

ARTICULATING THE EXODUS: PLACE AND MEMORY IN VIETNAMESE- AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS' NOVELS

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The fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War formed the prelude to one of the largest exoduses in the twentieth century. Approximately two million Vietnamese left their homeland as refugees and migrants. This exodus has in turn led to a body of literature in the West. On the one hand, many influential writings that emerged from American perspectives tend to reconfigure the Vietnam War and its aftermath in terms of Cold War imperatives or the inevitability of a “noble cause.” The defeat in Vietnam serves as a “powerful reminder of U.S. involvement and failure in Vietnam” (Lieu 58). Conservative revisionist narratives, therefore, display a stunning ideological coherence in reconfiguring the innocent and heroic narratives and in the denial of a dishonorable past. On the other, with complicated confluence of politics, immigration, and memory, Vietnamese-American writers articulate their contesting voices in order to counter “the silencing of the South Vietnamese experience from most histories and narratives of the Vietnam War” (Nguyen N.H.C. 35). For many Americans, Southeast Asia and its inhabitants—particularly the Vietnamese—become visible only through the lens of the Vietnam War. In the meantime, contemporary Vietnamese tend to see that war as the major imperialist conflict in which they have been engaged unwillingly. A great portion of the Vietnamese came to the United States as a direct result of this conflict, which is accordingly associated with cultural representations of Vietnamese-Americans in the United States. The catastrophic experiences of war and exile become defining experiences of their identity. Vietnamese-American literary texts are consequently often viewed through the “sometimes totalizing grip of the Vietnam War” (Long 1) and are therefore situated in an “overdetermined and mythically constructed past” (Truong 224). Many critics of Vietnamese-American literature have remarked upon the inconvenient way this emerging literature finds its genesis in war. In general, literary texts that cultivate and reiterate the narrative of vic-

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timization are to some extent trapped in a common and simplistic trope—loss and mourning—which often meets with near universal approval by readers either from the West or the East. Yet, this trope presents only some “overdetermined” aspects of the complicated texts of Vietnamese-American migrants and their life experiences both in Vietnam and in the U.S. Viet Thanh Nguyen contends that the issues of how Southeast Asian American literature has been received and evaluated have a decisive influence on how we approach and study “Southeast Asia” as field of research and as a location. Marita Sturken has called attention to the fact that it is not that colonial and imperial wars in Southeast Asia have been monopolized in Western representation, but rather that a *location* like Vietnam is remembered *only* as a *war*. Monique Truong also warns that it would be erroneous to see Vietnamese as a “people defined exclusively by the military conflict that forced their resettlement” (220).

70 The three Vietnamese-American novels discussed here, Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* (1997), Dao Strom’s *Grass Roof, Tin Roof* (2003), and lê thi diem thúy’s *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003), are auto/biographical narratives about the Vietnam War and the exodus in 1975. But, they are telling something more. This essay aims to negotiate the conceptual tensions within and between “memory” and “geopolitics”—a discussion which derives from the word *topos*. A “*topos*” has double meanings: In Greek a *topos* means a “place,” while in Latin it refers to a “standardized method of constructing or treating an argument.” My main premise straddles the word’s dual implications to explore the way that Vietnamese-American women writers articulate a *topos* of their pasts that illustrates a sort of locational discourse which unsettles the overdetermined meanings of “Vietnam.” The essay proposes the significance of spatial rhetoric and locational politics in the constructions of memory, especially in migrants’ writings. An idea of “geopolitics of memory” reflects geopolitical constellations; it is especially a productive negotiation of locations and remembrance, and of “ideas, forms, images, and imaginings” of “geography.” In his *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said writes:

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings. (7)

Geopolitics, which generally refers to the involvement of geography and politics in an international framework, has been used by scholars to gesture toward the entanglement of nationality and transnationality in diverse localities. Some recent scholarship, including “feminist geography,” “transnational feminism,” and “auto/biographical narrative” has spoken to the potency of geopolitical critique. To begin with, “transnational feminism,” to some extent, resonates with the recent theories which interrogate how *space* as well as *time* is constructed in the contemporary U.S. transnational imaginary. One of the examples that exemplify geopolitical ideas is Susan Stanford Friedman’s *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of*

