating Humans," 11.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., 11, 10
- ⁸¹ DiQuinzio, 7.
- ⁸² Lê, "While Creating Humans," 10
- ⁸³ Ibid.
- ⁸⁴ DiQuinzio 7.
- ⁸⁵ Lê, "While Creating Humans," 42.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid., 42, 12.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁹⁰ I refer here to Hegel's theory about the relationship between the self/other which posits that consciousness is fundamentally oppositional and that individual subjectivity would not exist without a projection of an other. The boundary between self/other, suggests Hegel, is unequivocal and unambiguous. For an in-depth take on Hegelian dialectics of the self/other relation, see Simone de Beauvoir, "Biological Data" in *The Second Sex*, 21-48.

⁹¹ Lê, "While Creating Humans," 14.

⁹² Ibid., 13.

⁹³ Ibid., 12.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 44-45.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 44.

⁹⁶ Lê, "Crazy for Children."

⁹⁷ Rich 286.

**Becoming Situated:
Gió O as a Nomad-Cyborgian Project**

*The earth is calling out for me this afternoon
From the train stations that have now become familiar
Lakes and rivers drench my desire for earth
Crashing oceans incite my passion for sand
Peaks and mountains fuel my longing for rocks
January, the earth bursts open with love
Still my heart remains insatiable
– Lê Thị Huệ, “Earthsick”*

*i sometimes giggle contentedly
gió o o
whose sounds echo across the sky and sustain me...
Herstory is forever new!
– Lê Thị Huệ, “My Bundle”*

Over the past ten years, diasporic Vietnamese in the Western hemisphere are said to have taken to the Internet with a vengeance.² Part of this development has been the emergence of a number of literary webzines that have re-animated diasporic Vietnamese-language literary activities after nearly a decade of stupor. In a 2007 keynote address delivered at a literary conference in Orange County, California, the noted Vietnamese Australian scholar Nguyễn Hưng Quốc ranks the existence of electronic literary websites among some of the most important literary achievements of the Vietnamese diaspora.³ That Nguyễn’s insight continues to ring true with each succeeding year reveals the continued vivacity of diasporic Vietnamese literature and the increasing importance of the Internet to its livelihood.⁴ Among a dozen exclusively literary websites, Lê Thị Huệ’s weekly *Gió O* (literally, the Women’s Wind) is one of most established and, at the time of this writing, the only Vietnamese-language literary magazine – print and electronic– founded by a woman.

In the 1999 essay where Lê makes explicit her rejection of any *terra firma* as homeland, she also claims to have discovered a “surprise ally” and a “virtual house” in the digital world.⁵ Displaying the now thoroughly challenged optimism of early Internet users and cyberspace theorists,⁶ Lê romanticizes its ability to “elude the physical power of the State and other forces of domination.”⁷ Lê also claims that the intercontinental and global dimension of cyberspace both “makes passé traditional notions of home and borders” and facilitates the emergence of “alternative cultural spaces endowed with unprecedented potential” to challenge hegemony.⁸ Armed with this inflated sense of optimism and emboldened by the explosive availability of the Internet in the United States, Lê launched *Gió O* in 2001 initially to “test out different ideas” and to “find out for [her]self the potential of the Internet.” Eventually, however, Lê grew “increasingly ambitious in [her] desire to expand the mission of *Gió O*, hoping to create wind wherever *Gió O* passes though.”⁹ While Lê has retreated from her earlier belief in the immunity of the Internet, she remains committed to maintaining *Gió O* not only as “an open playground for creativity” but also a space through which to promote diasporic Vietnamese women’s writing

and to contribute to the larger project of making visible diasporic Vietnamese-language literature.¹⁰

The following chapter explores Lê's creation and maintenance of *Gió O* to illuminate Lê's participation in counter-hegemonic cyberactivism. It builds on Deleuze and Guattari's nomadology and Donna Haraway's cyborg theory to call for a reading of *Gió O* as a nomad-cyborgian project. It seeks to demonstrate that, as a virtual space anchored in concrete machinic and geographical physicality, *Gió O* makes intelligible Lê's enactment of *situated nomadism*. The discussion is divided into three parts. Part one situates *Gió-O* at the intersection of nomadology, cyborg and cyberspace theories to provide the discursive contexts for reading *Gió O* as a nomad-cyborgian project. Building on the body of cyberspace literature that explores the similarities between the rhizome, or the path that the nomad traverses, and the Internet, it argues that *Gió O* reveals Lê's nomadic praxis. It proceeds with a discussion of Donna Haraway's theorization of cyborg politics to describe Lê's politics via *Gió O*. It argues that, if a cyborg is a "hybrid of machine and organism" who embraces "machine skills" to undermine and subvert the structure of domination, then Lê's engagement with cybernetic technology to resist against historical silencing renders her a cyborg. And if cyborg politics is "the struggle for language... against the central dogma of phallogocentrism," then *Gió O*'s explicit struggle against linguistic hegemonies effectively renders it a cyborgian project. Part one ends with a reiteration that the space of *Gió O* functions as a strategic font from which to activate heterogeneity and multiplicity both as historically lived conditions and as constitutive of nomad-cyborgian subjectivity.

