

## History Interrupted

### *The Death of South Vietnam and Refugee Hauntings*

In a 1977 poem, Du Tử Lê, a well-known Vietnamese-language poet, writes of the refugee entanglement in the life and death of self and nation: “When I die please take me out to sea / On the way there remember to sing the national anthem / No one sings it any longer / (The song is now like a ghost).”<sup>1</sup> If the Fanonian colonized must win their sovereignty in the anticolonial nation, as discussed in the last chapter, and nation requires the writing of its life history both backward and forward, as Benedict Anderson argues,<sup>2</sup> then what happens to modes of imagining subjecthood when the postcolonial nation is foreclosed, its life ended? This question becomes more pressing as the nation-state becomes the form of “sovereignty more jealous and absolute than anything known before,” according to Karl Polanyi,<sup>3</sup> institutionalized across the globe since World War II. If refugee is assumed to acquire sovereignty in the new nation of settlement, what happens when such form of collective sovereignty forbids entrance through racist exclusion?

The First Indochina War began when France returned after World War II to reclaim its Indochinese colonies. What ensued was a war for independence lasting from 1946 to 1954, fought by nationalist and communist forces, many in a broader front known as the Việt Minh led by the Communist Party. France’s defeat by Việt Minh forces at Điện Biên Phủ led to settlements at the 1954 Geneva Accords, which partitioned Vietnam into North and South, understood to be temporary until general elections could take place to decide the new nation’s fate.<sup>4</sup> The North retained the name of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party (which at the time went by the name of Đảng Lao Động or Workers’ Party). The Republic of Vietnam, situated geographically

south of the 17th parallel, was both a postcolonial state, in its continued economic and military dependence on old and new colonial masters, and one that was also built on the ideology of anticolonial nationalism, a condition less contradictory than it may sound. This phenomenon is only difficult to fathom for us who are Cold War inheritors susceptible to the kind of Manichean imagining that places the Republic of Vietnam and its citizens who have not joined the NLF in the category of *bù nhìn* or puppets to American imperialism and capitalism. American Cold War imperialism seems to permit a convenient acceptance that those existing in its shadow lack the complexity assigned to full humans, however constrained the circumstances.

Duy Lap Nguyen goes so far as to argue that the war between North and South Vietnam was one between two competing versions of anticolonial communism, quoting Ngô Đình Nhu, President Ngô Đình Diệm's brother and chief strategist, as stating that the Republic was about fighting both "the guerillas and imperialism," and "combatting communism in order to put an end to materialistic capitalism."<sup>5</sup> This ideological vision was carried by the state-sponsored *Cần Lao Nhân Vị Cách Mạng Đảng* (Personalist Labor Revolutionary Party) under Diệm's First Republic, seen by its many domestic critics as brutally repressive in its leaning towards the state socialist model in fascism. After tumultuous coups by South Vietnamese forces with American support that unseated the Ngô brothers, followed by other less enduring governing coalitions, President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's Second Republic retreated from such grand visions but retained a more pragmatic pursuit of wealth redistribution, especially in the extensive land reform campaigns mentioned in the last chapter. At the very least, South Vietnam flourished and floundered in the conflicts and complexities presented by diverse groups and factions that operated politically from that location. The South's early refusal to hold general elections in 1956 to decide the fate of the entire country and American involvement resulted in the North's decision to pursue a war of national liberation and unification. The eventual victory by the North over the South in 1975 ended the latter's history, depriving its citizens, including those who would become refugees, of access to sovereignty through a nation of their own, the implications of which are addressed in this chapter and the next. And as the United States fought these hot wars in the name of promoting the principle of national self-determination, its engagement delivered racialized allies abroad and later racialized refugees at home faced with racist exclusions from the domain of the human.

I am interested in refugees' self-bearing of history to write themselves into futures across this violent end of nation and sovereignty by reading for how Vietnamese-language refugee writers address modes of being in the American context. Not enough attention has been paid to refugee Vietnamese-language writing under the assumption that it would correspond to exilic literature in the first years of settlement, and that this literature would be too nostalgic and

parochial to contend with fundamental formations in the ethics and politics of race and time in the country of settlement or the world at large. Such assumption corresponds with the expectation that refugee is a transitory state of being that would give way to either assimilation into the dominant society and language, or true contestation from a second generation cognizant of their stake in the new country. Yet, Vietnamese-language refugee literature is not so easily dismissed in volume, reach, scope, or thematic content. In the 1980s and '90s, at least two dozen publishing houses and roughly six hundred Vietnamese-language periodicals with a few dozen specializing in literature served the refugee diasporas worldwide. By the 1990s, these vibrant refugee literary activities had generated a Vietnamese-language forum in which critics and writers in Vietnam could participate, constituting an intellectual and artistic public sphere that encompassed Vietnam and the global diaspora.<sup>6</sup> Not confined within the borders and concerns of one nation-state, this body of writing in Vietnamese spans at least four decades, and confronts some of the most fundamental questions of politics and ethics across an end of the world for these refugees, a condition that in this moment afflicts us all. Such refugee fiction explores an ethics that guards against the assimilation of others into the self, which undergoes the decimation of its world.

I begin with a reading of a South Vietnamese story that portends the death of South Vietnam to pose questions of genealogy and explore how we might be able to read across that historical rupture through a discussion of ghostly elements anchored in material objects. In the decades since the 1980s, writing that reinvested the material with the ghostly, resulting in a destabilized ontological status of the human self, became a major mode of literary expression in Vietnamese refugee communities. I suggest that such refugee mode of writing, which includes spectral and occult elements, can be read in continuity with South Vietnamese works that intimate the fall of the Republic. Refugees had to live on without recourse to humanist recuperation through the sovereign anticolonial nation because of the American military occupation of the South and later its defeat by the North. Nor would they have recourse to American sovereignty, due to racist exclusion. The last chapter begs us to look not at but from the threshold of the catastrophe. This chapter asks us to read stories by authors who write across the catastrophe that ended their nation and their world. A reading attentive to the feminine and queer as haunted sites of chrono-normativity allows us to see the alternative anchoring of the violently fractured self in refugee time. This body of fiction shows how the feminine and the queer have been subsumed and suppressed under imaginings of the hetero-masculinist anticolonial nation that, for its humanist deliverance, engaged in organized violence against not just colonial masters but its own subjects. The apparitions at the site of the feminine and the queer gesture to temporal modes of being and becoming alternative to national liberation and racism dominant in expressions of humanist sovereignty. If the previous chapters propose epistemologies that are open to the poetic, the allegorical, the iterant as responses

to humanist interdiction in economy and politics, this chapter explores ontologies of the human that would be open to haunted futures.

#### GENEALOGY ACROSS HISTORICAL RUPTURE

At the end of Nguyễn Mạnh Côn's story "Lời Nguyện Trong Không" (Prayers in the Void), the narrator's sister informs him: "My husband thinks the scenario willed by one essence spirit can be communicated to the void which then manufactures that scenario in reality."<sup>7</sup> The sister has obeyed her brother's instructions for rituals involving her handkerchief and some old coins that would allow her to enter her own dream about her paratrooper husband's death in order to alter the outcome. The story was published in the literary magazine *Văn Chính* in Saigon 1972 and selected in 1973 for inclusion in a collection of *Our Country's Best Short Stories* in the period from 1954–73, basically the duration of the Republic of Vietnam before its defeat by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam two years later. Considered serious literature, this story untypically engages with the occult. At the time in South Vietnam, works on the occult and ghostly were often relegated to the domain of the genre of the ghost story—revenge by the wrongfully dead—and other fantasies of popular reading, most of which came in the form of the illustrated story sold to children, young women, and members of the working class. As an avid reader of this genre, my intention here is not to celebrate canonized works over "low-brow" literature. My purpose, rather, is to think through the appearance of the occult and ghostly where South Vietnamese readers might not expect to find them.

In contrast, various specters haunt a large portion of nongenre refugee works in Vietnamese that garnered attention from readers and critics alike, particularly from the late 1980s through at least the first decade of this century. Writing from France, Trần Vũ is the most insistent and celebrated practitioner of what has been popularly called magical realism. The very long list of refugee writers contributing to Vietnamese-language fiction who have made use of some alternative realist elements in their writing includes Mai Ninh, Lê thị Thẩm Vân, Hồ Minh Dũng, Thận Nhiên, Nam Dao, Đặng Thơ Thơ, Nguyễn Danh Bằng, among others.<sup>8</sup> While contending with this flourishing, literary critic Thụy Khuê for one complains that too many refugee writers wrongheadedly try to break with the past through the use of such modes as magical realism, which she hastily credits to pure imitation of the Latin American genre.<sup>9</sup> This seems to contradict the commonsensical assumption that much of refugee literature in Vietnamese is an extension of South Vietnamese literature because most writers from the Republic of Vietnam simply continued to write as they resettled in the United States and elsewhere. Refugee writers making use of these alternative realist modes mostly come from the 1.5 generation in the United States, those who left Vietnam when they were children, but we can also find these elements among some older refugee writers who had begun their writing careers in South Vietnam. If the prevalence of such alternative realist

modes of writing does not present an obvious and straightforward borrowing from a large body of similar literature in the Republic of Vietnam, is there a lineage to be drawn? If so, in what way? How should we read such elements—the occult, magic, ghosts, apparitions, and dreams existing side by side with material depictions—in South Vietnamese and refugee literature? What relationship could we draw when we juxtapose such nongenre works containing spectral elements from South Vietnam and the refugee diaspora?

