

# VIETNAMESE MASCULINITIES IN LÊ THI DIEM THÚY'S *THE GANGSTER WE ARE ALL LOOKING FOR*

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## ABSTRACT

The defeat of South Vietnam in 1975 transformed Vietnamese men into fleeing refugees, boat people, and state-sponsored asylees. Writing against the popular and scholarly representations of Vietnamese refugee men as incapacitated objects of rescue, this paper provides an in-depth analysis of the intimate, insightful, and intense portrayal of Vietnamese masculinities in Lê thi diem thúy's novel, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. Focusing on the "sad and broken" father in the novel, the article conceptualizes his bouts of domestic violence neither as a private family matter nor an example of individual failing, but as a social, historical, and transnational affair that exposes the conditions—war, urban neglect, poverty—under which Vietnamese masculinity is continually produced, negotiated and transformed.

**KEY WORDS:** Vietnamese refugees, Vietnam War, masculinity, domestic violence, lê thi diem thúy.

## RESUMEN

La derrota de Vietnam del Sur en 1975 transformó a los hombres vietnamitas en refugiados, huidos por mar y asilados con subvención estatal. Con la intención de contestar las representaciones populares y académicas que muestran a los hombres refugiados vietnamitas como incapacitados que han de ser rescatados, este ensayo ofrece un análisis exhaustivo de la representación íntima, profunda e intensa de las masculinidades vietnamitas que presenta la novela *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, de lê thi diem thúy. Centrándose en el personaje del padre "triste y roto", el artículo conceptualiza sus arrebatos de violencia doméstica no como un asunto familiar privado, ni como un ejemplo de fracaso individual, sino como un asunto social, histórico y transnacional que muestra las condiciones —guerra, abandono urbano, pobreza— bajo las cuales la masculinidad vietnamita es continuamente producida, negociada y transformada.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** refugiados vietnamitas, Guerra de Vietnam, masculinidad, violencia doméstica; lê thi diem thúy.



All Vietnamese have their own stories about what the Americans dub the “Fall of Saigon.”<sup>1</sup> This is mine. We left Saigon on April 29, 1975, in those last few hectic hours. Although we often characterize this “first wave”<sup>2</sup> as part of the Vietnamese elites, there were also many others, like my family, who were swept into this exodus, leaving to be on the safe side, never intending this to be the “goodbye.” It wasn’t until we reached the Philippines that we heard on the radio that Saigon, our home, had “fallen.” That evening, in our makeshift tent city, I remember the stillness of a people in disbelief, in shock, a people suddenly without their *quê hương* [homeland]. It is funny how after all these years, what I remember most about that night are the cigarette lights that dotted our tent city, and the men who sat filled with their own thoughts that evening, grieving, contemplating, already missing the way things used to be and could never be again. To this day, I am compelled by the particular masculinity that I witnessed that evening—not triumphant and potent, but in *lê thi diem thúy’s* words, “sad and broken” (117)—an initial lesson about the intersections of race, class, gender, and national origin.

As a people fleeing from the only war that the United States had lost, Vietnamese in the United States have been subject to intense scholarly interest. Casting Vietnamese refugees as objects of rescue, this literature portrays them as “incapacitated by grief and therefore in need of care (DuBois 4-5). Scholars’ hyper-focus on the refugees’ needs and neediness has made “un-visible” other important facets of Vietnamese personhood: their self-identity, their dreams for themselves, their hopes for their children, and their “ground of being.” In short, we know more about how social scientists have constructed Vietnamese, but less about how Vietnamese have created their worlds and made meaning for themselves. In recent years, moving beyond demographic and needs assessment studies, a new generation of Vietnamese American scholars have shifted the focus of study to the gender, sexual, class, political, religious, cultural, and generational diversity of the Vietnamese diaspora (Võ). In particular, scholars like Thuy Vo Dang and Phuong Nguyen have written eloquently about Vietnamese men’s attempt to reassert their masculinity in part by adopting a vocal anticommunist position<sup>3</sup> as a way to affirm their South Vietnamese national identity, keep alive the memories of their losses, and counter negative

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<sup>1</sup> The “Fall of Saigon” refers to the capture of the capital of Vietnam by the People’s Army of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front on April 30, 1975—an event that effectively ended the Vietnam War.