Part two contrasts Lê's utopian view of the Internet as presented in the 1999 essay "Fanciful Imaginings @ Words" with her much more complex rendering of the emancipatory potential of virtual reality in the short story "Sextual Love" (2003). It does so to argue that Lê ultimately perceives cyberspace as a web of interlocking power relations rather than a zone of liberation but that, while vulnerable to "cyberimperialist domination," Lê insists that it is also possible of resistance. Part two argues that, not unlike the activity of writing, *Gió O* makes possible for Lê "những chân trời viễn mộng hoang đàng,"¹¹ or phantasmagoric horizons that provide Lê with a space of belonging. Part three argues that through *Gió O* as through her writing, Lê participates in what she calls Vương Quốc Tiếng Việt Hải Ngoại, or the Commonwealth of Diasporic Vietnamese Language, a linguistic space in digital reality that functions as a "virtual house" (ngôi nhà ảo) for diasporic Vietnamese speakers and a tool of resistance against both English language hegemony as well as the ongoing effort by the ruling regime in contemporary Vietnam to deny diasporic Vietnamese literary and cultural existence.¹² The chapter ends with a reiteration that *Gió O* enables Lê to become a situated nomad, one who puts down roots in multiple alterities, not to exploit or dominate them but ultimately to reconstitute and transform them.

The Informatics of Resistance

Since in the early 1990s, cyberspace scholars have drawn extensively on Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome model to theorize the structure and the possibility of the Internet. The earliest anthology on the subject, *Hyper/Text/Theory* (1994) edited by George P. Landow, contains several chapters relating the rhizome model directly to hypertext theory. Most notably, Martin E. Rosenberg's "Physics and Hypertext: Liberation and Complicity in Art and Pedagogy" applies the rhizome model to warn against a reading of cyberspace strictly as a zone of liberation. He points out that cyberspace resembles not only the conceptual structure of the rhizome but also the

latter's power dynamic. Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis that within a rhizome smooth space and striated space "exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space," Rosenberg examines hypertext's complicity in oppression and potential for resistance. Published four years later, Landow's own work *Hypertext 2.0* (1997) references Deleuze and Guattari and the rhizome model extensively. The section "Hypertext as Rhizome" begins with a reiteration that *A Thousand Plateaus* may be viewed as a proto-type hypertext document and that hypertext may be the "first approximation if not [Deleuze and Guattari's] complete answer or fulfillment" of the rhizome model. Drawing directly from Deleuze and Guattari's description of the principles of multiplicity and mapping, Landow shows how the rhizome "perfectly matches the way clusters of subwebs organize themselves in large networked hypertext environments, such as the World Wide Web."¹³

But if cyberspace scholars largely agree about the rhizome-like structure of the Internet, their perspectives regarding its subversive potential vary significantly. The debate over whether the Internet constitutes a cybertopia or cyberghetto of sorts has remained central to the field of cyberstudies over the past two decades. Proponents of the cybertopia perspective maintain that the Internet delivers a [self-]emancipatory and democratizing tool mainly because it "deemphasizes hierarchical political associations, degrading gender roles and ethnic designations, and rigid categories of class and relationships found in traditional, visually based and geographically bound communities."¹⁴ Opponents of this view challenge what they perceive as the myth of the Great Equalizer as well as the construction of the Internet as a space conducive to, if not ideal for, democratic discourse and subversive praxis. For instance, weary of the idea that the Internet offers the promise of virtual transcendence, Robert Markley exposes it as "the ultimate capitalist fantasy because it promises to exploit our own desires as the inexhaustible material of consumption."¹⁵

Similarly, David Bande reminds us through a reading of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* that, far from constituting a smooth space from which to launch toward unlimited horizons, the Internet merely functions as an extension of the State apparatus and "a fantasy of endless expansion of markets and future opportunity, and the means of a symbolic reterritorialization in the service of greater deterritorializations of the global market"¹⁶ Moreover, race and ethnic studies scholars in recent years have exposed the limits of the Internet as a space of empowerment and agency for the racialized subjects. They show how subaltern bodies and identities in cyberspace are more often than not made invisible and otherwise abstracted and commodified for dominant white consumption.¹⁷ Responding to the high traffic in sex-trade circuits which have effectively turned *Asian* into a pornographic category in cyberspace, some even argue that the Internet "may in fact not be a critical space for the exercise of agency and resistance," particularly for those whose bodies "are passed around in global capitalism's circuits of desire."¹⁸

Rather than exaggerating the liberatory promise of the Internet or downplaying its subversive potential, other scholars see it as a tangled web of power relations, that which is vulnerable to state control but also capable of resistance. Writing in "Foucault in Cyberspace" (1997), James Boyle calls for an analysis of the potential of cyberspace that extends beyond the "available avenues of *state* power" (emphasis in original). While Boyle condemns as "definitionally blind" studies that upholds the "Internet Holy Trinity" – the "faith" that cyberspace is largely immune from state power because of the technology of its medium, the geographical distribution of its users, and the nature of its content – he draws on Foucault to

advocate for an engagement with virtual technology that takes as the point of departure the assumption that power does not simply begin and end with the State. While Boyle did not directly cite the following quote from Foucault, he likely had it in mind: “Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which functions in the form of a chain... Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its thread; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power.”¹⁹ Boyle concludes by suggesting that, even though Foucault was not writing about the Internet, his understanding of power and of the role of the individual within the matrix of power makes intelligible, if not desirable, resistant strategies devised and executed from the conceptual and virtual space generated by the Internet.