#### MATERIALISM AND ITS GHOSTS

To explore these questions, I propose we pursue an updated materialist and historical reading of these texts. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff note the spectral, even occult, nature of post-Fordist global capitalism in heightened speculative practices accompanied by instantaneous transfer of intangible finance and currency markets, among other imagined commodities that require no material production, phenomena that took off since the 1970s.<sup>10</sup> At the height of this kind of magical realist fiction in the refugee diaspora some years before the financial collapse of 2007, the volume of finance capital exchange had already reached \$1.5 trillion per day, equivalent to the total world trade in four months; and in just the year 1997, derivatives were traded at a value of \$360 trillion, a dozen times the size of the entire global economy at the time.<sup>11</sup> Yet, Comaroff and Comaroff have also pointed out that the “(post)modern person is a subject made with objects.”<sup>12</sup> The objects, tangible enough to be consumed, must be consumed through a magic-like process to attach imagined meanings to them. Production itself becomes increasingly spatially scattered, detached, and hidden in the magical part of marketing and consumption. The unfathomable discrepancy in how much Nike pays its offshore workers in Vietnam and how much it pays its athlete celebrity endorsers in the United States goes to illustrate the monumental efforts by capital to obscure the materiality of production and ascribe to its products a phantom corporeality of, in this case, vicarious athleticism. Seeking an understanding of the connection between political economy and cultural forms, I am interested in the interplay between the presence and absence, the materiality and ghostliness of objects that constitute the modern subject in these modes of expression.

Haunting is not new to capitalism. Writing in 1867, Marx explains this spectral effect of the commodity fetish in his *Capital*. He observes a “mystical character of commodities” that “does not originate . . . in their use value.”<sup>13</sup> Instead, “the relation between men assumes” the “fantastical forms of a relation between things.”<sup>14</sup> Exchange had even then eclipsed the process of production hinged on labor. Marx writes, “The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour as long as they take the form of commodities, vanishes therefore, as soon as we come to other forms of production.”<sup>15</sup> While taking on the mantle of science with its rationality to organize the observable,

Marx's necromantic language betrays the uneasiness in his insistence on the truth of materiality and an ontology of presence in order to resurrect the "real" of labor relations. The ghost was already in the machine at the time of Marx's writing of *Capital*, as commodity exchange already occulted labor relations. The degree to which capitalist production and exchange have undergone two more levels of transcendence away from the "real" of labor relations, first Fordist and now post-Fordist, makes a materialist ontology even less adequate. First, Fordism had upped the stakes with unprecedented mass consumption, requiring the expansion of the commodity exchange relations that so haunted Marx. Then post-Fordism untethered currency from the gold standard, untied the growth of financial and currency markets from the now geographically scattered production process. South Vietnamese and refugee writings about hauntings can be situated in the traces of the material and immaterial in that moment. Reworking the material in the ghostly also enables an ethics that perhaps can circumvent an ontology that, because of its insistence on exorcising the traces of aberration within itself to reassert materialist presence as a mode of knowing, has either been translated into violent suppression of unorthodox thinking and being in actual socialist revolutions, or has had a hard time keeping its epistemological foothold in our world of postness. A historical reading of haunted writing reconsiders the rational epistemology underlying materialism, yet does not dismiss its concerns. Let me now historically situate the magical realism that refugee writers have been accused of imitating.

Perhaps the first round of explicit theorization of magical realist aesthetics was Franz Roh's 1925 call for a return to tangible objects in an altered realism away from Expressionism in painting.<sup>16</sup> It should make us take notice that this call happened during the Fordist moment, exemplified by the mass-production and consumption under the reign of the Model-T. Attention to the current deployment of magical realism at our post-Fordist moment refocuses our attention on modes of imagining and representing materially tangible objects that anchor subjectivity in new elements of the ghostly, magical, and occult, as economy and history entwine. This approach breaks down the Marxist, albeit dialectical, dichotomy of base and superstructure, focusing instead on the material as both present and absent. This allows us to read these texts in a new light, one that takes into account not only political economy as context, but also heightens our sensitivity to the haunting of history where past events and people exist in the present as traces, and cannot be fully assimilated into the present any more than they can be materially resurrected or understood in empiricist terms.

Although attention to objects irreducible to their materiality coincided with the historical rise and expansion of the commodity and speculative economy, a focus on objects also has the ability to decenter the humanist subject as master of knowledge. Advocating an alternative realism based on the relative autonomy of objects where "the relation between these is on the same ontological footing as any human-world relation," Graham Harman argues against making "human

experience the homeland of all relations.”<sup>17</sup> This centering of objects runs counter to Marx’s attempt to drag their commodity value back to materialist relations between men. Treated in this way, objects give off a magical realist effect, which in turn pushes our understanding of reality into the aporetic, recreating the real at “the limit events that resist representation” as “an immediate, felt reality,” as Eugene Arva argues.<sup>18</sup> This has two interrelated implications here. First, the irreducibility of objects to humanist relations allows me to entertain the potentiality of the unhuman when paths to becoming human are foreclosed. Writing about Yann Martel’s *The Life of Pi*, Eva Aldea contemplates how becoming “non-human in magical realism thus implies a becoming-imperceptible not only between the human and non-human, but between the real and the magic, the true and the false.”<sup>19</sup> And second, if as Sylvia Wynter tells us, the master code of the human since the Enlightenment has been cast in terms of rationality in colonial racialization, refusal of a rational empiricist epistemology also refuses the criterion used to render racial others subject to chattel slavery and colonization. It is perhaps because of its ability to disrupt the rational epistemology accompanying Western hegemony by affirming the simultaneity of mutually exclusive realities and histories that magical realism as a mode of visual and literary expression has often been celebrated in postcolonial studies, and its authors often situate themselves in relation to the postcolonial Third World.

The challenge to rational epistemology from the postcolony and racialized others seems relevant today as reason continues to mark whiteness. In a 2019 speech at the National Conservatism Conference in Washington, DC, Amy Wax, a law professor and intellectual voice of the affluent variety of anti-immigrant white supremacy behind Trump, proclaimed, “We are better off if our country is dominated” by “people from the first world, from the West, than by people from countries that had failed to advance.”<sup>20</sup> By the former, Wax means people who “hang out” in “nice, quasi-European, decorous, neat, clean, quiet, litter-free, beautifully maintained, orderly places.”<sup>21</sup> And by the latter, she means those from “shithole countries,”<sup>22</sup> her example being Malaysia, where supposedly there is “no science, no technology,” a condition Wax considers “very closely related to the lack of commitment to empiricism, the lack of a cultural practice of attention to evidence, rigor, analysis, facts.”<sup>23</sup> Never mind the farce as white nationalists sink ever deeper into QAnon conspiracies and spurn science as a model of rational thinking during a pandemic.

Given such a white supremacist claim to empiricist reason, it should be noted that magical realist and similar modes of haunted writing do not turn away from observable conditions. They just manifest these conditions differently. In addition to dealing with the onslaught of spectral capitalism, the writing of ghostly things offers a decentralization of the master code of the human connected to the fetishization of reason as the domain of whiteness, in relation to which refugees have been racialized in the United States and elsewhere in the West. It is for these

potential counter-knowledges that Yến Lê Espiritu calls refugees “tellers of ghost stories,” and for us to “follow these ghosts.”<sup>24</sup>

That the academy pays attention to these ghostly matters, of course, is indebted to Avery Gordon, who opened a new path of sociological inquiry with “a method of knowledge production and a way of writing that could represent the damage and the haunting of the historical alternatives and thus richly conjure, describe, narrate, and explain the liens, the costs, the forfeits, and the losses of modern systems of abusive power in their immediacy and world significance.”<sup>25</sup> Lawrence-Minh Bùi Davis cautions against this turn to haunting in critical theory as suppressing alternative knowledges in literal depictions of the supernatural in favor of metaphorical constructions in literary and sociological hauntings.<sup>26</sup> Similar warnings have been sounded before in Vietnamese writings in contexts of colonialism and modernity. Hồ Hữu Tường, an eclectic and irreverent thinker in that peculiar tradition of intellectuals from twentieth-century southern Vietnam, also worried about how to read stories that do not conform to a rational intelligibility. Introducing a collection of tales gathered from 1948 to 1955 during the Vietnamese anticolonial war, he writes: “My goal is to give thanks to my teachers who taught me to write in a country bumkin, superstitious, witty, humorous, satirical way—a specialty of peasants from the Mekong delta at the beginning of this 20th century.”<sup>27</sup> Tường, who began his search in Marxism for a viable social theory that would deliver Vietnam from colonialism and poverty, dismisses rationalist objections to the occult story in a dialogue he sets up about a prisoner telling a tale of ghosts and demonic tigers to his fellow inmates. One listener objects: “You are a materialist and you believe in such a superstitious tale?” Another responds: “There ain’t no idealism or materialism in the fabulous tale.”<sup>28</sup> In the South Vietnamese story I read in this chapter, its author does make a competing claim to Western epistemology at a time when the Republic of Vietnam verged on defeat, its modernist hopes dashed. I do worry that by reading that story as a manifestation of its historical context, I might have subjected it to a Western rational epistemology. But does a ghost really stop being literal when we read for its social connections, a move that might feel metaphorical? As a reader, I cannot help reading for both the literal and the metaphorical. Perhaps ghosts are instantiations of something we must hold simultaneously in multiple epistemological categories and traditions.

The texts selected here exemplify the ghostly or occult elements in Vietnamese-language refugee writing from the late 1980s on. I trace the contrasts and the echoes of gendered and racialized memory in the treatment of material objects and their specters in stories by South Vietnamese refugees in the United States: Hồ Minh Dũng’s “Người Ăn Mày Trên Phố Bolsa” (The Beggar on Bolsa Street),<sup>29</sup> Nguyễn Danh Bằng’s “Phòng Lạ” (Strange Room),<sup>30</sup> and Đặng Thơ Thơ’s “Mở Tương Lai” (Open the Future).<sup>31</sup> I read these in relation to a story by an earlier North Vietnamese refugee to South Vietnam, Nguyễn Mạnh Côn’s “Lời Nguyễn Trong Không” (Prayers in the Void).

