

# REVERSE EXODUSES: RETURNING TO VIETNAM AS A TROPE OF VIETNAMESE AMERICAN LITERATURE

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## ABSTRACT

In 1995, the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam restored diplomatic relations. After twenty years of embargo, the two former enemies reestablished trade links and removed the restrictions imposed on travels. As a result, members of the Vietnamese diaspora had the chance to return freely to their ancestral land, in many cases after a painful and prolonged absence. Most notably, the *détente* enabled many second-generation Vietnamese American to visit their fatherland for the first time, with all the emotional consequences that such a visit implies. In the following years, several Vietnamese American authors portrayed this experience in their works, either as a narrative turning point or as an autobiographical moment. This article analyzes three remarkable instances of this trope in contemporary Vietnamese American literature. The aim is to prove how the nuances of the Vietnamese American perspective on postwar reconciliation are still fertile ground for narratives and stories.

**Keywords:** Vietnamese American Literature; Vietnamese Diaspora; Ocean Vuong; Aimee Phan; Lan Cao; Viet Thanh Nguyen.

Is it possible to *return* to a place where you have never been? Such a question may appear paradoxical to many, but not for a Northern American, an Australian, or a European of Vietnamese descent, when descending an airplane staircase at Tân Sơn Nhất airport, feeling for the very first time the warm breeze of Southern Vietnam’s eternal summer. Perhaps, the same question could come back to him or her during a chat with a cab driver, while entering the bustling tree-lined avenues of Hồ Chí Minh City’s District 1, because of the driver’s oddly familiar Saigonese accent. Or maybe later on, while recognizing a small building wrapped in a tangle of wires and old loudspeakers—which now houses a family of total strangers—as the native house of his or her parents. This hypothetical second-generation Vietnamese person had never set foot on Vietnamese soil. Yet this first journey may somehow feel like a sort of homecoming.

Diasporic Vietnamese arts and literature often retell or reimagine similar ‘home(land)comings.’ Most notably, Vietnamese American narratives are frequently

“bound by the theme of return” (Pelaud 2001, 5), to the point that the reverse exodus could be classified as a recurring trope of sorts. Early Vietnamese American literature consisted mostly of an oral tradition of exile narratives, co-written with American authors, that targeted mainly an American audience (Wang 2013, 162). But in the past two decades, as 1.5 and second-generation Vietnamese Americans started to make headway in the literary world, the focus shifted. A new character emerged, the Vietnamese American *returnee*:

a cosmopolitan traveler whose encounter with contemporary Vietnam not only raises questions about history and memory as lived discrepantly by Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans but also compels us to reconsider the relations between representation, subjectivity, and the geopolitical history that is crystallized in the body of ‘Viet Kieu’ (diasporic Vietnamese). (Wang 2013, 164)

In 2013, Chih-ming Wang identified this paradigm in two Vietnamese American memoirs, *Catfish and Mandala* by Andrew X. Pham and *Perfume Dreams* by Andrew Lam. Wang raised the question of whether “this urge to return, in reality and in one’s memory” is in fact “the same as the Hollywood version of US comebacks for the purpose of putting the ‘Vietnam War syndrome’ to rest” (2013, 163). The aim of this article is to widen the frame even further, including also some works of fiction that have appeared in the meantime. The goal is to prove how the Vietnamese American perspective on postwar reconciliation is still fertile ground for narratives and points of critical discussion.

## EXILE AND BACK: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

*Monarchs that survived the migration passed this message down to their children. The memory of family members lost from the initial winter was woven into their genes.*

*(Ocean Vuong, On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous, 16)*

And if you bypassed a war, a war/ wouldn’t bypass you.

*(Diana Khoi Nguyen, “The Exodus,” 2018)*

If the archetypal diasporic Vietnamese traveler described in the introduction happens to hold an American passport, we should not probably date his/her first return before the end of the 1980s. Indeed, it was at that time that the United States started to gradually normalize diplomatic relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. For almost twenty years, Washington had refused to officially recognize Hà Nội's government. After the demise of the American-backed Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) in 1975, the US had imposed an embargo against the new regime. The reunified Vietnam was then a poor and isolated country worn down by thirty and more years of war: before long, people started to flee. Most of the refugees who escaped Vietnam in the late 1970s/early 1980s resettled in the United States. The first wave consisted largely of the political and military élite of the South Vietnamese regime. The second and the third are usually referred to as the 'boat people' exodus. Among the many who managed to escape, there were persecuted ethnic Chinese and ARVN soldiers who underwent hardships and starvation in reeducation camps.<sup>1</sup> Afterward, legal exits were authorized and coordinated through the Orderly Departure Program. In the following years, many of these refugees were to form large communities across the US. They published newspapers written in Vietnamese, opened *phở* restaurants, and embellished Californian strip malls and Boston's shop signs with the diacritical marks of the *Quốc Ngữ* alphabet. Every Lunar New Year, their veterans paraded in the avenues of Orange County, proudly wearing the uniforms of a now-dissolved army. The yellow flag of South Vietnam was hoisted again, trembling in the sand-filled wind of Texas or in the breeze of the Pacific Ocean: it was the birth of Vietnamese America.<sup>2</sup> Communications between those who left and those who stayed behind were slowed by the embargo, and by Communist Vietnam's policy of self-isolation. Letters and diaspora remittances could still reach the homeland, but with difficulties. Even making a phone call was a tough task, as shown in Lan Cao's novel *Monkey Bridge*: Chapter 2 begins with the protagonist Mai resorting to cross the Canadian border to get in touch with her

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<sup>1</sup> For comprehensive statistical data on Vietnamese refugees, see Aguilar-San Juan 2009; Pelaud 2011.

