UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Irony as a Critique of Nation-Building and as a Strategy for Survival in Modern Việt Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Trung Thanh Le

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The Dissertation of Trung Thanh Le is approved, and is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego
2024

DEDICATION

To bà ngoại, bố, mẹ, và em

To all the Việt people in the world of the past, the present, and the future

EPIGRAPH

Rừng núi dang tay nối lại biển xa
Ta đi vòng tay lớn mãi để nối sơn hà
Mặt đất bao la, anh em ta về
Gặp nhau mừng như bão cát quay cuồng trời rộng
Bàn tay ta nắm nối tròn một vòng Việt Nam
Trịnh Công Sơn "Nối vòng tay lớn"

From jungled hills to the distant sea
We reach our hands and form a giant circle to unite the mountain and the rivers
The land is vast, we now return
We meet each other, joyful like a sandstorm swirling in the sky
Our hands we join to make a complete circle of Việt Nam.
Trịnh Công Sơn "Joining hands to make a great circle of Việt Nam"

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NOTES ON NAMES AND TRANSLATION

Vietnam as a noun has two spellings throughout this dissertation. When I write it for my Vietnamese side in the dissertation, it is spelled Việt Nam, unless the English syntactical rules of inflection and derivation override my wish to express a somewhat Việt style of doubleness, multiplicity even, repetition, leakages, and contaminations of meanings. Việt Nam is therefore used when I wish the readers to feel the Việt language function not through inflections and derivations of syntax but rather through the doubling, compounding, and repeating of lexicon. When Việt people spell it, it will also be Việt Nam, unless they use other ways, which I respect and maintain verbatim. When non-Việt people use the term, I write Vietnam. Other inflections of Vietnam, including (non-)Vietnamese, Vietnamize, (non-)Vietnamese-ness, Sino-Vietnamese [Chữ Nôm] remain in English for convenience.

The term "Việt people" literally means the ethnic people of Viet living in the South in relation to their Northern neighbor China. In this dissertation, I use Việt people to refer to Vietnamese people. The relation to the South is implied and only stated explicitly when necessary. Vietnamese can either be spelled as Vietnamese or Việt language. Again, I use Việt language mostly, except when it is written by other writers or used in contexts that need clarity.

All translations from French and Việt language, unless otherwise cited, are mine. Some exceptions include citations from some of Kim Thúy's works translated into English by Sheila Fischman and Nguyễn Du's *Truyện Kiều* [Tale of Kiều] by Huỳnh Sanh Thông. Translations taken from other sources will be cited duly, but I make modifications to the translations when necessary.

My translations can be awkward and ungrammatical when judged in Standard English. This is because I want to keep the obscurity of *number* and *relation* inherent in the Việt language. Also, something can be lost in cultural translation, but in return, we enjoy defamiliarization.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

Trung Thanh Le

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

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Professor Shelly Streeby, Chair
Professor Erin Suzuki, Co-Chair

This dissertation identifies one trait it calls Vietnamese irony that helps to build the characteristics of Việt Nam and Vietnamese-ness. Throughout the immensely complex history of Việt Nam that involves colonization, settler colonialism, involuntary cultural assimilation, war, and globalization, a nation-state called Việt Nam was born in 1975 under the rule of the Communist Party of Việt Nam. A young, yet very old, nation seeking to define itself against its

pasts and futures, Việt Nam, this dissertation argues, employs irony as one of its methods in nation-building. Used by Việt people, irony also offers itself as a useful method of critique and a crucial strategy of survival. Via a limited selection of literary, visual, and historical texts, including Nguyên Ngọc's "Rừng Xà Nu," Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*, *The Complete Documents of the Communist Party*, Chế Lan Viên's poetry, Kim Thúy's *Ru*, Nguyễn Du's *Tale of Kiều*, and Vũ Ngọc Đãng's film *Lost in Paradise*, this dissertation attempts to trace some instances of irony as it surfaces in both the official writings and the lifestories of Việt subjects. The dissertation first argues for the usefulness of irony as a critical method in nation-making projects of Việt Nam and in self-making projects of subjects that call themselves Việt people. It then traces the strategic deployment of irony in the survival of Vietnamese refugees and Vietnamese sex workers. While both groups navigate between the borders of nationality and belonging, statelessness and homelessness, they also show their Vietnamese love of beauty and of life in their most ironic earnest ways that deserve attention.

Introduction

Theoretical Departures

"Hiểu sao hết 'Người đi tìm hình của nước'."
[How to understand completely 'He, the human being, who goes in search of the form of Water/Nation]
(Chế Lan Viên, "Người đi tìm hình của nước")

"[J]e me sens à ma place partout. Je suis comme l'eau : j'épouse la forme du contenant, sans savoir comment résister." (Kim Thúy, *À Toi* 78)
[I feel at home everywhere. I am like water: I espouse the form of the container, without knowing how to resist]

"Irony as the negative is the way; it is not the truth but the way." (Kierkegaard 327)

"The social revolution of the nineteenth century can only create its poetry from the future, not from the past." (Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte 149)

It is possible to read irony into the first quotation that I take from Vietnamese poet Chế Lan Viên's famous 1960 communist poem "He, the human being, who goes in search of the form of Water/Nation." It has been a cliché to note to global readers that in the Việt language, 'water' and 'nation' and 'homeland' rely on the same free morpheme for their signification. The human being here, generalized, capitalized, and masculinized, is Hồ Chí Minh, who in the poem is depicted as having devoted the younger years of his life to becoming a self-imposed exile in order to find a suitable form for his beloved country. The poem starts, "Việt Nam is an immeasurably beautiful country, but Uncle has to leave" [Đất nước đẹp vô cùng. Nhưng Bác phải ra đi] to find a form for his country so that it will not be lost, so that its golden past can be continued with its red future, and so that it can straighten its backbone from four thousand years of bending. Exiled to build a home, finding a home in exile, living at home elsewhere, and building a home of belonging right here in Việt Nam, Hồ Chí Minh perhaps can (be made to) serve as one among many exiled figures in a modern exiled Việt Nam. Indeed, reading the line with irony, one wonders if Hồ Chí

Minh can find a form for his nation, which is, like water, either fully formless or formed only when it is severely contained. The poem in no way shows any uncertainty that the leader of communist Việt Nam can find and has found one shape for his beloved water—communism—even though the poet himself has transformed endlessly until his dying days to reflect the many subsequent shapes that his country takes after the communists took over.[1] But, sometimes in the poem, the form of the nation is shown to be less solid—"not one poem written on the stones that carve human beings" [Không phải hình một bài thơ đá tạc nên người]—and more ideal: "at night he dreams of the nation/water, but during the daytime he sees its shape" [Đêm mơ nước, ngày thấy hình của nước] ("Người đi tìm hình của nước"). Has his journey to find the shape of Vietnamese waters been a Sisyphean journey, one in which the fruitlessness of the journey itself marks an impossible human attempt to defy the order(lessness) of things? After all, in the poem, it is strange that the ideal container of dreams that shapes his nation/water appears to hold only twenty-five million Việt Nam people. Where are the rest of the Vietnamese, not counted even in bodies, minds, and spirits, that help shape the form of their water?[2] This question and the poetry of Chế Lan Viên will be addressed in greater length in chapter two; for now, it is sufficient to evoke his masculine and patriotic poem in highlighting the problematics of nation-building colored in irony—intentional or not.

By mobilizing the English word 'form' to translate the Vietnamese word "hình" in Chế Lan Viên's line, I mean to give to the word the burden of excess of translation: in Việt language,

[1] See Nguyễn Bá Thành's *Thơ Chế Lan Viên với Phong Cách Suy Tưởng* for a fuller account of the changing life and thoughts of the poet. Nguyễn's book, however, dares not move Chế Lan Viên beyond the confines of communist ideology.

[2] The population of Việt Nam reported in 1960 for both the North and the South was 30.172.000 people. See Tổng điều tra dân số và nhà ở's "Quá trình thực hiện và kết quả sơ bộ" 25. http://portal.thongke.gov.vn/KhodulieuDanso2009/Tailieu/AnPham/BaoCaoSoBo/1_Baocao-sobo.pdf

hình—式 in Chinese—echoes a form, a shape or pattern [hình thù, hình hài], a formality, a system of rules or formulae [hình thức], a body form [hình thể], a shadow or image of a body [hình ảnh], a becoming, forming or taking shape [hình thành], a symbol/idol [hình tượng], an appearance, a description, an imitation [hình dung]. In Việt language, as in Chinese, meanings leak into each other and contaminate purism as each word has a meaning on its own but can couple, triple, and sometimes quadruple with other words to create related, expanded, and even contradictory meanings.[3] Calling Việt language an analytic and isolating language, as opposed to its synthetic others, may lead one to focus on the language's ability to break down into free morphemes and treat the language's compounds only as derivational morphology. Việt language words, somewhat like its Chinese roots, are free to form their own meanings and free to come together to form new alliances of meanings—even meanings that are contradictory to their individual components. 'Hình' in Việt language is both something shapeless, shadowy, becoming and something fixed, definite, and overwhelmingly symbolic. To chase after a *hình*, to catch a *bóng* [a shadow], as the Vietnamese saying goes [đuổi hình bắt bóng], is to follow something elusive.

Like other nations, Việt Nam has long been a nation longing for form: the historical text *Đại Việt Sử Kí Toàn Thư* [*Complete Annals of Đại Việt*], first published in 1479, is often mobilized by both early modern historians and communist historians to validate Việt Nam's 4000 years of history. History, always understood within the context of its mythical quality of origin and its politically charged intention, betrays the desire to build a definitive form out of time's disjuncture. Unlike many other nations, Việt Nam has invariably been coerced into finding an appropriate form too soon and too late by those who desire to separate and distinguish it from imperial powers—

[3] For a review on Chinese as the partial source of inspiration for Việt language, see Phạm and others's *Từ ngữ Hán Việt: Tiếp nhận & Sáng tạo* and Maspero's "Etudes sur la phonétique historique de la langue annamite." For other languages as sources of inspiration for Việt language, see Bùi and Vương's *Từ điển các từ gốc Âu Mĩ trong tiếng Việt*.

both ancient and modern—coming from the North or the West. As young communists, we were taught to think of two enemies: the ancient ones coming from the North [giặc phương Bắc] and the modern ones coming from the West [giặc Tây]. Việt Nam, the country of the Việt people coming from/to the South, is our name and our nation's name. The south has always been us, in our name, in our various demarcations of our own name further into north, center, and south [miền Bắc Việt Nam, miền Trung Việt Nam, miền Nam Việt Nam]. This name suggests a movement, a direction, and a relation between the Việt people, their neighbors, and the Earth rather than a fixed entity. If identity means something to Việt people, it is an identity as a unifying alliance rather than a fixed position. Việt Nam in its own name is a directional aspiration to look forward to in the future and an open promise for expanded understanding as much as it is a colonial desire to expand its own territory.

It is therefore even more ironic to contemplate upon the demand for fixed boundaries as Việt Nam went through wars, internal and external, throughout its history. This demand for an always-already pre-mature singular form presupposes the country's inherent risk of formlessness whereas the failure to remember its always-already formlessness forces all of the country's constitutive contradictions out of its formation. *'Irony' is what I encompassingly label these indelible traces of constitutive contradictions that are foreclosed along Việt Nam's consistent progress to its nothingness, or to its monolithic concept of nation and citizenship, as something more precious than independence and freedom.*[4] *Paradoxically, irony is also the methodology whereby those contradictions come together to create living spaces for those deemed not Vietnamese enough to enjoy the true meaning of their country's independence, freedom, and happiness.*

[4] Hồ Chí Minh's saying "Nothing is more precious than independence [and] freedom" [Không có gì quý hơn độc lập tự do], rendered more ironically famous in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*.

The irony of a nation longing for a form reflects the irony of its people longing for forms.[5] Vietnamese citizens are commonly taught that their fate is tightly bound up with the fate of their homeland. A nation of mountains and rivers produces a people of high mountains and deep oceans: the Vietnamese fairy mother of the mountains, Âu Cơ will raise half of one hundred sons in the mountains while the Vietnamese dragon father of the seas, Lạc Long Quân, will raise the other half at sea. The two help each other, protect each other, and together form the nation of the children of dragons and fairies. The marriage of land and water to give birth to a nation mirrors the marriage of the people to their ever-changing histories. The Việt people have learnt along the way how to literally cohabit with floods—[sống chung với lũ]—and how to adapt to the vicissitudes of time by wearing the Kasāya when they go with Buddha and by wearing paper clothes when they go with ghosts. People with ironic perspectives survive, talking about floods as if they are lovers that are destined to tolerate each other within a family.

Irony throughout this dissertation is divided into two broader categories. When it is mobilized as a method of reading to investigate a political longing to form a nation, it is often best utilized as a critical tool to open relations already foreclosed. Such mobilization of irony as a method of critique of the construction of a nation named Việt Nam and a masculine self born out of it will be showcased in chapters one and two respectively. On the other hand, when it is mobilized as a method of reading to highlight a political desire to survive through the disjuncture of time and space, irony shows great promise in drawing attention to the strength of will and the

[5] I echo so far Timothy Brennan's famous essay "The National Longing for Form" in Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration.* It is important to note here two cursory remarks from the article. First, in Brenna's words, "the 'nation' is precisely what Foucault has called a 'discursive formation'—not simply an allegory or imaginative vision, but a *gestative political structure* which the Third World artist is consciously building or suffering the lack of" (46-7). Second, "the idea that nations are invented has become more widely recognized in the rush of research following the war" (49). See similar ideas in Benedict Anderson's famous *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Anderson's text is welcome in Vietnam, with its translation *Những cộng đồng tưởng tượng* published in 2019.

immense source of life that its subjects possess. As such, irony as a life-sustaining and life-producing method for subjects of refugees outside Việt Nam and modern sex workers inside Việt Nam will be covered in chapters three and four.

Kim Thúy's self-observation of the link between her personal life and the life of a nation she is still connected to is showcased in the second quotation that welcomes the reader's entry into this introduction. In feeling like water/nature, Kim Thúy refers to a common characteristic of many Việt people and of their own nation: the ability to *feel* and *be* at home anywhere that is not home. Active in, or perhaps against, her own container, Kim Thúy and her nation refuses to give up agency, the choice to face adversities in their own way. Việt Nam as such is not denying the delimiting influence of a subjection to imperial powers that lasted for at least a thousand years, but it refuses to give up its voice altogether, the interrogating voice that gives shape to what it is. Indeed, its limitations define what it is. What is against Vietnamese defines what Vietnamese is. In this manner, world-historical irony is entangled with, engendering and engendered by, human subjects of irony.

By writing that she feels "at home everywhere," Kim Thúy makes a conscious and playful attempt to mirror the nature of her nation/water: "I am like water" because I bond with, get married to, and am at one with my container. What can be simultaneously more treacherous and patriotic than this claim? To claim for a home everywhere is too easily associated with the elevated spirit of a broken soul that replaces its inability to find a home anywhere with being at home everywhere. Such a claim is not so much anti-national as it is transnational, for it appeals to the permeability and prevalence of the concept-metaphor of home rather than denying any concrete existence of a specific home. And yet, to claim that she is acting like water/nation, Kim Thúy echoes not just Việt Nam as a nation, but the concept of nation itself as easily and—almost always already—a

contained form. To be a citizen, to belong to a nation, then is to be limited by its container. If a nation is like water and like its citizens, the container is that very limiting ideology, the mold that holds the nation with its protean and proliferative nature. For water to turn into a nation, and for a nation to hold its water, a container is both needed and resisted. The attitude here is one of a resistance marriage without the pre-made know-how. A Việt person wanders in the dark, wondering what a home and a nation constitute, sometimes going with the flow of history, sometimes resisting it, never fully aware of what needs to be done. And without that know-how, a home is made.[6]

This dissertation begins with irony because, I believe, it marks a useful way, among many others, for Vietnamese subjects to identify themselves; it does not end with irony, for to end with irony is to end with an absence of truth. First, it maintains that to ironize Việt Nam is as important as to Vietnamize irony. To ironize Việt Nam entails unearthing all the contradictions that are bound together, violently foreclosed, and therefore turned into objects seemingly impossible to be woven together. These objects exist within the plane of historical happenings—the stories without official historicization and therefore public commemoration—that human beings live through, whether or not they are conscious of them, and whether or not they hold more or less power to narrate official histories. To see Việt Nam ironically is to see a fuller picture of Việt Nam in its contradictory historical realities.