Encounter (1998), in which she argues that third-wave North American feminism is marked by a rhetorical turn to “the geopolitical,” characterized by a spatial politics that emphasizes the conjunctures between national identities and international conditions (21). In her “Locational Feminism: Gender, Cultural Geographies, and Geopolitical Literacy” (2001), Friedman further argues for a shift from “modern’s temporality” to “postmodern’s spatiality,” calling for attention to feminist narratives’ multiple, shifting, migratory, borderland location. Following this vein of argument, scholars have increasingly recognized that memory is a complex cultural and national process, and that it is geographically and politically situated.

In “Resisting Autobiography,” Caren Kaplan mobilizes general discussions on the form and mode of “autobiography” to its variations across national and cultural borders. The six types of outlaw genres, according to her, are not “a comprehensive list or complete map of global literary production that refers to the ‘autobiographical’ tradition” but indicate “a variety of reading and writing strategies in operation as the law of genre intersects with contemporary postcolonial, transnational conditions” (119). In one way, Kaplan’s essay provides approaches to explicating how and why autobiographical practices become compelling for writers historically excluded from the promise of inclusive citizenship and for writing across diverse geopolitical contexts. In another, Kaplan’s argument facilitates research in understanding when and how these transnational identifications are forged in autobiographical narratives, and to what ends. Significantly, Kaplan identifies autobiographical hybrids as forms of resistance that is “marked by *geopolitical* situation” and that therefore “breaks many of elite literature’s laws” (209, emphasis added). The novels I examine in this essay epitomize Kaplan’s “out-law genres,” i.e. transnational forms that struggle to represent the “I” outside of a narrow national framework and that evoke a spatial aesthetic and a politics of location, in addition to the temporal one that typifies conventional autobiography. While there are differences among them, Cao’s *Monkey Bridge*, Strom’s *Grass Roof, Tin Roof*, and lê’s *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* take advantage of multiple realist strategies for representing the affective experiences of women crossing borders—strategies that construct *both* new forms of transnational identification, affiliation *and* new forms of cross-cultural spectacles. The spatial aesthetic employed by the three women writers is multiply “mapped” in their texts’ construction of the “out-law” auto/biographical subject through metaphor and tropes, fiction and non-fiction, presents and pasts.

In writing about the memories of the Vietnam War, Cao, Strom, and lê chart their exilic encounters across places and territories metaphorized in geopolitical rhetoric. The book titles as metaphors tell us a lot about the position and politics at work in the texts. “Monkey Bridge” as a spatial metaphor, implies connection, a transitional route between two adjacent places. It further refers to a succinct image—the tenuous stripe of interstices connecting East and West, past and present, and war and peace. As Cao describes it, the monkey bridge is a “thin, unsteady shimmer of bamboo,” an “unaccommodating structure, lacking completely in width and strength,” that took the

uninitiated by surprise when they realized “they were expected to place their entire body weight on [it]. And, more than that, propel themselves forward and across” (M 179).¹ The implication of geopolitics of memory lies in the novel’s contextualizing terrains (US-Vietnam) in recollective narratives with the metaphor, “bridge.” *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* also presents an affective scenario with a suggestive title. In the novel, the father character clearly is a literal gangster in Vietnam. But, what is its implication? In a publication event, the author replies that the title implicitly refers to one of her unfulfilled promises of wild tales about “shoot ‘em up gangbangers.” The author knows that the misplaced expectations the title has created baffle its readers. In interpreting the title, the author reminds the reader the importance of the title is that it is the six-year-old girl who speaks the phrase that gives the novel its title. lê continues that “gangster” is a “projection of a bravado, an attitude of rebellion, the notion of a figure who can hold it all together...What will it take for you to be that person?” (Hidle). Likewise, Strom’s *Grass Roof, Tin Roof* carries a title

72 which cannot be understood immediately. In reviewing it, Donna Blumenfeld writes of the novel as a work that “pushes beyond grass, tin, and borders” (Blumenfeld). What the title is all about may not be specifically intended by the author, but it signals a sense of shifting, dual, and contrasting territory. With the unusual title, Strom evokes the divided minds of the children as refugees of two cultures, two places, two countries, two ideologies, and two significations. “Grass” and “tin” represent the many contrasts between them. It is the children’s efforts to connect the two terrains that manifest the theme of the novel.