The emergence of cyberfeminism in the 1990s and its continued relevance provide perhaps the clearest indication of the view that the terrain of information technology is open to theoretical consideration, political contestation, and feminist appropriation. While the meaning and practice of term remain to be hotly debated²⁰, cyberfeminism underlies an engagement with information technology as a tool, a medium, and a strategy to critique and mobilize against gender oppression. In one of the earliest attempts to articulate the meaning of cyberfeminism, Faith Wilding and the Critical Art Ensemble (1997) define it as “new wave of thinking and practice” resulting from the increasing participation of women in cyberspace. They describe the territory of cyberfeminism to be “large,” which includes “the objective arenas of cyberspace, institutions of industrial design, and institutions of education – that is, those arenas in which technological process is gendered in a manner that excludes women from access to the empowering points of techno-culture.” Thus, they draw attention both to the Internet’s replication of traditional structures of oppression and to cyberfeminism as a strategic response to the power dynamics in the Age of Information.

Writing a decade before Faith Wilding and the Critical Art Ensemble put together their statement, Donna Haraway in the now classic work “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1987) invents the figure of the cyborg as a strategy of resistance against what she calls the informatics of domination.²¹ Through the cyborg imagery, Haraway calls for a critical embrace of technology rather than a retreat into an imagined organic, technologically unmediated past as a response to gender oppression. She defines the cyborg as a machine-woman hybrid and renders cyborg praxis as that which embraces machine skill “not as a sin, but an aspect of embodiment.”²² A cyborg body is neither innocent nor accidental, for it is both an “illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism” and a “condensed image of both imagination and material reality.”²³ Thus, Haraway invites us to engage with technology, not to “worship” or “dominate” it, but to take responsibility for the social relations shaped by that very technology. And taking responsibility, as Mini Nguyen helpfully clarifies in “Queer Cyborg and New Mutants,” must go beyond the “liberal democratic models of subjectivity and publicity premised on the imagined absence of social forces and the micro- and macropolitics of power.”²⁴ The liberatory promise of digital play and performance can only be realized when, Nguyen further stresses, cyborgs fully contend with the social and material conditions that produced not only technographics but also the very regulatory apparatus of deviance and normalcy.²⁵

The shared emphasis on fluidity, transformation, and mutation between cyborg identity and nomadic subjectivity has been well observed by feminist and cyberspace scholars alike. Writing in 2002, Rosi Braidotti focuses extensively on the resonances between Haraway’s cyborg figuration and Deleuzo-Guattarian theory of becoming, noting that both insist on the subject’s capacity for multiple, symbiotic, non-linear, non-unitary inter-connections with external

forces and others, including non-human others. Again in 2006, Braidotti emphasizes the connection between cyborg theory and nomadology, drawing attention to the rhizomatic principle of cartography and the material aspect the cyborg's hybrid figuration:

The work of Haraway is of far greater relevance to rhizomatic philosophy than has been acknowledged so far. The cyborg as a technologically-enhanced body-machine is the dominant social and discursive figuration for the interaction between the human and the technological in post-industrial societies. It is also a living or active, materially embedded cartography of the kind of power-relations that are operative in the post-industrial social sphere.²⁶

Similarly, cybertheorists Mark Poster and Sherry Turkle place Haraway and Deleuze and Guattari in the same category of philosophers who transform our thinking about the machinic, i.e. the cyborgian body-machine and the Deleuze-Guattarian desiring machines, not only as embodied beings but also the very structure of subjectivity. Last but not least, writing about monstrous bodies in the arts, Yvonne Volkart describes both the cyborg and the nomad's line of becoming as "body and subject concepts that spring from, embody, and symptomatize the relations of domination in the information society; however, at the same time they are also their resistant traversals and effects," thus acknowledging their potential for subversion.²⁷

Returning once again to the rhizome structure, which this study upholds as an appropriate metaphor for cyberspace, it is stressed that *Gió O* functions both as a line of flight and a line of becoming-other, both a means of "translat[ing] and tranvers[ing]" into the striated space of the State and an ethical commitment to "affecting and being affected" by others.²⁸ That is, through *Gió O* Lê participates in the creation of nomad space. Deleuze and Guattari describe nomad space as a *local absolute*, the coupling of space and locality that is achieved "not in a centered, oriented globalization or universalization but in an infinite succession of local operations." An encounter with the open Whole, they further emphasize, occurs only at the local, a strategic and provisional center that shifts and proliferates in connection with other locals, lines and circuits in a ceaseless process of rhizomatic formation. *Gió O*, then, can be said to be a strategic and provisional center working in connection with other provisional centers, i.e. Lê's subject-positions as woman, writer, mother, Asian American, diasporic Vietnamese, etc., to enable Lê to partake in the nomad journey toward the open Whole.

And yet, the open Whole is not a space outside or beyond the striated space. Deleuze and Guattari remind us that smooth space and striated space "in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space," suggesting that resistance and domination are mutually generative forces rather than distinct entities continually seeking to elude each other.²⁹ Resistance, as Aurelia Armstrong suggests via Foucault, is conditioned by the powers it opposes, rather than by any "primary and inviolable capacity for freedom."³⁰ Such that, to combine nomadology and cyborg theory, even if we should "[n]ever believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us,"³¹ we could certainly take *some* comfort in the "simultaneity of breakdowns that crack the matrices of domination and opens geometric possibilities."³² It is this understanding of power dynamics that I argue characterizes Lê's nomad-cyborgian praxis. Lê's investment in *Gió-O* is motivated not by a fantasy of endless border crossing, but an acute awareness of the need for and an intense desire to participate in, to extend Haraway's expression, the informatics of resistance.