Irony is not a word easily translated into the Việt language, not because the Việt people do not know irony, but rather because irony is so ubiquitous and various in their lives that they have

[6] One by all means should not mistake this strategic view of nationality as an indicator of an absence of its oppressive nature. That home everywhere that a Vietnamese refugee feels, if one turns to a more critical and serious note, may also refer to the ironic power of the state over those who have been cast as stateless. See's Butler and Spivak's *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging*. For instance, Butler states, "those who have become effectively stateless [are] still under the control of state power. In this way, they are without legal protection but in no way relegated to a 'bare life': this is a life steeped in power" (8-9).

countless words to denote it. Irony can mean *trớ trêu* [to curse, confuse, or sadden], *châm biếm* [sarcasm], *đa đoan* [full of twists and turns], *mâu thuẫn* [paradox], *mỉa mai* [subtle criticism]. To theorize a condition of life is challenging enough, but to theorize the complexity of life itself is indeed impossible. On the surface level, irony takes place when there is a difference between reality and appearance, between what is and what appears. On a deeper level, irony is born out of cosmic realities that contradict each other without cancelling them out. Irony as such is closest to *mâu thuẫn* in the Việt language.

The compound noun, *mâu thuẫn*, like many others in Việt language, has a story to tell. *Mâu* is the pike, or 矛 in Chinese, and thuẫn is the shield, or 盾. The story starts off by the people's impossible question that shows their cruel curiosity: if we use a pike that can pierce anything against a shield that cannot be pierced through, which one breaks? Separate, the pike and the shield are truths on their own, complete and immaculate. The vendor can of course sell the penetrating pike over there and the impenetrable shield over here and make a profit for himself, but doing so must necessitate cutting off their impossible relations, their veins, the fragile string that connects them. And the story shows another way of cutting off their impossible relations: by turning them into enemies. But relations are never really off. Without a *thuẫn*, the best pike of the world will lie until it rots, losing its identity and its purpose; and without a *mâu*, the best shield of the world knows no passive glory. They're supposed to be together. They are forbidden love, forbidden to love, and taught to love being forbidden. Because if they are really together, they perform wonders: they give birth to a new concept, a new vision of constitutive contradictions, an irony, 矛盾, *mâu thuẫn*. Together, they haunt the world, not each other. They taunt the world just by standing side by side. And they inspire stories of love, not of annihilation. It is precisely this coming together of the pike and the shield that forces an exit of language and an appeal to language.

In the story, the claims made by the duplicitous vendor that he sells both an unbreakable shield and an all-penetrating pike are challenged and defeated by logic: the two cannot exist simultaneously. But out of it is born a new world of irony. The readers often accuse the vendor of making absolute truths incompatible with each other. But we forget to blame the audience, who forces *mâu* and *thuẫn* to break each other, just to prove their point that the world does not entertain a paradox, an irony, or a contradiction. How cruel can the audience be? To tell *mâu* and *thuẫn* to try and destroy each other, to tell them that their only purpose in existing is to destroy each other is cruel. But together, they form an un-reason-able idea, a love: they are opposites that love to come together to make something in common. In their dance, not fight, *vũ*, not *võ*, 武, they blend into each other, forever (in Chinese, the word for dancing and fighting is the same). I always wonder why the audience cannot see that in their dance, neither is destroyed. The perfect *mâu* obviously needs a perfect *thuẫn*. What else can they dance with and not break? The one that destroys needs the one that cannot be destroyed. And the one that cannot be destroyed needs a partner to challenge it forever. Undoing in the face of being, and being in the constant threat of undoing is a love ironic by nature. Irony in the Việt language carries this je-ne-sais-quoi with it.

To ironize Việt Nam is by no means to imply that Việt Nam is not inherently an ironic space and therefore requires an imposition of irony upon it. The work of ironizing the histories of Việt Nam is rather premised on what Kierkegaard argues, "irony has a world-historical validity," which stems precisely from irony's ability to speak silence before truth: "Truth demands silence before it will raise its voice, and [the subject of irony] was to bring about this silence" (210-11). Even though I highlight the need to read Việt Nam's history ironically, I do not suggest that anything ironic about Việt Nam arises purely out of a critical disposition to read it that way. In that manner, ironizing Việt Nam works negatively: before any affirmative construction of historical

concepts and theories to name what Việt Nam is, ironizing Việt Nam brings to the surface recalcitrant phenomena not immediately compatible with any systematic way of recognizing them. In other words, irony re-activates what Foucault labels subjugated knowledges: "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (82).

The resistant slippage between historical existences and their conceptualization is well-documented. On the one hand, no historical existence should become so reductive as to "[fall] away from the idea"; on the other hand, no historical existence, even the whole sum of all historical existences, can positively play medium to the idea, whose nature consists of "temporality and fragmentariness . . . that long for the backward-looking repulse emanating . . . from the consciousness" (11). As water/nation and its container show, sometimes an idea does not help existences due to their incompatible natures. In other words, as the story of Việt people becoming communist given below will reveal, there is a gap called silence between a people existing before the label "communist" comes to them and reduces them by giving them a substance of an idea from which they cannot escape easily and to which they cling for an identitarian relation. That gap called silence can be surfaced by recognizing irony as an appropriate mode of living life.

To Vietnamize irony, on the other hand, is to situate a worldly phenomenon historically and locally. The history of Việt Nam is a highly condensed version of world history as long as the latter is defined as a recording of epiphanic crises—of tropes, of twists, and of turns—stretched across vast expanses of times and places, engendered from the interests of colonization, imperialism, militarism, globalization, and neoliberalism. Indeed, Việt Nam ranks among the few nations that have been colonized for thousands of years. For instance, its linguistic burden-cum-

treasure testifies that enabling violence: what nation, over the past one hundred and seventy years, was swept away by the tongues of Chinese, of Sino-Vietnamese, of Vietnamese, of French, of Russian, and now of (American) English? Six tongues in one mouth—at least five out of six descending from imperial powers—speaking oftentimes the contradictory demands of their mother-nations indeed shape the rich and scarred Vietnamese mouth and its discordant sounds clinging to Việt Nam to connect them all. Language therefore is already a highly contested terrain for Vietnamese-ness. A condensed version of a kind of world history that, in Paul Fussel's suggestive wording, no longer knows its own innocence lays bare the ironic conditions of a larger phenomenon that in turn transcends time and space.[7] Irony, with its "dynamics of hope abridged," haunts memories without teaching a lesson in reading better for the future (Fussell 14). So to learn from the historical ironies of Việt Nam is to inherit a lesson that, to echo the Other of US named Martin Luther King Jr., goes beyond Vietnam, "beyond national allegiances" and "beyond the calling of race or nation or creed."

To Vietnamize irony is also an aspiration to provide content for the historical container haunted by and filled with past ghosts. It is to make Việt Nam new again, by emptying it again of spirits and filling it again with unmediated ghosts. The reader may feel irony is out of touch with past or contemporary Vietnamese identities in many cases, and that feeling is no doubt justifiable. As Marx claims, "the social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future" (12), irony sets itself up for the task of cleaning inchoate contents and preserving the protean form for the future. It works with the double, and therefore doubly dangerous, assumption that Vietnamese history is too full to include other histories, precisely when

[7] Fussell refers to this loss of innocence and the rise of irony as a distinction between the Great War and World War II, in both of which, of course, Việt Nam and its soldiers played a part. See Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*. For Việt Nam's less known involvement in World War I, see Kimloan Hill's "Sacrifice, Sex, Race: Vietnamese Experiences in the First World War."

it refuses to turn the mirror upside down to admit that it is also at the same time too empty because of its lack of contradictions in its official histories told by all sides. Irony works when it allows contradictory content to be blasphemed into the past and future of Việt Nam.

An ironic Việt Nam is to be painted under a critical eye and within the silenced voices of (his)stories. Those voices come from human beings rather than mere official documents, even though those voices require the contrast and the masquerade of official documents to manifest the irony inherent within them. Those human beings can be truly abject Việt people, who are forced into other discomfiting labels of circumstances like *Cộng Sản* [Communists], boat people, national traitors, *Việt Cộng*, *Việt Minh*, puppet soldiers [lính ngụy]. They can also be people once wielding immense power to enact decisions on the national scale, the Việt people whose voices are silenced in multifaceted ways—be it the way of circumstances, of fate, of higher groups of power, or of their own ignorance and unfounded fears. The ironic project of seeing an ironic Việt Nam is precisely to risk offending by op-posing, or re-sur-facing, or con-fronting the humanness in all sides of histories, without removing the responsibility of any.[8] It is the double bind of what Spivak names "an intended mistake," to collapse all sides for a moment to reveal complicity all the while acknowledging the existence of secondary differences, hierarchies, structural and systematic mis-organization of politicalized lives. Such an intended mistake is meant to force foreclosed contradictions open; it is "a(n) (ab)-use that makes room for justice, because it takes away for the absoluteness of guarantees and secures it from the mordant satire of a *Candide*" (Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education* 21). That all sides are silenced by the ironic situations in Việt Nam is something to elaborate on in the next part of this introduction; a critical reading of the whispers and murmurs of those who suffer from losses of any kind, be it personal, national, familial,

[8] To write multi-perspectivally is not to valorize, but to offer a richer version of a human life. That version is often anti-valorizing and critical, indeed. See, for instance, Evyn Lê Espiritu's "Who Was Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn?"

political, or ideological, and those who decide the nation's fate will hopefully render them more visible in chapter three. For now, suffice it to say that official powers do not exempt subjects in the office from being silenced.

Consequently, the primary materials—the silenced voices that tell stories so that we may see them, to echo Socrates—of this paper for an ironic Việt Nam do not just come from groups of subjects circumscribed within limiting labels of the abject but also come from groups normally characterized as representative of the Vietnamese governments on all sides. What these two groups share are their silenced stories that beg for an understanding. Their sufferings, displaced across time and space, can only connect them as long as they are ironically bound together. A conciliatory tone, such as that of this paper, risks both a token of self-betrayal and a foolish hope for that lovely doctrine that teaches one to love one's neighbor—coded one's enemy—as one continues to love God—coded an ideology.

A study of irony and Việt Nam requires both the personal and the historical, both the anecdotal and the academic, both the fictional and the archives, and both a comfortable feeling of arriving home and a destabilizing fear of not recognizing home upon one's arrival. In other words, this dissertation limits itself to seeing human subjects (some having no power throughout their lives and some having had and lost it in different moments in their lives) and to analyzing what they have to say about the ironic conditions that make modern Việt Nam what it is. Adopting this narrow perspective is not tantamount to ignoring or playing down the instrumentality of systemic structures, ideological hierarchy, institutional power, or collective identification in affecting real, lived lives; rather, it is to locate a possibility of resistance by highlighting the fact that those paradigms are human-based and therefore susceptible to human intervention. Indeed, chapters one and two address directly those powers inherent in the politics of populism and in the Việt language

under communism. Irony after all offends by making distinctions where there should be none and equivalencing enmities when there are erected boundaries. A methodology always out of time and place, irony calls itself home as long as it remains a useful traitor by prioritizing singularized histories from below, from particularized and silenced voices of those with or without power, and from particularities that defy grand-scale theorization, schematization, and even textualization. Always out of time and space, irony calls home whichever space it works most to betray and unravel. Exiled and homeless—these are the two conditions for irony to be at home with itself. It therefore serves any subjects that find themselves cast out, played down, or mis-represented in histories.

First, to work with irony means to work with particularities rather than universalities. Irony resists thematization because it is helpful with the localized, singularized, unsystematizable, and sometimes the un-verbalizable.[9] Second, the intricate link between the phenomenon and the concept, the subjects and history, actualities of being-there and concepts of what-being-there does not negate a prioritization of the formers in those binary oppositions. With irony, Kierkegaard rightly argues, "subjectivity asserts its rights in world history for the first time" in its emptying mode, *being contentless precisely by being full of styles* (*The Concept of Irony* 242). With a persistent attempt to locate irony within the phenomenal, the subjective, and the actual, Kierkegaard activates the historical in the ironic and justifies the former as a position on its own in and before theory.

[9] Irony therefore is also ethical in the sense that it aims towards the universal condition of life as inherently non-universalizable, a condition that is categorically anti-normative. In his more mature age, Kierkegaard would criticize his own view of Socrates in the following manner: "Influenced as I was by Hegel and whatever was modern, without the maturity really to comprehend greatness, I could not resist pointing out somewhere in my dissertation that it was a defect on the part of Socrates to disregard the whole and only consider numerically the individuals. What a Hegelian fool I was! It is precisely this that powerfully demonstrates what a great ethicist Socrates was" (qtd. in *Concept of Irony* 453).

This dissertation is never about recording truly subalternized histories, although it aspires towards them and builds upon those genuine silences that haunt. Its failure is precisely that: to never fully arrive at recording silenced voices that it so much wishes to do. It is therefore only more appropriate to remind oneself here that for every story that is unearthed, thousands of other stories are buried deep within the land, the sea, in the jungles, down below the rivers, and scattered across the winds. It is precisely ironic to claim representative power of an ironic Việt Nam and its subjects because irony is all about silence that must speak so that it can be seen. Here, I am interested in advancing an active, receptive mode of reading irony as a way to speak some partial and silenced truths rather than in excavating irony to claim that it has always been there, subalternized and unrepresentable. The corollary of this reading mode is that it highlights how precarious the subaltern as a subject position is: as the Vietnamese saying goes, human subjects always live lives in which sometimes they get to rise to the elephants and sometimes lower to the dogs [lên voi xuống chó]. Wars turn things upside down, be it social classes, hierarchy, institutionality, history, tradition, or nationality. Such sudden tropes, or catastrophes, require irony to work them out in a comprehensible, if not systemic, manner. Irony therefore carries a twofold task in this dissertation: it is a tool of critique of dominant nation-building schemes and it is a survival tool of subjects from below.

Before the dissertation's proper start in chapter one, I include in this introduction anecdotes related to my own histories, some of which I did not come to know before embarking upon this project. In that sense, they are subalternized to me, and absolutely subalternized for everyone else, simply because they are so common that they lose their exemplarity to be worth telling. After all, subaltern individuals—rather than subaltern groups—on the margins of history attest also to the abrupt shifting of margins from center and to center, as well as of one margin to yet another. Here,

at least two definitions of the subaltern can be glimpsed from Spivak's works: first, they constitute the referents out there as those defined as inhabiting a space of identificatory difference (Spivak, *A Critique* 272). Second, the concept refers to groups and individuals with subalternity as their qualitative determination whose antinomy lies in its necessarily ironic purpose: the injunction to systematize a group that cannot be systematized and the need to systematize a group so that political acts can be activated, hence the infamous conclusion that the subaltern cannot speak.[10] Along with the lumpenproletariat, the subaltern is identified always with a mismatch, suggesting an impossibility of identification and an injunction to further identification. In Spivak's works, two women-figures were mobilized to represent the subaltern and subalternity: an intended mistake that opens further identification. In this paper, the subaltern are the people defined by the negative of ironic histories, or by the 'non' prefixes of identities: non-communist, non-Southern Vietnamese, non-Northern Vietnamese, non-central Vietnamese, non-living, non-class, non-theories, and non-Historical with a grand H. We are a people, living in a country whose histories were swept beneath our feet and whose identificatory labels rain down on us like golden dreams of peace that dazzle and wound. Staying still in an ever-changing world does not guarantee that one stays the same—another ironic lesson that Việt people know quite well.