In addition to titles as metaphors, discourses of displacement and location are produced and re-defined in the novels. In *Monkey Bridge*, painful reminders of failed American military effort are, for the author, “invisible and at the same time awfully conspicuous” (“Interview”). Cao chooses to write about it in a “natural” way, by shifting between past and present, Vietnam and the United States “through two different cultural lenses almost simultaneously without even necessarily noticing it” (“Interview”). The story revolves around Thanh and her daughter Mai Nguyen, who attempts to unravel her family’s pasts in Vietnam. In the opening scene of the novel, Mai is visiting her mother in the hospital after her stroke. In the meantime, Mai flashes back to her job in a Saigon hospital during the war. Even though Mai wants desperately to escape the memories of the war-torn Vietnam, she keeps tracing back to the past to delve into the truth to her mother’s napalm scar as well as the truth surrounding Mai’s grandfather being left behind in Vietnam. Her re-memorizing leads her to see things in a knowing and multiple ways. Gradually, the retrospective narratives that “traverse” spaces of varied kinds begin to “translate” experiences of memory across borders. As Mai and her mother attempt to embark upon new lives in the United States, the mystery of the past resurfaces and propels the novel forward to its climax.

Memory is elaborated through affectively mapping the terrains traversed. The way Mai reacts to the spaces that surround her, such as hospitals, living rooms, transit

vehicles, Mekong Grocery, and her concerted efforts to re-define these spaces in connection to her act of remembering speak to the matrix of the text. Devoted mostly to recalling the pasts in spatial terms, *Monkey Bridge* opens in the space of the hospital, where Mai visits her mother, Thanh, at Arlington Hospital located near Fall Church, Virginia, U.S. in 1978:

White, the color of mourning, the standard color for ghosts, bones, and funerals, swallowed in the surface calm of the hospital halls. A scattering of gunshots tore through the plaster walls. Everything was unfurling, everything, and I knew I was back there again, as if the tears were always pooled in readiness beneath my eyes.... Arlington Hospital was not a Saigon military hospital. (M 1)²

Mai is not simply thinking about the past, but she is associating two places, Arlington Hospital and Saigon military hospital. Since *Monkey Bridge* unfolds, the evocation of place is a recurring element. In the non-space of the train, Mai recalls the hospital again; she “yields” to the flashback of seeing a horribly wounded man come in on a stretcher with painful burns on his body. Mai feels that she “was back there again,” and she relives her war-torn past through re-imagining locales. While Mai is traveling on a train to a college interview, she connects two cartographies:

Except for the fecund heat of the tropics and the tall coconut palms, the railroad route from Virginia up north toward Uncle Michael’s Connecticut could have been the same route connecting Bien Hoa to Saigon....

The sameness of the landscape gave the peculiar impression that the train, in spite of its movement and speed, was also standing still, and for a moment I felt disoriented, unable to tell whether the train’s motion was real or imagined, whether we were gaining ground or simply kicking in place. (M 72)

In this passage, the route from Falls Church, Virginia, to Farmington, Connecticut, is directly compared to the “route connecting Bien Hoa to Saigon.” Mai’s memory of the Vietnam War has thus been mediated via space of varied kinds. Her memory illustrates how these spaces are both fluid and compressed. As Mai travels, the landscape passes her by and becomes a visual marker that shifts her *from America to Vietnam*, which reinforces the way places of two different countries—Vietnam and America—are incarnated to pronounce meanings for both the past and the present.