I stay with Vietnamese as the language of writing for two main reasons. One reason is to resist the overwhelming primacy of English in national and global contexts. In this national context, what counts as American literature is often limited to English. Vietnamese-language refugee writing too often gets dismissed as the site where the predictable “wrath and anger toward both the old and new lands tear through the literature.”<sup>32</sup> Such characterization can feed the assimilationist relegation of Vietnamese-speaking refugees to “fleeting marginalia.”<sup>33</sup> Timothy August places hope in a new generation of Southeast Asian writers/activists who are “producing a body of literature that both invites and critiques dominant culture, elongating the temporality of the refugee condition so that the past is not simply left behind when political designations are removed.”<sup>34</sup> From and for communities across geographical distances, Vietnamese-language refugee authors write beyond literary markets that demand they perform identity and authenticity in colonial languages. They write to critique belonging and sovereignty, search for alternative ways of being, and otherwise address many of the things ascribed to the English-language refugee writers. To dismiss this body of literature as ephemeral when all things are ephemeral is to miss what it has to offer. In the global context, Vietnamese-language authors write at the periphery of the English- and French-speaking worlds, in which what they write become accessible to most Western scholars only through translation. I am not making the case for the primacy of the original language of a literary work over its translation. But English has become the primary marker of relevance to the point where writers in Vietnam feel compelled to have their works translated into it. There is now a commercially successful trend in Vietnam to publish and sell English translations of original Vietnamese-language works to a Vietnamese-speaking readership.<sup>35</sup>

The other reason I want to focus here on Vietnamese-language works is to explore the intense echoes, redeployments, and contestations that bounce off different parts of a literature in one language, more so than across writings by Vietnamese diasporic authors in different languages because of simple linguistic access and/or the varying pressures in national and global literary reception placing different burdens of representation on minoritized or “Third World” writers writing in colonial languages like English or French. Because of the popularity of the concept of bilinguality and hybridity in postcolonial and transnational studies of the 1990s,<sup>36</sup> literature in one language has been prematurely dismissed as monolingual.<sup>37</sup> While acknowledging the importance of critiques against monolingualism in nationalist projects, Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us that no language is not already plural by virtue of colonial histories, and that investigations of “deep monolingual traditions” do not “entail any assumption of purity of languages.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the redeployments, contestations, and commingling of refugee and Vietnamese literature reveal the multilocal and complex relationship across national and historical divides of war and migration between a literature in Vietnam with legacies of Vietnamese settler colonialism followed by Western

imperialism and a refugee literature with its incorporation of English or French modes of expression in settler, colonial, and immigrant linguistic legacies.

The texts examined here contain hauntings anchored in objects. When read simultaneously in rational and alternative epistemologies, these South Vietnamese and refugee works yield ghostly traces of (1) the material in the process of commodity fetishization within history; and (2) people harmed or killed in political and economic violence and elided in symbolization. These two processes are conceptual parallels that inform one another. In the case of the texts examined here, the two processes intersect as their authors reflect, negotiate, or contest both their history and the economic forms of their world. I argue here that these texts do this by drawing on the feminine and queer in occult ways to create alternative relations to economy and history. Narrators and characters seek to circumvent a sovereignty foreclosed by the death of a postcolonial nation. Feminists have drawn our attention to the long history of masculinist deployments of the feminine as a sign of the other to symbolize nations, places, histories, which then can be appropriated in commodity representations of the self.<sup>39</sup> For the stories at hand, the feminine other becomes the site of history's haunting, and queer sociality can alter historiographic time in our understanding of events.

If we could connect the literature of South Vietnam to refugee literature, it would not be the resettlement abroad of writers from the South or even stylistic continuity across generations, but the haunted deployments and redeployments of self and history exemplified by these texts. I make the case that the death of the South becomes the catastrophic horizon from which emerge the hauntings in the South Vietnamese and refugee texts examined here. What this haunted writing offers are alternative temporalities and modes of existence therein as South Vietnamese and refugees confront the end of their nation and racist exclusion in their place of refuge.

#### THE FEMININE OCCULT AND A DEATH FORETOLD

In Nguyễn Mạnh Côn's 1972 story set during the Second Republic in South Vietnam, the unnamed male narrator recounts the story of his beautiful sister, Duyên. Duyên, like her narrator brother, was a fighter in the guerrilla base during an unspecified earlier phase of the war, which in this story seems to stretch seamlessly from the anticolonial war of 1946–54, alternatively called the First Indochina War, to the later war that ended in 1975, one variously called a war between the two states of the Democratic Republic in the North and the Republic in the South, a civil war between North and South, a war of unification and liberation from American imperialism by communist forces, a war against communist aggression, the Vietnam War, or the Second Indochina War. The proliferation of names for that war signals the complications of what it meant for those involved. One day, when she was still a Resistance fighter, Duyên captured a Republican paratrooper

and fell in love with her captive. To escape from the Resistance-controlled area to the Republican government-held territory with her lover, she demanded her brother's assistance in the name of love—her brother's familial love for her and her love for her lover, who would become her husband. The brother narrator provided Duyệt's lover with the brother's own papers and his identity as a guerrilla leader. The Republican lover passed through Resistance-held territory disguised as Duyệt's brother. The brother narrates this entire passage using the first-person pronoun to refer to his sister's future husband. The narrator signals this doubling of the self in a rather straightforward way: "She introduces herself [to the guerrillas] as my female secretary—'my' here means her husband's. . . ."40 This doubling of the self acts as a bifurcation of the subject position of the narrator, to which we shall return.

His sister's history as a guerrilla fighter, the narrator tells us, goes to show that she "is not the type of person who would shrink from the sight of a gun."<sup>41</sup> And her modern (Western) education has made her skeptical of the occult world. Yet, Duyệt again goes to her brother for help to save her husband's life, years after the successful passage out of the guerrilla base, a stunt that got the brother arrested by his comrades-in-arms and necessitated his rescue by Republican government forces. Now that they have made their lives on the Republican side, Duyệt brings a dilemma that acts as a ghostly reiteration of the original rescue of her husband, in that she again asks her brother to intervene to change the course of events, only this time in her dream. She tells her brother that she has had a recurrent nightmare in which her husband jumps out of a plane, has his parachute ripped, and falls too fast towards the wrong landing site, where a broken tree branch impales his body. With each recurrence, the dream becomes more vivid in its visual and aural details. But her presence at the scene of her husband's death feels too immaterial for her to enact an intervention.

Duyệt's brother, similarly skeptical of the occult, interprets the dream to be the symptomatic anxieties of a soldier's wife, and decides to help his sister by tricking her into calmed nerves. He makes up a story about a black magician who sees all and works through amulets. The brother explains to Duyệt that the dreaming person differs from the dead in the duality of her spirit: *giác hồn* or conscious spirit, and *anh hồn*, or essential spirit. The former grounds her spirit in the sensate body, while the essential spirit travels and can communicate with other essential spirits in a space called the Void. Such communication is responsible for this kind of prescient dreaming. The brother then passes to Duyệt instructions by the black magician to find among things left by their parents three objects: Duyệt's own maiden handkerchief and two silver coins issued in colonial times. At 4:00 in the afternoon, a mute beggar will meet her to collect the objects and in exchange will give her two lead coins issued in 1960 imprinted with the head of deposed and assassinated president Ngô Đình Diệm of the First Republic.

What follows is narrated by Duyệt in a letter to her brother. Duyệt's voice takes over the narration of the climax in the story. After performing the above rituals to endow the objects with her desire to save her husband out of love, Duyệt sits down in prayer. She becomes her essential spirit and achieves a state of communion with other spirits in the Void. She feels at peace and is able to reenter her dream, in which she does save her husband by conjuring enough of a presence on site to alert him of impending danger. He hears her call and steers to avoid the awaiting fate. In his stead, his friend in the same unit meets his death, impaled through the neck. Others in his unit drown in the river. When the husband comes home and finds out about her dream intervention, he suggests the explanation that an alternative reality can be conjured up in the communion with other spirits in the Void. At the end of Duyệt's letter describing the reunion with her husband, we find the old silver colonial coins in her husband's combat boots and her maiden handkerchief in his breast pocket. To her brother's astonishment, the occult he has deployed as a fiction to calm her anxieties turns out to be much more potent, even if it does not change the impending fate of the South.

Duyệt is the only character fully named besides two military figures who had been historical contemporaries: Mã Chiếm Sơn, the first Chinese general to lead a resistance against the Japanese in 1938; and Charles de Gaulle, the nationalist liberator of France from Nazi Germany. The brother has made up the black magician's story as the son of General Mã, evoking nationalism in the Vietnamese cultural lineage in the East. Juxtaposed to Mã, de Gaulle from the West appears in the brother's story as the beneficiary of Madame de Gaulle's premonition about her husband's death, from which he is spared to tell the tale that at the fateful moment, he hears his wife's voice in a manner rehearsing Duyệt's enactment. These two historical liberators of their respective nations orient the subject location of the Republican Vietnamese narrator along an East-West cultural axis.

Nguyễn Mạnh Côn was born in 1920, in what was then colonial Tonkin. Like the narrator, the author joined the anticolonial Resistance. He was stationed in the northern bases (Việt Bắc) until 1952, when he returned to French-controlled Hanoi to live as a writer and school teacher. He came south as a refugee in 1955 after the partitioning of the country. The narrator's crossing from the Resistance base to government-controlled territory parallels that of the author. Neither crossing is explained in political terms. In the case of the narrator, the explanation given is the persecution he experiences after allowing his sister to use his identity to get her future husband out of Resistance-controlled territory. The explanation of his acquiescence for love of his sister and her crossing for love of her husband acts as both a placeholder and the sign that obscures the politics of the decision to defect the cause of national liberation in revolution. In English, the exact definition of the concept of the occult is twofold: as a noun, it refers to supernatural phenomena; and as a verb, it is to conceal or cause to disappear from view. The Vietnamese

equivalent, *huyền bí*, similarly contains the supernatural as hidden from view. In contrast to his sister's experience with the supernatural, here we see the narrator's move, out of love for his sister, as an ideological act in that it conceals political relations. In a magical sleight of hand, a sign of cultural femininity—that is, the sister's love for her husband—comes into the placeholder that occults the political conflict from view.