Activating Historical Irony

"[Water] was healing only when it was agitated."
(Kierkegaard 17)

This dissertation aims to identify a Vietnamese characteristic, something that perhaps marks Việt people and Việt Nam as different. It selects works produced by Việt people from the 1930s to the early 2000s, a period of tumultuous change both in the world and within Việt Nam

[10] See Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak."

that marks the foundation of Hồ Chí Minh's Indochinese Communist Party in 1930, Việt Nam's declaration of independence in 1945 at the end of World War II, the Vietnamese struggle against the return of the French colonial powers, the splitting of Việt Nam into North and South at the Geneva conference of 1954, the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam in 1955, the rise and fall of American involvement in the Vietnam War, the end of the Vietnam War and the merging of the North and South into the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam, the waves of Vietnamese boat people after the war, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet bloc, the Vietnamese-Chinese border conflicts, and the post-socialist neoliberal Việt Nam after the 1986 reform up until the modern day. It reframes history via two routes: the contextual history of Việt Nam as ironic and the anecdotal stories of Việt people as ironic subjects. Both routes include the same type of materials: stories, deeply personal and highly charged with affect and irony. The first contextualization of Việt Nam as a location of irony serves to provide justification to read the figure of refugee as a subject of irony. Even though irony is omnipresent in general life, I do argue that the fraught situation of Việt Nam—a situation of constant crises, ongoing wars, and endlessly internal and external conflicts—facilitates a reading of irony into being.

Those stories offer a fuller account of Việt Nam and Vietnamese refugees that is at heart contradictory, multivalent, and therefore full of life. They invite non-fun laughter in the wake of excruciating pain, they invite a touching of the others precisely when touching offends, and they invite a reconsideration of a broader view of those who have been for quite long narrowed down to the title of Vietnamese refugees and boat people. Such a reconsideration is more than ever timely because human beings are always more than what their labels suggest, especially those they do not make unto themselves and because what confronts and characterizes Vietnamese subjects is not

identificatory titles but their continued *shared* experience of displacement, statelessness, and literal deaths on the one hand—mobility, transculturation, and survival on the other.

In November 2019, Việt people were consumed by sadness over the case of thirty-nine dead "box people," who asked—at an exorbitant price and always a wealth of gratitude—their country fellow traffickers to transport them to the United Kingdom. Their journey to paradise ended in hell: with heaven in mind and hell all over their bodies, they all perished—"luckily" because in the very least they had a chance to text home to their loved ones and to tell them that they wanted to be buried home, to follow tradition. Stories covered in Western newspapers are not new because they are all cast within the old framework of "boat people": the central part of Việt Nam is poor; they are young and desperate people who want to escape for a better life so that their family at home can enjoy economic prosperity in terms of remittances; and as always, their peregrination highlights the oppressive nature of the Communist Party and its utter incapacity to improve the material lives of the people. Sui-Lee Wee from *The New York Times* does not fail to quote a popular South Vietnamese saying about the exiled electricity pole during the horrifying periods of economic centralization in South Việt Nam immediately after 1975: "Nếu cây cột đèn mà biết đi chắc nó cũng đã bứng đất mà đi mất" [if the electric pole could walk, it would uproot itself from the soil and walk away from Việt Nam].[11]

I take the story personal, not just because they are my people, but because thanks to our common container, I can more easily imagine myself in their position; I take the conflicting attitudes towards them with pain, because they range from seriously condemning to endlessly empathetic. What seems to be a series of puzzling irony is explained away with some coherent narratives under the umbrella topics of poverty, communist reign, human greed, idealistic dreams,

[11] See Sui-Lee's New York Times article "Britain Hasn't Named 39 Dead in a Truck. But in Vietnam, They Know."

human trafficking, or thoughtless youth—the majority of them are quite young, two of the youngest being 15 years old.[12] Few would highlight the age-old inconsistencies and treat them seriously as those belonging to an ironic Việt Nam.[13] Some of those inconsistencies are as follows: (1) Việt Nam is developing at one of the fastest rates in the world, yet the majority of its citizens do not enjoy the fruits of economic prosperity, (2) the poor victims who could, or had to, borrow around 10,000 to 50,000 dollars to pay the traffickers come from Nghệ An, a region where the monthly average earning is around 132 dollars,[14] and yet they still decided to invest it all in no other way but going abroad to work illegally, (3) they all knew the risks, and they still wanted to leave the country for a while to earn enough to return home: their lives seemed to count for less than did the possibilities coming from that place beyond Việt Nam, and (4) ironically, the food truck container that contained them, those who left with a dream to make their homeland more prosperous and to make themselves successful dreamers, suffocated and froze them to death—this container appeared too much to take in for a people who left, following their Hồ Chí Minh, to search for a form to their water. To characterize their story, one can write them as a people who dreamed: they dreamed the good dreams in the day and lived the bad dreams in the night.

While I do believe that Việt Nam, with its short periods of violent transitions, gives rise to ironic movements, ironic human beings, and ironic political consequences, I also believe that it requires a deliberate act of reading to make irony surface because there have been attempts to suppress ironies and to favor more linear and smooth narratives of progress. Conditioned by the government's utopian rhetoric of communism, any signs that contradict the image of a progressive

[12] See Radio France Internationale (rfi)'s "Trial of 19 People Accused of Involvement in Vietnamese Migrant Lorry Tragedy Opens in Paris."
[13] See Trần Thị Lam's poem "Đất nước mình ngộ quá phải không anh" [Our country is so funny, isn't it] for an instance of a critical list of ironic situations in Việt Nam.
[14] See the article "Nghệ An có thu nhập bình quân đầu người theo tháng hơn 3,6 triệu đồng"

and prosperous Việt Nam to come are to be cast aside. Indeed, Việt Nam is a country fraught with ironies and therefore it lends itself easily to readings of irony because its promised future is always too good for its reality. From Nguyễn Du's *Truyện Kiều* [Tale of Kiều] with its balanced struggle between cosmic irony and human agency to numerous modern poems created online to reflect the modern conditions of the society, Việt people learn to associate their nation with *lạ lắm* [absurdity], *trớ trêu* [ironic twists in ways of life], *dở khóc dở cười* [half crying half laughing]. One of the most popular shows in modern Việt Nam —*Gặp nhau cuối năm* [An End-of-the-Year Gathering] is the precise combination of the satiric and the comic into a sort of tragi-comedy in which the comic is rendered stronger an element than the tragic. The show, aired in the evening of the last day of the lunar year, summarizes major national political scandals and turns them into laughing stocks for the audience. Its proposed content is always heavily censored, but what gets through to the audience is also quite bold and forward. One wonders whether the mild tone of irony, the ending with an optimistic outlook on the tomorrow during Tết, and the branding of the show as comedy helps it pass through censorship without compromising its critique or neutralizing it to the extent that the audience will enjoy it but it will have no consequence afterwards.

These cases hopefully demonstrate that irony as a source of tragi-comedy is a ubiquitous phenomenon in Vietnamese lives. More importantly, it is as such not necessarily a useful tool for critique or revolution, at least not without an active agent of reading. Yet, its potential to do harm for being either too overt, or ironically enough, too covert, is always duly noted by its critics.[15] Irony then contains what Linda Hutcheon calls a "transideological politics," neither useful nor harmful in itself, either useful or harmful depending on its interpretation, application, and

[15] See, for instance, Thomas Mann's *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* for a deep divide between irony and politics, Vaheed Ramanazi's *The Free Indirect Mode: Flaubert and the Poetics of Irony*, or David Kaufer's ""Ironic Evaluations." Either writing for or against irony, all critics warn of its danger.

intention. As an epistemological or ideological position, irony as a specific outlook on life and as a specific response to life is located beyond the binary oppositions of right or wrong, dangerous or safe, reactionary or progressive (Hutcheon 10). Its potential use-value, I argue, lies strictly in the act of reading: reading for critique and reading for life.

But despite its trans-positionality and its readiness to be co-opted by all conflicting forces, irony can be, perhaps more than Hutcheon would want to highlight it, *political*. To argue for its transideological politics does not negate its political nature. My stance is precisely this: irony is political, in a broader sense of the word, because it can be read as a critique of a type of either/or politics that refuses to acknowledge constitutive contradictions, foreclosed involvements, and denegated complicity. The fact that irony as a political tool used by all sides to either consolidate or question "established attitudes" betrays the inherent links between those sides rather than irony's impotence as a critical tool (Hutcheon 10). Indeed, irony betrays itself by becoming politics precisely when it is "performed in the service of life" (Conway & Seery 2). Life requires irony to be political.

The consequences of both acknowledging that irony has a political dimension and that its political dimension is easily co-opted by all conflicting sides are twofold. First, irony requires engagement rather than detachment from all parties concerned, especially those that need it the most. Because "there are *always* going to be potential problems with *any* use of irony" (Hutcheon 14) and because "between the intended irony that goes unperceived and the unintended that becomes irony by being perceived, there is room for many kinds and degrees of misunderstanding, misfire, and fizzle, as well as of understanding and complicity" (Chambers 19). Irony is never to be left alone or forgotten. Indeed, Kierkegaard contends, "[e]ven though one must warn against irony as against a seducer, so must one also commend it as a guide" (327).

Irony is not automatically a positive force born out of and aimed towards the good, the living, and the true. The more proper view of irony is that it is something neutral towards its targets—with more potential for harm than good—that can be used either destructively or constructively. To be more specific, it is a neutral force in terms of its targets, but never in terms of its nature. In other words, irony can be mobilized towards all ends, but its nature as one of being edgy and critical is hardly neutral. Irony then, left alone by people of good will and employed by people of bad will, effectively falls into the abuse of people of ill will. Political neutrality as a position is never a twofold either/or game. There exist three possibilities, two negative and one positive: irony can be (1) utilized, (2) left alone, or (3) abused. Only the first among these three possible actions promises to bring about positive effects. People must use irony, not just live with it.[16]

This political potential latent within irony is what Hutcheon calls an edge and sometimes a sting; to ignore this edge of irony or its "wide and complex range of affective possibilities" proves risky for any "discussion of the politics of irony" (14-15). According to her, irony "always has a 'target'" and sometimes "a 'victim'," hence its cutting edge (15). But it is more accurate for me to maintain that irony can always be targeted towards something, someone, or at least some entity. Irony itself does not have a prior target; rather, irony becomes irony when it is attached to some entity we name a target or even a victim. This explains why in situational ironies we have victims—or active participants as players within the ironic situations—without clear targets, whereas in verbal ironies we may have targets who do not perceive themselves as victims. In its potential and applications, it reserves the promise to sting everything and be edgy everywhere, hence its frequent inappropriateness and constant abuse. The problem, and potential, of irony lie

[16] The same approach to time is voiced in King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." The message is similar: people must use time, not wait with time, and they must use irony, not live with irony.

precisely in what Kierkegaard would call "a negatively liberating activity," a liberating activity that takes liberation as an end in itself and asks for no further purpose (123). Uncontrolled irony, especially that of Socrates, is that stinging gadfly that stimulates the lazy horse: it makes the horse move without giving a definite direction, all the while pushing in all directions (Kierkegaard 95). Irony, in other words, denies the trait of inevitability and invites deep, critical engagement—no one should wait with irony; one works with irony.

Second, I join Hutcheon in highlighting the *interpretative* and *contextual* sides of making irony happen. Even in her reluctance to valorize irony in any socio-politico-historical struggle, Hutcheon can be made to join with Kierkegaard in the importance of locating irony within a world-historical actuality, a world worded in texts and beyond texts in persons. Because an admission of ironic intention on the ironist part may work to undermine the effects of irony, the ironist rarely leaves more than traces and clues; and because any interpretative work that assigns ironic intention to the ironist is largely influenced by the reader, to claim for the overt intention of the ironist to be ironic is to masquerade the covert intention of the reader in reading irony into being. Indeed, "irony isn't irony until it is interpreted as such—at least by the intending ironist, if not the intended receiver" (Hutcheon 6). Hutcheon will go even further to claim that "the attributing of irony to a text or utterance is *a complex intentional act on the part of the interpreter*, one that has both semantic and evaluative dimensions, in addition to the possible inferring of ironist intent (from either the text or statements by the ironist)" (13, emphasis added). For her, irony is motivated regardless of the ironist intention, and the decision to activate it is purposeful (43). In this direction, it becomes less important to attribute irony to the intention of its maker, much less to the possibility of comprehension on the part of its targets, than to the active engagement of any interpretative agent. Indeed, situational ironies, a category that is not the focus of Hutcheon's text, do not always

contain a target as do verbal ironies, even though there are active participants who play an integral part in making those situational ironies *happen*. Here, I do not find it fitting to call these active participants victims of ironic fate. As we shall see, their attitudes, if not actions, suggest that they are more than just victims in their lives that are sometimes beyond their control. In other words, victims of fate can opt to retain their power of choice.[17]

That irony depends on the figure of an interpreter does not mean that it is not context-based. The possibility of detecting cases of irony lies in what Hutcheon calls "discursive communities" within which humans operate: "it is less that irony creates communities, then, than discursive communities make irony possible in the first place . . . [therefore] the more the shared context, the fewer and the less obvious the markers needed to signal—or attribute—irony [we need]" (17-18). And because humans all live in overlapping discursive communities, they give birth to a wonderful and oftentimes conflicting and confusing number of ironic interpretations to the same situation.

If irony is activated within discursive communities, it relies more on *echoes* of arbitrary associations—whether cultural, historical, ideological, experiential, or oppositional—than on strict contraries. Indeed, irony suggests something differential in both the Saussurean and Derridan sense rather than two contraries of 'what is' as opposed to 'what is not.' This differential quality of irony assumes that all ironic meanings possess a relational quality that binds irony's actors within a relationship that is always asymmetrical in power but equally necessary in their roles to make irony happen.[18] This ability of irony to bind the incompatible within an unequal relationship marks its

[17] Again, we remember Marx's convoluted path to human agency: "Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen, but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted. The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living" ("The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" 146).
[18] See Hutcheon 56-64

tolerance for constitutive contradictions. Examples of irony then can be "as affectionate as they are wounding, as playful as they are derisive" (Hutcheon 38), but irony lends itself more easily to the other side played down in relationships: the echoes, the silences, and the murmurs.

Setting Ironic post-1975 Việt Nam in Motion

Irony abounds in any given moment of revolution. One such moment in Việt Nam took place after April 30, 1975. It is a moment that, in the name of consolidation and stability, severely restricts the form of a new nation, so much so that it requires an ironic worldview to reveal a cluster of histories that has been foreclosed. In this part as well as the chapters that follow, I argue for a particular use of irony in reading: it can be worked to destabilize, unsettle, and perhaps suture the strict relations between arbitrary oppositions.

To read irony in Vietnamese history after 1975 is not to prioritize equivalencing over differentiating, but rather to trace the attempt to foreclose the relations in all seemingly binary oppositions so that all differential-making work can begin. Histories differ only first and foremost by relating themselves to each other; without common grounds for relations, there can be no grounds for differences either. My work starts with the common grounds that bind relations and that activate differential-making processes. In that vein, it manifests complicity, collusion, and involvement of opposing forces; it contaminates the clear-cut boundaries of perpetrators versus victims, saviors versus sufferers; and it problematizes restrictive identificatory labels that haunt us, the Việt people, for too long. In other words, the history of post-1975 Việt Nam stings everything and edges everywhere.[19] More broadly, I hope to show that Vietnamese history echoes that of the U.S.—its once sworn enemy of the twentieth century—and, more importantly, how

[19] In that sense, works like those of Yến Lê Espiritu's *Body Counts* or Mimi Nguyen's *The Gift of Freedom* manage to reveal unimaginable complicity: the saviors are the perpetrators, dreams are nightmares, freedom is debt, and gratitude to the other is betrayal of the self.

arbitrary the divisive lines are that separate Việt Nam from the U.S., the North from the South—let us not forget the central part of Việt Nam—the communist from the Southern army, the victims in the jungle and the victims in education camps, the refugees waves from North to South, from South to North, from Việt Nam to China, from China to Việt Nam, from the geo-political state of Việt Nam to the global villages of diasporic communities outside Việt Nam,[20] and from the community of Vietnamese overseas people back to modern Việt Nam.