The Mekong Grocery in the Little Saigon section of Falls Church, Virginia, which was established not long after Vietnamese immigrants settled in the area as exiles, is another indicator of place in connection with memory. The Mekong Grocery, in contrast to the big supermarket in the U.S., is a place in substitute of the affection of homeland. The form of the grocery store also serves as a replicate of Saigon. American Veterans and exiled Vietnamese-Americans, who are not completely welcomed in American society after the fall of South Vietnam, gather there. The grocery sells not only novelty items such as silk fabric, but also Vietnamese food items such as “vats of nuoc mam, salted fish compressed for four months to a year into a pungent, fermented liquid used as a dipping sauce mixed with lime...” (M 65). In this miniaturized Vietnamese society, Mrs. Bay, Thanh’s best friend, develops close friendships

and social networks with GIs, who come to appreciate the grocery for its “consolation” and “familiarity.” The affection toward Mekong Grocery, like other local spaces in the novel, is a sentiment to recall the Vietnamese culture in the new land, the U.S. The exotic and foreign goods not only re-create a familiar sense of home, but also enable the characters to “re-live” their past.

Furthermore, the sense of place, community, or territory is penetrating through mother to daughter, and vice versa. Mai describes ways to find her mother’s past in terms of “private realm”: “I began turning, turning, turning. I could feel the pulsing of veins that usually precedes entry into a forbidden, private realm” (*M* 169). Later on, in response, Thanh writes of her daughter as “*under an illusion of freedom. Unless you create your own circumstances, make your own luck, determine your own fate, forge your own path through uncharted territory, you’re not free in her eyes*” (*M* 169; emphasis original). Thanh hopes that her daughter sees into the distance; her eyes “*will always be glued to a far horizon*” (*M* 169-70; emphasis original).

- 74 In *Monkey Bridge*, the aspiration to explore varied spaces (hospitals, communities, transit vehicles, and supermarket) brings about a curious illustration of the roles that place plays in re-defining a fragmented past. Like Cao’s seminal work, Strom’s novel also shows how place serves as enforcement of memory. The interlinked stories that make up *Grass Roof*, *Tin Roof* alternate between Saigon before the city’s fall in 1975, and present-day Northern California. Strom’s protagonist, like Cao’s, is a mother who has been burned by a cook fire in Vietnam (though, as it turns out, Strom’s mother, named Tran Ahn Trinh, has really been burned by napalm). The autobiographical novel, which reads like a memoir, revolves around a Vietnamese family’s resettlement in the United States. The cool and the dark woods of Northern California and the steamy, crowded streets of Saigon form the two contrasting settings of *Grass Roof*, *Tin Roof*. Brought up in a family where girls are not educated, Tran studies all her brother’s books, and works her way through Saigon University to be a liberal and independent woman. While in college, Tran falls in love with a French war correspondent, Gabriel, who recommends her to read “an American classic, *Gone with the Wind*” (*GT* 5). Tran is fascinated with the story, especially the descriptions of the lush landscapes of the American South, with its panoramic green hills and hilltop Greek revival plantation houses. With Gabriel, Tran has a son, Thien. To raise the boy, Tran works for a newspaper, writing an ongoing serial based on *Gone with the Wind*, but its setting is in a Vietnamese port city. Tran becomes the lover of the semi-underground, married editor of the newspaper, Le Hoang Giang, with whom she conceives her second child, a girl, April. Giang, who uses the newspaper to expose atrocities committed by both the North and South Vietnamese, draws her into his revolutionary activities. Tran witnesses the burning of a village, where South Vietnamese soldiers (backed by the United States), are killing their own people. The village is destroyed simply because it is located close to a corrupt general’s mansion, constructed with funds stolen from the government. Giang publishes photographs of the mansion and the burning village under Tran’s byline, which leads

to Tran being abducted, questioned, and beaten. Shortly, the newspaper is shut down. One day before Saigon and the South Vietnamese government fall, Tran boards an airplane guarded by American soldiers and flies to the United States with her two small children.