<sup>2</sup> The first wave of Vietnamese refugees comprised largely of highly-skilled and educated individuals who left Vietnam by plane during the Spring of 1975. Between 1978 to the mid-1980s, a second wave of Vietnamese refugees, who were generally lower on the socioeconomic ladder than those in the first wave, left on leaky small fishing boats in a hazardous attempt to get to neighboring countries by sea.

<sup>3</sup> Vietnamese American public retellings of their history often take the form of “anti-communism,” which include boycotting Vietnam-produced books, magazines, videos, and television broadcasts, waving American flags while shouting anti-communist slogans, denouncing human rights violations committed by the “corrupt” and “heartless rulers of Vietnam,” and plotting the overthrow of the communist government.

racial stereotypes of Vietnam and Vietnamese refugees in the United States (Vo Dang; Nguyen).

Vietnamese American artists have also begun to grapple with the war's disastrous consequences for Vietnam and its people, giving rise to oft-haunting artistic and cultural representations that imagine, remember, and trace complex genealogies of war and forced displacements that precede and shape Vietnamese resettlement in the United States. For an intimate, insightful and intense portrayal of Vietnamese masculinities, I turn to lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, a novel widely noted for its lyrical contemplation on the tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions of Vietnamese American lives. Focusing on the "sad and broken" father in the story, I conceptualize his bouts of domestic violence neither as a private family matter nor an example of individual failing, but as a social, historical, and transnational affair that exposes the conditions under which Vietnamese masculinity is continually produced, negotiated and transformed.

### THE GANGSTER WE ARE ALL LOOKING FOR

Told through the knowing eyes of a lonely and imaginative child, lê thi diem thúy's 2003 *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* is a quietly powerful account of a Vietnamese refugee family who is in America but not of it. Part-memoir, part-novel, it is among the first book-length fictional works to come from the "boat people" generation of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1978, six-year-old lê and her father fled their home village of Phan Thiết in southern Vietnam in a small fishing boat, leaving behind her mother and younger siblings in the chaos. After a brief stay in a refugee camp in Singapore, they were resettled in Linda Vista, a racially diverse working-class community in San Diego. In 1980, lê's mother and younger sister, after a stint in a refugee camp in Malaysia, joined them in San Diego (Mehegan). Growing up, lê sensed an implicit silence in her family about the Vietnam War: "When my dad got together with his friends, they would sing songs and tell stories about when they were schoolboys. But there was a way they leapt over the war and the aftermath of the war. There was no one for me to turn to with my questions: how did we get here? Why are we boat people? If my mom misses her parents, and our town, then why aren't we there? ... And because I had no one to ask those questions, I swallowed them inside myself" (Moore). At the same time, she was bombarded with media images of the Vietnam War as a spectacle—and as an American tragedy: "In mainstream narrative about Vietnam, it's usually about the American GI, while the Vietnamese are part of the landscape. They rarely get particularized as characters" (Mehegan). lê reveals that she wrote *The Gangster* in part to put on record what happened to the Vietnamese people, not just during the war, but also before and after the war: "In this country ... [t]he questions about what happened to Vietnamese people don't get brought up ... For America to grow in its consciousness, it needs to ask what happened to the Vietnamese" (Moore).



In lyrical prose that reads like poetry, lê depicts the United States not as the land of opportunities but as the breaker of families—a place where family life will never be what it could or should have been. Haunting the narrator's family is the specter of her dead older brother, who drowned in Vietnam when he was just six years old—a death made more tragic by the absence of the father who was being held in a reeducation camp. The brother's death provides lê with a narrative device to move the story back and forth between Vietnam and California and to shift time, place, and viewpoint constantly throughout the novel. As lê interweaves memories of Vietnam with incidents in the United States, she melds the past and present, conveying the fluidity of time but also the unending-ness of the war's impact on Vietnamese lives. As she reminds us: "War has no beginning and no end. It crosses oceans like a splintered boat filled with people singing a sad song" (87). Because *The Gangster* refers repeatedly to history and politics, it demands that we confront the sad and violent history that exists between Vietnam and the United States, and the politics of translocated race, gender, and class that springs from this past.