This is why Duyên remains pivotal and the only named character. The narrator can only construct a position for himself as a masculine subject in the Republic of Vietnam through bifurcated subject positions based on sets of binaries embodied by a woman character because of the South's loss of access to the mantle of national liberation. The Democratic Republic in the North, as the inheritor of the Viet Minh victory over French forces at Điện Biên Phủ, doubled the stakes of liberation by starting a war of unification on southern soil. With the American-supported assassination of Ngô Đình Diệm in 1963 that opened the way for massive American military presence in South Vietnam, the young republic was pushed into the American camp given its warfooting with the North in a Cold War geopolitical chessboard. Liberatory credibility could only remain in the southern past, a source the First Republic could not tap because of its persecution of a wide range of formerly southern anticolonial forces in order to centralize control through a significant reliance on anticommunists from northern Vietnam who came south during the partition. Leftists like the Trotskyists and anarchists, nationalists like the Đại Việt, militarized rebels like the Bình Xuyên, and armed politico-religious sects like the Hoà Hảo and Cao Đài had constituted the most important forces in the southern anti-French Resistance, a situation that prompted the Vietnamese Communist Party to pursue its systematic slaughter in a struggle for power.<sup>42</sup> Co-opting this past and depicting Americans and South Vietnamese under the Republic as foreign invaders and their puppets allowed the North to monopolize national liberation as the source of legitimacy in the anti-American war.

The narrator remains unnamed throughout the story. He is addressed by Duyên in her pivotal letter as "my dear brother."<sup>43</sup> In the long passage describing Duyên's and her future husband's escape from Resistance territory, the narrator, still a guerrilla leader in the resistance, is merged with Duyên's future Republican husband through the curious use of the pronoun "I" by the brother narrator to refer to the husband. This passage is the process of the narrator's coming into the new subject position within the Republican South, one struggling with the question of nationalist and therefore the humanist formulation of sovereignty. The narrator's sovereignty is ambivalent during the passage of this bifurcated subject from his Resistance past to his Republican future.

Since the husband's masculine position of Republican soldier can no longer draw on its usual construction of proprietary nationalism for its expression of sovereignty, it must again occupy another bifurcation, that between the masculine

narrator and his sister as the embodiment of feminine love. The narrator is careful to signal how they overlap: the sister also starts out as a guerrilla fighter partaking in the masculine activity of claiming the nation for Vietnamese sovereignty; and the brother also acts out of love, love for his sister that renders his doubling as her husband in an almost incestuous union with the self. Her love for her husband in the end astonishes the brother in its power to exceed his rationalist way of being in the world. Duyệt is his double, but with excess.

This excess of the feminine, like the excess in objects of the commodity fetish, is the site of the occult grounded in tangible objects. The handkerchief and the coins ground this excess and allow the occult elements to come forth. While the handkerchief grounds her spectral girlhood, the coins ground a whole economy of exchange between the past colony with its anticolonial legacy and the present violence of a civil war. In exchange for the silver coins of 1927 and 1931, the mute beggar gives Duyệt the 1960 lead coins with the disembodied head of the soon-to-be dead and deposed president Diệm. For North Vietnam, 1960 marked the official start of the war against South Vietnam with the election of Lê Duẩn, who championed that war, to the position of first secretary of the Communist Party, even though there had been no real cessation of activities in the southern bases between the First and Second Indochina Wars. The currency devalues from silver to lead, corresponding to the devaluation of the political currency of nationalist legitimacy. During the Vietnam War at the time of the setting and writing of the story, the United States issued the military “red dollar” for its soldiers to spend in South Vietnam, avoiding the circulation of that cash back into the dollar economy proper with potential inflationary effects. This government-issued currency became the cheaper red double of the green dollar, itself on the verge of going off the gold standard in 1973. The currency in the South during the war was undergoing economic devaluation at the same time as the South was undergoing devaluation of the symbolic political currency, accompanied by the escalation of devastating violence perpetrated by all sides on the bodies of civilians and soldiers. In all this devaluation, the feminine excess is carried by the ritual objects and ultimately anchored by Duyệt. She herself becomes the material object to anchor the feminine occult. Through an occultist ritual, Duyệt as the occulted woman is able to save the husband whom she loves by adding value to his symbolic devaluation through turning the protective currency from lead back to silver. But she merely shifts the imminent loss. Another soldier must die in his place. By 1972, the salvation of South Vietnamese sovereignty was largely lost. As a girl growing up in South Vietnam, I still remember 1972 as the Summer of Fire with the returning coffins, sometimes carrying only bits of Republican soldiers attended to by wailing mothers in my neighborhood. My eldest sister’s paratrooper fiancé returned to her that summer in this way after he was blown up by North Vietnamese artillery fire during the battle for La Vang Cathedral in Quảng Trị.

The feminine occult embodied by Duyệt as the narrator's double allows yet another binary the narrator-subject can reach for to bolster his voided nationalist sovereignty: the East-West binary. Short of recourse to national liberation, the narrator makes a move to draw on Orientalism in a way that allows for a differentiated subject position within the West. The North and its National Liberation Front allies in the South negated Republican sovereignty under American occupation and subsumed the Republican subject under the sign of the West in their reference to Southern authorities as American puppets and fakes—*bù nhĩn* and *ngũy*. The narrator's Orientalist move allows for an imagined Republican rejection of the West, which during the Cold War meant the Western Bloc led by the United States. Resisting subsumption under the sign of the West, yet having no recourse to a position outside the West, the Republican narrator must carve out a differentiated position for himself under the opposing sign of the East in Vietnamese cultural lineage. Duyệt enacts this positioning for him when she rejects the brother's suggestion of a Western psychoanalytic treatment even as she demonstrates her Western-educated knowledge:

I know of this dream analyst who cured the psychotic or that dream analyst who thirty years ago found the source of one woman's disorder of frigidity. But they will not understand my dream, first because the field of psychoanalysis is still only researched by western doctors, when my soul, I know it differs from those of western women as sky from the abyss. Why? Because the western woman craves pleasures to be had from the husband, she therefore harbors a complex of dependency on the husband. She compensates for this dependence by demanding equal rights and fights for every advantage. The Vietnamese woman of course knows how to enjoy pleasures, but does not view such enjoyment as indispensable in life. So on the outside, the Vietnamese woman is dependent on the husband materially for daily living, but on the inside, she does not need the man so much. That's why I don't think the psychiatrist could treat me using psychological principles from Europe and America.<sup>44</sup>

This binary situates the Vietnamese character in the East as an opposing category to the West. The move allows for a distancing of the Republican subject from the America of the West, whose military presence in South Vietnam blocks the narrator's access to a masculinist position of nationalist sovereignty. In the story, the mortal dangers posed to the husband's unit of paratroopers come as a result of an American pilot's error of space-time calculation using American war technology. In Duyệt's recurring dream, she sees an American soldier standing aside at the plane's opening, ushering her husband and his soldiers to jump to their impending deaths. In contrast, the force that enables her to save her husband's life comes from a magician imagined as the progeny of Mã, the Chinese general with liberatory nationalist credentials. The discontinuity with its own liberatory nationalist past necessitates the circuitous repositioning of the Republican subject through bifurcation and binary displacement. The narrator performs this move

through the fetishization of the feminine, coded as the sister's love for her husband, the occultation of which prolongs the life of the masculine subject of the Republican South.

If the first reading reveals an ideological move to elide the underlying political conflict and the deployment of the feminine occult in the formation of the Republican masculine subject, a second reading reveals the Republican masculine subject cannot be saved after all. Commenting on this story at the occasion of its selection for the Best Stories collection, Nguyễn Mạnh Côn talks about spirituality and the unknowable. He points out that the story is about the surprising materialization and actualization of the narrator's original deception, a phenomenon both the narrator and the author attribute to a "woman's love for her soldier husband."<sup>45</sup> The brother-narrator relies on his sister's feminine occult in order to conjure a Republican subject position. Yet, it is this occult feminine as alternative to the rational epistemology of the West that also renders him superfluous. The sister saves her husband through the occult practices that deliver real effects beyond the fictional placebo the brother feeds her within rationalist thinking. The author's juxtapositioning of the occult as supernatural, inexplicable in a rationalist epistemology, and the occult as a sign necessary for the constitution of the masculine Republican subject places us in a position where we must read the occult both literally and metaphorically in the colonial history leading up to the approaching fall of the South.

As the occult Void in the title upends the brother-narrator's rationalist deployment of metaphor in binaries of East and West, femininity and masculinity, his salvaged presence is fragile in its refusal to be appropriated wholesale in political projects by either the American war effort or the government in the South. Nguyễn Mạnh Côn does not choose to have the soldier die by enemy hands, which might symbolically denounce the violence initiated by the North. Instead, the death of the Republican soldier results from the failings of the American war-making machine in the face of natural elements. The violation of the body, the very violence of war, happens as a piercing by a broken tree branch. That nationalist violence taken by the North to unify the nation is here naturalized and made impersonal by terrain itself with its tree branches that can impale and rivers that can drown. It is the Americans who mistake that space and time, going against the natural order of the terrestrial nation. The alignment of freedom and tyranny issued from American Cold War rhetoric is here rendered inaudible, invisible, and illegible in the unaltered symbolic economy of the nation. The husband's death is foretold by many dream iterations, and is aft-told by the death of his fellow soldier. It is as if the war, as the narrator sees it under the sign of the nation, has already been lost.<sup>46</sup> The Republican soldier is impaled through the neck, suspended between the dream rehearsals of his death and the collective death of his nation that appears already as an accomplished event. Unable to feel his bodily pain from the piercing, the dying soldier calls out the

name of every fellow soldier in his unit. Those present in the roll call have begun their absence. And it is only 1972.