Irony offends and illuminates in its capacity to break down fixed boundaries before weaving them into the textiles of life. By cutting the restraints of boundaries, irony provides a beginning rather than an end for reconciliation. It shows that contradictions do not just co-exist but rather co-existence requires contradictions; simultaneously, it shows that the multiple destinies ironic visions make visible can help one see oneself in the other—rather than just see the other in oneself—and act accordingly. By selecting the moment after April 30, 1975, I also aim to provide a crucial contextual cue that resurfaces as a ghost in all subsequent chapters. The fall of Saigon, or the unification of Việt Nam, changes the future, the present, and most ironically, the past of Việt Nam in various ways yet to be told. It—again—announces another birth of Việt Nam (its most recent birth, to be more exact) among a series of birth announcements that were interrupted by external and internal forces over thousands of years.

Contradictions are both historically actual—they simply exist and cannot be easily negated out of life and narrativized into formalistic logic—and constitutive of evolutions. Contradictions, in Kierkegaard's view, mark the betrayal of a Hegelian reading of world history grounded in actualities, whose conflicts in times of crises give contradictions their own beings and legitimacy

[20] Trầm Tử Thiêng's song "Good News in Times of Despair," [Có tin vui giữa giờ tuyệt vọng] is a nice example I wish to discuss but cannot for lack of space, with one line as follows: "More Vietnamese villages are being built outside Việt Nam" [Làng Việt Nam đang xây thêm bên ngoài Việt Nam] as a new home was built for Vietnamese refugees in the Philippines.

in the course of phenomenal flows. As History indeed constitutes counter-currents of histories, contradictions arise as individuals crystalize into a generation. For Kierkegaard, the contradictions—with justification but without authority—require a self-sacrifice from the individual so that contradictions can resolve into evolution, instead of being caught in revolution. A sacrifice is what feeds a contradiction; a contradiction is in turn what feeds a historical evolution. It is no wonder why Kierkegaard's last thesis is, "[j]ust as philosophy begins with doubt, so also a life that may be called human begins with irony" (6). In that vein, a reading of ironic history in post-1975 Việt Nam does not work to negate arbitrary oppositions but rather it negates the assumption that arbitrary oppositions are naturally fixed and cannot co-exist. A reading of irony strictly makes things move and forces alter-native perspectives upon readers. Human lives are the sacrifice of all readings here, and the writer, by all means, is their accomplice.

In this introduction, I draw (hi)stories that are clustered on the aftermath of the 30/4 Giải Phóng event [liberation, as named by the North]. I intend to extract from those scenes the whispers, murmurs, and silences that are erased on the palimpsest of history-telling. By doing so, I enact another work of mourning the death and of grieving the relations that the Việt people living under Communism are strongly encouraged to forget.[21] I follow Nguyen-vo Thu-huong in calling for a restoration of collective memory through the act of mourning not just the self, but its others too:

> If the living are who we are through the dead, our memory formed through their mourning, then all the dead represent all our pasts—women, South Vietnamese, North Vietnamese, American, children, assorted men without guns, and all those individual names that must be enunciated without categories. If we reprise all the stories about our past and not just the one dimensional story about communist persecution, we open up choices for the future. (171)

[21] See Bill Hayton's *Vietnam: Rising Dragon* and Nguyen-vo's article "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?" Forgetting on the U.S. part is well-documented in Nguyễn-võ's article. For the forgetting on the Vietnamese part, see Hayton's book, especially the chapter "Enemies into Friends" in the context of Vietnam's new "amicable" relationships with the U.S. Indeed, on 10 September 2023, Vietnam finally put its political relationship with the U.S. to the highest possible level: Comprehensive Strategic Partnership [Hợp tác chiến lược toàn diện], 48 years after the War. See the White House's "Joint Leaders' Statement."

This call for inclusive, equivalencing act of mourning is constitutive of subjecthood formation all the while acknowledging the différance of identitarian categorization: dead Hanoians are not dead Saigonians, the dead Viet Cong from the North and the dead soldiers of the Republic of Vietnam are not quite the same. But after all, on another scale and on a different perspective, as Nguyễn-võ argues, "at least, the dead here remained Vietnamese" (157). But it is not my aim here to prove that they are all Vietnamese. What will become clear soon is that those who disappear from histories are those who are more than Vietnamese, less than Vietnamese, not just Vietnamese, or sometimes a little bit too Vietnamese—the definition of Vietnamese-ness here becomes too narrow to be inclusive, too broad to be defined, and too changeable with time and space to be fixed.

To realize an ironic Việt Nam then involves a walk through the past, as opposed to the proposed solution of forgetting the past to move on or of remembering some selective pasts from all sides concerned. The past in Vietnamese is *quá khứ*, as a verb it is *qua đi* or *đi qua*. Deriving from Chinese, 過去, the verb/noun is composed of two very common verbs: *quá* 過, to overcome, to pass, to overtake, to be lost, to die. The Chinese word, when simplified into 过, has two components: to walk or to move, and the unit measurement of a Chinese inch. With an active interpretation and a willingness to betray the authority of Chinese etymology, I (mis)interpret that the past is something that must be walked through, moved through, experienced, bit by bit. It is something to be survived, sur-vivre, to live on, to be beyond living. The word *quá* always carries within the Vietnamese mind some excess that one must carry within oneself towards one's transformation. The next word, *khứ* or 去 in Chinese means to go, to leave, to die, to become distant. One way to betray the Chinese word is to break it into two components: the native land and the private/secret. In that analysis, *khứ* means to leave behind one's native land, to leave behind

what one owns, what one keeps in secret, to move away. The past, *quá khứ*, then has that compounded meaning of a place one leaves behind, a home one cannot *not* abandon. To live in the past means to stay within one's home, one's native land. But the moment one is born, one will be faced with the coming of the future, *tương lai*. The past, *quá khứ* signifies that inborn exilic state of human beings. It is their nature to become exiles.

Understood in that manner ironically unfaithful to the authoritative etymology of the past, *quá khứ* signifies two ideas. First, one cannot claim one's past unless one walks through it, bit by bit. Second, the past is something one turns to but must abandon; it is a part of one because one is always-already born in the past, and yet the to-come will turn one into an exile. The noun/verb is summoned by two active movement verbs with contradictory meanings, contradictory not to us the language users who mobilize the words every day but rather to those outside the common tongue enough to question its logicality. The past therefore is not a fact or an event of life—it demands an action. Highly suggestive of death and excess, the word also connotes disconnection and beyond-ness, with them the concomitant desire to reestablish connection and continuity. One cannot properly leave the past if one has not gone through it, overcome it, or died. *Quá khứ vãng lai*, 過去 往來, literally means the past goes back and forth, makes contact, and communicates, visits us like a ghost that walks past us. The past then always remains something to be walked through. It is always a past in motion but never something one should live in or be drawn back to.

Ironic Post-1975 Việt Nam

> After at least twenty years of separation, History put many Southern families in extremely ironic [oái oăm, nghiệt ngã] situations. Some families were eager for the return of the [communist] children who had jumped into the mountains while their other "puppet" children [those who became soldiers for the Republic of Vietnam] were lying upstairs worried sick; some high-ranking officials from Hanoi came back to Saigon just to find out that the children they had left behind [before they went North to become Communists] had become "puppet" soldiers [for the enemy]. (Huy Đức 29)

There is a site of forgetting other than that of purist forgetting. If there were Southerners who belonged to a family purely of the South, fought purely for the South or if there were Northerners who came purely from the North, identified consistently as poor working class, and never stepped foot outside of what was marked resolutely as land of the North, forgetting may be less, though in no way not, complicated. But how does one forget the entangled presence of conflicting pasts, of intertwined facts of life, of constantly moving worlds, and of the indelible mixture of colors on one's skin in a new nation that longs for and resolves to arrive at that purist future? How does one reform [cải tạo] oneself free of one's blood and guts and flesh [máu mủ ruột thịt], of one's family, of one's or beloved ones' past deeds? In the immediate aftermath of "liberation," instead of scenes whereby long-lost friends met again, long-lost brothers and sisters reconnected, long-lost children had a chance to pay gratitude to parents, we had scenes of ironies from which escaped few, whether they are high-ranking officials—those who were, after all, still Vietnamese human beings—or nobodies whose categories were unavailable for naming.

One story belongs to that of Trần Văn Hương, the prime minister and the third president of the Republic of Vietnam and his eldest son Trần Văn Dõi (Lưu Vĩnh Châu), who became a Việt Cộng and joined the battle of Điện Biên Phủ against the French. Portrayals of Trần Văn Hương by the West and by some Vietnamese refugees were those of an anti-communist civilian politician, who was intolerant of Việt Nam's militant Buddhist movement and who joined the Anti-French Resistance War (First Indochina War) but defected after recognizing the "true face" of the communists.[22] A patriot of the whole country, a politician in the Republic of Vietnam, a lover of South Việt Nam, Trần Văn Hương is also a father of two sons: the elder one following North

[22] See Lâm Vĩnh Thế's "Cuộc gặp gỡ cuối cùng với cựu Tổng Thống Trần Văn Hương," Huy Phương's "Những ngày cuối cùng của Tổng thống Trần Văn Hương," George Kahin's *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam,* Huy Đức's *Bên thắng cuộc,* and Mark Moyar's "Political Monks".

communists while the younger one following him. Here I will focus on two news stories delivered from the winning side: reporting sources from his elder son.

On May 07, 2009, Tuổi Trẻ [The Youth] newspaper published an article ironically entitled "Son fought in Điện Biên; Father became the President (of the Republic of Vietnam)."[23] The article used the name that the son chose, Lưu Vĩnh Châu, instead of his given name Trần Văn Dõi. Taking the last name of his mother, the son deleted his patrilineal past in a gesture that acts both as a nod to women rights in newly founded Vietnam and as a turning away from a betrayal by the father of his beloved country. For both political causes and identitarian reasons, the changed name signified a period of twists and turns in which the men could make themselves anew into many ideological molds. In October 1945, the young Lưu Vĩnh Châu broke with [thoát ly-脫離] his family and enlisted in the communist army. The Chinese-derived words in Việt language are significantly more lugubrious than the English ones: thoát means to escape, to shed skin, to break off connection and *ly* means to break apart and to be distant from; they suggest to a Việt reader like me the sentimental phrase *sinh ly tử biệt* [(1) to live apart from loved ones and (2) separated forever by death] indicating two excruciating pains in human lives. In this father and son's story, those two pains seemed true to them at the time: the father thought that his son was dead, and the son knew nothing of what happened to his father. More than thirty years apart from his home, the article reports, "ông Châu quặn thắt nhớ nhà" [Old man Châu missed home dearly]. Again, another teary phrase that resists translation. In Vietnamese culture, many fundamental emotions are related to the belly, the stomach, or the guts [lòng]: to love is to fall into the belly [phải lòng], to lose one's favor is to lose the belly of the other [mất lòng], to be in pain is to have a pain in the stomach [đau lòng], to be moved by something is to be moved in the belly [động lòng], 'out of sight, out of

[23] https://tuoitre.vn/vu-khi-van-hoa-cua-vi-dai-tuong-314816.htm

mind' means "far from the face, detached from the belly" [xa mặt cách lòng], to be sad is to be sad in the belly [buồn lòng], to be weak and vulnerable to emotional manipulation is to be weak in the belly [yếu lòng]. The verb used, *quặn thắt* [to be contorted in pain] refers to that belly of feelings: His belly contorted in pain in longing for home.

Talking about his long-lost "puppet father," with tears filling up in his communist eyes, ông Châu continues,

> I recognized my father immediately. Memories rushed back and I asked him: 'in front of the flag of the People's Army of Vietnam [cờ vệ quốc đoàn][24] dad [you] and son [I] swore to protect the Homeland, why did you betray the oath? After 33 years of wandering, the two of us became people of two fronts . . ., what do you think?' My father remained silent, dead mute [lặng lẽ, nín thinh]. I was so much in pain and I loved—with pity—[thương] him so much!

The article ends abruptly by rushing in to defend ông [Old man] Châu: even he did not understand why he dared to grill his father with such a question, especially when "he [Châu] tried to suppress himself so that the past could sleep peacefully." Defending against what, one may ask. For one reason, no Việt son has the authority to question his father; for another, no Việt culture allows uncomfortable truths in times of important family reunions [hội ngộ]. By being a good communist, the son risks becoming an ungrateful son [bất hiếu] and a culturally insensitive Việt person. Emotions and tears are what is left to hold his unbridgeable sides together: a twisted scene, an ironic question. Granted that the article was written on 7 May 2009 to commemorate the fifty-fifth year after the victory in the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ, the emotional tone does feel foreign to those used to a somewhat detached tone of newspaper reporting from the West. One knows a newspaper piece such as this is more literary than factual if one notices the word choice: Chinese derived [Hán Việt], highly literary, and highly sentimental.

[24] The third name for the People's Army of Vietnam. There are five names in total: Đội Việt Nam Tuyên truyền Giải phóng quân, Việt Nam Giải phóng quân, Vệ quốc đoàn, Quân đội Quốc gia Việt Nam, and lastly the modern name Quân đội nhân dân Việt Nam. See "Ý nghĩa tên gọi Quân đội nhân dân Việt Nam qua các thời kỳ lịch sử."

But that article is significantly less literary than another one, delivered on 7 May 2005, in commemoration of the thirtieth year after what the communist side calls "Day of Southern Liberation for National Reunification"—30 April 1975. Published by Tiền Phong newspaper, the article has a title that would have been unthinkable had thirty years not passed: "The Story of a Man Participating in the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign Who was . . . the Son of President of Republic of Vietnam Trần Văn Hương." The story begins—appropriately—with a setting of contrasts: the quiet house where ông Châu lives seems to be lost in the hustle of an always-on-the-move Sài Gòn. Lost in the flow of a 60-year-old memory, ông Châu recounts his perilous journey at sea to the North of Việt Nam, to the Northern land of biting wind that tears the skin apart.

After the battle of Điện Biên Phủ, ông Châu tried to find news about his father in a divided country without success:

> the image of a slender and tall father holding his son's hand tightly is engraved in his heart . . . [his father told him] The North I haven't been to for long . . . over there I still have some friends from the time I studied at the college of education in Hanoi like Nguyễn Khánh Toàn, Hoàng Minh Giám, Phạm Huy Thông. . . Anyway, go there, try to complete the mission and come back! (Xuân Ba)

The long list of friends the father has betrays his Northern connection; the friends, whose names are now still used for streets throughout communist Việt Nam, are indeed friends to both sides. Then ông Châu came to learn that his long-lost father became the vice president of Republic of Vietnam. He did not have enough time to be happy about the news that his father was still alive; he was already being bombarded with the news that his father was the new enemy now. After twenty years away from his father and family, ông Châu did not have time to have a single proper feeling. He was also consumed with a third thought: no one must know he is the son of the vice president of Republic of Việt Nam. Three years after spring 1975, the father and the son met again

in Sài Gòn where they lay awake all night talking about what happened. Here, the tone of the article became apologist for the father:

> because the communists captured some intellectuals and, mistaking them for Vietnamese traitors [Việt gian], shot them, the father was disgusted, ashamed, and confused. Even though the father did not want to get involved in politics, other officials came with words, with pleading, and with reasons: the people under the military forces of Thiệu and Kỳ suffered greatly, so they needed the father. . . . your letter I got already. But for one reason, I thought you were dead; for another reason, no one could know I had a son on the other side, so your younger brother told me to burn it to protect ourselves. (Xuân Ba)

Both sides chose to suppress the father-son relations during the war; both men chose to forget that one had the duty of a son and the other had a son who was still alive.

Even though the stories come from official news outlets, I decide to call them stories for their literariness and the lack of fact-checking possibility. If journalism reveals the lies, a story can perhaps reveal the truths. The purpose behind the article seems clear to me: it aims for reconciliation and for an appropriate time to struggle with the complicated past. With a single view of communist reconciliation, though, it suppresses and falls short and therefore offends.

By portraying Trần Văn Hương as a man who knew he was wrong, who did not seem to believe strongly in what he fought for, and who did not know what he should have done, the communist version of Trần Văn Hương deprives him of human complexity all the while allowing him the complexity of a father. This Trần Văn Hương appears in stark contrast with the president who, according to Huy Đức, "was determined to die defending Sài Gòn [against the communist invasion] even if Sài Gon must be bathed in blood," (11) or who, according to Mark Moyar, "chose to follow the example of Diem . . . refusing to tolerate public disorders or to meet the [militant] Buddhists' demands" (783).