Situating Gió O as a Nomad-Cyborgian Project

In an interview conducted by the critic Đoàn Nhã Văn for *Gió-O's* Ten-Year Commemorative Series (2011), Lê claims that “promising prospects” of the Internet as well as technical facility were the motivating factors behind her decision to launch *Gió-O*: “I was never really interested in the idea of founding my own journal. Nor did I find the business of managing a journal appealing. I only wanted the freedom to write to my heart’s content. But when the Internet appeared, I became quite curious about its promising prospect... and I wanted to test out different things. But really, if not for the incredible simplicity of launching a website, I probably never would have created *Gió O*.”³³ Lê later reiterates this point: “In 2000, I tried out my luck and began building gio-o.com on the free property that was Geocities at that time. As I told Đinh Trường Chinh [the artist who designed *Gió O's* logo], I just wanted to play around. There was no serious desire on my part to run a literary webpage.”³⁴ Indeed, it does appear from her 1999 that Lê was no less than seduced by the emancipatory promise of virtual technologies. Writing at an Internet café in Hanoi, Vietnam, a little more than a year before *Gió-O* came into existence in 2001, Lê describes the potential of the Internet in cybertopian terms. Like the “definitionally blind” enthusiasts whom James Boyle criticizes above, Lê celebrates the Internet’s ability to “complicate traditional notions of physical borders” which “undermines the supremacy of the State and other traditional forces of domination.” Seemingly oblivious of the reality of the digital divide, Lê praises the potential of information technologies to democratize civic and cultural discourses, arguing that “cybertechnologies have given more human beings than ever before the opportunity to present themselves to the world, thereby offering a promise of equality of unprecedented scale in the history of humankind.” Lê further suggests that participating in virtual reality sharpens our consciousness and enhances our imagination: “Virtual reality taps into every pixel of human consciousness. If physical reality requires us to exercise our five senses and [Buddhist] six roots of sensation, in virtual reality we cannot smell, touch, or taste so we rely significantly on our imagination and our language skills... It is precisely these fanciful imaginings that sate our seemingly insatiable imaginative capacity.” Last but not least, reflecting the influence of research on cyber-identities in the early 1990s which posits the Internet as a subversive venue that enables endless identity blending and gender bending, Lê seems particularly mesmerized by what Susanna Paasonen calls the “aura of possibility,”³⁵ or the belief that, in Lê’s words, “[o]ne can enter into any *chat room* (sic) and become anything one wishes simply by selecting the right *nick* (sic). One can switch in and out of one’s role – man to woman to boy to girl to angel and devil – all in a matter of seconds.”³⁶ In short, in this particular essay, Lê perceives the Internet as no less than a zone of liberation, a view which, ironically, was instrumental to her decision to launch *Gió O* in 2001.

In a separate interview, Lê admits that in retrospect she had been too optimistic about the Internet but stresses that it was that very optimism that encouraged her to start *Gió O*. “Had it not been for my extreme curiosity and hopefulness in those early days,” Lê shares, “I probably never would have started *Gió O*. I set out to experiment with the potential of the Internet and I definitely brushed up against some of its limitations.”³⁷ One of the limitations that Lê claimed to discover was that her “virtual house” was not as immune to external meddling as she had thought. In a 2011 commentary, referencing the various cyberattacks experienced by *Gió O* over the years, many of which allegedly coincided with the appearance of works that were openly critical of the Vietnamese government, Lê suggests that some of these attacks might have been government-sanctioned. While the means to verify Lê’s claim is unavailable, given the well-

documented aggressive and extensive degree to which the Socialist Republic of Vietnam regulates its citizens' access, both virtual and physical, to overseas Vietnamese cultural and especially political discourse,³⁸ Lê's suspicion does not appear unjustified. In a 2011 interview, Lê describes her "slowly coming into the realization that the hand of George Orwell's 'Big Brother' was encroaching upon *Gió O*."³⁹ This suggests that, whether or not the cyberattacks were actually ministered by the Vietnamese government, they certainly led Lê to question her earlier belief in the inviolability of cyberspace.

Lê also experienced a shift in thinking on the question of identity in cyberspace. If Lê subscribed to the "aura of possibility" in 1999, she became decidedly critical of it by 2003. In the short story "Sextual Love" (2003), Lê couples her acknowledgement of the potential of cyberspace to de-naturalize gender norms with a discussion of the limits of identificatory praxis that displaces the body from its social location and physical constitution. Lê suggests that the digital ability to assume a persona that does not [have to] reflect the physical body may constitute a [self-]liberating escapist fantasy, but not a means of social liberation. "Sextual Love" follows a fifty year-old widow's online romance with a poet thirty years her junior (although her e-profile insists that they are only three years apart). Having thought that at her age she "no longer needed sex or emotional connections," the widow soon discovers that she was wrong on both counts. Not only is she intellectually re-invigorated by their passionate literary discussions, her libido also undergoes a near complete reawakening in the course of their romance. Even though it remains unclear whether or not the pair engage in cybersex, it is clear that the widow is constantly aroused by the thought, the sound, and the [textual] sight of her lover, leading her to seek self-pleasure after every virtual encounter with him.⁴⁰

While Lê's portrayal of the widow's sexual reawakening appears to celebrate the view that cyberspace provides an arena in which "women are equal to men and can assert their [sexual] power and dominance,"⁴¹ it is a celebration undercut by Lê's suggestion of an unlikely if not impossible future for the lovers outside the realm of digitality. Even though the widow enjoys her lover's virtual company, she has good reason to suspect that an encounter with him in the real world would end up less than ideally. She notices that even with their purported three-year gap, the poet seems unwilling, or at least unable, to embrace the fact of her being older. His interaction with her reflects a reluctance to deviate from traditional gender mores and standards. Despite being younger, he insists on addressing her as *em* (younger maiden/lad) in all of his poems about her, effectively displacing her senior status and conferring it upon him. In fact, by rhetorically positioning himself as someone older, thereby bestowing upon himself qualities conventionally associated with being older (and male), qualities such as wisdom, maturity, experience, the ability to protect, etc., the poet effectively infantilizes the widow's femininity and depowers her subjectivity. This also suggests his desire to reproduce rather than defy patriarchal prescription of gender relations.