#### THE FEMININE SUBLIME AND THE INTERDICTION OF HISTORY

If the occult in Nguyễn Mạnh Côn's story anticipates the voiding of the Republican masculine subject unsalvageable in the impending doom of South Vietnam, twenty-four years later, Hồ Minh Dũng in "The Beggar of Bolsa Street" conjures his posthumous presence sustained by hope in an American Dream. Bolsa is the main thoroughfare of a vanquished city's double in America—Little Saigon in California. Hồ Minh Dũng was born in Huế, the former imperial capital of pre-colonial Vietnam. He was a Republican soldier-writer until the defeat of South Vietnam in 1975. He, like the narrator in his story, was incarcerated in a reeducation camp under the label of *ngụy quân* (fake and illegitimate soldiers) by the victorious government of a now unified Vietnam. The narrator describes the hope that America held for inmates: "When we were still in the prison camp, in the later years, we lived by that hope, when our bodies gave out, our strength expired, we had been saved by that medicinal dose, faint though it might be."<sup>47</sup> America, no longer the occupying force, is projected as a merciful place and alternative reality anchored by objects of enlightened technology and prosperity: a "hallway in a free hospital packed with advanced computers that can cure all ills;" and "a supermarket, where we can eat anything for free as long as we do not pocket them."<sup>48</sup> These are object-enabled visions that promise to revive a dying body as the narrator asks, "A Vietnamese from years of destitute, with a hundred diseases in his internal organs like me, what more can I ask for?"<sup>49</sup>

The promise of material plenitude is imagined as part and parcel of the promise of freedom in America. And freedom, the narrator informs us, is the right of the sovereign individual. He explains his prison-induced vision of America: "Long ago, under monarchic rule, the right to inviolability belonged solely to the monarchs and the aristocracy. Now, that right belongs to you."<sup>50</sup> The America he ends up in, however, necessitates a split vision and a disavowal of the realities encountered: "If some native throws in your face the insult that you are a good-for-nothing parasite, then that is just a malicious rumor, or it's not aimed at you. Perhaps it's aimed at another minority, or because we encounter hardship to the point of hallucination?"<sup>51</sup> If it is not a hallucination, then the shameful status of a racial minority must have originated with another group, and now being used to malign Vietnamese refugees in America. Vinh Nguyen names "refugeetude" the state of coming-into-consciousness whereby refugees realize they "share in the common but incommensurate situations of socioeconomic marginalization that many racialized, (im)migrant, and undocumented individuals face in the United States."<sup>52</sup> Yet, the racial ideological occultation in America generates disavowal

in this refugee. Refugee socioeconomic marginalization does not appear to him intrinsic to America, so the reflection of him cannot be of him but of some other. The racist reflection is displaced onto another “minority” group. The former soldier fails to recognize a now racialized self in the mirror that is America. In this racial mirror house of America, the Republican soldier does not come back to life, he merely exists in an afterlife, like the undead.

The failure to see oneself in the American mirror house with all of its consumerist plenitude turns into pains of recognition when the narrator meets the beggar of the title. Shamed as a recipient of social welfare, that mechanism of governmental subject-making as Ong argues,<sup>53</sup> the narrator sees the beggar as a noble person who refuses government assistance and embraces his beggar status. The beggar places the worn conical hat in front of him and repeats the request for one dollar, unmistakably presenting himself as a beggar, but he does not try to extract pity. He embraces his lowly status, mingling among the poor as if they are his true home, refusing to play into the larger regime of model-minority recognition. He refuses to enter the spiral of anxieties of his fellow immigrants who counter the official shame by overachieving as a way to beg for recognition that they are not like others in their own or other minoritized communities, thereby rescuing a difference, the mark of good-refugee pride. When they spot him, the beggar’s fellow refugees report him to the police to avoid shaming their Vietnamese heritage. Unlike them, the beggar hears something other than shame when news of robbery and murder committed by his expatriates reaches him: “he does not listen to such news, but he hears in the air strange sounds tearing at his insides, the sounds of the wings of flies struggling in a spider’s web.”<sup>54</sup> It is in this beggar that the narrator sees himself finally, as someone caught in that noted marginalia, and a ghost who hears sounds others cannot. The beggar, like a body that channels a spirit, allows the narrator to hear and see himself and his fellow refugees as they might be heard and seen by a white America.

It is then that the narrator fully realizes the warnings his close friend had issued about America back when the narrator was still awaiting entry into it. His letter to the narrator tells of beggars and those who cannot afford to bury their dead, all in a “rich country with advanced food processing technology offering food without taste.”<sup>55</sup> In America, plenitude is revealed to be without sensuous presence. America is a place devoid of life beyond the biopolitical. The ideological projection of America as the land of freedom and plenitude itself is a mere chimera with its monstrous state between life and death. America cannot be home. The assimilationist spell is broken.

Before the narrator meets his beggar, the friend has left Little Saigon to find work in the meat packing industry in a cold-weather state, taking with him the memory of his weeping children when he left them in Vietnam to find a future in America. Among the objects that carry his memory of Vietnam is an urn of his wife’s ashes, “grey and fine.”<sup>56</sup> The friend travels to Iowa for work in meat

processing, one of those industries relying on immigrants racialized into cheap, hard-working labor. Then another job takes him to sea on a fishing vessel operating out of Hawaii. He writes new letters to the narrator in which he describes yet a different America, one glimpsed at sea, imagined to be away from the bloody history of American land grab. For him, the sea opens up a sublime space that transcends their homelessness in a racist and brutal America. The narrator recounts his friend's experience at sea with thousand-year-old corals and phosphorous sea stars. The sea is "always crystal clear, its depth does not haunt,"<sup>57</sup> where the friend can "point to white clouds and say: my home is down there."<sup>58</sup>

The tangible objects of a consumerist America are revealed to be devoid of magic, the magic that would have given life to resuscitate the Republican soldier-narrator. Yet, the splitting of America's image is itself a result of the occultation of American plenitude—the ideological investment of consumers' objects with the power to revive the decayed body of the defeated soldier. The divestment of such commodity magic turns the narrator (doubling as his letter-writing friend) into a site of haunting, where he fails to recognize himself in the racializing mirror of America. Unable to preserve the fetishized America, the narrator looks to transcendence into the sublime. In the sublime space of the sea, the haunting stops.

As the commodity occultation stops at sea, another mode of the occult takes its place. At the point of resolution, the narrator turns our attention from consumers' objects to another object. His friend, the fellow traveler and guide of his passage into and out of a mythical America, sends him unsent letters to the friend's children and the urn with the friend's wife's ashes to keep. The narrator tells us: "In the days she spends with her husband out at sea, that woman's ashes turn blue, sparkle, and sprout crystal clear veins, like new hair."<sup>59</sup> It is as if the masculine refugee-immigrant subject has transposed the haunting from himself to his wife's ashes, and from there it sprouts new life. Her ashes hold the memory of home and become the receptacle of the occult, thereby allowing her husband's transcendence to the sublime as resolution to refugee homelessness in a racist America. The South Vietnamese man in America can no longer enact sovereignty in the masculine proprietorship of the nation—Vietnamese or American. Barred from masculinist possessive nationalism, the Republican man displaces the occult onto the site of the feminine. The woman figure is reduced from the fully corporeal *Duyên* in the previous story, when there was still a public story of a nation for the soldier to defend, to the wife's ashes in this story. The woman, here in her ashes, becomes the fetishized vessel of a history that must now turn private if it is to be told at all. The narration of defeat, imprisonment, loss, disappointment becomes a familial story about children left behind and the absent presence of a dead wife that would allow the defeated soldier to exist in the time of story-telling itself, because America has barred him from its public history and turned him into a ghost. His now private history becomes a source of new life for him in the space

of the sublime, beyond conflict. The magic in the maternal woman's ashes allows material life to grow anew.

The commodity occult presents itself as a realist order of things in America. In other words, it disavows its occult status through the tangible presence of products on the shelves. This material display of American plenitude occludes the poverty and racism encountered by the narrator. The whole story up to the ending is written in a mimetic realist mode. The spectral phenomenon of the ashes sprouting new life at the very end stands out as the only readily recognizable occult element in the story. All the haunting swirls unacknowledged throughout the story, but comes to rest here in the sublime of maternal sea and ash. If, in Nguyễn Mạnh Côn's story, Duyên's engagement with the occult nullifies the Republican narrator's occultation of the loss of his nationalist legitimacy, Hồ Minh Dũng's supernatural development nullifies the occultation of the commodity in the American dream of consumers' plenitude. This singular appearance of the magical reveals the hollowness at the heart of the realism projected by the commodity occult in the American dream. Much more so than Nguyễn Mạnh Côn's anticipation of death written in a matter-of-fact mimetic language, Hồ Minh Dũng's lyrical prose projects a melancholic knowledge after the Fall: after the end of South Vietnam and after the fall from innocence about America. Espiritu has pointed to the narrative of the good refugee as part of a recuperation of an American narrative about itself as the savior of other nations in the face of defeat in the Vietnam War, a self-narration she calls "We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose."<sup>60</sup> This story denies America its title as the savior in a hot Cold War or in the life of a refugee in war's aftermath.

#### THE FEMININE APORETIC AND THE TRACE OF HISTORY

Refugee haunting continues as a new generation of refugee writers come on the scene. If Hồ Minh Dũng writes as an exile from a lost South Vietnam struggling in the promise of a linear assimilationist time—that is, foreign past to American present, marginal present to future center—of the American refugee and immigrant story, Nguyễn Danh Bằng writes from a nomadic refugee position that slides back and forth along the length of an imagined history staged across a global landscape of commodity phantasmagoria. Perhaps among writers in Vietnamese, Nguyễn Danh Bằng is the most insistent and certainly among the most successful in his consistent deployment of a language of haunted objects. His objects appear in the ghostly light that accompanies the commodity, which requires, as Marx conceded, necromancy to decipher. Neither the Marxian strategy of dragging the commodity back to a materialist theory of value nor, it seems, a purely metaphorical reading would be sufficient here. The reader must bring a method of divination to enter the phantasmagoria of dead things. Nguyễn Danh Bằng left

Vietnam for California in 1992, having been born in 1967 to Northern parents who came south to Gia Định during the 1954 partition. Saigon had emerged as the capital of French Cochinchina and later as the capital of the Republic of Vietnam, which includes the site of the old citadel at Gia Định that was vanquished by French troops in the 1860s. And, of course, the Vietnamese citadel itself was built on the site of the history of Vietnamese dispossession of Khmers and Indigenous people from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

While the author wrote the story from locations in the diaspora, “Strange Room” was published in Vietnam. In the story, the obscure history of places and of self is buried within objects that carry a ghostly presence. Deprived of sovereignty by way of national history, the third-person refugee protagonist pursues the past in the acquisition of objects across temporal and spatial borders. The story opens in a boarding room in Taijiang-Kaili, in Guizhou province, China, as the narrator chases after a “mythical silver headpiece rumored to have been made in Kaili” and searches for its handicraft techniques in the “indigenous items and silvery trinkets” of a tourist market.<sup>61</sup> The futile hunt for this object takes us to a room in the Vagabond Hotel in California’s state capital Sacramento, and ends in a cabin in the Sierras twenty-five miles from Yosemite National Park. The story is structured as a journey through the phantasmagoric landscape of touristic consumption, to the heart of the consumer’s empty room in an American middle-class hotel, and finally out to an alternative space of nature.