A Trần Văn Hương with fuller political agency is lost in Việt Nam and in turn highlighted in refugees' writings of him. Huy Phương in his article mentions the fact that Trần Văn Hương

refused Vietnamese citizenship until all of his Southern fellows could enjoy equality and freedom under the new regime. The irony comes in two forms. One irony offends because it borders on blatant lies and risks ceasing to be an irony. Another irony irritates because it reminds every side of the inherent intolerance of the complexity in a man who is always more than what is expected of his role. Can a full history of Trần Văn Hương and his sons ever come into being? One is painfully reminded that the story of the younger son who worked with the father and became a refugee in the U.S. received little coverage, the stories of the wife, whose full name is still virtually unknown now, remain erased.[25] The importance of irony is that it always reminds one of the unsaid in the presence of the said, the deafening silences in the sounds of those who have voices to tell stories. The human sacrifice, we see here, feeds living contradictions, which in turn feed evolution.

Scenes of irony can happen anywhere and to anyone. According to Huy Đức, Second lieutenant of the Republic of Vietnam Lưu Đình Triểu lived with his elder sister in the South of Vietnam for more than twenty years without their parents, who left their two children to the grandparents and moved North to become communists.[26] The day they met after "liberation" day, Lưu Đình Triểu was more than just happy: "So many a day have I dreamt of this meeting and thought of shouting out so loud the words I have longed to say for decades, 'Ba ơi! Má ơi! [Dad! Mom!—*ơi* is an interjection]" (45). But on the day they met again, only his father was there while his mom and another younger sister, born out of the North, could not come yet. They sent him messages of love through a recorded song on a cassette. The younger sister growing up in the Communist North, out of ironic innocence, greeted her brother and sister in the defeated South with a song: "Sài Gòn đó, quê ta ơi/Trong biển lửa vẫn ngời ngời/Ta đi như sóng căm hờn dâng

[25] What little is known about Trần Văn Hương's other son in the U.S. is scantily recorded in Vietnamese refugees' online news outlet. See Huy Phương's article.
[26] For a fuller account from Lưu Đình Triểu himself, see "Tâm sự của nhà báo phản ứng gay gắt 'Bên thắng cuộc' (1)"

trào/Xô lên trên xác quân thù hung bạo . . .” [Sài Gòn, my homeland, in the sea of fire still shines through. I/We walk like the rising waves of hatred, crashing on the corpses of brutal enemies] (45). Lưu Đình Triểu listened to the song performed by the sister with love, intended for the brother long lost, with a heart contorted in pain: “One ‘enemy’ is right here. Do you know, dad? Do you hate?” (45). Triểu, of course, still had to go to reeducation camp, despite the works his parents had done for the party. His father never visited him in the camp, but instead wrote him a letter of “encouragement,” “Try to reform well son.” “He [Triểu] tore the letter and cried in bitterness” (46). It is a common case in a history under transition: the individual past of the son does not flow within the collective past of the nation, and the collective past of his own family cannot symbolically absolve his own past or literally save him from the camp. So many quotation marks for slippages of meanings, ironic connotations of title, and erasures of complexity—that is rightly the condition of Vietnamese history on the winning side and of Huy Đức’s historical stories in *The Winning Side* [*Bên Thắng Cuộc*].

There are of course scenes of irony in which the participants are swept away. Histories of all kinds mis-record them with a number, records of all kinds mis-relate them with a title, and papers mis-give their lives with ink of black and white. When Vietnamese children grew up in communist countries, they understood that every Việt person stood up to fight the French, the Americans, the American “puppets” [khởi nghĩa toàn dân], that the whole nation resisted the invasions of Westerners with blue eyes and striking noses [Tây mắt xanh mũi lõ]. We did not know that in those armies there were the othered peoples: the South Koreans, the Thais, the African-Americans, Chicanos, the Australians, and the New Zealanders. We did not know that in our armies there were never just the communists. There were always other human beings, living lives without an official title until one came to them and they became communists—part of the whole.

Lê Quý Bình belonged to a generation of Confucian scholars tracing back to Lê Quý Đôn (1726-1784)—one of the greatest Vietnamese scientists in early modern times. Like his parents and his grandparents, he studied to become an intellectual before the communists came with their land reform and attack on intellectuals, landowners, and those who had gold. His family ran away from Hải Hưng to Quảng Ninh, where he met his future wife, a daughter of another Confucian scholar, a friend of his father.[27]

Dropping the intellectual title, the young couple collected giẻ rách [scrap cloths] from French soldiers in the 1940s and 1950s, recycled and sold them to live by—this is such an instance of rising to the elephant and stooping to the dog [lên voi xuống chó]. Those were the times when minor businesses of the lowest kind were common and permissible so that the people could survive. The communists came and said to his wife, Mrs. Bình—the wife had no name, only the name of the husband— "in this new age, gold turns into iron. It is worthless. Hand it over to us if you have any. Or you will regret it." She trusted them because she was full of fears, fed by the truths as much as legends and myths: "the communists were brutal. They buried people with their heads above the ground, and then plowed them with the plow. That was how the people's blood enriched the land, and how no one dared hide gold from the communists." Moving to Hanoi in the 1960s, they met a new enemy: the Americans and their "puppet" government. Lê Quý Quang would listen to his parents recount the horrifying legends of the communists and he would witness the reality of the bombing of the no-face Americans and the "puppet" government onto Hanoi.

They lived near Thái Hà church, near Khâm Thiên street, where the bombing was the most severe and where the locals still call those nights the nights of B52. Out there in the world, the nights were more well-known as Linebacker II Operation. When asked which ones he feared

[27] The stories of Lê Quý Bình and his extended family come from my interview with Lê Quý Quang, his youngest son.

more—the communists or the Americans—ông Quang said, "the communists, of course. The Americans were vague. We hated them, but we never knew their faces. It's hard to hate an enemy without a face. They always came with bombing, high from above, without a face, only with head-splitting sounds and with body parts scattered everywhere." "The communists," he continued, "felt more real. Even though the stories sound exaggerated to me now. I mean, who could actually kill their own people like that. But they wore the concrete faces of people like us. They were more real. That's why we forgot our fear of the Americans very soon. Three years after 1975, we already forgot they were the enemies, and would have loved to live in their luxurious country."

Ông Quang and his family lived lives of constant evacuation. Like refugees, they found no place for home until they were visited by the communists and his father, hoping to avoid starvation, found a job in one of the communist cooperative workplaces [hợp tác xã]. There, he met his future wife, Đoàn Thị Huệ. She just broke up with her boyfriend because—she said with ironic laughter dipped in nostalgia—"the boy kept saying yes when we invited him to stay for meals. We were hungry, you know, there was nothing to eat, but we asked out of politeness. And he was too hungry to be polite and say no. So my parents ordered the break-up, to which I agreed." Love and hunger did not get along well, and tradition gave up and joined with realities.

Cô Huệ's family are nobodies too, like ông Quang's. They were more afraid of the communists and the Americans than they wanted to become either. Living near Thái Hà church, cô Huệ would always run there to hide from the bombing, under the feet of white stoned Jesus, who she thought had divine power to protect her and other Vietnamese yellow-skinned kids.[28] That was how she developed a strong faith in the Catholic church. Only much later did she know that

[28] The non-fictional description here, albeit true, borrows the words from Helena Maria Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus.*

even the Americans dared not upset the Catholic world and bomb the Church location right near Khâm Thiên.[29]

Cô Huệ [Auntie Huệ] had an aunt, the younger sister of her father, who married a man and went with him to Sài Gòn. The man, her uncle-in-law, became a soldier for the Republic of Vietnam. Back then they all knew the famous saying: "một người đi lính ngụy, cả họ được nhờ" [one person becomes the "puppet" soldier for the Republic of Vietnam, the whole family could reap the benefits]. In those times when hunger killed love, and poisonous food that killed softly was much better than quick starvation, that was enough to fight for money. "We did not care about the communists or the ideology, we were just hungry. And aunt could provide for all of us. She visited us very rarely during the war, but every time she came she could bring so much it fed us for days." Everything must be done in secret, if the Republic of Vietnam—the enemies or the friends?—knew her uncle and aunt had anything to do with the communists, they would be killed to the roots [triệt tận gốc]. In those years, she would often become confused, wondering whether she was so scared for her aunt and uncle because she was indeed a communist, or because the communists might find out about the family's source of food and kill the whole family.

When liberation came, the uncle-in-law, like many others, ran away from the communists, threw all their belongings into the River of Sài Gòn, spent years working in the New Economic Zones, and finally returned to Sài Gòn as a normal citizen of the new country on the same land again. Now, their children are wealthy again, being owners of a series of mini-hotels themselves. They were not victims of their ironic fate; they were active participants in the flow of history. Coming back to their adopted hometown named Sài Gòn, they brought with them songs of uplifting spirits that tell of the unimaginably hard times they endured in the New Economic Zones.

[29] For an account of the bombing from a U.S. veteran's side, see William Broyles's "The Road to Hill 10."

Swimming upstream, they did not care about living but about surviving. Their stories were not recorded because they were nobodies, and the stories are not significantly neat for categorization. There were hardly any modes of ideology-making suitable for them either. All forms of identification targeted towards them come back with a reply, 'not quite, perhaps, and maybe more.' Their lives came together positively, non-communists, non-pro-American, non-ideological, non-love, and full of choices and strategies too subtle to be named. They are, indeed, fully living human beings in the times in which ironic neat labeling demands fixation. To survive, they became empty and ready to be filled anytime. Their lives are tragically ironic, and they use irony as a strategy to survive through them.

Mapping Irony as Critique and as Survival Strategies

The argument running through this dissertation is that irony is effective as a reading method of critique and a useful strategy of survival. Together, irony offers a fruitful approach to a definition of Vietnamese-ness. Chapters one and two primarily employ irony as a critical method whereas chapters three and four highlight how irony is mobilized by Vietnamese subjects for strategic survival. However, traces of resistance and survival can be found in all chapters.

Chapter one "Irony For/Against the Nation-making Projects of Việt Nam" reads three Vietnamese texts with irony: *The Complete Documents of the Communist Party of Vietnam*, Nguyên Ngọc's short story "The Forest of Xà Nu," and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*. The first text is the official publication of the vast archives of the Communist Party of Vietnam while the two other texts are fictional. All three share the common theme on the narrativization of the Communist Party and its relation to Việt Nam as a nation and Việt people as its subjects. The chapter traces the changing narrative of the Party pre- and post-1975. If prior to the conclusion of the Vietnam War, the Party utilizes irony effectively to establish itself as a populist representative

of the people coming from any walk of life, it suppresses irony after the war to exclude the people it deems not Vietnamese enough from singing the nation. Against this suppression, subjugated subjects of Việt Nam mobilize irony again as a critical tool to question the Party's nation-building. Chapter one is itself a showcase of how irony can be used effectively towards political ends by either establishing or dismantling political foundations. It reinstates the need to use irony in critical works instead of abandoning it. The chapter relies on Laclau's works on populism to extract the effective irony used in nation-building projects in their initial stage.

Chapter two "The Political and the Personal: Irony in the Poetic Language of Constructing a Nation and its Citizens" continues its survey of the journey of a Việt Nam on its way to find itself, yet now it does so on a more personal note. It argues for a parallel view of a life-long journey of a poet named Chế Lan Viên to find himself and that of a country to define itself as a nation-state. Both journeys take irony as an enabling mode to establish their respective identities, a mode that allows the poet and the nation to become more than what they are allowed to become, to become a synthetic identity tolerant of contradictions in extremis. More specifically, the poet, reflecting his nation/water, changes from a being full of itself, to a being emptied of the self, and finally to a being in constant crises between its vanishing self and its incoming other. But in doing so, in becoming more true to the self of the poet and the nation, the poet must betray, via irony, himself and his own nation-making project. In that sense, irony enables and disables; it enables precisely by disabling. And by disabling the limited self and its nation, irony opens possibilities for questioning, challenging, and destabilizing identitarian and nationalist discourses of self- and nation-making respectively. Poetic language here means not only the language of poetry but also the language of poesis that creates identities which are either personal or national. Irony towards the end, after the near completion of self-finding and nation-building, turns into a potential source

of critique that allows the self to question itself, break forth its boundaries, and wander into the territory of the other to find more pieces of itself. Hegel's and Paul de Man's works here provide the theoretical foundation to excavate an ironic working of a self on the way to find meaning, a nation on its way to find a form, and a productive parallel view of both the personal and the Political in the work of identity-construction.

Chapter three "Vietnamese Refugees and the Critical Art of Living with Irony" departs from irony as a source of critique towards irony as a strategy for survival in Kim Thúy's work-life writings on refugees. It argues that irony allows Vietnamese refugees to see life worth living in its multitude, to recognize the limitations of their worldviews, and to live on/survive—instead of merely existing—through healing and meaningfulness. The chapter borrows from Joana Garmendia's work on irony as collectively understood from the theoretical perspectives of semantics, pragmatics, philosophy, and literary studies. Specifically, it relies on the understanding of irony as echoes of silences, murmurs, and whispers that can be more easily heard by those with attentive ears and an ironic outlook on life. Through earnestly ironic worldviews, refugees resist the label of victims of their times and actively reconstruct their voice, their regard of life, and their manner of dealing with, or reconnecting to, the world around them, be it their home or their host country. Living with irony is an art in itself. It exudes life; living with irony therefore is contagious living, spreading beauty to everything it touches.

Chapter four "Irony in Tình Đời: Modern Kiều, or Sex Workers, and Affective Labor" furthers the theme of irony as strategic survival and moves the focus towards Vietnam of the new millennium. It tries to connect a classic character named Thúy Kiều in Nguyễn Du's *Tale of Kiều*—Vietnam's representative national literature—to her contemporary Vietnamese humans in Vũ Ngọc Đãng's film *Lost in Paradise* via her occupation as a sex worker. Irony here, in the end, is

understood largely as living in its desperate attempts to connect all of its parts that are separated by the conditions of its time, be it feudalism or patriarchy of the past or neoliberalism and post-socialist capitalism of the present. Works by Marx and other Marxian thinkers come to aid the theoretical foundation of the chapter, which in turn focuses on the affective labor of those abject human beings portrayed in the film. Deprived of affect for life by the nature of their sex work within capitalism, they try their best to maintain their humanity in the face of inhumanity and therefore come to symbolize that Vietnamese spirit of resistance and surviving against all odds, or more precisely in this case, against life itself as a battle. During the course of their lives, the characters manage to re-connect to themselves and to others via acts of highly ironic natures. One way to live then is to do ironic, or *mâu thuẫn*, acts.

The conclusion "Skirting Vietnams of the Past and the Future" touches briefly upon possibilities to use irony as a method of critique, of healing, and of nation-building in the writings of two neglected groups: the contemporary generations of Việt people and female writers of Việt Nam. The chapter highlights differences in these groups' construction of their Việt Nam in comparison to its more classical imagination. Importantly, they collectively focus on building a Việt Nam of moving boundaries, a temporal space of moving modernities that are much more inclusive of what is to come and those who are going to be born. Together, they also provide revision of history that curiously probes into its gaps and silences. In writing the future and re-imagining the pasts of Việt Nam, these two groups have much to offer.

Broadly speaking, this dissertation attempts to move beyond the critical aspects of irony, and the critical disposition in general of politically charged literary studies. It believes in the more affirmative and life-sustaining side of literature and of the politics of interpreting it. As Cynthia Franklin states, those who believe in a better and equal life for the disadvantaged need to be aware

of the importance of "not simply taking 'anti' positions in which those who have been dehumanized remain abstractions, or not (fully) human" (5). Indeed, where "castigation and critique [does] not seem sufficient," life writing, or lifestories in my dissertation, proves additionally useful in expanding the map of humanity, of Việt humans, of a more human understanding of the concept of human itself through its texts and its performances in living out lives grounded in physical and spiritual conditions. Irony plays a crucial role in bringing out the critical *and* the vital aspects of lifestories. The living depends on critique of the inhuman, but thrives on life potentialities. This dissertation is more interested in showing that illuminating beauty of life inherent in the most abject subjects.