The short story ends with the widow resolving to "cố quên" (forget) her lover while affirming her passion for poetry, for it was her love of poetry that enticed her to him in the first place. Via "Sextual Love," Lê suggests that, because digital fantasies and interactions continue to be governed by, rather than freed from, patriarchal mores and regulations, cybernetic play and performance seeking to liberate the body from these regulations by severing it from its physical location and social identity may end up reproducing rather than challenging them. Thus, while acknowledging the ways in which cyberspatial play and performance *can* empower women's sexuality, Lê expresses doubt that such empowerment would carry over to the material world to

disrupt the cultural imperatives and social conditions that transpired the desire to play and perform in the first place.

Although Lê has stepped back from her earlier view regarding the immunity of the cyberspace and the emancipatory potential of digital performance, Lê nonetheless remains hopeful and optimistic about the resistive potential of the Internet. Asked in 2011 what has most pleased her about *Gió O*, Lê provides a hopeful and definitively utopian answer: “Survival and Flight. *Gió O* is space of dwelling for survivors of a war fought on borrowed bombs a time ago in Vietnam’s history. *Gió O* is a marginal society of surviving souls reaching out to breathe in Freedom and reaching in to breathe out arts.” Lê’s juxtaposition of the concepts flight, survival, freedom, and arts in her assessment suggests unequivocally Lê’s view of *Gió O* as a line of flight, a site from which the nomad launches toward the open Whole. In spite of its limitations, virtual reality has clearly provided Lê and her community a concrete space with which to make arts and through which to take flight. The marginal[ized] space of *Gió O* exists as a space of belonging, a space which at the same time reinforces its radical nonbelonging. Seen in this light, Lê’s continued hopefulness about cyberspace seems less a marker of naiveté or obliviousness but rather a sign of what Susanna Paasonen calls critical utopianism: “Utopianism should not be seen as the problem per se, as it need not be innocent or fall back on deterministic views of gender or technology. A certain utopianism is necessary for feminist thinking committed to envisioning change, since without dreaming there is little alternative to the current state of things.”⁴² Siding with Adrienne Rich and Angelika Bammer, Paasonen argues that “utopias and utopianism can be critical, and they can be based on partial, situated views of alternative futures, as opposed to an all encompassing models of perfect worlds.”⁴³ It is precisely this critical utopian view of the Internet that I argue undergirds Lê’s commitment to *Gió O* for the last decade, and counting.

‘Net Surfing: Wind Making

Writing in “*Gió O*. Ten Years. Random Notes,” Lê sheds light on the journal’s mission, revealing her two-fold commitment to women’s writing and to bringing more visibility to diasporic literature – both as a minority literature in the West and a minor literature in relation to Vietnamese literature and to promote women’s writing. In their study of Franz Kafka’s writing, Deleuze and Guattari define minor literature as that which is written in a “deterritorialized tongue,” or a major language that seeks to resist dominant codification. Written from a marginalized or minoritarian position, it is political by nature: “[B]ecause it exists in a narrow space, every individual matter is immediately plugged into the political.” And, because of its political nature, minor literature is a collective rather than individual arrangement of utterances: “[W]hat the solitary writer says already constitutes a communal action, and what he says or does is necessarily political even if others do not agree with him... [A]nd, if the writer lives on the margin, is set apart from his fragile community, this situation makes him all the more able to express another, potential community, to force the means for another consciousness and another sensibility.”⁴⁴ Following Deleuze and Guattari, one can argue that diasporic Vietnamese literature constitutes a minor literature in relation to the literature produced in Vietnam, including but not limited to works produced post-1975.⁴⁵

Although Lê does not explicitly reference Deleuze and Guattari in her writing, her characterization of diasporic Vietnamese literature also suggests her recognition of its

marginality, collectivity, and political nature. Not only does Lê time and again insist upon its oppositional origin (read refugee and anticommunist), she also insists upon its independent historical trajectory, arguing that that its growth depends not on what is happening in Vietnam but in the multiple places where diasporic Vietnamese have put down roots. She also refuses to be classified as a Vietnamese writer and instead self-identifies as a diasporic writer:

Being an exile and living in the diaspora means having no geographical homelands. I write in the Vietnamese language even though the language I use daily is entirely different. [Vietnam] has undergone drastic changes in the last quarter of the century and I haven't participated in any of it... So whoever wishes to lump diasporic Vietnamese writers with other "authentic" writers in Vietnam should really get my name off that list. I don't belong to any part of that list. I might occasionally borrow words or images from this geographical homeland but my writing has long escaped it.⁴⁶

Moreover, Lê insists upon the presence of an independent diasporic Vietnamese dialect, one that shares a common ancestry with the *lingua franca* of the contemporary Socialist Republic of Vietnam but has undergone its own trajectory after the mass exodus that resulted from the fall of Saigon in 1975. She contends that diasporic Vietnamese should be considered a separate entity:

I and my community of Vietnamese speakers outside of Vietnam have established a new kingdom. The Commonwealth of Diasporic Vietnamese Language. We cling on to one another to survive: Vietnamese-language papers in Stuttgart, Vietnamese-language television programs in San Jose..., *Thúy Nga* in Australia, weekend get-togethers at *13 Paris*, Tet festivals in Tokyo. That's how we sustain Vietnamese in the diaspora. This is also why diasporic Vietnamese should not be forced to submit to the semantic rules and standards of... that which is spoken in Vietnam.⁴⁷

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, Lê's demand that diasporic Vietnamese language "not be forced to submit to the semantic rules and standards" of the *lingua franca* of contemporary Vietnam constitutes as much an act of linguistic severance as a claim to diasporic sovereignty. Ironically, as I have also commented, because much of diasporic Vietnamese cultural production, particularly its literature, continues to be maligned and made invisible in contemporary Vietnam, diasporic Vietnamese claim to sovereignty has entailed the struggle for recognition – of existence and of legitimacy – from the very political apparatus it seeks to dissociate and challenge.

As a writer, Lê's privileging of diasporic Vietnamese language as the language of creativity is also consistent with her ongoing advocacy for cultural self-determination. Born during the demise of French Indochina and growing up under the American period, Lê experienced firsthand the remnants of Western colonization and, at the age of twelve, felt compelled to understand its ramifications. Writing in "My Own Language," Lê recounts the context for her early politicization:

My rebellion began in the seventh grade when I was sent to St. Paul School, an all-girls Catholic boarding school built on the shore of Mỹ Khê, Đà Nẵng. It was my first breakfast there when I saw over a hundred of us girls standing up to greet a nun in French: *Bon Jour Ma Mère*. Suddenly I froze, thinking: Why are we greeting her in French when she is Vietnamese? By eighteen, I stopped practicing Catholicism because I figured that it was an instrument of French colonialism... Later, when I was at the University of Đà Lạt, I constantly felt resentful and angered upon witnessing just how

deeply the world was dominated (sic) by Western cultural values and systems of thoughts.⁴⁸

As a political subject, Lê draws inspiration from the legacies of the Civil Rights movement and remains committed to the struggle for cultural self-determination. An advocate of racial diversity, Lê cautions us against complacency and reminds us that only in continued struggle can the progress toward diversity and equality be sustained: “Diversity... entails all of us Black White Brown Yellow to continue speaking up for our collective right to equality – economic equality, electoral equality, and educational equality.” While it may appear that Lê’s investment in a diasporic Vietnamese dialect would be at odds with her advocacy for “all of us Black White Brown Yellow to continue speaking up for our collective right to equality,” the kind of political mobilization that typically requires the use of the English language, I argue that these are not mutually exclusive spheres of action. Lê’s insistence on her identity as a diasporic Vietnamese does not, and in fact has not, preclude her from laying claim to an Asian American identity or participating in ethnic American coalitional politics as a person of color.

As an American ethnic subject and a woman of color, Lê is deeply aware of the psychological and material dimensions of racism. Lê vocally criticizes the Vietnamese/Vietnamese American desire for whiteness. In a discussion about assimilation, Lê clarifies the difference between being American and being, in her own characterization, “whitewashed”: “White Worship (sic) Syndrome is a chronic disease among Non-White (sic) communities, and the Vietnamese comprise but one of these communities. I have run into many [ethnic] intellectuals... whose souls are enamored with Western cultural values.” Lê explains the self-destructive consequences of succumbing to Western cultural domination: “Knowing other [cultures] is necessary. But knowing only them and not anything about your own will lead to deracination and self-enslavement. Relying on others’ sources of nourishment without being able to discover your own can result in tremendous hunger and suffering.”⁴⁹ Given this context, it can be said that Lê’s privileging of diasporic Vietnamese language reflects her effort to find on her own sources of nourishment. Lê’s mother tongue provides her not only with a tool of resistance but also a place of belonging:

Looking out from a corner in Saigon can feel strange for me. Eating ice cream at Thủy Tạ Hà Nội can feel utterly unfamiliar. Even sleeping in my own house in San Jose feels nothing particularly special. Eating American hamburgers doesn’t mean I love them. But picking up a Vietnamese-language paper makes me ecstatic. Being able to express myself fully in a poem makes me feel alive. Chatting with a stranger who uses Vietnamese beautifully makes falling asleep at night a little easier. I find myself going back to Vietnam now only to be showered with the language, and nothing else.⁵⁰

For Lê, moreover, the presence of the Commonwealth of Diasporic Vietnamese Language disrupts not only the Socialist Republic of Vietnam’s persistent claim to cultural and linguistic legitimacy but also English hegemony in the age of cyberspatial imperialism. Lê argues that while Internet technology deepens the hold of Western hegemony, it also provides spaces for cultural resistance: “Even though the Internet enables English to penetrate every corner of the world and, thus, threaten to become the world’s language in the next century, and no doubt cyberimperialism is currently at its prime, now is also an exciting time for the world’s languages to challenge and compete with English.” The verbs “challenge” and “compete” connote active resistive efforts, rather than passive hoping as strategy to undermine Western hegemony. Clearly, Lê envisions *Gió O* as an resistive effort in the larger struggle against English hegemony.