#### "SAD AND BROKEN": MASCULINITY THROUGH THE LENS OF EMOTIONS

In Western social thought, emotions are understood predominantly as the antithesis of reason and as interiorized private experience, disconnected from history and culture (Lutz). The tendency to devalue emotions and to "disappear" them from social analysis has deflected attention from the relationship between emotions, social structure, and power. Since the 1970s, there has been a resurgence of emotion studies in virtually all of the disciplines, with scholars challenging the Western academic and popular association of the emotions with irrationality and biology and have insisted that the emotions are about social life rather than simply internal states (Lutz; Bendelow and Williams; Reddy). In other words, emotions constitute collective ways of acting and being shaped by the historically specific social structure and culture of a particular society, group, or community. British cultural materialist Raymond Williams coined the concept "structure of feeling" to define social experiences that are often not "recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating" (132). Since the most common modes of social analysis define the *social* as the known and reduce it to fixed forms, they tend to miss the tensions, shifts and uncertainties of feelings that constitute the living present. Williams argues that the alternative to these analytical reductions is not the silencing or disappearance of these complexities and tensions but a "kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material" (131). Thus lies the importance of examining masculinity through the lens of emotions: it enables us to see the material, cultural, and political circumstances that constrain men's lives, their responses to and against these constraints, and the emotional tensions that result therein.

In *The Gangster*, lê poignantly details the emotional tolls of living a life not of one's own design. Most poignant are the exquisite portraits of the haunted,

brooding father, whom she calls Ba,<sup>4</sup> “who cries in the garden every night” (27) and who is “sad and broken” (117). Ba’s sadness and brokenness often turn into hopeless rage for a father’s authority: “He becomes prone to rages. He smashes television, VCRs, chases friends and family down the street, brandishing hammers and knives in broad daylight” (116). “Growing up, there were nights when I would hear him staggering in the alley outside my bedroom window. I listened as he tackled the air, wrestled invisible enemies to the ground, punched his own shadow. Drunkenly, he would yell, ‘I’m not scared! Come out and fight me. I’m here!’” (100-101). At night, once his rage has subsided, he sits motionless in the dark for hours, “his body absolutely still, his hands folded on his lap, penitent ... straining toward things no one can see” (116).

## WAR, RACE, AND MASCULINITY

Ba’s rage bespeaks the aftermath of gender, race and global inequality. As subjects of U.S. war and imperialism, Vietnamese masculinity has to be understood within the context of U.S. war in and occupation of Southeast Asia. Americans first encountered Vietnamese men through war—and “largely through the trope of violence” (Chong 91). During the Vietnam War era, Vietnamese men appeared on American television news, in newspaper photographs, and in government pronouncements as ruthless and depraved Viet Cong or corrupt and inept South Vietnamese who were vicious in their disregard for human life (Chong 91). Both during and after the war, Vietnamese dead bodies were not accorded the same humanity and dignity given to American bodies. “From the American perspective,” argues Viet Thanh Nguyen, “the Vietnamese bodies must be dehumanized, de-realized, in order to allow for the humanization of the American soldier and the substantiation of *his* body and, through it, of American ideology and culture” (618). In this context, “Vietnamese Americans as refugees occupy the position of self-mourners because no one else mourns us” (Nguyen-Vo 170).

The depiction of Vietnam and its people as the “yellow peril” shaped American reception of Vietnamese refugees. In May 1975, soon after the arrival of the first wave of Vietnamese refugees, a Harris poll found that the majority of Americans did not welcome them: more than 50 percent of those polled felt that the refugees should be excluded; only 26 percent favored their entry. Five years later, a poll of American attitudes in nine cities revealed that nearly half of those surveyed believed that the refugees should have settled elsewhere. This poll also found that more than 77 percent of the respondents would disapprove of the marriage of a Southeast Asian refugee into their family and 65 percent would not be willing to have a refugee as a guest in their home (Espiritu, *Home* 206). As Sylvia Chong suggests, in American orientalism, Vietnamese refugees constitute an internal threat since they “could

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<sup>4</sup> “Ba” means “father” in Vietnamese.

not be digested by a body politic that desired to forget its participation in a failed imperialist endeavor” (103).