Chapter 1: Irony For/Against the Nation-making Projects of Việt Nam

"Nothing is more precious than independence [and] freedom."[30]

"The water-nation of Vietnam is one, the Việt people is one, river can go dry, mountain can wear away, but that self-evident truth-logic cannot change."[31]
Hồ Chí Minh

The first quotation by Hồ Chí Minh is perhaps better known to a United States citizen than is the second, thanks to the recent popularity of Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*. Yet, to a Vietnamese growing up in the communist country, both claims hold equal levels of importance, even though the first one, being shorter, is more commonly detected in banners and posters. In Nguyen's novel, the gradual slippage from "nothing" to "nothingness" signifies the increasing emptiness in the promise of independence-freedom for many Việt people on the other side of the victors.[32] The character, after all, is drifting away geographically, just as he has always been drifting away ideologically, from Vietnam in the end. The country, the land-water, that he works for his whole life, longs to return to, and comes to represent coldly spits him out and denies his request for belonging, all in his so-called best interests. Written in 1966, the year that marked the U.S. escalation in the Vietnam War, the speech was meant to encourage the Northern and Southern communist Việt people in the South to remain steadfast, not to lose hearts to incoming Americans that were soon to rain bombs on their heads. In that context, Hồ Chí Minh needed to emphasize again the importance of independence and freedom: independence and freedom now mean the South, the South as part of a united post-colonial Việt Nam, the South as free from capitalist United

[30] The sentence comes from Hồ Chí Minh's famous 1966 speech "Lời kêu gọi đồng bào và chiến sĩ cả nước" [A call to all fellow-citizens and socials throughout the country] to call for the whole Việt Nam to remain steadfast against the U.S.'s escalation of the Vietnam War.
[31] See Hồ Chí Minh's 1946 letter "Thư gửi cho đồng bào Nam Bộ"
[32] The Việt language often ignores conjunction, something that holds it in common with Chinese and, to a lesser degree, French, without the complaints of Viet speakers.

States and their imperial allies. They are more precious than everything, including death itself because living in a country without them is a life worse than death.

That immortalized sentence in Việt people's living memory, however, is turned totally upside down by the ironic protagonist in Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*. For him, nothing becomes nothingness. For people like him, the spooks, the men of two minds, the loving hate and hating love of the country, there is no independence or freedom to enjoy in Việt Nam. In the story, he is forced to choose: nothing-ness or independence and freedom, or staying in Việt Nam or leaving it. His choice does not matter, because independence and freedom are forced down this throat: he is leaving Việt Nam, where nothingness resides. His Vietnamese-ness, or that Vietnamese part of independence and freedom, left Việt Nam with him that day. The independence and freedom of a large population of Việt Nam who fought for the lost side, who were born in the worst time and space not of their own choosing, or who were forced into circumstances paradoxical at heart that tear themselves asunder.[33]

It is surprising, and ironic, for a Việt person growing up in Communist Việt Nam, to see such an unequivocal sentence turned upside down in a different context. Because my thirty years of living and thinking Việt Nam have not conditioned me to read Hồ Chí Minh's nothing into Viet Thanh Nguyen's nothingness, I consider that trope both deeply ironic and highly rewarding: it allows a glimpse into that destructive creativity and re-imagination that irony promises. It is by all means not new to assert that the same sentence can be understood in contradictory ways depending on the context; irony is ubiquitous and ancient. But it is worth reminding ourselves that the very function of irony is to awaken our senses to newness every day, lest they become dull through the passage of time.

[33] Those who are born not for their times include, for instance, babies of mixed race in Việt Nam. Literature on mixed race babies during and after the Vietnam War abounds. For literature, see Kien Nguyen's *The Unwanted.*

A double play is at work here: two contradictory meanings of the same sentence are born out of distinct, yet related, contexts. It is ironic, and tremendously sad, to recognize the vulnerability of dead words against the living flow of time. Nonetheless, it is also liberating to know that dead words are flexible enough to make room for new truths, different truths, and marginalized truths. Within the context of this chapter, the nothing in Hồ Chí Minh's sentence can also mean the Communist Party itself. In that sense, the nothing that both *is* independence-freedom and *displaces* it is the Communist Party of Vietnam. This chapter argues that the Party is nothing, and it is more precious than independence-freedom. This two-fold self-contradictory argument highlights the contested success of the Communist Party of Vietnam in (1) amassing populist support of many Việt people during the war and in (2) excluding many othered Việt people after the war had ended. The first two texts used in this chapter will be used to support the first part of this statement whereas the third text by Viet Thanh Nguyen will be analysed to support the second part. Throughout the chapter, irony is seen as an effective means of politics, used either by the Party or its critics, to garner public support, to oppress public dissent, and to critique this very oppression.

The second quotation brings into the equivalential chain the problematics of counting qualities. It makes more sense to count the nation and the people as one, if I put the signifier reminder of water next to it: in Vietnamese, nation is water, both meaning the same thing. But the figure of that nature as water is, again, double play. Nature as such changes, but the *nature* of that nature does not and cannot be allowed to change: *không thể nào*, like "cannot," suggests both the agency of not allowing change *and* the non-human, or non-relational, fact of things unchanging. So this is the *one* thing that does not and cannot be allowed to change. We are arriving at something particular, and particularly elusive enough to be something else, or even nothing in the positively

absent and full sense.[34] That one thing is both natural, suggested in its signified slippage and naturalized as different from, in relation with, nature as its referent. Water does not count, and yet, we might as well claim that water can *only* count as one: the first suggests emptiness in the sense of malleability; the second, fullness in the sense of a blurred boundary between particularity and universality.[35] The second slogan then both *borrows* from nature its most unique trait—permanent changeability—and *betrays* that same nature by co-opting it into a political model of a nation-state with a trait that is unchangeable.

As a pathway into this chapter, the two slogans, widely known by and taught to the post-1975 generations born to communism in Vietnam, gesture towards the ironic character constituting the nature of the Communist Party. First, this chapter argues that irony, in its ability to absorb and to promise, not everything, but constitutive contradictions, allows the Communist Party of Vietnam to reach its goals and comes to define its identity as a populist body inclusive of everyone, but not quite. Second, it argues that in different moments of its history, the party showed two kinds of ironies: one early irony with an open futurity that refuses a limited end and another later irony with a fixed futurity that turns Vietnam into a nothing for many excluded Việt people. When this oppression takes place, irony is again used by the silenced others to question and challenge the Party's doctrines itself. This chapter explores *The Complete Documents of the Communist Party* (*Văn kiện Đảng Toàn Tập,* or from now on, *VKĐ*), in conjunction with Nguyên Ngọc's short story "The Forests of Xà Nu" and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*.[36] This chapter also utilizes

[34] I am referring to the productive intimate opposition between particularity and universality in Ernesto Laclau's work. See Laclau *On Populist Reason* 70

[35] For the blurred relation between particularity and universality, see Laclau's *Emancipation(s)*, chapter 2, pages 20-36

[36] Nguyên Ngọc published the story under the Vietnam War alias Nguyễn Trung Thành. The in-text citation lists Nguyên Ngọc, but the works cited entry will list him as Nguyễn Trung Thành, for the research convenience of readers.

Ernesto Laclau's concept of populism to trace the changing nature of the party from an open-ended irony to a limiting irony.

The Communist Party is Nothing: On the *Complete Documents of the Communist Party* and the Nature of the Proletariat

During the past 20 years, the publication of the *Complete Documents of the Communist Party* allows a much more extensive and intensive look into the systematic ideology of the Communist Party of Vietnam.[37] Formalized in 12 January 1995 by Decision 101 QD/TW of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam to establish the Publishing Committee for the *Complete Documents of the Communist Party* that includes such figures as Lê Khả Phiêu, who would become the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1997, Nguyên Văn An, who later became the Chairman of the National Assembly of Vietnam in 2001, Nguyễn Hữu Thọ, and Nguyễn Đức Bình, who later became Chairman of the Central Theoretical Council of the Communist Party of Vietnam. On the third of February, 1997, The Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam issued another Decision 25-QĐ/TW to make the complete *VKĐ*, in all 54 volumes, available to the public.[38]

The *VKĐ* marked a turning point for scholars and anyone interested in the history of the Communist Party, both inside and outside Vietnam, because it was the first time such a complete collection was made available to the public by one of the most secretive political parties in the world. The documents betray much more information and knowledge than they conceal. And this fact brings with it both significant merits and challenges. Like any archives, the *VKĐ* are not without ideological influence, being heavily edited and containing many ellipses and revisions.

[37] The fact that it is heavily edited is, of course, not to be ignored. See for instance Tuong Nguyen's "*Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập*: The Regime's Gamble and Researchers' Gains."
[38] See *Văn Kiện Đảng: Tập 1*, p. 6

But such heavy editions have been conscious and motivated. The fact that all members of the publishing committee were prominent politicians and core members of the party mean not only that *VKĐ* are the most authoritative sources of information on the party but also that *VKĐ* are the most suspect in claiming objectivity and complete truth to the nature of the party. The party, represented by its core members, does not just want to tell the so-called unmediated truth; it also wants to ensure that the manner, the motivation, and the goals of such truth-telling follow the ideology of the party.

Its legitimacy granted, the reliability of *VKĐ* in revealing the nature of the party is somewhat contested. Phạm Quang Minh, for instance, highlights the highly involved process of including and excluding knowledge, of revising, adding, or omitting contested words, lines, or passages. Suggestions made by the Editing Groups to leave out or modify information are not always accepted by the Publishing Committee. However, Phạm points to the hopeful beginning of "the innovative process of Vietnamese Studies" and for the studies of the Party's history thanks to the publication of *VKĐ*, noting that it "will still take a long time before we reach a complete collection of documents" (215).

Proposed motivations behind the publication of *VKĐ* vary. On the one hand, Phạm argues that the publication was motivated by the Party's greater confidence in its leadership in making Vietnam not just independent and free but also accepted by the world. He highlights the year 1995 as significant when Vietnam, after ten years of Reform [Đổi mới], "normalized relationships with the United States on July 11, signed a Framework Agreement with the European Union on July 17, and gained membership into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations on July 28" (209). On the other hand, Tuong Vu argues that the publication was more likely motivated by "fear and anxiety about threats to the communist regime's legitimacy . . . rather than confidence" (184). Vu

cites the collapse of the Soviet bloc and "ensuing global delegitimization of communism" as instances of external threats to the party. Internally, domestic dissidents grew increasingly visible, exemplified by Bùi Tín among others. In analyzing the five stated goals of the publication of *VKĐ*, Vu reads content against context compellingly, noting for instance that the second goal, namely "to draw lessons to learn from, to add to, and to develop policies suitable to the needs of a new revolutionary phase," suggests the Party's need to consolidate lessons from the past to respond to the recent collapse of the Soviet bloc (185-6).

It is intriguing but perhaps not very productive to deliver educated guesses about the Party's motivation because what is involved in its decision-making process is both complex and secretive. This is why this chapter chooses to focus on what the *VKĐ* betrays rather than what it hides. Yet, perhaps it is important to note here another factor: the Internet was coming to Vietnam in the late 1990s. From 1995 onwards, talks on the advent of the Internet became unavoidable. On March 5, 1997, the Government issued decree 21, outlining a temporary regulation of the Internet based on the principle "develop only to the point where it can be regulated." On November 19, 1997, inside the Ministry of Information and Communication at 18 Nguyễn Du, Hà Nội, the celebration of global Internet connection took place (Huy Duc, *Ben Thang Cuoc: Quyền Bính*, 329-30). This means that if we have come to the age of information accessibility, whoever gets to control the Party's narrative gets to dictate the future of the Party. The Party's core members, therefore, may have found it better to take the story-telling of its history into its own hands before other sources of information became available to the public. The main point here perhaps is not about threats, which render the Party's responses somewhat passive, or about confidence, which will paint Party's responses in a somewhat overly optimistic light; it is that the Party likes to take

an active role in dictating its own nature and promoting its own approved version of history against the challenges and changes of the times. It is, again, about independence and freedom.

It is from here that I side with suggestions to use the *VKĐ* in connection with other sources, rather than to use them "as stand-alone sources," in understanding its nature (Maclean 202). Or in the words of Pierre Asselin, "[w]hile the documents might prove problematic if scholars rely on them exclusively to relate party decision making, they can be remarkably illuminating if used in conjunction with other materials" (221). However, I intend to juxtapose *VKĐ* to literary works to show the contradictions within that cannot be smoothed out by a convenient narrative, regardless of the enormous attempt to edit the documents. Rather, those contradictions can only be contained within an ironic logic that maps out reality as always something beyond intentions, ideology, or narrativization. Reading *VKĐ* against the grain can perhaps betray what they do not want to show.

It should also be noted here that despite the large number of volumes, *VKĐ* is marked by slow revolutions and highly repetitive content, as Holcombe notes after reading three volumes,

> the basic language of the regime has been memorized. The same terms and arguments appear over and over again as the party leaders turn their Marxist-Leninist lens from one problem to the next, making the *VKĐ* volumes easy to read. New ideas . . . rarely appear in the collection. (240)

While it is true that the language and content are repetitive and that new knowledge will take a long time to surface in *VKĐ*, this repetitive-ness reflects an ideology rather than simplicity. First, Vietnamese education, heavily influenced by Marxism, believes in the dialectical method, *giáo dục hình xoắn ốc* [education in the spiral form], as we call it. All knowledge is repeated with gradually increasing depth. It would be a grave error indeed, to think that repetition here reflects the lack of sophistication in the ideology of Vietnamese Communism. Yet, this also means that the language as such rarely changes throughout many volumes. Because of this reason, I only include the most fundamental, the most famous, and the most immutable passages in my analysis.

These passages are highly representative of the Party's nature throughout its short history. The aim of this chapter is not to trace the gradual change in tone and attitude in *VKĐ* through seven decades in Việt Nam, even though that work is highly promising.

In this chapter, I read the *VKĐ* alongside Nguyên Ngọc's short story "Rừng Xà Nu" and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*. I trace the two modes of ironies the Party employed from its initial formative period prior to and during the Vietnam War to its early years after 1975. I argue that the irony with an open-ended flexibility that characterized the Party during war-time gradually gave way to a close-minded irony that witnessed the Party exclude the othered Việt people whose ideology and actions are antagonistic to it. The diversity of this antagonized force is easily simplified and generalized into a group of so-called "reactionary" Việt people [phản động]. Nevertheless, I briefly suggest that this group, despite their oppression, mobilizes irony to express themselves, their Vietnamese-ness, and their own right to belong to a larger Việt Nam than the Party will admit it. Chapters three and four will continue with this theme in greater depth.