<sup>2</sup> On the cultural and political texture of Vietnamese American communities, see also Bui 2017, Nguyen 2017.

long-lost grandfather. For many families, it was not unusual to wait years for news of their loved ones.

When the Cold War came to its end at the turn of the 1990s, things started to change. As the American journalist Neil Sheehan puts it, in the late 1980s Vietnam had learned the hard way that “the concrete of socialism crumbles” (1991, 17). Thus, after the Sixth National Congress of the Party, Communist Vietnam reversed course. In 1986, the Politburo and its new general secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh launched *Đổi Mới*, a market economy reform that ultimately managed to “Vietnamize capitalism” (Bui 2017, 180). “American neoliberals,” from their part, “wanted to dominate the world economy even if doing so required recognizing the legitimacy of the Hanoi regime” (Nguyen 2017, 121). Establishing lucrative trade connections with a country that sacrificed millions of its men in the name of Marxism-Leninism enabled the United States to frame “reconciliation as a postwar victory” (Nguyen 2017, 121). From then on, it was not long before overseas Vietnamese were finally allowed to come back. Initially, the process did not start well. The wounds of the war were still fresh: “[b]ack then, the former refugees ... weren’t exactly welcomed” and “[m]any were harassed at the airport, unless they slipped a \$10 bribe to the officers stamping their passports” (Ly 2003). In the streets of Hà Nội, foreigners were observed with curiosity. American journalists and war veterans might feel even well-liked and welcomed. But for the losing side, the “enemies of history” (Lam 2005, 30) long since removed from the national narrative, it was different. The phrase *Việt Kiều*, which translates as ‘Vietnamese sojourner,’ “became a common slur for people who were fat and spoiled” (Ly 2003). Moreover, officials feared exiled insurgents and tended to distrust returning refugees.

However, as soon as Vietnamese American wealth started to flow back in, the old grievances lost importance. Business opportunities arose, and the returnees slowly became an asset. The same government “that once would have imprisoned them” (Ly 2003) ended up passing laws that allowed *Việt Kiều* retirees to own real estate. Many of them even decided to return to their homeland and settle for good, forming “a small but growing reverse exodus” (Ly 2003). Yet, many never went back. They resolved to grow old and die on American soil, refusing to accept the very idea of a Communist

Vietnam. “In time, April 30”—the day Sài Gòn fell/was liberated, depending on who you ask— “became the birth date of an exile’s culture, built on defeatism and on a sense of tragic ending” (Lam 2005, 68).

Their children, however, are a different matter. The distance between Vietnam and Vietnamese America is deep, but so is the distance between first and second-generation Vietnamese Americans. In a way, even the latter experienced war and displacement: but only vicariously, through the pain and the memories of their parents. Such forms of intergenerational trauma “do not often express themselves as holistic narratives of past suffering but rather *as deep silences* produced within families still trying to heal from their past” (Bui 2015, 78, emphasis added). Thus, for a second generation Vietnamese American, as poet Bao Phi puts it, to have kids is to wonder “[h]ow much blood and history can one last name hold” (2017, 16). For the above reasons, as anyone that grew up with second-hand memories of war and postwar atrocities, “mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (Hirsch 2012, 5), second-generation Vietnamese often return to Vietnam with a heavy heart.

Meanwhile, for better or worse Vietnam had shed its skin. A new flag waves over the Perfume River and on Sài Gòn’s City Hall. There are giant billboards with hammers and sickles celebrating Five-Year Plans on every major roundabout. President Hồ Chí Minh’s face smiles at them from *đồng* money bills. Now, the texture itself of the cities is different: after 1975, in Sài Gòn/HCM City many street names were changed. The new authorities replaced 26% of the topography “to both de-commemorate the previous regime and celebrate the new national identity” (Hương and Kang 2014, 69).<sup>3</sup> As a result, one might get lost between the layers of history, resorting to asking for directions to passers-by old enough to remember Sài Gòn as it once was. Upon departure, many

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<sup>3</sup> For that matter, South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm had done the same in the 1950s with the colonial French toponyms. See Hương and Kang 2014. As exiled intellectual Nguyen Long recalled in his memoir *After Saigon Fell: Daily Life under the Vietnamese Communists* (1981), the post-1975 name-changing could lead to unintentional ironies. “Công Lý (Justice) is now Nam Kỳ Khởi Nghĩa (Southern Uprising) and Tự Do (Liberty) is now Đồng Khởi (Simultaneous Uprising). As I walked I often remembered a popular jingle about the name changes: “The Southern Uprising has destroyed Justice, /The Simultaneous Uprising has killed Liberty” (61).

Vietnamese refugees had lost houses and properties to new occupants. For their sons and daughters, visiting those houses and meeting those occupants could prove to be an unforgettable event. Several YouTube travel vlogs made by second or third-generation diasporic Vietnamese depict the intensity of such moments: brief exchanges on camera between those who had remained and those who had left show how deep the scars of history can go. It is as if the Cold War made the whole Vietnamese people play a sick game of musical chairs. In the words of Andrew X. Pham, “[e]verything could shift, and nothing would change,” because “[t]he shoes to be filled were the same” (1999, 107).