In Kaili, the rumored origin of the desired headpiece, the protagonist male traveler—an antihero—arrives at his destination already defeated, “soft,” and “feeble.”<sup>62</sup> His emasculated state is explained in terms of the failure to attain possession of the past in the sought-for object. To “find the past,” he realizes, is “as difficult as to discover something new.”<sup>63</sup> He instead finds himself aimlessly wandering around an increasingly feverish geographical space marked by a touristic catalogue of cultural and climatic sights, sounds, tastes, and sensations that endlessly repeat themselves: corn strung roof-high; pig legs marinated and hung out to dry; boats gathering for market; communal meals of small river fish that he partakes with friendly locals; the sudden grip of winter, the howling wind through swollen wooden doors that will not close. This touristic consumption of locality, marked by Indigenous Miao culture, slips into a cultural penetration and a self-conscious realization of his status as an intruder. He hears the murmuring of whole villages plotting to set his room on fire, as he imagines they see him as a “malicious intruder, a stranger who has come to steal something from them.”<sup>64</sup>

The masculinist mode of cultural intrusion and appropriation leads to a hallucinatory coupling ceremony between the protagonist and an Indigenous young woman. Here as in the previous stories, the feminine spectrally channels, receives, or anchors the masculine subject. In this story, the young woman carries the commodity phantasm; only this time, she turns to face the tourist and presents him with an impasse. In his consumerist delirium, he sees the silver headpiece on the

woman, pursues her through a forbidding landscape. But now that she faces and speaks to him, he realizes he cannot without shame ask to purchase from her the longed-for object:

The gigantic silver block vibrates each skillfully crafted detail, clanging, tinkling. She tells him: "Go home." He asks: "Why?" She does not answer, but looks at him sternly. "Festival?" "Yes." He feels shame and mumbles: "Then you should go." Even before reaching the bend in the road, she disappears into the white of air. The white approaches him. He turns.<sup>65</sup>

The face of the other, writes Emmanuel Levinas, "is present in its refusal to be contained,"<sup>66</sup> and the "facing position, opposition par excellence, can only be as a moral summons."<sup>67</sup> The narrator has reached an aporia, an impasse in facing the other: the penetration and extraction of the object needed for the constitution of the modern consumer subject means the loss of humanity for that same subject. Shamed by the woman whose face and speech issue a moral summons, the man fails to consummate his hallucinatory relationship with his desired object via consumption. Although she begins as an embodiment of culture and history in the commodity phantasmagoria, once she turns to face him and speaks to him, she becomes the other, whose historical and cultural alterity is ultimately irreducible to the commodity sign. Her existence as such cannot remain stable. She turns into insubstantial white, unyielding to the capitalist capture. The road, disappearing after her, does not offer passage to the consumer. An impasse.

As the Indigenous culture is placed on a teleological temporality, the refugee tourist deliriously tries to possess the past via an acquisitive grasp of objects in their sight, sound, and touch. Failing to acquire history in the pursued object on the head of the young woman, he beholds a horse dragging the tatters of a war chariot from the ancient battle that defeated the Hsia and established the Shang dynasty. He cuts loose the horse from the remains of its history and sees it home, just as the young woman has bid him home. The hallucinatory tone gives way in the story to detached observations of the landscape of current commodity capitalism with its postmodern temporal and spatial juxtapositioning. He sees the capitalistic annihilation of history: towns that spring up hurriedly, luridly, with tofu vendors loitering near fountains illuminated by city lights; and a girl wearing a red bow and blue jeans, carrying a Gucci bag with a rooster inside. The traveler retreats wistfully into a classical painterly landscape that he imagines could remain outside postmodern commodification: "a village beautiful like ruins. Bamboo still thickly fringing it, mountains still standing amongst clouds, a river still flowing like velvet from on high. Out on the river, a fisherman with a thatched cloak gliding on a boat made from three bamboo planks."<sup>68</sup> The hallucination in the phantasmagoric space of the commodity fetish with its whole-body sensuousness gives way to the distancing of pure sight. The man is quite aware of his retreat from the swirling phantasmagoric effect of commodities to the safe observations of their

vener. The author writes of his narrator's presently detached sight: "He feels like he's observing an old coin in an antique shop, trying hard to judge if it's real or fake."<sup>69</sup> The authenticity of the coin in this case is not its value as currency but its very patina of antiqueness. He can no more acquire the phantasmic commodity object than he can escape the commodity world. Another impasse.

If the commodity phantasmagoria in the exoticized tourist space of Kaili resembles the Platonic phantasm, its reality distorted by sensory perception, then the next space of the Vagabond Hotel room in Sacramento takes us to the metropolitan heart of modern consumption itself. What Nguyễn Danh Bằng reveals there is neither the Marxist material nor the Platonic ideal, but lifeless projections in a void. The male traveler finds not a speck of dust there. The alienating sterility of the First World hotel room takes him "far away from the world of relations."<sup>70</sup> It is an eventless world of mere projections in which what remains absolute is light: a singular lamp in the room and the glow of multicolor fish swimming on the screen-saver of a computer monitor. A voice tells him that "we are here alone in a *void* without dimensions."<sup>71</sup> He seems to have reached the heart of an absence in the metropolis from which spawns the commodity phantasmagoric symbolization in the object world of consumption elsewhere, in distantly othered places like Kaili. The sterility in that absence, of history and of self, is what spurs our voracious wanderings into the sensuous phantasmagoria of the commodity signs across vast distances. The tourist of our age, that consumer vagabond, is spawned from the void of middle-class spaces like the Vagabond Hotels of the First World.

The commodity world necessarily makes absent—murders—life forms in history in order that they can be symbolized and contained in the commodity object. At the end of his feverish wanderings in the touristic Chinese hinterlands, the male traveler turns south and crosses the border for Vietnam. The refugee becomes aware that it is not history as commodified antiqueness he is after but his own history, his past, his memory. All murders leave traces, as the detective story tirelessly instructs us. In the void, that sterilizing scrubbing after the kill in the space of the Vagabond Hotel, the refugee traveler finds traces, specters of his own memory. And as expected, it is a memory of death. What is unexpected is the recovery of his memory of the first time he encounters the object that launched his wanderings to its imagined place of origin:

"What about the headpiece?" he remembers suddenly and asks.

He remembers a time from before it turned cold, he met the silver headpiece in the Asian Art Museum. It was placed in a glass case, lit by a small light. The air in the room was dry and cold. He looked at it for a long time, a very long time, but started to see the shape of a tiny chick. When he was little, he had stood and looked into the bedroom of an abandoned house. Grass grew from the cracks in the floor of that bedroom. He saw the carcass of a chick with still a bit of yellow down. The sun scorched. In several days, the chick turned black and flat.<sup>72</sup>

The space of the Vagabond Hotel room evokes the space of the museum, the site for the appropriation of a life form for purposes of representing history. The headpiece's transformation into the sign of exotic antiquity as it enters into the making of a commodity object. There, history is made absent for its symbolization. There, the refugee sees the whole process of death and absence itself. But what he sees murdered is not just history in the headpiece but his own history and a sense of self constituted in that history. The memory, the chick's death and decay in the procreative space of the bedroom, is backlit by an off-center Vietnam, his destination after the hallucinatory Kaili. It is the trace of his own history that has spurred him on his consumerist quest in the first place. But that memory as the ghostly trace also allows him to realize its ultimate irreducibility to the commodity object and can never be fully captured through consumption.

Like death, an *aporia* is a coming without passing. The refugee's aporetic journey through the commodity phantasmagoria, and then through the heart of the empty American middle-class space that spawns it, pushes him to withdraw from partaking in an identity based on the acquisition of commodity objects. He now longs for a nature beyond commodity and begins to sense animals lurking in musty shadows: "And like that, he walks naked through strange creatures hiding in grey and winding hallways."<sup>73</sup> Rather than the traveler's last retreat into nature found in the Chinese landscape painting at the end of his journey to Kaili, the author takes us to his traveler's disappearance in the last space of the story, the cabin in the Sierras. When we arrive at the cabin, the traveler, whom for the first time the author describes in racial terms as a "yellow-skinned person," has fled, perhaps chased away by the return of nature in the smell of rotting leaves, moss, and new grass "blooming in verdant green."<sup>74</sup> We read the words of his realization left behind in a notebook:

"The Merced River will be wrapped in a box. Like many things that happened in the past neatly tucked away in sealed packages with labels. Some items have clear date inscriptions, others remain crude objects that no one recognizes. And there are things of the past that stay entirely outside! An antique ceramic vase flies in a boundless dark space"<sup>75</sup>

Because the *aporia* is the experience of limits in relation to another, it becomes an experience of ethics. The *impasse*, in this case the encounter with a human face in the phantasmagoria of commodities, is what allows the tension between possibility and impossibility necessary for such decision and responsibility. Speaking of his writing, Nguyễn Danh Bằng draws attention to a person's "*impasse* [*tiến thoái lưỡng nan*] when witnessing the corrosion of culture on a global scale by the conquest of values in a consumerist society. The individual is drowned in [ . . . ] a world teeming with objects, when that individual, whether wanting to or not, must still carry a past, a history, and disparate life beliefs."<sup>76</sup> For the refugee traveler seeking a consumerist reconstitution of self and sovereignty, he encounters

only the aporetic in the apparitional face of the young Miao bride in the hallucinatory male traveler's journey through the commodity phantasmagoria. If her femininity as indigeneity carries culture and history symbolized in the commodity for the desire of the masculine consumer subject, the trace of her irreducible historical alterity in the face encounter poses an impasse to his consumerist pursuit, and provokes in him an ethical response of shame for his violation of people and history. The face of the other issues an interdiction to her annihilation for the use of her and her "culture" for the constitution of the consumerist self in the commodity phantasmagoria.