In the U.S., Tran writes her experiences of the 1975 exodus in *The Sacramento Bee*. Hus Madsen, a Danish immigrant and survivor of World War II, reads it and writes to her to share his feeling of displacement. Soon, they marry in Nevada, and Tran has a third child, Beth. Hus is an architect, and he buys a piece of land in the woods outside Sacramento, with views of yellow wheat fields, the American river and the Coloma Valley.

Like a family saga of the American West, *Grass Roof, Tin Roof* dramatizes the part-Danish, part-Vietnamese family being transplanted into the bewilderingly beautiful northern California countryside. Each of the main characters negotiates diffuse identities and map out a concrete and solid space for his or her existence in the U.S. The story, as a result, changes its voices and viewpoints continually, offering multiple perspectives on issues of exile and identity, place and displacement. Aptly, the spatial rhetoric and locational politics are conveyed with the story's covering a lot of ground: wartime Saigon, Guam, post-hippiedom rural California, the ethnic neighborhoods of San Diego. We read:

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In whatever fashion the end comes, somehow a marked population of people (be it family or nation) must knowingly or unknowingly join together in an acceptance of the fate of: dissolution. Home—whatever that is—will be extinguished or rearranged. And what remains afterward, the survivors, eventually they are scattered, too, like seeds, or sent out like scouts but bearing messages they've forgotten by the time they land and begin to roam amid other populations of people. They set up smaller, sadder camps of the old life, always with the same sense of something shattered and undistilled behind them. *It is my belief that all survivors contain within them an understanding of the true ephemeral nature of location, but it is up to each to realize this as potent, or terrifying, or meaningless.* (GT 163-64; emphasis added)

The dimension of the unstable locations in connection to the gradual awareness of refugees' sense of placelessness constitutes the matrix of the text. *Grass Roof, Tin Roof* is as such inscribed with spatial narratives that not only serve as the backdrop but also contribute thematic significance to the depth of the plots. Clearly, Strom investigates the myth of westward progress through her powerful and intimate writing, her affectively articulating of place, which lend more entreating characteristics to people in a changing world than merely mourning of loss can do. April writes of the surrounding landscape of their house:

I climbed to where the hill leveled into a meadow of thin, yellow grass and scattered boulders. From here I could see the mountains and the American River winding quietly along the bottom of the Coloma Valley. This was the view our father had built our house to look out on. The only sound I could hear was the creek running. I opened my mouth to scream into the silence then, and I tried to make myself sound like a red-tailed hawk. (GT 80)

Such a delineation of the American West is set deliberately in opposition to that of Vietnam, two settings being approached with different but equally complicated affections. Vietnam emerges in the last section of the novel when April, aged twenty-three, returns to Saigon for the first time, following the sudden death of her mother. In her letters to Hus, April writes of her observations and cultural shock—the dark, winding alley of Saigon, where her relatives' house is located. The building “has two rooms with a single faucet on the side alley outside, on a narrow rutted street where all the houses are low and small and built very close together. They store water in a big plastic tub and hang their clothes to dry on a line in the back of the alley” (GT 205).

For April, Saigon is an exotic and alien place. Her relatives tell her that she looks like her mother and she is struck by her mother's mannerisms in them. She has a hard time believing she is ever part of the place, the language, the culture, and the “sadness” of the country. April writes in her journal her affective connection to the place:

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My cousin and I were sitting on a bench facing the Saigon River when she told me that sadness is actually the main current of life. To feel sadness is evidence of the true texture of experience. Sadness, it seemed she was telling me, is also an inherent characteristic of the Vietnamese culture. They have staked their claim to it. They are certain they are among those in the world who have had the most of it—and how can you say they are wrong? (GT 203; emphasis original)

Delineations of “place” (the Saigon River, Vietnam, etc.) are complicated by “sadness,” and vice versa. With this, Strom elaborates emotional geographies.