Figure 1. Page from a forthcoming volume of “The Gulf” series (Nguyễn 2020)

In short, returning second-generation Vietnamese Americans carry the weight of the ‘American possibility’ no less than the burden of the Vietnamese past. They embody “a successful model minority who returns to Vietnam as a kind of Superman, flaunting the American wealth that the Vietnamese could not have had” (Nguyen 2016, 205).<sup>4</sup> They

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<sup>4</sup> As Andrew Lam writes: “[i]n Vietnam my face and body take on mythological proportions ... Visions of double-tiered freeways and glassy high-rises are to be extracted out of the Viet Kieu’s flesh. Squeeze a little harder, and who knows, you might just see Disneyland” (2005, 128).

stand at a crossroads between what has been, what will be, and what could have been. Hence, it is no accident that the emergence of many Vietnamese American literary works coincided with the coming of age of the 1.5 and the second generation. The reverse exodus, i.e. the possibility of going back to confront the trauma, is a central point in many Vietnamese American and diasporic Vietnamese narratives. “The movement from the homeland to the adopted land, as refugees and exiles, and finally the return and the reconciliation, marks much of the literature” (Nguyen 2016, 205). When 1.5 and second-generation Vietnamese Americans started to produce literature, they juxtaposed the reverse exodus narrative with the usual rhetoric of remembrance commonly associated with the Vietnam War. Sick of Hollywood revenge fantasies in which the Vietnamese were relegated to extras, they took center stage. Instead of the American Vietnam of *Apocalypse Now* or *Platoon*, they narrated Vietnamese America. They wrote family sagas and choral novels that explored its ambiguities and complexities, and created characters and narrators that strive in order “to reconcile the singular self with collective history” (Wang 2013, 167). As Isabelle Thuy Pelaud summarizes:

More emotionally and politically detached from Viet Nam than those of the first generation, these narratives articulate *a new concept of home*. Identity is depicted to a different degree in terms of movement, one that goes back and forth between North America and Viet Nam, either by actual travel there or by acts of memory, imagined or recollected. (2011, 36; emphasis added)

These narratives were rife with home(land)comings and reverse exoduses: as Vietnamese American literature entered this new phase, the trope of the return to the fatherland gained prominence.

#### “WOVEN INTO THEIR GENES”: THREE OCCURRENCES OF THE TROPE IN 2010S VIETNAMESE AMERICAN WORKS OF FICTION

##### *I. To rebuild*

The reverse exodus trope marks respectively the beginning and the end of the narrative in two Vietnamese American novels of the 2010s: Aimee Phan’s *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* (2012) and Lan Cao’s *The Lotus and the Storm* (2014). Phan’s novel is a

saga that spans generations and continents. Drawing on her family history, the Orange County native crafted a multilayered cross-Atlantic perspective on the Vietnamese diaspora. *Reeducation* is at once a journey of self-discovery and a reflection on Vietnamese identity, as much as a story of betrayals and silences. Phan wrote Cherry as a detective bent on unfolding the hidden secrets of both the French and American branches of her extended family, learning “much more than she bargained for” (Bui 2015, 81) in the process. Notably, the novel also contains a cross-section of the diasporic Vietnamese reverse exodus process. The prologue opens with a reunion between second-generation Vietnamese American Cherry Truong and her brother Lum, who has recently resettled in Vietnam. A failure back in the States, Lum has remade himself as a successful entrepreneur in the homeland. He is in charge of a housing company that targets Vietnamese American buyers:

“Wait until you see the finished product. You’ll be happy.” He gestures up to a sign.

Cherry hadn’t noticed it when they drove in. On a clean yellow billboard, in red block letters, her eyes take a minute to focus: THE FUTURE SITE OF NEW LITTLE SAIGON... THE COMFORTS OF AMERICA, IN YOUR TRUE HOME, VIETNAM. (Phan 2012, 5)

Lum’s desk is covered with miniature dioramas of the development’s different housing options: the Magnolia, the Westminster, the Bolsa, and the Brookhurst. (Phan 2012, 19)

According to Long T. Bui, in creating Lum Phan highlighted a neo-neocolonial dynamic of sorts:

Lum is a ... quintessential loser who comes from a people viewed as the ultimate losers of history...[h]is incapacity to live up to the middle-class ideals and upwardly mobile values espoused by so many Vietnamese Americans today is transfigured in postsocialist Vietnam, where overseas Vietnamese like him return to colonize, modernize, and reeducate South Vietnamese people on capitalism. (2015, 83)

Lum’s reverse exodus is a paradigm shift: raised in America as the son of unwanted refugees, he returns to Vietnam as a welcomed expat who capitalizes on refugees’ nostalgia. His “New Little Saigon” is explicitly named after Orange County’s topography.



Besides being the product of a wise business move, his housing complex is in a sense akin to other Vietnamese American “strategic memory projects” such as the Westminster’s Vietnam War Memorial (Aguilar-San Juan 2009, 88). To reclaim “Bolsa” or “Brookhurst” as *Vietnamese* toponyms is to quietly reverse the post-1975 de-commemoration campaign of streets-renaming. Thus, Lum’s project is a monument to Vietnamese American culture: built in the homeland, hidden in plain sight, and made possible by American dollars.