The refugee traveler is returned to his conscience. His subsequent insight into the heart of commodification as symbolization allows him to return to his own private memory that could not be incorporated into a public history of America. The refugee narrator fails to gain sovereignty through the purchasing power bestowed on those who make it into the American middle class. History can no more be purchased through commodified objects or touristic wanderlust than resurrected in his memory of a Vietnam as the source of a sovereign self. Instead, the story ends with the refugee's absence in the cabin and his presence in words he leaves in a notebook, marveling at things past, forever flying in the boundless dark. The subject carrying the memory of history can only be itself a trace, in an aporetic in-between of subject and object, self and other, present and past.

#### TRANS TIME AND THE CLOSURE OF HISTORY

If Nguyễn Danh Bằng makes visible the ethics in impasse encountered by a marginalized subject trying to pursue his history through commodity consumption, Đặng Thơ Thơ confronts us with the possibilities opened by the very experience of physical and historical finitude in the fateful moment of the death of the South. Đặng Thơ Thơ was born in 1962 in Saigon to a family famously connected to Tự Lực Văn Đoàn, an influential literary collective formed in Hanoi in the 1930s. One of the few transgender writers of her generation, Đặng Thơ Thơ lived through the Fall of Saigon as a young teen and experienced life in what had become Ho Chi Minh City for almost two decades before leaving to settle in the refugee community of Southern California. Her story "Open the Future" was written for a special issue of the refugee literary journal *Hợp Lưu* commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the war in 2005.

At first glance, "Open the Future" resembles Nguyễn Mạnh Côn's anxious return to the dream in order to alter the course of historical events. But what eventuality Nguyễn Mạnh Côn could only displace in 1972 had long become accomplished fate for those with a South Vietnamese history thirty years after the end of the war. Đặng Thơ Thơ tells her memory of the Fall of Saigon, or rather its unfolding over and over again. The story opens with two young friends, both prepubescent girls, standing at the moment of 1975, their "life consisting solely of the future."<sup>77</sup> Thơ,

the narrator, reads the future in her dreams and tells her friend Hương that there is going to be a separation. When the friend asks its duration, Thơ thinks of the “time of dream” that blooms and contracts. The organismic time of the dream will not coincide with chronological time, which serves historical determinism. Believing in the multi-direction of dream time, Thơ thinks she can influence future events by dreaming about them. When Hương leaves the country as it convulses, Thơ promises she will ensure her friend’s safe passage out. The rest of the story unfolds as Thơ and her family desperately search for a way out as the death of the South closes in. Rather than ensuring her friend’s passage by dreaming it, Thơ, from a place about to be foreclosed, is haunted in her own desire for her friend as an apparition of an impossible future elsewhere. Thơ’s failure to leave eventually traps another ghostly presence in her dreams, her mother’s friend, Hồng Trang. Hồng Trang is supposed to provide Thơ’s family with safe passage out of the country through her connection with an American organization. But all of Hồng Trang’s attempts fail and she commits suicide. Her return in Thơ’s dreams opens them to a dimension of the accomplished past doubling as a possible future. The convergence and communion of the three characters, their living-on across time and space, disrupt both progressive history and the gender binary in heteronormative national time as the South undergoes its death.

The story offers nodes of meaning in sexual orientation as temporal orientation. It addresses the transformation out of the structuring of reproductive genders that doubles as a structuring of time in a nation across its death. The story demands a reading for a move from a feminist critique to a trans treatment of the closure of historical time when such violence was enacted in the name of revolutionary progress. Julia Kristeva suggests that the gender binary organizes meaning in the modern state’s politics of time as this binary links the nation as a unity in space and time to “reproduction, survival of the species, life and death, the body, sex, and symbol.”<sup>78</sup> The collapse of a nation’s future is a moment that exposes the fragility of binaries in this temporal-sexual linkage. Moments like the AIDS crisis, when the future diminished for so many in queer communities, expose the perilous imposition of what Lee Edelman calls “reproductive futurism.”<sup>79</sup> In response, J. Jack Halberstam stresses how “queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.”<sup>80</sup> These alternative temporalities offer possible futures for us moderns whose time keeps running out and must be imagined anew.

The death of South Vietnam is one such moment of modernist temporal ruptures. Revolution and its modernist fulfillment of history play across a temporal surface of endings and beginnings as though these are successive events that sweep history forward, when all that those caught in the rupture can feel is the prison house of the frozen moment. The frozen moment is one of death or fate,

beyond an Enlightenment humanist historiography that stays vital only through dialectical progressive movement narrated with vital events as convulsions in the birth of new eras. Against this temporal structure of nation and revolution, the defeat of the South in the story bankrupts its heterosexual and capitalist reproductive nexus, while another heterosexual socialist nexus takes its place to produce and reproduce the New Socialist Man as the next stage in the evolution of man as master of his fate through mastery over others.

The death of the South in the story plays out simultaneously as a devolution of the commodity world and a queering of the vital nation in the death of the grandmother. The matriarch sits dying, with one amputated arm bottled in formaldehyde near her bed. Behind her hangs a painting by a famous painter that her daughter will have to sell for one-twentieth of a tael of gold, enough to eat for one month. The painting passes through many hands in Vietnam's postwar socialist economy. Finally, as Vietnam marketizes in the late 1980s, it goes to a foreigner who purchases it for 30 taels of gold and takes it out of the country. The painting is a commodity whose value depends on capitalist exchange relations. The dissolution of a market at the moment of the South's defeat turns the fetishized value of the painting into use value in a barter economy before the Vietnamese Communist Party undergoes its own capitalist conversion in the postsocialist economy. But rather than returning people to the mentioned "relations between men," as Marx dreamt, the dissolution of the commodity market at the end of the war in socialist triumph leaves men imprisoned by needs so base that, when unfulfilled, they foreclose their humanity in the eyes of the narrator. In other words, they have arrived at the end of human history only to reach the end of their humanity imagined as (masculinist) mastery over their material world.

On the day the socialist authorities confiscate the family home in an apartment complex, Thở sees people lining up for pork at a state distribution center:

It was towards the end of the month, and hungry people desperately craved pork. They lined up from the side of the Thanh Đa market, rounding Lot E, running along Lot A, all the way out to the boulevard. Each held in hand a meat coupon book. They were tired and patient, resigned and hopeful, waiting under the scorching sun to purchase their monthly quota of half a kilo of fatty meat. I looked at the mound of bones and gristles. I looked at the jet-black flies circling the piles of entrails. I looked at the human creatures that were just like me, and I felt indescribably sad. Suddenly I understood I was different now: I no longer craved meat.<sup>81</sup>

At the end of the commodity process, the socialist masses cease to be human because this arrival at the telos in a devolution of everything into the concrete marks not humanist redemption but the utter loss of their mastery over their own hunger. These supposedly liberated humans have fallen from their apex of the predator chain that had always marked that taxonomic distinction from animals. Thở undertands this fall in the revulsion she feels for animal meat. It would be

cannibalism. Yet, there is something that can halt the devaluation of both goods and human dignity. On the fateful thirtieth of April, the dying grandmother passes to each one in the family a vial “containing a clear liquid, its weight sloshing about,” of which she tells them: “Not even with gold can you purchase it.”<sup>82</sup> The liquid is cyanide. In death, the poison lies outside the commodity world and its devolution. It lies outside of the dialectical movement towards Marxist mastery at the end of history. The assurance of the poison lies in the possibility of meeting one’s fate not in mastery in life but in sterility, the end of lineage and thus of procreative national time. Meeting fate in queer integrity, the grandmother offers the poison to all her progeny before taking her own life. Not in procreative life but in death will the matriarch’s wholeness as a body and a person be restored to her, as her long-amputated arm is buried with her. Thơ sees maternal history severed in national partition and masculinist war restored only in death.

In his turn-of-nineteenth-century canonized work, Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Du spun a feminine tragic *Kiều* out of the meeting between human quality and fate, elevating this encounter to a common condition of misfortune for women: “Lời rằng bạc mệnh cũng là lời chung.”<sup>83</sup> Fate in this way lies beyond mastery in sovereignty within dialectical history. The matriarch and her women meet the chronological date of the thirtieth of April as fate. Such reenactment of fate lies beyond negotiation or resistance as those are acts in the realm of sovereignty. They instead encounter fate as the event that cuts off the flow of living history for those in the South. Thơ, Hương, and Hồng Trang dream of surviving the already-foreclosed human sovereignty as it is conceived in both Western and anticolonial humanism. This moment of fate offers a future other than the nationalist reproductive one. The thirtieth of April for Thơ, as for many of us who are surviving it, does not end at the death of the procreative southern nation: “The world after the 30th of April no longer contains dates. The 30th of April will last a long time afterward, across decades. If we live to be a hundred, it will last a century.”<sup>84</sup> The date has become mythical in its refusal of both the biopolitical and the historical dialectic. From her moment of the everlasting rushing forth of finitude, Thơ pulls in all of time, in all its ghostly manifestations. And all of time meets in trans time in that it is “asynchronous and nonnormative.”<sup>85</sup> Her dreams of her friend Hương as an apparition of the future become increasingly sexual in her pubescent thirst to go on living, which would mean living in a temporal and spatial elsewhere. But Hồng Trang’s ghost fights to keep her from a full union with the future that must demand to forget its past: “Hồng Trang begins to weep, her hair wet with rain and mud. But my death is not without meaning, she looks up and tells Hương. The future has no right to alter a death from its past. All values may change. But the value of death does not.”<sup>86</sup> In the allegorical space of the dream, the women must contemplate murdering themselves to claim a presence in a history that murders them. In the end, Hương resigns herself to the absolute demand of the past for recognition in an alternate future: “Suicide,

like dreaming, is a gesture of hope, in the things that cannot be known. It is also a saintly mark of the permanently immaculate.<sup>87</sup>

Failing to forestall history through a return to the dream, as Nguyễn Mạnh Côn's *Duyên* has done, Thơ's dream in the end brings together the three women as apparitions of past, present, and future, whose chronological order will coincide with neither the time of the procreative nation nor that of progressive history. Their queer relationality to one another stands in place of the gender binary of the South's social world that ends with the victory of the revolutionary yet no less nationalist North. If education is reproduction of the labor force, of imagining community up and down linear time, then the South's hetero-ideological reproductive matrix of sovereignty is rendered bankrupt as its offspring seem to the new regime fit only for reeducation in socialist labor camps that would revise their own personal biography as well as that of their defunct nation.<sup>88</sup> The Republic of Vietnam would be cut off from not only its future but its own past. That date in April is a radical finitude at both ends of the linear time that links the reproductive nation to progressive historiography. Southern men in the subject population were emasculated. Roughly a million men who either were designated as *nguy* because of their association with the "puppet regime," or who could pose any potential challenge to the new regime, were sent to reeducation camps where the death rate is estimated at 16.5 percent.<sup>89</sup> Other Southerners without revolutionary credentials were deemed suspect and deprived of a social and economic existence.