The defeat of South Vietnam battered Vietnamese masculinity, transforming them into fleeing refugees, boat people, and state-sponsored asylees. As a people without their *quê hương*, Vietnamese refugee men in the United States, cast by the media as incapacitated and demoralized objects of rescue, often found themselves at the mercy of white men who had been (re)positioned from defeated foes or allies to valiant rescuers of fleeing Vietnamese. The moment Ba, the four uncles,<sup>5</sup> and the narrator (a nameless six-year-old-girl) stepped off the airplane at San Diego International Airport, they turned into indebted refugees who had to appear appropriately grateful to their sponsor, Mel, who had reluctantly assumed responsibility for the group after the sudden death of his father, the original sponsor. As the six refugees crammed into the one bedroom in Mel’s house where they would all be sharing, they overheard Mel talking agitatedly to his mother; “the tone of their voices” troubled the new arrivals. Inside the crowded bedroom, furnished with two bunk beds and one double bed, the five grown men and young girl kept still, quietly pondering their new lives as Mel’s charges. As one of the uncles lay down on the bed, he “let his feet hang off the edge of the bed so he wouldn’t get the covers dirty” (7)—a telling sign of his/their distress about living in the borrowed space of another man’s home.

In the face of Mel’s evident discomfort in having “inherited a boatload of people” (6), Ba swallowed his unease and insisted to his four companions and his young daughter, who “heard without listening,” that “Mel was a good man” because he “had bought our way into the United States” (7). Because Mel had “opened a door” for them, Ba exhorted, we had to “thank him. And then thank him again” (7-8). But beneath this public deference to white masculinity and forced gratefulness to U.S. “generosity,” rage simmered. During that very first night in America, after exhorting the dispirited group to be grateful to Mel, Ba “climbed out the bedroom window and was sitting ... on the front lawn of the house staring at the moon like a lost dog, and ... crying” (8). Although Mel was oblivious to the anguish of his new charges, the young daughter noted intently that her Ba “cries in the garden every night” and that “nothing comes of it” ( 27)—an early lesson on the brutal aftermath of the U.S.-Vietnam encounter. In this scenario, Vietnamese men and their families, as the purported grateful refugees, constitute the human scenery deployed to confirm the superiority of white American middle-class way of life and the righteousness of America(ns) rescuing and caring for Vietnam’s “runaways” that erases the role that U.S. interventionist foreign policy and war played in inducing this forced migration in the first place.

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<sup>5</sup> The four “uncles” were fellow “boat people” who traveled with Ba and the daughter from Vietnam to San Diego. As the narrator explains, “Ba and I were connected to the four uncles, not by blood but by water” (3).

## DOWNWARD MOBILITY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

It is within this context—of war, displacement, and racism—that Vietnamese refugee men have had to carve out a place for themselves and their families in America. The economic status of the majority of Vietnamese Americans, especially of the post-1978 arrivals, is characterized by low-status minimum-wage employment, dependence on public assistance, and participation in the unstable informal economy (Gold and Kibria; Zhou and Bankston). As a predominantly working poor population with limited human capital and human resources, many of these refugees have resettled in low-income minority neighborhoods that have borne the brunt of governmental neglect, social isolation, and persistent poverty. Treated with disdain as subordinates in the racial hierarchy of U.S. society, many Vietnamese men—with backgrounds in farming or soldiering, limited education, and suffering the aftereffects of war, flight, and displacement—could not find suitable and steady employment (Gold and Kibria).

At the same time, the growth of female-intensive industries in the United States, particularly in the garment and microelectronics industries, has increased employment options for many Vietnamese women, even those with limited education, skills and English fluency (Kibria). In these labor-intensive industries, employers prefer to hire immigrant women over men because they believe the patriarchal and racist ideologies that women can afford to work for less, do not mind dead-end jobs, and more suited physiologically to certain kinds of detailed and routine work (Espiritu, *Asian* 89). Research on Vietnamese refugee masculinity has established that gender role reversals—wives' increased opportunities in the labor market and husbands' reduced economic and social status—have diminished men's patriarchal authority, forcing men to renegotiate their labor and social value within the family (Kibria). Men's inability to "be masculine," due to their unemployability and loss of status and power, places severe pressure on their sense of well-being, leading in some instances to sexual and other physical violence against their wives and children (Bui and Morash 192). In particular, former political detainees, like Ba, were more likely than other men to engage in physical and verbal abuse against their partners (Bui and Morash 202).