Lan Cao’s *The Lotus and the Storm* describes the reverse exodus in a rather different light. Cao, the daughter of an ARVN four-star general, escaped Vietnam at the age of 14. Like other 1.5 generation authors, she has direct recollections of wartime Vietnam. Therefore, her depiction of the exile/reverse exodus dynamic is particularly poignant. The novel covers more than forty years of history, from 1963 to 2006. Cao uses the great national Vietnamese epic *Truyện Kiều* by eighteenth-century poet Nguyễn Du as an intertextual reference. In doing so, she establishes a parallel between the ancient Trịnh–Nguyễn partition of Vietnam and the divisions of the recent past.<sup>5</sup> Even in this case, incidentally, the plot is centered around a family that harbors secrets and divided loyalties. Moreover, one of the main character-narrators of *The Lotus and the Storm* is a person that suffers from multiple personality disorder. The split has been caused by war trauma: in a sense, Mai/Bao/Cecile herself could be seen as a sort of living allegory of the partitioning of Vietnam. Therefore, the division is undoubtedly one of *Lotus*’ core themes. Hence, the *double* reverse exodus with which the novel ends. Cao encapsulates the dualities of the *Việt Kiều* experience through the different attitudes of Mai/Bao concerning the home(land)coming. Whereas Mai feels alienated in returning to Sài Gòn after a thirty-year absence, Bao seems to feel at home. Chapter 28, “Knowing,” dwells on Mai’s impressions:

When the plane landed, I felt as if Saigon had been willed into unlikely existence by an extravagant act of faith—mine. ... It is still Saigon. But my infatuation with

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<sup>5</sup> This parallel was actually at the base of the commemoration strategies and nation-building of the Republic of Vietnam, as evident from several decisions of Diệm’s government in matters of toponymy. See Hương and Kang 2014.

it is mingled with suspicion. ... *It is exactly as it was*—this is what people like me want very much to tell themselves when they return home. But this is not the case. Thirty years after the war's end, the city is visited daily by the love-struck Viet Kieu, the overseas Vietnamese who, like me, are perpetually filled with unrequited longing. We have embarked on our trips in search of a time and place that no longer exists. ... If it were not for the hard currency—U.S. dollars—we bring with us, we wouldn't even be welcomed here. This is no longer my city. ... I realize that I am but a few steps away from a house that is no longer there. I cannot even locate the spot where it once stood. ... I look at the surrounding space with proprietary wonder and ascendant hope, searching for the afterimage of life as I once knew it. ... I am both restless and anchored, touched and alienated, present and invisible. (Cao 2014, 354, 355, 357)

Mai's reverse exodus is truly an "act of faith." Growing up, she kept scenes and places of her childhood frozen in memory. Now, as she wanders in those same streets, she clings to distant reminiscences as to an outdated map unable to point the way. Like *Reeducation's* Lum, Mai is a rebuilders of sorts. Whereas Phan's character was literally building a piece of Vietnamese America in the homeland, Cao's character-narrator is metaphorically excavating the ruins of South Vietnam. She is not visiting the city; she is *reimagining* it as it was—desperately trying to reconcile her memory with her perception. However, hers is a failed effort: pre-1975 Sài Gòn is a "time and place that no longer exists," and its very existence is possible only through an "act of faith." For Mai, Hồ Chí Minh City's avenues are a landscape of the *Unheimlich*. She knows that under the surface the city has remained the same. Nonetheless, she cannot accept the new flag, the new names, and the new symbols. She behaves like an "ordinary stranger" (Cao 2014, 355), avoiding raw vegetables, distrusting street food vendors, and drinking only bottled water. In 1971, she was a Vietnamese girl. In 2006, she is an American tourist.

Conversely, Bao seems pleased to be back. She loves the smells and the vibrancy of Bến Thành Market. She feels at home in Vietnam, a place that she claims to "inhabit without ambivalence" (Cao 2014, 362). "After more than thirty years in America," Bao says, "I remain wholly and quintessentially Vietnamese, tethered to this place" (Cao 2014, 362). As often with Lan Cao, food descriptions are a key narrative factor. Whereas Mai distrusted an elder *bánh cuốn* seller and looks for "Westernized" (Cao 2014, 359) restaurants, Bao is intrigued by the food stalls and by the flavors that linger in the air.

As Mai observes, whereas she feels “alienated” and “invisible,” Bao “makes peace with Vietnam as it is” (Cao 2014, 355). *The Lotus and the Storm*’s last two chapters are thus an interesting take on the trope of the reverse exodus. Stating that Bao embodies the Vietnamese in ‘Vietnamese American’ as Mai embodies the American is to oversimplify. More properly, it could be said that Mai and Bao embody two *possible* shades of the returnee experience; two seemingly conflicting kinds of reverse exodus, that, on some level, can even coexist—as the split personalities of Mai/Bao/Cecile ultimately manage to do. Placing back a woman with two names in a city with two names allows Cao to paint a nuanced picture of the *Việt Kiều* condition and of its complexities. As a 1.5 generation author, she sits somewhere in the middle between nostalgia and projection. Every refugee home(land)coming, Cao seems to suggest, is at once a painful and joyous experience. Mai/Bao’s journey is a path of reconciliation and healing, as Cherry’s reverse exodus in Phan’s *Reeducation* was. But it is a reconciliation based on remembrance, not on oblivion. Both novels end with a peace agreement of sorts between the self and its memories (or, in Cherry’s case, *postmemories*). For this reason, the choice of putting the reverse exodus respectively at the beginning and the end of the narrative is significant, as the trope marks a crucial moment both in *Lotus* and *Reeducation*. Now let us see how the reverse exodus can play a minor, but equally crucial role in the framework of another novel, Ocean Vuong’s acclaimed prose debut *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019).