I now turn to the nature of the Party represented in the VKĐ. My argument is that, in learning heavily from the ideology of Leninism and Maoism, adapted towards the case of Vietnam, the party comes to signify itself as an empty signifier that effectively attracts a wide diversity of social forces within its populist program. The Summary Strategies of the Communist Party of Vietnam [Sách lược vắn tắt của Đảng], drafted by Nguyễn Ái Quốc, aka. Hồ Chí Minh, in 1930 (the year the party was founded) list five critical points:

1) The Party is the vanguard of the proletariat; its central task is to enlist [*thu phục* in Vietnamese suggests a strong connotation of enlisting via argumentation] the majority of the proletariat and to enable the proletariat to lead the people;
2) The Party must enlist the majority of peasants and enlist their help to conduct land reforms and overthrow landlords and feudal lords;
3) The Party must remove the power-influence of national capitalists on workers [thợ thuyền] and peasants [dân cày];

4) The Party must establish communications with the petite bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia, middle-class peasants, Thanh niên, Tân Việt [other contemporary parties, the names mean Youth and New Việt] to push them to follow the side of the proletariat. Among the kulaks [phú nông], the medium and small landlords, and the capitalists in An Nam, the Party must exploit those portions whose reactionary faces do not yet reveal and later make their positions neutral, and the Party must overthrow those portions with clear reactionary faces; and

5) In all communications with other classes, the Party must *never* forsake the interests of workers-peasants and must reach out to international proletariat, especially those in France. (*VKĐ: Tập 2* 4-5)

What we can notice from the five tenets is first the constant slippage of the represented and second the surprising level of flexibility on the level of *tactics* overdetermined only by a secondary class interest of workers-peasants. Let us begin with the slippage of the represented. The definition of the proletariat is both time- and location-specific enough to refer to the workers in Marxism and flexible enough to be mobilized towards different groups.[39] In the case of the Communist Party of Vietnam, the proletariat refers to both the working class as the legitimate dominant class to lead and specifically the class alliance of workers-peasants. The Party here is determined to stay faithful to both theoretical Marxism and to the reality of the population in Indochina, an incompatible demand indeed that is not peculiar to Việt Nam only.[40] The problem becomes more obvious when we notice that the proletariat, by historical necessity, is tasked with leading the society in the revolution against capitalism into communism. And yet, when it comes to addressing the specificity of exactly what social groups such a class consists of, or more precisely, what social groups can assume the central stage and lead, it cannot be the workers in the factories in the case of Indochina where ninety percent of the population consists of peasants and only five percent of workers, as reported later in the sections "Mobilizing Workers" and "Mobilizing Peasants" (*VKĐ* Volume 2 130, 150). Even though the equation of dominancy with majority is simplistic, the urgent

[39] See Laclau's *On Populist Reason* 142-3

[40] The situation in Italy in Europe and China in South Asia were similar. See, for instance, Antonio Gramsci's "Workers and Peasants," Vladimir Lenin's "April Theses," and Mao Tse-Tung's "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan."

and practical task of a populist movement is precisely to gesture towards that impossible equation. I remember being taught to count differently in high school, where my teacher would claim that the workers-cum-proletariat must lead because they are the majority if we take into consideration the global count, not just regional or national count. Again, the counting becomes central. But this counting is challenging for us because it focuses on a regional outlook rather than an international one. Vietnam then, in that sense, is always international before it can be national: the announcement of the Party's name as the Communist Party of Indochina reflects this fact well.

The specific problem of the exact constitution of the vanguard class in Indochina was not unique to Vietnam and the Communist Party. Discussions concerning the readiness of peasants to join revolutionary forces were frequent in Marx and Marxist thinkers in both the West and the East. For Marx who was writing in 1852 during the early reign of Napoleon III, the peasants were simply not ready to join the ranks of proletariat because they were still bound by their local perspective: "[i]n so far as these small peasant proprietors are merely connected on a local basis, and the identity of their interests fails to produce a feeling of community, national links, or a political organization, they do not form a class" (*Surveys from Exiles Volume II* 239). The French peasants en masse, for Marx, represent "potatoes in a sack" that "form a sack of potatoes" (239). All together without any class consciousness to link them together, they come to their own ruins by selecting a master that governs them all: "they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. Their representative must appear simultaneously as their master, as an authority over them, an unrestricted governmental power that protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above" (239). Marx's critical irony detected in this section is consistently directed towards Napoleon the nepot whereas the downfall of the peasants is described quite objectively, albeit with some note of sympathy, as the product of historical conditions. He does

not appear to look down on them, but he clearly sees them as lacking leadership: gradually, they "find their natural ally and leader in the *urban proletariat*, whose task is the overthrow of the bourgeois order" (242, emphasis in the original).

Writing in 1919, Gramsci already noted the gradual but significant transformation of class consciousness of the peasants due to the effects of World War I. This change in peasant psychology, he notes, is noteworthy in the case of Russia, where "selfish, individual instincts were blunted; a common, united spirit was fashioned; feelings were universalized; the habit of social discipline was formed" (84-5). This leads Gramsci to conclude, for Russia as well as Italy, that "factory workers and poor peasants are the two driving forces of the proletarian revolution . . . . They represent the backbone of the revolution, the iron battalions of the advancing proletarian army" (86). In the Soviet, Lenin echoed the importance of the peasantry's alliance with the proletariat in his 1917 *April Theses* whereas the early Mao in the East in his Hunan report would highlight in 1927 the importance of poor peasants as leaders of peasant associations in their revolutionary task.[41] While their writings differed in the degree of importance that the peasants hold in the communist revolutions, Gramsci, Lenin, or Mao were starting to acknowledge the historic roles that the peasants played, especially in struggles in the East.

For the Communist Party of Vietnam itself, the problem was addressed in the later 1930 tenets, entitled "The Political Thesis of the Indochinese Communist Party" [Luận cương chánh trị của Đảng cộng sản Đông Dương] written by Trần Phú, the first general secretary of the party. First, the document admits that the proletariat was not yet *many* but increasing in numbers; the 1928-1929 strikes and the fierce struggles [tranh đấu rất dữ dội] by workers and peasants in 1930 show that class struggles in Indochina were spreading (*VKĐ* Volume 2, 90). The following page will go

[41] See Mao Tse-Tung's "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan."

on to affirm that the proletariat *and* peasants will be the two driving forces during the bourgeois democratic revolution [cách mạng tư sản dân quyền], a mediate revolution characterized by land reforms and anti-imperialism, before the possibility of the communist revolution is actualized. The thesis stresses that even though the proletariat and peasants are the two driving forces, the proletariat alone must lead the revolution to its success. Here, at least in theory, the proletariat is categorically marked as different from the peasants, their role considered secondary, important in their majority and yet undefined in theoretical space. And the proletariat, constituting only the minority in actuality in Indochina, is fading gradually into an abstract category functioning only for theoretical convenience.

Ironically, two pages later, the document makes another attempt to address the actual content of the proletariat:

> the proletariat in Indochina is transformed mostly from peasants or unemployed manual laborers, those who are literally newly formed [mới mẻ]—illiterate, unable to escape narrow-mindedness, feudal backwardness. All of these traits make challenging their class consciousness formation. Yet, they are getting more concentrated and crowded (94).

From this, we now know that there is a connection and a slippage between the proletariat proper (wage earners) and its origin in Indochina (the peasants). Moreover, the space occupying that connection *and* slippage is class-consciousness, formed *negatively* against the cruel colonial exploitation of the French. In other words, even though the proletariat, now understood in *content* as the peasants and unemployed manual laborers, are newly formed and therefore inexperienced, they overcome their weakness swiftly because of, or thanks to, the very cruelty of the French colonizers.[42] The two inevitable corollaries are that (1) the proletariat is both a destination that can potentially welcome an extremely diverse range of social groups and that (2) the proletariat is not

[42] See Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak" for another argument for a secondary level of class consciousness formation in Marx.

necessarily non-essentialist because of the first consequence, but rather it requires an essentialized piece of identity of an oppressed and exploited group. These two characteristics of the party, its simultaneous being both particular and open-ended to multiple inclusions, allow the party to both draw internal lines and blur them as necessary. The two corollaries allow for what Laclau would call the ability of the empty signifier to become representative without losing its particularity *and* for the self-made drawing of internal frontier and the constitutive exclusion of the heterogeneous.[43]

Since Laclau's theories are useful in understanding the populist nature of the communist movement in Vietnam, some notes on his central concepts are warranted here. In *On Populist Reason*, Laclau revisits the relevance of four concepts, namely discourse, empty signifiers, hegemony, and rhetoric, in understanding populist logic. For Laclau, discourse consists of a space in which "relations play the constitutive role" (68). Out of relations are born any element inhabiting such a space; thus, there is no set of a priori elements before such relational complex. Relation, therefore, is objectivity (68). Second, the concepts of empty signifier and hegemony arise out of the necessity to understand the logic of totality. To grasp totality conceptually, Laclau argues, one needs to investigate the nature of a significant difference that marks the limit of totality as something beyond and other than totality. But by formal definition, the totality in question is understood as encompassing all differential elements, so this other difference becomes the *othered* difference—a difference internal to totality; but unfit as it is to the work of totalizing, it is expelled from totality so that totality can constitute itself (69-70). Totality therefore embraces constitutive contradictions: it works in ironic systemic structures. It always already presumes failure and "an irretrievable fullness," and its role is always both "impossible and necessary" (70). Totality for populist logic is both an insurmountable problem and a political necessity: without an excluded

[43] See Laclau's *On Populist Reason*, especially chapters 4 and 5, pp. 67-156.

difference that offers a kind of closure, there would not be totality, identity, or signification. The space, or the gap, between the problematics of totality for populist logic and the political necessity of it is the work of representation, in which one particular difference, "without ceasing to be a *particular* difference, assumes the representation of an incommensurable totality" (70). Hegemony then, for Laclau, is this operation of "taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification" (70). Being itself and beyond itself, this particular difference presents the failed totality with a future, a future almost there. In order for it to function, this particular difference requires a radical investment of affect (71). Affect here for Laclau is strictly Freudian: it suggests a persistent attachment to the object. Unlike love, whose "cathexis invested in the object is . . . exhausted every time satisfaction is obtained," affect ensures long-lasting relation to the object even during its "passionless intervals" (54). A radical investment of affect, therefore, allows narcissistic intensities to be transferred to the object, resulting in both "idealization of the object" and its immunity to criticism (55). It is not love, but affect, that allows a Freudian subject to both act and be acted upon. In other words, the subject is not controlled by love in its relation to the object, but instead the subject lets the object invested with narcissistic libido act on the subject's self. Once achieved, this difference, invested with affect, becomes "something of the order of an *empty* signifier," whose particularity embodies "an unachievable fullness" (71). Lastly, the work of the empty signifier is always rhetoric by nature; in other words, it is catachrestical and especially synecdochical, given that it will always have to represent a totality beyond itself.

The ironic role of the Party becomes clearer now: it occupies the space between the problematics of totality for populist logic and the political necessity of having to represent a totalizing identity of Việt people. Within that space of representation can we understand more fully the first tenet, the most important of all, acknowledged in both documents by Hồ Chí Minh and

Trần Phú: the Party comes to assume a displaced identity of the populist *and* the communist groups. The Communist Party of Việt Nam in this case has a specific particularity: its identitarian space is strictly anchored to the proletariat, itself an increasingly empty signifier. Simultaneously, it promises to represent, to politically speak for, and to hegemonically concentrate the heterogeneous—in the sense of various—voices and act in the single role of a right force against an antagonistic one. It is an equivocal vague concept that, by accruing a deep intuited sense of specificity, becomes concrete and universal.

By being vague and imprecise in its definition of the proletariat, the party shows itself to operate "performatively within a social reality which is to a large extent heterogeneous and fluctuating" (Laclau, *On Populist Reason* 118). For Laclau, vagueness and imprecision in the operating language of populist discourse are "an essential component" rather than a weakness (118). This applies to naming, thereby not just including but also defining the concept of people. The representation of people, dislocated as such, brings about the unity of the people via the act of inconsistent naming that adapts itself organically to social reality. In this particular case, the naming of a vanguard group proletariat is constantly vague and imprecise because it is struggling with a historical reality and physical contingency of a Southeast Asian country whose people come from, and perhaps suffer from, such heterogeneous influences and forces that give rise to their own identitarian heterogeneity. The naming, therefore, tries to include as many popular subjects as possible without losing its particularity, namely its nature of the proletariat. This means that (1) there is a constant struggle between attempts to maintain particularity and attempts to forge relations between heterogeneous groups and (2) the naming act itself is never just an act external to the object it names but rather an object of affective investment itself, an action that brings the Party to self-identification with its subjects and above any criticism that threatens to damage its

core existence. As long as the proletariat in actuality is only a dream of a future always almost there, its name and the process of naming it are the closest possible to having the proletariat for the movement. The name therefore embodies the object it tries to name: it has raised itself and become "the Thing" (120).[44]

Laclau does not focus on or refer to the theories of irony in the construction of the people by populist logic. His theoretical work on populism and hegemony is both serious and structural, so it would be counterintuitive to rely on his work for an ironic reading of a political movement of populism. But perhaps irony does not have to be bound within the realm of non-seriousness and anti-structural. After all, irony relies on seriousness and structuralism to work by breaking free of them for a moment. If irony is understood as embracing constitutive contradictions and containing more meanings than it is allowed for, then the theory of populism is fitting for an ironic note. Laclau already remarks that the dialectical method alone cannot explain the inherent antagonism in political discourse.[45] Irony in that case is the intervening work of social reality in any convenient systems of understanding. It always highlights the gaps, the incongruencies, and the contestable.

Yet, irony is not merely a reading method used to describe a deeper and truer layer of reality. To assume that formal logic lacks the social reality that irony can fill is not to assume a sense of hierarchy. Indeed, irony is as much a discursive and linguistic phenomenon as it is a mode of thinking and reading. It therefore partakes creating the very social reality it addresses. What is special about irony, though, is its insistence on referring to contradictions, to something beyond, to the gaps and what fills them, to what Laclau terms "heterogeneity" that is at the same time without and within the system. In other words, it is self-reflexive and auto-critical. Irony then is a pathway through which social reality can be processed and incorporated into systemic thinking.

[44] See also Bill Brown's "Thing Theory"
[45] See Laclau's *On Populist Reason* 49

Bearing in mind this use of irony, I now turn to (1) the work of naming in the construction of the antagonistic other and (2) the investment of affect, both of which contribute to making the populist nature of the Việt Nam Communist Party

Nguyên Ngọc's "Rừng Xà Nu": Naming, the Antagonistic Other, and the Work of Affect

Nguyên Ngọc's "Rừng Xà Nu," originally published in 1965, is a story about the enemies making our very selves manifest; it is about the Enemy's help in the construction of the Party self. To this extent, it is also about the impossibility of making the Party self without the help of the Enemy. This section will investigate this construction of the Party members to show that the space of representation between the formal proletariat and the actual people is occupied by the empty signifier that names itself the Party. This Party, in representing the people that in turn represent it, works in the manner both particularistic and universalistic: it tries to keep its essence, symbolized eternally in the land and the water of Vietnam; but it also becomes empty enough to recruit any groups of people suffering from its enemies. The story, albeit short and deceptively simple, is actually written in codes and symbols. The reader knows that it is about highlanders living in the central region of Vietnam, but it works to generalize the nature of highlanders rather than to focus on the living realities of any ethnicity. Even though some names like Old man Mết [Cụ Mết] refer to historically real people, other names like the Village Xô Man or the type of tree called Xà Nu are fictional. Nguyên Ngọc, whose famous novel is *The Nation Stands Up* [Đất nước đứng lên], is hailed in Vietnam for his historical epic and romantic style [khuynh hướng lãng mạn sử thi] and his insightful writing on the heroic nature of the people during the war in the face of extreme adversities. Specifically, the story traces the history of how highland villagers come out fully as Party members, stand up and join other villages to fight their enemies.

The full transformation of the highlanders into Party members operates via naming and investment of affect. The naming operations will take place in the forms of retroactive history-telling and performative story-telling. The investment of affect comes from its capacity to flexibly attract various, even formally logically antagonistic, forces to its cause. Indeed, the goal is to expand revolutionary movements, or in our terms here, to *become* not just communist but populist. In detail, Trần Phú's "The Political Thesis of the Indochinese Communist Party" states that the Party can *temporarily* cooperate with other parties, on the conditions that they must also fight imperialism and do not prevent the Party from enlisting and becoming the representative of workers-peasants (*VKĐ Volume 2* 96). And when it comes to local varieties, like the Highland part of Vietnam—the setting of Nguyên Ngọc's story—the Party is willing to assimilate without losing its core. Its policy is named *4 cùng*, or the 4 rules of togetherness with the locals: The Party, represented by a communist agent, must eat with the locals, live with the locals, work with the locals, and speak the language of the locals (Trần 135).[46] In other words, the Party can enlist the locals because it *becomes* the locals. The only tenet it will not lose and will try to teach the locals is the exploitative, destructive, and inhumane nature of imperialism, which must be shown to be *immediately* experienced by the locals.