In many ways, Lê's investment in *Gió O* attests to her insistence upon both *exilic homelessness* and *situated nomadism* as central components of her intellectual praxis. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, Lê repeatedly makes clear her rejection of return and refuses to claim any *terra firma* as homeland.⁵¹ This conviction to remain deterritorialized, perhaps more than any other factors, explains her critical utopian embrace of the Internet. The rhizomatic structure of the Internet lends itself readily to Lê's vision of nomadic deterritoriality: "*Gió O* is *Lũng*, a space suspended between and betwixt. Cyberspace and the Vietnamese Language have given birth to *Gió O*."⁵² In her view, cyberspace has given the Vietnamese diaspora not only a place of belonging but also a means of self-legitimation: "Our existence [as diasporic Vietnamese] has been marginalized, forgotten, and delegitimized by the powers that be. Yet, we continue to survive, holding our heads high and extending our arms to make arts. We have managed to make own name [diasporic Vietnamese] and carved out a linguistic commonwealth that is all our own."⁵³ It is precisely via cyberspace that Lê's praxis of *situated nomadism* finds fullest expression. Here, her participation in diasporic politics and commitment to American civic duties coexist without tension. They appear to complement and inform one another, reflecting the multiplicity of places in the personal and historical journey that Lê has undertaken.

Via *Gió O*, one can also describe Lê as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction," a cyborg.⁵⁴ If cyborg politics entails an engagement with, rather than demonization of, science and technology as a means of combating hegemonic forces, then *Gió O* can be said to be Lê's attempt to challenge the informatics of domination. But long before Lê came into contact with information technologies, she had already begun practicing cyborg politics by way of writing. Cyborg writing, to reference Haraway once more, "is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked [women of color] as other."⁵⁵ Indeed, Lê has seized writing as her "instrument of choice" and it, in turn, has given her a "position from which to critique and re-present."⁵⁶ By confronting patriarchies, state militarisms, racism, and global capitalism throughout her work, Lê reveals an oppositional consciousness that is crucial to cyborg politics and identities.

In a poetic tribute to *Gió-O* written in 2009, Lê locates the journal's subversive power in its abilities to make tangible the existence of diasporic Vietnamese bodies. *Gió O*, Lê tells us, is made up of bodies "transformed by words," words that "remain" to mark the historical journey undertaken by the Vietnamese.⁵⁷ As this chapter, and dissertation project, has demonstrated, Lê's critical attention to the body informs not only her writing but also her cyberspatial praxis. Gendered determinations, Lê suggests, are challenged not by nullifying the body or digitally assuming another but by interrogating the very social conditions that prompted the desire for emancipation in the first place. Despite Lê's celebration of the porous boundaries and fluid identities enabled by virtual reality, that she takes deliberate care to assert herself as diasporic Vietnamese woman writer gestures toward her recognition of political subversion and gender emancipation as inextricably tied to material embodiment. Lê dedicates *Gió O* to those "without a home," those who pledge allegiance to "lush green freedom" rather than any geographical homeland.⁵⁸ Via *Gió O*, Lê actively seeks to contribute to the Commonwealth of Diasporic Vietnamese Language, a cultural and linguistic space in cyberspace that functions both as a home for diasporic Vietnamese and a tool of cultural resistance.

Notes

¹ Non-italics in the original.

² In “Virtually Vietnamese,” Kim An Lieberman documents the thriving presence of diasporic Vietnamese online political activism and shows how the latter functions as a statement of self-determined diasporic identity. Through an examination of a number of pro-democracy and anticommunist websites in the Vietnamese diaspora, Lieberman suggests that the Internet “has become a crucial forum for the expression of ideas that before were suppressed actively, in the case of Vietnamese censorship of democracy, or passively, in the case of Western stereotypes of Vietnamese identity,” 78.

³ Quốc qualifies: “Inside Vietnam after 1975 into the present, there have been no literary journals with the longevity of the diasporic journals *Văn* (since 1982) and *Văn Học* (since 1985); no journals focusing singularly on poetry such as *Thơ*; no websites devoted exclusively to literature such as *Tiền Vệ*, *Da Màu*, *Gió-O*, *Tạp chí Thơ*, *Thơ Tân Hình Thức*. As of [2007], all literary websites are to be found only in the diaspora.” See Nguyễn, “Keynote Speech.”

⁴ While *Tạp chí Thơ* which discontinued its electronic version in 2009, a string of literary websites and blogs have since emerged in its place. See, for example, litviet.com lunched by the writer Phan Nhiên Hạo in May 2009.

⁵ Lê. “Fanciful.”

⁶ James Boyles here.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Interview with Doan Nha Van. <http://www.gio-o.com/GioO10DoanNhaVanPVLeThiHue.htm>

¹⁰ Lê, “*Gió O*. 10 Years. Random Notes.” Hereafter, “Random Notes.”

¹¹ Lê, “About Fanciful Imaginings @ Words.” Hereafter, “Fanciful.”

¹² Lê, “Fanciful.”

¹³ Landow, Hypertext 2.0, 39.

¹⁴ Ibo, “Internet or Outernet,” 3.

¹⁵ Markley, “Boundaries,” 74.

¹⁶ Bande, “The Business of Cyberpunk,” 105.

¹⁷ See Lisa Nakamura, “Race in/for Cyberspace” and Jennifer Gonzalez, “The Appended Subject,” both of which show, among other things, how Internet practices of Asian minstrelsy and racial passing (what Gonzalez calls cyberpassing) effectively reinforce racial and sexual stereotypes of the Other.

¹⁸ Gonzalez and Rodriguez, “Filipina.com,” 229.

¹⁹ Foucault, power/knowledge, 98.

²⁰ In *Figures of Fantasy* (2005), Susanna Paasonen provides an excellent overview of the debate regarding the meanings of cyberfeminsim. She points out in particular how cyberfeminism has been “defined through negotiations and refusals to fix the meanings of the term” or else “through what it is not.” See Chapter 4, section “Cyberfeminism and the Problem with Difference,” 200-212.