## II. *Two funerals*

Ocean Vuong’s first novel has definitely caused a stir. Since its appearance in June 2019, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* has been a recipient of numerous awards, has been translated into several languages, and has topped countless year-end ‘best book’ lists. It was also recently announced that the prestigious indie studio A24 has optioned the movie rights to the book. Having already made a name for himself in the 2010s as a poet, Vuong is now indisputably one of the most renowned and promising Vietnamese American novelists of our time. Despite his young age, Vuong is a first-generation Vietnamese American. Born in Vietnam in 1988, he resettled in Connecticut with his

mother, grandmother, and aunt as “the only child in the three-generation exodus” (Armitstead 2017). At the time of his birth, thirteen years had already passed since the day that the North Vietnamese tanks crashed the gates of Independence Palace in Sài Gòn. Nonetheless, Ocean considers himself a “product of war” (Tippett 2020), like the speaker of his 2016 “Notebook Fragments” poem, who does the math and concludes: “[a]n American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my mother exists. Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me. / Yikes” (Vuong 2016, 70). The same ‘war equation’ comes back again in *On Earth*, as character-narrator Little Dog applies it equally to golf champion Tiger Woods and to his mother, Hong/Rose. Both a successful sportsman and a humble pedicurist, Little Dog argues, can be seen as a “direct product of the war in Vietnam” (Vuong 2019, 77) because of their family history. But in fact, Vuong observed in an interview, deep down “so much of American life is a product of war,” as Americans celebrate themselves using a “lexicon of death” and “talk about pleasure as conquest,” all while “standing on stolen ground” (Tippett 2020).<sup>6</sup> America, Vuong implies, is a warrior society and does not even know it.

For the above reasons, Vuong’s historical perspective is rather different from the ones we have seen so far. His family did not escape the collapse of South Vietnam, but lived through it. His grandmother worked as a prostitute during the war and had a relationship with an American serviceman. His mother, for her part, grew up as a mixed child in postwar Vietnam, when Amerasian kids like her were seen as the living embodiment of the ‘betrayal’ of the South. Growing up, along with reading Homer and Roland Barthes, Vuong studied the war that ‘produced’ him. Unsatisfied with the hasty summaries he found in his textbooks, he went deeper. As he revealed in an interview:

I realized right away that one’s research with the Vietnam War—something I was not prepared for—was to see upwards of hundreds of dead bodies. Asian bodies. Bodies that look like me. So when you are most recognizable, in your research,

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<sup>6</sup> In a passage of *On Earth*’s third section, Little Dog further elaborates on this idea. Wondering whether “destruction is necessary for art” (Vuong 2019, 256), he gathers several occurrences of said “lexicon of death” in the everyday language of the art world: “[y]ou killed that poem ... I am hammering this paragraph ... We smashed the competition. I’m wrestling with the muse. ... The audience a target audience” (Vuong 2019, 257).

as a corpse, it does something to you. Sometimes, the bodies were so mangled, you didn't know where one began and ended. And so I wanted, for my first book, to have Vietnamese bodies on the cover that were living. (Tippett 2020)

Vuong's acclaimed poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016) dealt extensively with the memory of the war, turning historical events like the Fall of Sài Gòn into impressionistic images and unreal visions. Likewise, inherited trauma is scattered everywhere on the pages of *On Earth*. In addition to being a coming-of-age and a meditation on grief, race, class, and queerness, the novel is also a testimony of what it means to be Vietnamese in America, and a testament to the power of words. It is structured around the idea of incommunicability, showing how language shapes people and relations—especially among migrant families. Little Dog writes a letter to his mother knowing that she, as an illiterate woman, will not be able to read it. He writes it not despite this, but *because* of this. As he affirms: “the very impossibility of your reading this is all that makes my telling it possible” (Vuong 2019, 165). Incommunicability dooms also the life of Little Dog's first love, Trevor, who, even before succumbing to drug addiction, had already fallen victim to his father's abuse and to “the rules ... already inside us” (Vuong 2019, 176), that is, to the burden of societal norms regarding masculinity, frailty, and homosexuality. In the background of Little Dog's tale, the tobacco fields of Connecticut, Bush's America, the opioid epidemics, and the lyrics of 50 Cent's rap classic *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'*.