Growing up in the refugee community, I was familiar with stories of women heading households in cities and in the remote New Economic Zones where the socialist state sent many urban families as part of the new regime's strategic and developmental goals to break up potential resistance among the southern urban population as well as to facilitate economic collectivization. Women learned to clear land, often of jungle vegetation, thereby displacing Indigenous communities, and cultivate what little edible crop they could for their families.<sup>90</sup> While the new socialist state tried to socialize the southern economy into the Leninist central command economy that set production and distribution goals, southern women anchored family livelihood. To incorporate the conquered South into a new socialist heteronormative and historically progressive time, the new state still had to rely on southern women. Yet, these women had become more than women within the gender binary at the foundation of the reproductive nation. Discussing her story, Đặng Thơ Thơ elaborates on the devaluation of Republican men: "Those who bore arms on the defeated side became a kind of refuse under the gaze of the victors. The women had to take their lives into their own hands, to make up for the sovereignty the men had lost. The women became both men and women at the same time."<sup>91</sup> In the story, time's depletion in the moment of the southern nation's death becomes the horizon of time's plenitude through queer regeneration.

It feels as if all of the modern era has been about the wounds of time and the promise of redemption for the humanist subject. Revolution is a form of wounding

to correct past injury so that history can move forth towards a redemptive future. The temporal rupture reorganizes new life, which is no less based on the gender binary's centrality in state heteronormativity. Elizabeth Freeman observes that modernity peddles in "signs of fractured time" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and that sexual dissidents emerged as "figures *for* history" in its narrativity of movement and counterpoints.<sup>92</sup> Socialist revolutionary time emerged precisely at this juncture in European history, and anticolonials outside of Europe deployed such movement and counterpoints in anticolonial revolutions stretching through the twentieth century. If the sexual dissident is produced by, for, or in tandem with historical time's rupture, then temporal dissonance and sexual dissidence are intertwined. These connections play out in varied and complex ways at moments of rupture for postcolonial nations. In the case of the historical rupture of the postcolonial Republic of Vietnam, these sexual dissident refugees became "bearers of new corporeal sensations,"<sup>93</sup> signaling the possibility of time's plenitude rather than its exhaustion from not just within the dead southern nation-state, but also from before that, in temporal convulsions of colonialism, the anticolonial struggle, and the Cold War that delivered the warring states of North and South. Đặng Thơ Thơ explains the history from which she writes: "Such history includes the dead in a past littered with events. It isn't just the history of the South but also the history leading up to the formation of the South."<sup>94</sup> The short story offers generative time in a queering of self and history for those caught in the moment of rupture. Its author thinks "trans is a state of movement," "in search of space that has yet to be occupied" by defined gender and sexuality.<sup>95</sup> The three women's union in life and death creates a temporal mobility against history's hard closure. Their existence of being in nonbeing, presence in absence, and vice versa in each other allows their willful entrances and exits through the end of their history, queering the binary between life and death that upholds the time of nations.

#### THE ETHICS OF INTERRUPTION AND RELATION

If the American turn of phrase—the Fall of Saigon—to signal military defeat sounds like masculinist imperial melancholia, we must nevertheless be attentive to the ways that event foreclosed history for South Vietnamese refugees whose lives were ruptured, and the ways they lived on through it. If the postcolonial nation became the primary grantor of humanist sovereignty for formerly colonized peoples, then the foreclosure of the temporal horizon of the Republic spelled the end of human status for its erstwhile citizens. The arrival of the revolution did not allow most South Vietnamese a path to human status in self-mastery when the new regime treated them as a potential threat to be reeducated, marginalized, or eradicated. And as refugees, they would encounter other racial taxonomies within nations whose organization of time was also hetero-redemptive in ways that excluded them. Even as Halberstam and others offer us queer possibilities

in failure when queer lives are pitted against social structuring that reproduces at their expense, Ly Thuy Nguyen reminds us yet again of the stakes of such failure: “For racialized refugees, ‘failure’ is never symbolic: it means to die in war, go missing in the refugee passage, or to succumb under racist violence after resettlement. There will literally be no future. How does one ‘carry on’ such historical traumas, and still dream of radical queer politics that divest from upholding hegemonic futures?”<sup>96</sup> For those whom Viet Thanh Nguyen calls the “dead, missing, lost, or forgotten people who have passed beneath history’s wake,”<sup>97</sup> time had run out. We who survive carry them and make time in whatever ways we can.

I began this chapter with the question of lineage. It is commonly assumed that there is continuity between refugee writing and writing from the Republic of Vietnam when most refugee writers in the decade after 1975 came from there. But from the late 1980s on, as refugee writers from the 1.5 generation began to come on the scene, such assumption of continuity came under scrutiny. Yet, I see refugee writing in continuity across historical rupture with South Vietnamese writing in its last years because both bodies of literature are haunted by the death of the South, which is impending in the former and accomplished in the latter. In the slippage between the impending and the accomplished, I ask with Saidiya Hartman, “how does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom?”<sup>98</sup>

We could say that these works from South Vietnam and its refugee communities are haunted attempts at retelling their place in contexts of economy and history. As possibilities of postcolonial sovereignty die with the Republic of Vietnam, racialization in white supremacist countries of settlement like the United States bars admittance into its biopolitical and symbolic procreation on the basis of race. America includes refugees in its sovereignty by excluding them from seeing themselves in the mirror house of whiteness. The loss of sovereignty doubles as loss of masculinity in both possessive nationalism and within the gender binary reproduction of the nation in both Vietnam and the country of settlement. Deprived of access to masculinist sovereignty as the mark of the human, some writers find recourse in the feminine as the site of a haunted search for a way to be in the world. These South Vietnamese and refugee authors anchor their narrators’ elided presence in material objects already apparitional in the commodity process. Nguyễn Mạnh Côn’s feminine occult momentarily forestalls the nationalist contradiction of the postcolonial sovereign subject in the Republic of Vietnam caught in American capitalist dominance within Cold War geopolitics. Hồ Minh Dũng’s feminine sublime sidesteps the absorption of what was left of South Vietnamese history into an American assimilationist ideology of commodity plenitude as a recuperation of imperial magnanimity after American defeat in the Vietnam War. Nguyễn Danh Bằng’s feminine aporetic in the face of the irreducible other poses ethical limits to the symbolization of self and history in the commodity fetish. Departing

from these responses to failed masculinist sovereignty, Đặng Thơ Thơ's queer fateful offers a trans vision of time that can traverse history's closure accompanying the dissolution of the commodity economy at the moment of triumphant socialism and national liberation. Lost to sovereignty, the writers of these tales seek the occult, the sublime, the aporetic, and queer sociality that will allow life, albeit haunted life, to continue on beyond the end of their time, and alternative to the bankruptcy of the reproductive nation. Writing to live in loss, Dante Alighieri begins, "In that part of the book of my memory, before which little can be read, there is a heading, which says: *Incipit vita nova*: Here begins the new life."<sup>99</sup> For South Vietnamese and refugee writers, it is through haunting memory that life can be read and yearned anew, so that branches do not impale, ashes sprout new hair, the face of the other brings conscience, and queer refusal gives time when there is no more time.

In the lineage I draw between South Vietnamese and refugee writing through the death of South Vietnam, I hope to attempt two ethico-political moves. The first reaches across historical rupture to trace not the sovereign subject but the apparition of the elided other. This other's haunting of its sovereign double provides the basis for a kind of Levinasian ethics. It interrupts the sovereign's "eternal return to self,"<sup>100</sup> because this apparition poses an interdiction to being fully known, spoken for, or killed by the sovereign without consequence. This historical other presents us with a moral summons. The stories demand that those of us who are living with varying access to forms of sovereignty face those we have to overcome. By gathering the ghosts in these texts, I hope to draw attention to the traces of those occluded in the commodity process and in the writing of official history. For many in the West, it is too easy to regard South Vietnam as a French or American creation, enunciated with a racist appropriation of the epithet of "puppet" in a satisfying return to self via a critique of empire that only highlights their place in it. I remember the use of the dehumanizing term "Saigon puppets" in some protests in the West against the acceptance of South Vietnamese refugees after the war. Such epithet echoes the national liberators' naming of these historical others, who could be rubbed out in an equally narcissistic return to the historiography of Vietnamese sovereignty. I am guilty of drawing on such historiography as well, as I too often retrace a genealogy of the present-day Socialist Republic of Vietnam to the government and culture of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North. Of course, all official historiographies appropriate the dead in a symbolization process that runs the dangers of an eternal return to self. A South Vietnamese official historiography did the same during its lifetime and would have continued had that nation-state survived. Nevertheless, the violence that we inherit demands limits in an ethical stance towards those who have been maimed, imprisoned, killed, raped, left to die, and erased by war victors and racist states.

With the second ethico-political move, I hope to follow other critical refugee scholars in using these ways of writing and being when we are deprived

of sovereignty to reach across incommensurate histories to other communities whose sovereignty has also been foreclosed in historiographic time. Vinh Nguyen's *refugeetude* calls for "the relationalities that extend beyond the parameters of refugeeness, generating connections to past, present, and future forms of displacement."<sup>101</sup> This time, the call is not for solidarity of the oppressed in a liberation that replicates the violent structure of sovereignty and historiography. It is instead a call for ways to live on surrounded by the dead, to go on past the time of the human.