²¹ Haraway describes the informatics of domination as “the scary new networks” which are replacing “the comfortable old hierarchical dominations,” 161.

²² Ibid., 180

²³ Ibid., 151, 150.

²⁴ Nguyen, Mimi, “Queer Cyborgs and New Mutants,” 301.

²⁵ Gonzalez and Rodriguez, 220-226 and Nguyen, Mimi, 297.

²⁶ Rosi Braidotti, “Affirming the Affirmative: On Nomadic Affectivity.”

<http://www.rhizomes.net/issue11/braidotti.html>

²⁷ Volkart, Yvonne. *Monstrous Bodies: The Disarranged Gender Body as an Arena for Monstrous Subject Relations*

²⁸ Bradotti. Website.

²⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 474

³⁰ Armstrong, “Beyond Resistance,” 29.

³¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 500

³² Haraway 174.

³³ Interview with Doan Nha Van. <http://www.gio-o.com/GioO10DoanNhaVanPVLeThiHue.htm>.

³⁴ Lê, “Random Notes” -- <http://www.gio-o.com/LeThiHueGioOMuoNamGhiRoi.htm>

³⁵ Paasonen, *Figures of Fantasy*, 109.

³⁶ Lê, “Fanciful.”

³⁷ Email Interview November 8, 2012.

³⁸ The Socialist Republic of Vietnam regulates access to the Internet by its citizens extensively and aggressively through both legal and technical means. In 2006, OpenNet Initiative (ONI), a collaborative partnership between the University of Toronto, Harvard University, Oxford University, an Cambridge University, released a report that documented Vietnam's heavy-handed control of its citizens' access to the Internet. See, "Internet Filtering in Vietnam in 2005-2006: A Country Case Study." <http://opennet.net/studies/vietnam>. Reporters Without Border in 2008 declared Vietnam an "Internet Enemy."

³⁹ Interview with Doan Nha Van. <http://www.gio-o.com/GioO10DoanNhaVanPVLeThiHue.htm>.

⁴⁰ The story begins with her listening over and over again to her lover's voice message beckoning her to come meet him in person. As she listens to his quant accent, she "rubs hands on her breasts..., allow[ing] ecstasy flow from her lower to upper body." Half way through the story, we find her "[i]mmersed in the lavender-scented bathwater, touch[ing] her velvety lower part and feel[ing] pleasure coursing through her body." This self-pleasure seeking habit, we are further told, is "a habit she recently developed from reading his poems". The story ends with her sitting in front of the computer in the middle of the night, hungry and scantily clad, "gently bit[ing] into a curved banana" as she begins reading his new poems.

⁴¹ Writing in "Netsex: Empowerment through Discourse," Charlene Blair maintains that the Internet provides a unique opportunity for women and men to "renegotiate and redefine sexual relationships. Netsex empowers both men and women because it allows sex to be freed from the physical and dwell in the intellect. At this level sex is freed from the baggages of duty and family and becomes pleasure and fulfillment" (207, 209). Because Blair's conclusion is predicated on the premise that the parties involved in Netsex are interested primarily in (1) sexual pleasure and, more specifically, (2) sexual pleasure "freed from the physical and dwell in the intellect," its explanatory power does not extend to people seeking physical contact via the medium of the Internet as in the case of the young poet in Lê's short story.

⁴² Paasonen, 230

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Deluze and Guattari, "What is Minor Literature?" 16.

⁴⁵ The critic Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, for instance, would concur with this assessment, as his own characterization of diasporic literature reflects the three characteristics above: "The essence of exilic literature is uncertainty. Uncertainty about what is being written and what is left unsaid. Uncertainty about the very existence of what is called exilic literature; about its immediate presence and its long-term future. Uncertainty in every aspect. And it's not easy not to feel uncertain. Our immediate surroundings tell us: Exilic literature is marginal, untenable, trivial, and extremely fantastical. Our homeland, the place we have left behind but have never forgotten, also reminds us: Only "they" belong to the mainstream and to history. Their discriminatory attitude is rampant, unapologetic, and blatant. Diasporic journals and magazines: Banned. Diasporic literary criticism and discussions of aesthetics: Banned. Even works citing diasporic writers: Definitely banned." See, Nguyễn, "Keynote Speech."

That said, I argue that any consideration of diasporic Vietnamese literature as a minor literature must contend with the fact that an overwhelming majority of diasporic Vietnamese/writers are of Kinh ethnicity, the dominant ethnic group in Vietnam that has historically and continually sought to uphold its hegemonic power over other ethnic minorities through violent conquests and/or social subjugation.

⁴⁶ Lê, "Fanciful"

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Lê, "My Own Language"

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Lê, "Fanncciful"

⁵¹ For instance, Lê declares in "Fanciful": "Although my geographical homeland gave me a place to enter into the world[...], in its name I have also greatly suffered. In its name I have been excluded. In its name I have been asked to commit and sacrifice... Growing up, I was taught to believe that serving one's homeland is one's greatest obligations... until one day, like a bastard child I broke free from these obligations. Now I consider myself not belonging to any geographical homelands. I still live in my familiar surroundings, but my intellect has long escaped its boundaries."

⁵² Interview with Doan Nha Van. <http://www.gio-o.com/GioO10DoanNhaVanPVLeThiHue.htm>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Haraway, 149.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 175

⁵⁶ Lê, “Journey from Innocence to Near Truth” 120, 121.

⁵⁷ Lê, “Words Remain”

⁵⁸ Lê, “Live Between Die Betwixt”

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