In *The Gangster*, *lê* depicts the family's arrival in the United States not as the end but as the beginning of story, poignantly detailing the main characters' struggles with living a life not of their own design. Cognizant of what Avery Gordon terms "the endings that are not over" (195), *lê* refuses to naturalize and privatize domestic violence among poor refugee families; instead, she shows how it is intimately linked to the violence of war, of urban neglect, and of poverty. The young narrator bemoans her parents' unfulfilled dreams and unfulfilling lives in America: "[Ma]<sup>6</sup> worked as a seamstress, doing piecework at our kitchen table. [Ba] worked as

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<sup>6</sup> "Ma" means "mother" in Vietnamese.



a welder at a factory that made space heaters. Neither of them wanted to be doing it; Ma wanted to have a restaurant, and Ba wanted to have a garden” (43). She *sees* their poverty intensely, in the rusted gates of their small red apartment building; and she *sees* how demeaning jobs and crushing poverty have contributed to her father’s hopeless fury, and her parents’ “big fight[s] about nothing” (66-67). During one of their fiery arguments, Ma ordered Ba not to touch her with his hands. “Ba clenched his hands into tight fists and punched the walls ... I see his hands punch hands punch hands punch blood” (92). These violent incidents indicate that the cost of institutional oppression is palpable not only in blocked opportunities but also in stunted relationships.

In the following scene that takes place in a runaway shelter, lê poignantly depicts the complexity of the father-daughter relationship, one that refuses to be privatized but calls into being the larger history and context of war, refugee resettlement, and chronic poverty:

Before I had run away for good, my father once came to pick me up at a shelter. As we sat in a conference with two counselors, he was asked if there was anything he wanted to say. He shook his head. When pressed, he looked down at his hands. He apologized for what his hands had done. The counselors understood this to mean he was taking responsibility for his drunken rages. They nodded in approval. But then he drew his palms together and apologized for all that his hands had not been able to do. He spread his hands wide open, and said, in Vietnamese, to anyone who could understand, there were things he had lost grasp of.

The room seemed to shrink in the face of his sorrow. Beside him the two counselors were like tight little shrubs no one had ever watered. I thought they had no right to frown at my father. I could not wait to get us out of there. I told the counselors that I was ready to go home. I remember crossing the parking lot, my hand in my father’s hand, the two of us running to the car as though we were escaping together again. (118-119)

In this excerpt, lê disrupts the widespread Western construction of patriarchy as particular to Asian culture, which freezes Asian immigrant men as always-already “subjects-who-perpetrate-violence,” and foregrounds the need to theorize and situate all forms of male violence (Mohanty 58). Stressing the intersection of race, gender, and class, she makes clear how gender differentiation and oppression is not a universal experience but is structured differently, depending on how it intersects with other inequalities such as race and class. Thus from their race and class vantage point, the two social service workers understand the gesture of the father as an apology for domestic violence—“for what his hands had done.” In contrast, the shamed father and daughter recognize that the apology is more for his inability to provide for his family—for what “his hands had *not* been able to do” (emphasis added). More than a cultural misunderstanding, the scene evinces a power struggle in which the feminist values of the American counselors are deemed universal while those of the powerless refugees are misrecognized—though not entirely silenced. The novel thus exhorts us to acknowledge that economic and social discrimination have locked many working-class men of color into an



unequal relationship with not only privileged white men but also privileged white women (Espiritu, *Asian*).

Facing the overbearing and patronizing social service workers, the daughter abruptly and protectively took her father's hand and both fled—away from the oppressive state system that threatened to further humiliate a man who has just apologized for what “his hands had not been able to do.” This scene encapsulates the parent-child role reversal common in immigrant families, yet another erosion of the father's authority in the domestic sphere: the night they left Vietnam, it was the father who carried the daughter down to the beach and placed her on the fishing boat; but now in America, it was the English-speaking daughter who freed the father from the prying bureaucrats in the shelter.