*On Earth's* reverse exodus is presented as a diptych: a juxtaposition of two episodes, rather than a single narrative unit. Significantly, both episodes are centered around a memorial service. In part III, Little Dog and Hong/Rose return to Vietnam. They travel down to the rural Gò Công District, in the heart of the Mê Kông Delta, to bury the ashes of Lan, Little Dog's grandmother, near the paddy fields of her native village. The first episode of the diptych takes place on the day of the funeral. After the ceremony, Little Dog Skype-calls Paul, Lan's estranged ex-husband. Paul asks him to place the laptop between the graves to ‘see’ Lan for the last time. Little Dog holds Paul's face in front of Lan's tombstone, hiding unseen behind the computer. Paul is an American veteran: he had abandoned Lan back when he had to leave Vietnam during Nixon's Vietnamization. Now, he asks for Lan's forgiveness. It is another occurrence of

*On Earth's* structural theme of incommunicability: the only moment in which we see the former lovers facing each other, all that we see is a one-sided conversation. Paul's a confession that does not allow for answers: it is American pain versus Vietnamese silence. As in the case of Little Dog's confession to his mother, the very impossibility of Lan hearing Paul's confession is all that makes the confession *possible*. In this light, considering that this scene is itself a part of Little Dog's narration, that is, of his macro-confession, we could interpret Paul's confession as a sort of *mise en abîme* of the textual whole.

But there is more. Little Dog cannot help but notice that “[a] few children from the village had gathered at the edge of the graves, their curious and perplexed stares hover on the periphery” (Vuong 2019, 303). He sees himself through their eyes: “I must look strange to them, holding the pixelated head of a white man in front of a row of tombs” (Vuong 2019, 303). Paul's Vietnamese is not good, he is stuttering, and the Wi-Fi connection does not work. His face is a mess of pixels. Little Dog senses that to village boys not used to American technology the scene must appear grotesque. Suddenly, he realizes that he is holding a simulacrum in front of another: Lan's smile on the grave picture does not match Paul's sobbing, because neither Paul nor Lan are really there. Paul is thousands of miles away, and Lan is ashes. Besides, the picture was taken when Lan was 28, “roughly the age when they first met” (Vuong 2019, 301). It is as if Paul was somehow hoping to travel back to 1971 and ask for Lan's forgiveness right after she realized he had abandoned her. He is an old man apologizing to the young version of an old woman: as he is crying, she smiles in response. When it comes to Paul's perspective, all of this makes perfect sense. In the eyes of the kids, however, in holding the laptop Little Dog is performing an incomprehensible ritual.

“As I look at Paul's face on the screen ... I realize how little I know of us, of my country, any country” (Vuong 2019, 303), he muses. Little Dog is understandably stunned after having learned the hidden secrets of his family history. On the one hand, he considers the long cause-effect chain of trauma and pain he is a ‘product’ of. In carrying the laptop, Little Dog is quite literally holding the weight of Paul's choices on his shoulders. Symbolically, he is bearing the burden of America's military intervention

in Vietnam. Ironically, as a ‘product of war’ which owes his very existence to those choices and to that intervention, this is a task that suits him fine. On the other hand, Little Dog cannot help but consider how relative everything is when seen from the outside. From his perspective, he had just witnessed the end of a sad love story. In fact, he was the one who made it possible: it was Little Dog who had actively enabled Paul to say his “last words to his first love” (Vuong 2019, 303). They performed a one-time ritual that nonetheless was somewhat already encoded in their set of cultural practices. But, for a group of poor kids born in rural Vietnam, witnessing such a strange funeral is to question their own interpretative codes. And in understanding this, Little Dog is slowly starting to question his own. Let us see how the second part of the diptych broadens and completes this hermeneutical process.

The second episode takes place two days later. Little Dog and Hong/Rose are back in Sài Gòn, and it is two in the morning on a hot summer night. The boy is awakened by music and voices and decides to step outside the hotel to see what the commotion is about. Walking past the alley, he is suddenly blinded by “colors, garments, limbs, the glint of jewelry and sequins” (Vuong 2019, 317). There are vendors, food, people. To the sleepy Little Dog, this impromptu street party looks like a sort of fever dream. Someone set up a “makeshift stage” (Vuong 2019, 318); women are dancing and singing karaoke. Upon hearing Vietnamese lyrics, four words suddenly flash into Little Dog’s mind: “[y]ou’re **already Vietnamese**” (Vuong 2019, 318, in bold type in the text). It is a reminiscence of something that Hong/Rose used to tell him back in Hartford: “Remember,’ you said each morning before we stepped out in cold Connecticut air, ‘don’t draw attention to yourself. You’re already Vietnamese’” (Vuong 2019, 312).<sup>7</sup> In this case, however, the phrase takes on a different meaning. In hearing Vietnamese pop music from the 1980s, Little Dog is reminded of his ‘*Việt Kiều*’ condition. Even though he did not grow up in this country, he still thinks he can

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<sup>7</sup> Vuong repeated this line verbatim, further elaborating on the concept during a 2019 interview with PBS’ *Amanpour*. As a person of color, “your goal is to be invisible,” he said to Michel Martin. “That’s very strange for a mother to tell a child: ‘disappear.’ ... What I realized is that they were trying to protect me” (Amanpour 2019).

understand its codes. Approaching the party, he recognizes the language, the food, and the music. Yet, he still senses that something is wrong. The party is limited to a single city block: just outside of its edges, Sài Gòn's roads are empty and silent as they usually are at such an hour.