In *Grass Roof, Tin Roof*, each character's memory is affectively mapped and connected to contrasting senses of place, while in lê's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, a story following a Vietnamese girl's journey through Vietnam to San Diego in the long drawn-out process of displacement, sense of place is doubly and bitterly narrated. Unlike Cao's and Strom's novels, *The Gangster We are All Looking For* privileges personal stories and comments on national pasts: the legacy of French colonization and the aftermath of the Vietnam War. lê inscribes her nation's and family's pasts through an aloof point with all the adversity viewed through the eyes of a nameless girl of six, who stumbles to make sense of the turmoil experiences. The random stitch of the five sections—“suh-top!” “Palm,” “The Gangster We Are All Looking for,” “The Bones of Birds,” and “nước”—implies how the construction of the Vietnamese-Americans as survivors is contingent. As such, the novel is episodically fractured, on which the author comments that, “memory, by its nature, is very fragmented” (“Interview”). Embedded in the understated narrative is not simply a story of poignant relocation, of assimilation, but also of profound reflection on the life that was lost. The narrator tells of how she, her father, and four “uncles,” connected by “water” instead of by “blood,” float across the South China Sea together in a U.S. Navy ship and then stay in Singapore refugee camp. In 1978, all six “family” members got a sponsor in the name of the retired navy officer Mr. Russel, who died before their papers were processed. Based on her husband's dream of flying birds, Mrs. Russel decided to take care of the six refugees and moved them into Mr. Russel's son

Melvin's house. Arriving at the seashore of a strange new country, the girl narrator struggles to make sense of her surroundings. Melvin tells them not to touch anything. The girl, however, starts playing with the forbidden glass sculptures secretly, telling them stories. One day, as the nameless girl attempted to free the trapped butterfly inside a paperweight to make her dream a reality, she threw the glass butterfly at the cabinet and shattered that piece along with the rest of the collection. The Vietnamese family was expelled and began another journey of displaced life.

In the following episodes, the family's pasts are intertwined with French colonialism and the Vietnam War. In their temporary housing, the narrator's mother puts aside her greatly treasured photograph of her parents in the attic. When their home is demolished to pave the way for gentrification and the family is evicted, the mother forgets to take the only photograph with her in the family's frantic attempt to rescue their belongings. Watching the destruction of her home, the mother calls out to her parents, "Ma/Ba, Ma/Ba." The narrator, a child, listens to her mother's cry and imagines:

the whole world is two butterfly wings rubbing against my ear. Listen...they are sitting in the attic, sitting like royalty. Shining in the dark, buried by a wrecking ball. Paper fragments floating across the surface of the sea. There is not a trace of blood anywhere except here, in my throat, where I am telling you all this. (TG 99)

The poetic narratives that shine throughout the autobiographical novel are cast affectively upon the treacherous territories of memory. The memory of the family's pasts is hence simultaneously cohered and shattered around those temporary shelters that the family stays, around the shifting locations. lê writes about war not by accusation but by connotation, allowing the reader to imagine what war is like. The profound sense of pain caused by war becomes haunting images:

Ma says war is a bird with a broken wing flying over the countryside, trailing blood and burying crops in sorrow. If something grows in spite of this, it is both a curse and a miracle. When I was born, she cried to know that it was war I was breathing in, and she could never shake it out of me. (TG 87; emphasis original)

In many cases, the line between reality and imagination is blurred and lê delivers an unusual story of the "boat people," full of arresting images and sentiments.

In *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, the displaced Vietnamese practice the compulsion of re-memorizing to forge "imagined communities," to borrow Benedict Anderson's term, through making sense of diverse geographical contexts. To tease out the ideology of identity politics, the author narrates events in different political territories with a subtle touch of sophistication, which sounds matter-of-fact. Negotiating such geopolitics of memory in the changed locales, lê goes further to point out the unstable discourse of nation. In the very beginning of the novel, lê notes, "In Vietnamese, the word for water and the word for nation, a country, and a homeland are one and the same: *nuoc*." Strangely, "a country, a nation, and a homeland" are equated to the fluidity of water, which is capable of flowing, moving, traversing,

and being shapeless. The merger of the historical with the aesthetic through weaving the metaphors of “blood,” “water,” “butterfly,” etc., further makes an unordinary novel, which challenges the predetermined images of Vietnamese and the stories they choose to tell.