At the same time, this act—“of escaping together again”—moves the story beyond the familiar sociological trope of intergenerational conflict and deviant masculinity to one about joint lives. Although divided by generation, culture, and language, the father and daughter are connected by their shared histories as racialized and gendered refugees in the United States. The crises that have shaped the father, while unknown to and unheard by Mel and the social service workers, are deeply felt and lived by the daughter.<sup>7</sup> Having witnessed and braved these misfortunes alongside her father, the daughter's memories of him and their relationship contain a mixture of both tender as well as terrifying moments:

To protect myself, I tried to forget everything: that first night at the refugee camp in Singapore; those early morning walks after we arrived in America; the sound of his voice asking a question no one could answer; the shapes his fists left along a wall; the bruises that blossomed on the people around him; the smell of the fruit he brought home from the gardens he tended; the way the air seemed charged with memories of blood; the nets we fell through, faster and faster, year after year, dreaming of land. (117-118)

Out of the scraps of their lives, which include “early morning walks” as well as “bruises” and “memories of blood” as well as “smell of ... fruit,” a life lesson about surviving emerged: “It was my father who taught me ... how to keep moving even when a bone in the leg was broken or a muscle in the chest was torn” (100). It is the father's will to “keep moving” that enables the daughter to see him, however “sad and broken,” as one who is never utterly defeated: “His friends fell all around him ... first during the war and then after the war, but somehow he alone managed to crawl here, on his hands and knees, to this life” (103).

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<sup>7</sup> Cam Nhung Vu, in her analysis of this same scene, notes that she was also struck “by the imagery of the two holding hands and running together, an image that suggests their collusion, their togetherness and of course, the reference to the original escape” (143).



## “PEOPLE LARGER THAN THEIR SITUATION”

Having few recourses to change the conditions of their lives, many Vietnamese men, like Ba, “fold down, crumble into their own shadows” (122). And yet, lê writes that having managed “to crawl here,..., to this life,” Vietnamese are a “people larger than their situation” (122). Even when Ba tries to make himself small, “so that in the world there was very little left of him” (122), traces of him, as a virile “Buddhist gangster from the North,” persist in his wife’s gentle memories, in his daughter’s active imagination, and in his own “complex personhood” (Gordon 4).

Throughout *The Gangster*, lê intersperses depictions of the “sad and broken” father with recollections of the handsome and irreverent young man who courted his eventual wife with his “sharp profile” and a “handful of pebbles” (83). War intruded on their relationship, taking him from her at key moments in their married lives: the birth of their first born when he was at a military camp in South Vietnam, the death of their second child when he was detained in a “reeducation” camp, and the escape from Vietnam when he couldn’t find her anywhere in the chaos. And yet, in spite or perhaps *because* of these multiple separations, Ba and Ma “are always meeting for the first time, savoring the sound of a name, marveling at the bones of the face cupped by the bones of the hand” (82). For the daughter, the enraged father who sent her reeling to a runaway shelter coexists alongside the enigmatic young man who stares out of a black-and-white photograph, “in which he wears a hat of canvas camouflage cocked to one side. His expression is wary. His arms are crossed in front of him, bare and luminous, one hand balled into a fist” (103). In this picture, he is defiant: “what reveals him most is the will to give nothing away” (103). The figure of the once-fearless and swaggering lover/husband in South Vietnam rounds out the portrait of the angry and dispirited man in the United States, reminding us that Vietnamese have not always been “sad and broken,” and that they have led full and fulfilling lives in another time and place. As Avery Gordon tells us, “even those called ‘Other’ are never never that” (4).

Beside the brash gangster and the enraged husband/father, another form of masculinity percolates, as the father tends to the young daughter during his wife’s absence. As the daughter tells it, on their daily walks to school each morning, “we’d stand on the sidewalk and Ba would comb my hair with his fingers. Then he’d pull two barrettes out of his shirt pocket, push my hair away from my eyes, and gently snap the barrettes in place” (18). This tender gesture reminds us that all people, including those who live in the most dire circumstances, are beset by “contradictory humanity and subjectivity” (Gordon 4). Sometimes, they “get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles” (Gordon 4) but other times, they transform themselves. There lies the contribution of lê’s novel: it makes audible and visible the “noisy silences” and “seething absences” in Vietnamese life (Gordon 200), exposing the brutal conditions that constrain refugees’ everyday life but also revealing the possibilities of transformation that always lie therein.

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