“In the ground, Lan is **already Vietnamese**” (Vuong 2019, 318, in bold type in the text), Little Dog says to himself. In the Saigonese episode, Hong/Rose's old advice is doubly reframed, as the adverb “already” assumes two different meanings. Here, “already Vietnamese” signifies the completion of Lan's reverse exodus, as her ashes now are *physically* one with her native land. Little Dog's reverse exodus, however, is another issue. He approaches the stage and takes a look at the dancers. Suddenly, he realizes that, until that very moment, he had not really understood what he was seeing:

It was only when I came close enough to see their features, the jugged and heavy jawlines, the low forward brows, did I realize the singers were in drag. Their sequined outfits of varying cuts and primary colors sparkled so intensely it seemed they were donning the very reduction of stars. ... To the right of the stage were four people with their backs to everyone else. ... They stared at something on a long plastic table in front of them, their head so low they looked decapitated. ... I stepped closer, and that's when I saw on the table, impossibly still, the distinct form of a body covered in a white sheet. By now all four mourners were openly weeping while, on stage, the singer's falsetto cut through their racked sobs .... (Vuong 2019, 318-20)

Little Dog's shock mirrors the perplexities of the Gò Công's kids from the first episode of the diptych. He believed he was crashing a party, when in fact he was stumbling into a funeral. Albeit being “already Vietnamese,” until that night Little Dog had not yet possessed the cultural and social codes of the event he was witnessing. At the time of the narration, he is finally able to understand them:

Later, I would learn that this was a common scene on a Saigon night. City coroners, underfunded, don't always work around the clock. When someone dies in the middle of the night, they get trapped in a municipal limbo where the corpse remains inside its death. As a response, a grassroots movement was formed as a communal salve. Neighbors, having learned of a sudden death, would, in under an hour, pool money and hire a troupe of drag performers for what was called “delaying sadness.”



In Saigon, the sound of music and children playing this late in the night is a sign of death—or rather, a sign of a community attempting to heal.

It's through the drag performers' explosive outfits and gestures, their overdrawn faces and voices, their tabooed trespass of gender, that this relief, through extravagant spectacle, is manifest. ... [T]he drag queens are, for as long as the dead lie in the open, *an othered performance*. Their presumed, reliable fraudulence is what makes their presence, to the mourners, necessary. Because grief, at its worst, is unreal. And it calls for a surreal response. The queens—in this way—are unicorns.

Unicorns stamping in a graveyard. (Vuong 2019, 320-22; author's emphasis)

In these passages, Little Dog's writing style is almost journalistic. Having detached himself from the phenomenon, he is now able to see it from the outside and draw conclusions. Until he got close to the stage, he believed he was seeing just some girls singing at a party. Then, he realized he was seeing a crew of drag queens paid to mourn an untimely death. In a single instant, his whole perception had completely shifted. This epiphany allows him to encapsulate the phenomenon into his interpretive codes: namely, his Western and queer perspectives. Now, he can draw parallels. He considers how different cultural codes are equally effective when it comes to coping with grief. The reaction differs, but the underlying causes are the same. Little Dog understands that in both cases the grief has to be *performed*. Whereas he was holding a laptop in front of a piece of stone, the queens are filling the night's silence with falsettos. Whereas Paul needed to confess his sins to an old picture via a Skype call, to "delay sadness" the four mourners need the "surreal response" of having sequined dancers and laughing children in the vicinity of a corpse. Both Little Dog's laptop-placing and the queens' karaoke are *performative acts*, practices that make sense only if the 'public' and the performer share the same set of cultural codes. In both episodes of the diptych, this is not the case. In the first, the Gò Công kids did not understand what Little Dog was doing. In the second, Little Dog, in order to fully grasp the meaning of what he had witnessed, had to do research afterward. Little Dog's dual role of performer/public allows him to overcome his own fore-structures. As a cross-cultural subject, the *Việt Kiều* is perpetually in the midst of opposing interpretative frameworks: with *On Earth's*

funerals diptych, Vuong shows how such awareness can come at them at any moment, even during a Skype call or a nighttime walk.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, Ocean Vuong's take on the reverse exodus trope differs significantly from Lan Cao's and Aimee Phan's. As for the form, the double episode is presented in a way that is consistent with *On Earth's* scattered narrative structure: the episodes are intermingled with suggestions and calls to other passages of the novel. *On Earth's* reverse exodus is framed as a pair of complementary scenes loosely connected to the textual whole, rather than as a narrative turning point—as in Cao and Phan's novels. But the political connotation of *On Earth's* reverse exodus is where the novel really differs. In fact, Vuong manages to represent the *Việt Kiều* condition without having to dissect it. He wrote what to an extent, for his admission, is an autobiographical story. However, as for the matter of the reverse exodus, he offered no context. On the surface, *On Earth's* reverse exodus is not connoted as an exodus at all. As far as we know, this could be a sought-after home(land)coming or a routine trip, indifferently. There are no political undertones in his depiction: Vuong describes the alienation of returning overseas Vietnamese without necessarily dwelling on their *alien nationalism*. His description of Sài Gòn is notably devoid of red flags and Communist billboards: for him, there is no paradise lost, no idealized happy past to retrieve. War and refugee politics are embedded in the fabric of *On Earth*, but there is no *before* nor *after* them: in all simplicity, they are what Little Dog is made of. As he writes to Hong/Rose: “Ma, to speak

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, the final part of *On Earth's* reverse exodus is marked by an illusory overlap between the two funerals, that ideally reconnects the two halves of the diptych:

In that street, beside the lifeless person who was somehow more animated in stillness than the living, the perpetual stench of sewage and runoff that lined the gutters, my vision blurred, the colors pooled under my lids. Passersby offered sympathetic nods, thinking I was part of the family. As I rubbed my face, a middle-aged man gripped my neck, the way Vietnamese fathers or uncles often do when trying to pour their strength into you. “You’ll see her again. Hey, hey,” his voice croaked and stung with alcohol, “you gonna see her.” He slapped the back of my neck. “Don’t cry. Don’t cry.” (Vuong 2019, 324)

It is revealed that the dead person mourned in the second funeral is in fact a woman. Little Dog's bewilderment is mistaken for grief, as passersby, assuming he is a relative, show him sympathy. A man even tries to console him. However, unbeknownst to him, he is in fact comforting Little Dog. Since the middle-aged Saigonese keeps using a female pronoun, he is unintentionally providing solace to the bereaved boy, who had just buried his grandmother. Symbolically, the two funerals of the diptych are now merged into one.

in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war” (Vuong 2019, 46). There is no way to overcome the war equation, at least in this world. The trauma is “woven into the genes,” passed on from generation to generation. It marks the body like a birthmark. But this does not prevent Little Dog from fantasizing about reincarnation, that is, about the possibility of overcoming it in the soul:

Maybe you’ll be a girl and maybe your name will be Rose again, and you’ll have a room full of books with parents who will read you bedtime stories in a country not touched by war. Maybe then, in that life and in this future, you’ll find this book and you’ll know what happened to us. And you’ll remember me. Maybe. (Vuong 2019, 341)

Nor this does prevent him to ultimately overcome it by inverting its premises. If the passing is inevitable, it may well be even a positive thing:

Yes, there was a war. Yes, we came from its epicenter. In that war, a woman gifted herself a new name—Lan—in that naming, claimed herself beautiful, then made that beauty into something worth keeping. From that, a daughter was born, and from that daughter, a son.

All this time I told myself we were born from war—but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty.

Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence—but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it. (Vuong 2019, 329)

This is Little Dog’s “im/possible reconciliation” (Wang 2013, 181). He recognizes that, because of his lineage, he is indeed made of war: but along with the pain, he inherited the strength to cope with it. Along with Lan’s trauma, he inherited her stories and her songs. Along with the war, he inherited Vietnam.

## CONCLUSION

*i know the promised land is a paradise but i still long for egypt/ i have found my oasis  
and still long for the desert/ sometimes after i eat, i am so full/ yet i ache for the  
hunger//*

(Kimberly Nguyen, “reverse exodus,” 2019)

The trope of the reverse exodus is still a constant presence in diasporic Vietnamese literature.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the three occurrences that we have examined in this article, there are still several other instances that could be listed. In Vietnamese American literature alone, the trope has recently made its appearance in seminal works such as Viet Thanh Nguyen's short story collection *The Refugees* (2017), or Thi Bui's graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do* (2017).<sup>10</sup> This constant series of occurrences goes to show how the theme of the return is still at the center of Vietnamese American collective imagination. Even now, thirty-five years into Đổi Mới and after decades of legal border crossing.

We have seen how, for diasporic Vietnamese, to return often means to reconcile: reconcile the perception with memories; reconcile the memories with places; reconcile the places with tales you grew up with. But the situation is further complicated when it comes to political reconciliation. Whereas returning American war veterans often feel welcomed and embraced by their former enemies, and the United States has long exorcized the ghost of defeat, the same cannot be said of the exiled South Vietnamese. "Mainstream narratives about postwar reconciliation read like morality tales, with the Vietnamese refugees depicted as petty, vindictive simpletons who should learn to forgive their enemies, as America and Vietnam had evidently done" (Nguyen 2017, 121). In the last episode of Ken Burns and Lynn Novick' 2017 documentary *The Vietnam War*, returning American veteran Mike Heaney asserts that such a reconciliation is possible: "you don't get closure, but you get some peace." For former refugees, however, both closure and peace can still seem impossibly elusive. As the real losers of the war, they do not possess "the luxury of historical amnesia" (Nguyen 2010, 145). Many of them

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<sup>9</sup> The trope is also present in cinema. A recent occurrence of it can be found in H. Khaou's *Monsoon* (2019).

<sup>10</sup> Nguyen's short story "Fatherland" is a prominent example of how the trope can be used skillfully by someone who has studied and mastered its mechanism. As we have seen, in his *Nothing Ever Dies* Viet Thanh Nguyen had already analyzed the theme of return in Vietnamese American literature. Moreover, Nguyen has recently announced that he is working on a memoir. For these reasons, I intend to return to the subject in the near future in order to give this matter the proper attention it deserves.

never wanted to go back. Some returned “only in their mind” (Lam 2005, 115). Others went back but returned with a markedly changed perspective, like Viet Thanh Nguyen’s father, who after his last visit simply told him: “[w]e are Americans now” (Nguyen 2017b). The reverse exodus trope embraces all of these perspectives and more. It can retell a real-life return or an imaginary one. It can shed critical light on the diaspora, on America, or on the homeland. It can argue for reconciliation, or dismiss the very possibility of mending fences. It can show how time changes everything, or show you the things that not even time can change. Finally, the reverse exodus trope demonstrates how, sometimes, the only closure one might get is the certainty that no real closure is ultimately possible. This apparently hopeless paradox is in fact fertile ground for narratives and points of discussion. We have seen how many of these narratives have already been written. There is no reason to doubt that many others will make their appearance in the near future.

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