Questions of representation, memory, and history lie at the heart of Isabelle Thuy Pelaud’s insightful analyses of Vietnamese-American literature, *This Is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature* (2011). Reading some recent Vietnamese-American writings in terms of fear, hope, despair, hybridity in Asian-American contexts, Pelaud theorizes Vietnamese-American literature as a sort of corrective to dominant narrations and as part of the struggle over memory and history: “For some, the act of writing itself is intimately linked with the wish to rectify social history, to serve as witnesses to the past, and to foster individual and collective healing and self-definition” (51). The timely question that Pelaud asks is important: “When will Vietnamese American literary texts be appreciated for
78 their literary quality and not only for their origin?” (103). She then presents a more nuanced definition of the boundaries of Vietnamese-American literature as based on “politics of identity, politics of position” (104), which disregards the absolutely determinative thinking of “origin” while pursuing a sophisticated gesture in locating a literature within porous borders and elastic territory.

In all, the three novels discussed here are varied in style, but are similar in some interesting and creative ways. The childhood of each is marked by insecurity and constant displacements and the three author’s works reveal the lasting visual and psychological impact of violent or disturbing incidents. Trauma encompasses not only the suffering experienced during wartime, it is also overwhelmingly linked with loss—loss of home, country, family members, loved ones, and loss of what James Freeman terms “meaningful sources of identity” (3). In a collection of essays entitled *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (2003), David Eng and David Kazanjian note that “if loss is known only by what remains of it, then the politics and ethics of mourning lie in the interpretation of what remains—how remains are produced and animated, how they are read and sustained” (ix). Cao, Strom, and lê translate this process of loss in geopolitical terms. Remembering the places along with recalling the pasts informs the plots of their individual novel. Their creative output moves beyond the long shadow of the Vietnam War and open up sites of introspection and intervention. With this, the three novels navigate the beginnings of alternative voices. A dual articulating of resistance and engagement has been suggested as a sophisticated way to narrate war and to unsettle the overdetermined images of Vietnam.

Each of these texts, which is initially situated itself in temporal autobiographical referentiality, gradually adopts spatial politics to narrate their life experiences of deportation from one place to another, and how their narratives become fragmented, and crisscrossed by “gaps and breaks” in V.T. Nguyen’s sense.³ Redressing the lapse in both American and Asian American memories and their national pasts, the three Vietnamese-American women writers create a matrix of geopolitical mem-

ories contextualized in the U.S. and in Vietnam, in the past and at the present, both nationally and transnationally. The *topos* of the pasts has thus been contested and commemorated.

In *Monkey Bridge*, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, and *Grass Roof, Tin Roof*, the writers' deep reflections on place and memory have been particularly important in bringing a geographical dimension to the surface of their auto/biographical narratives. In this way, the authors call attention to the significance of spatialities in shaping memory through the emotive power of imagined place. The authors mobilize the seemingly place-less re-formulation of Vietnam, their home country, in order to remake images of the land they once shared. The three novels discussed here are thus made even meaningful to the reader through the characters' anchoring in place, and through the delineation of place, which poignantly evokes the memory of shared past. My study of Vietnamese-American women writers' autobiographical novels illuminates the significance of place in relation to memory. The way Lan Cao, Dao Strom, and Lê Thị Diem Thúy negotiate the tensions between memory and place have provided sites for examining connections between national belonging, transnational linkages, and experience of replacement, which is where some of the crucial contemporary issues converge.

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NOTES

1. Hereafter, *Monkey Bridge* is cited as *M*; *Grass Roof, Tin Roof* is cited as *GT*; and *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* is cited as *TG*.
2. Here, "hospital" is quite suggestive; it both represents an affective mapping of the past and is a non-place, chiefly architectural and technological, designed to be passed through rather than appropriated.
3. Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, "...it is in memory that the distortion and warping must be accounted for" in ways fitful, fragmentary, or full of gaps and breaks" (18).

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