"Rừng Xà Nu" opens up its world to the readers via two presences antagonistic to each other: the forest of Xà Nù (a fictional three-needled pine tree) as opposed to the Enemy. The first word is made up; the second word, nameless. The first sentence situates the village within the range of the Enemy's canon ["Làng ở trong tầm đại bác của đồn giặc" (7)]. While the forest is eternally there by nature, the Enemy's indirect and metaphoric presence is established as eternally

[46] For further details on the Party's policy in Tây Nguyên, and the responses from Ngô Đình Diệm's Republic of Vietnam. See Tran Thi Lan's *Đấu Tranh Chính Trị ở Tây Nguyên trong Khánh Chiến Chống Mỹ từ Năm 1961 đến Năm 1968*.

there by violence, real and deadly: "they fire, *as a rule*, twice a day, early morning and late afternoon, or at noon and early evening, or midnight and when the chickens start to crow" ["Chúng nó bắn, đã thành lệ, mỗi ngày hai lần, buổi sáng sớm và xế chiều, hoặc đứng bóng và xẩm tối, hoặc nửa đêm và trở gà gáy"] (7, emphasis added). The damage is engraved on the forest: so many trees are killed, the tree sap looking like black coagulated blood everywhere. But the forest is not dying: the trees are yearning for the sunlight, so they try to grow as fast as possible, from destruction and death. The canon cannot kill the trees in the forest, "their wound healing fast like a young robust body" ["những vết thương của chúng chóng lành như trên một thân thể cường tráng"] (7-8). In this opening scene, the forest, symbolizing the people and the nation/land-water that the Party represents, puts forward its breast to shelter the village ["rừng xà nu ưỡn tấm ngực lớn của mình ra, che chở cho làng") (8). Right from the beginning of the story, the reader can see the construction of us, the people, as primarily foregrounded in the negative and secondary manner: we are us because of our common enemy, and they fire us because we are against them.

The story starts with the assumption that the reader knows clearly what groups it is referring to, that this village is communist and the enemy is Ngô Đình Diệm and his American allies, shortened as Mỹ-Diệm. Diệm is both historical and metaphoric. His name is generally attached to the other side, despite the list of other presidents that succeeded him. Throughout the story, though, the names change and, upon reflection, become increasingly clearer and, ironically, more confusing. The most common name for the enemy is just enemy [giặc]. Then, two more specific names are evoked: first, the enemy is American, then he is Mỹ-Diệm [American-Diệm]. American or Mỹ-Diệm, however, does not refer to a general nation, a group or an alliance; they act as a modifier of any common enemy-man, as in the American man (thằng Mỹ) or the Mỹ-Diệm man (thằng Mỹ-Diệm). Because the Việt language normally does not stress pronoun number, the name

is both singular and universal, referring both to one man and to the enemy in general. Finally, the enemy is thằng Dục, or Dục the man. Dục is both a general enemy and specific enemy, who comes to torment the village and is killed by Old man Mết. From the death of Dục, all villages' enemies are Dục. Tnú, a member of the village, will leave his own specific village to find and kill all the Dục's in other villages throughout the Vietnamese highlands. The operation of enemy identification is clear here in the story: from the enemy in general, to the American enemy, to the Mỹ-Diệm enemy, then finally to Dục the enemy in general again. It does not become more specific, in the sense of going from a general word to words with qualifications and finally to a proper noun. Rather, it goes from a linguistic generality to a proper noun universalized to any Enemy. The final Enemy is therefore both specific and universal. It points to the dangerously personalized, and internalized, notion of Enemy in the construction of an individual's sense of their people.

What is important to note here is the increasing Vietnamese-ness of the enemy. The enemy, in the end, is not general, nameless, faceless, as opposed to the forest (even though both are indeed equally abstractized); instead, he finally becomes quite specific, with a proper name, as opposed to the people. Dục, the final name of the enemy, becomes the concentrated target of the village from *within*. He is not non-Vietnamese, but anti-Vietnamese. He becomes an object of annihilation that erases everything that Vietnamese-ness is supposed to be. I will now investigate two instances in which Dục appears in all his anti-Vietnamese-ness.

Dục appears in the story as an individual from the Mỹ-Diệm side. As far as the story goes, he is a real Vietnamese person. Nguyên Ngọc never refers to the other side in the story as fake (*ngụy* in *Mỹ ngụy, ngụy quân, ngụy quyền*, meaning puppet army or puppet regime following the Americans) as it is common in many other stories and governmental documents to do so. Importantly, Dục has always been there, from the first story Cụ Mết tells in which brother Xút was

executed, to the second story in which Dục invades the village because they start to arm themselves. Dục, meaning desire or passion in Vietnamese, is the symbol of the evil of humanity, or the worst Vietnamese vice possible. The story makes it impossible to see him beyond his evilness: he tortures a young girl, Dít, terrorizing her by shooting and purposefully missing her one-by-one bullet, and he gives the order to murder Mai and her young baby in front of the whole village. And always from his mouth the word "communist" is uttered. The village never admits their identity directly. They are branded as such by the enemy, correct or not.[47]

Indeed, the village people and the communist agent never refer to themselves as communists. They have their way of identifying themselves: followers of the revolution [đi cách mạng], a title which they rarely mention and yet the reader is expected to understand immediately. It is the Enemy, Dục, in the story that keeps using the label in addressing them. The first time the Enemy hangs Brother Xút on the tree in front of the village, he says: "Whoever nurtures the communist, look!" ["Ai nuôi cộng sản thì coi đó!"] (18). The village at this time is not yet communist, but rather communist sympathizers, hiding outside communists.[48] Indeed, the enemy likely is one of the reasons they become communists proper. The second and third times, the label is uttered when the Enemy wants the young Tnú to point out the communists hiding in the village. Tnú, transforming into a hero, opens his hand and points it to his own belly: "Here is the communist" [Ở đây này] (20), as if he is forced to come out, to bring out some vague identity that has always been there inside him but that has only crystalized itself now thanks to the deadly pressure from the Enemy.[49] From a friend of a communist, Tnú now comes out as a communist

[47] The Americans were, of course, not always correct. The 1968 My Lai massacre stands as evidence of this fact.
[48] The difficulty of finding communists blending within a community becomes a source of annoyance and a reason for indiscriminate killings. Again, the My Lai massacre shows. See Michal R. Belknap's *The Vietnam War on Trial*.
[49] The reader may remember from the introduction that the belly in the Việt language is equivalent to the heart in English.

himself, a sort of self-identification that lands him several years in prison Kom Tum before he can escape. The fourth and fifth times the Enemy mentions the word communist, it is to discover that Tnú and other village members are arming themselves. The Enemy then decides to punish the village by burning Tnú's fingers with Xà Nu sap, perhaps in their attempt to showcase a poetic and ironic side of torture. While Tnú's fingers are burning, Tnú remains silent; he never utters a shout of pain, determined to become a true communist. Thinking of what Brother Quyết, a communist that helped the village, said, "A communist never bothers to complain or moan" ["người cộng sản không thèm kêu van"], Tnú only screams one time, the loud bang that becomes a battle cry that joins others' battle cries to stand up (25-27). Six times the word "communist" is uttered, only the last time it is uttered by a village member to sound more like a fact, impersonal and true —always already a communist, but indirectly, as natural as the Xà Nu forest is communist. The forest, too, never complains or moans.

We can now see how naming works via the excluded other, an other Vietnamese who is anti-Vietnamese and who gives legitimacy to the name communist in an antagonistic manner. But this statement needs qualifications. First, this does not mean that the village members, including Tnú, his wife Mai, her little sister Dí, are not already communists. The idea of being communist is much less in the label than in the nature the word can convey. While there is great pressure to the village in denying they are communists, there is also great incentive for them to become united around the label the Enemy imposes upon them via torture and terrorism. There is a mythical air surrounding the meaning of being a communist here. The story is not a vulgar propaganda work, but it manages to instill a strong sense of a community, a village, a family that supports each other. In that highland community, there is a history, a tradition of story-telling, a series of iconic places, a repertoire of collective memories, all of which give them a sense of identity that somehow

collapses into the label “communist.” To be a communist is to be in a community and a family within a nation of communities and families. A secondary formation of class consciousness is collapsed into a primary way of identity-making. What they fight against is not imperialism, but against a local Enemy threatening to destroy who they are as highlanders. In fighting against that local Enemy, they become fully fleshed communists.

Second, being a communist in this sense, is strictly secondary. The primary consciousness for the village members is precisely who they are as highlanders; such consciousness cannot be easily swayed or converted into communism or the proletariat. To follow the revolution, communism has to become them, which means it has to prove to them that being a communist and being a highlander have a lot in common. Positively speaking, being a communist is being a highlander, there needs not be any loss of identity here. Negatively speaking, the two have a common enemy: The Enemy. This enemy is Vietnamese and anti-Vietnamese. After all, he needs to be Vietnamese before he can become anti-Vietnamese: Dục denies Vietnamese-ness and becomes anti-Vietnamese in all his actions. In this strictly logical sense, Dục, the Enemy, is not just anti-communist like the American. Dục is opposed to the village, to the people’s way of life, which has become somewhat synonymous with a communist life. The antagonistic other here fulfils both requirements of being Vietnamese and anti-Vietnamese so that the true Vietnamese spirit of the people can be formulated.

Besides constructing the antagonistic other, and through it, completing the work of naming communists as highlanders, the story also collapses the nature of the Party with nature as such, providing the former with a radical source of affect and rendering the Party’s cause synonymous with nature’s cause. In other words, not only does the Party stand up, but the whole land-water stands up also. In the story, the elderly figure of the village, Cụ Mết, comes to symbolically suggest

the equivalent of the head figure of the Party, Cụ Hồ. *Cụ* is an honorific title for elderly and respectable people; Cụ Hồ is the friendly and intimate naming of Hồ Chí Minh. Cụ Mết tells the village stories so they do not forget, keeping to the long-standing traditions of imparting knowledge, wisdom, and practical know-how to the future generations. Yet what he says bears significant similarity to what a communist leader has to say. In witnessing the torture and subsequent deaths of Mai and her baby, Cụ Mết does not succumb to rage and passion like Tnú, but instead leads other youths into the forest to retrieve their self-made weapons. Dục then, not surprisingly, dies under the spearhead of Cụ Mết, the old man that symbolizes nature, Hồ Chí Minh, and the leader of the village-Party. After killing Dục, Cụ Mết calls out to the whole village to stand up and revolt everywhere: "Now it has begun. Light the fire! All the old, the young, the men, the women, each finds for themselves a weapon. Those with nothing, make spikes, five hundred spikes! Light the fire" ["Thế là bắt đầu rồi! Đốt lửa lên! Tất cả người già, người trẻ, người đàn ông, người đàn bà, mỗi người phải tìm lấy một cây giáo, một cây mác, một cây vụ, một cây rựa. Ai không có thì vót chông, năm trăm cây chông! Đốt lửa lên!"] (27). His call resembles that of a leader calling out his people to fight, because they have had enough. The construction of Cụ Mết then is stripped of vulgar propaganda, of political affinities with communism, and even of nationalist sentiments. In the story, his call is a local call, spreading out and echoing with the national sentiment of communism. Words that are communist by labels but communitarian by nature are spoken by a local head that reminds one of Hồ Chí Minh. The two are one. And since Cụ Mết, a highlander, belongs to a people whose close connection to nature defines who they are, he represents nature as such, part of the forest, the river, and the people. The story then continues to bring all of Vietnam into this metonymic work about the highlanders.

In the Việt language, the word for nation and for country, is Đất Nước, or Land-Water. The Sino-Vietnamese words, used in archaic or formal contexts, are Giang Sơn, River-Mountain, or Sơn Hà, Mountain-River. A contrast with English is needed to reveal the deep connection between the people and their habitat, through both agricultural practices and the nominal act in sociolinguistics.[50] In English, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) 'country' is derived from the Latin word 'contrā'; the root means opposite, in front of, but gradually comes to depict what is in front of the viewer, from the viewer's perspective. 'Country' in that sense is the *nature*, in all rich senses of the term, one confronts, or is confronted with, the moment one is born. Contrary to 'country,' nation, according to OED, is predictably derived from the Latin word '*nātiō*' as birth, race, nation, class of people, or gentiles. A country is what confronts a countryman whereas a nation is a birthplace and all its entangled connotations. In Vietnamese, *Đất Nước*, *Giang Sơn*, or *Sơn Hà* connote both the sense of home and of nature belonging to one living in it.

But the relationship between humans and their country here is a forged and external one. There is nothing human in those words. Nation is just land and water, rivers and mountains. Humans happen to be born within those spaces, and through living in them, become connected, attached, and devoted to them. They then try to see the part of that Land-Water in part of themselves. They build their own version of Land-Water so that they can belong to it. This does not mean humans can grasp the ontic, the physicality of their own nation in its entirety, which perhaps requires a great deal of contemplation and physical travel that few can afford. The terms are as much the works of imagination as any other terms associated with identities. But from the very beginning, the linguistic and discursive foregrounding of nature over the human in those Vietnamese words already mark the people as secondary. Nature, or our Land-Water, is there

[50] See *đất nước* in Hoàng's *Từ điển tiếng Việt* [Vietnamese Dictionary]: 'đất nước': miền đất đai, trong *quan hệ* với dân tộc làm chủ và sống trên đó [an area, in relation with a people owning and living on it]

before us and does not need us to just be. Out of all that mass indifference, the Vietnamese build their own Land-Water and try to maintain it, as in Hồ Chí Minh's words: "Hùng Kings [our forefathers] were instrumental in building this nation/water, we have to keep it together" ["Các vua Hùng đã có công dựng nước, Bác cháu ta phải cùng nhau giữ lấy nước"]. What we have here then is the precarious *relational* nature of living proximately within the place that one calls home, from which the desire is to become one with nature, rather than for nature to become human. To incorporate the Party into that of Nature then, is to bring it to that primary space of Vietnamese identity and to give it that mythical quality of being always already there as both nature and the protector of nature.

I now trace the appropriation of nature in the story. More specifically, nature acts as a source of radical affect in the general acceptance of the Party by the people. In aligning itself with nature as object of radical investment of affect, the Party disappears into its people and rises above criticism. To become nature, to become the nation of land and water, of mountains and rivers, is to become the most sacred thing in people's mind. "Rừng Xà Nu" begins with the suffering of the forest. Every day the village is bombed, but "nearly all the bombs are dropped onto the forest":

> The whole forest of xà nu, tens of thousands of trees, there is not a single tree that is not wounded. Some trees are cut in half, falling thunderously like a storm. At the wounds, the sap oozes abundantly, with an overwhelming aroma, reflecting the summer sunlight, then it turns pale, darkens and solidifies into huge chunks of blood. (7)

The trees, as living things, point towards lives wounded, precarious, passive, and insignificant. But they are strong too because of their *continued* capacity to thrive after death. They each are not immortal, but the thriving chain of succession makes them eternal:

> next to a newly fallen tree, another four or five younglings grow, green and pointing straight up to the sky. They desire the sunlight the most. . . . Some grow up to a man's chest and get cut down by the cannon, their wounds cannot heal, they fester and the trees die within five or ten days . . . But some trees the cannon cannot kill,

> their wounds heal as fast as a strong body. They grow up fast, replacing the fallen ones. Just like that, for the past two or three years the forest of xà nu has put forward its breast to shelter the whole village. (7-8)

It is reductive to understand here only the desire to anthropomorphize the forest; it is more challenging to conceive of the forest as a living being on its own. And yet because of such a challenge, the comparative language that reduces the forest to a human figure only points vaguely to a human and non-human *relation* and neglects the *excess* of that natural forest as something of its own. The lacuna between the ability to humanize nature and the inability to consume it renders the figure of nature both useful for appropriation to 'us' and dangerous due to appropriation from 'them'.

Indeed, the forest is passive in its suffering and active in its regeneration. It cannot be killed, but it does not fight back. The second task is reserved for humans, who transform the forest into an intricate land of traps and mines that deter the Enemy. That is, nature must be mobilized, and those who can mobilize it effectively "win" the game of representing Việt Nam. The Party then is intent on recruiting the help of nature in defining its own nature and in fighting against the Enemy. In this particular front, the Party must be active and careful, because the forest is mobilized by both sides. On the enemy's side, it is used to hurt and to kill. For instance, Tnú's torture begins as follows: a soldier wraps all of Tnú's fingers with cloths dipped in the sap of Xà Nù, and then Dục burns them himself:

> Tnú does not speak or moan a single word. He stares at Dục. Dục laughs heartily [saying to the whole village]: Look carefully at the communist that wants to hold weapons. Your fate is not one of holding weapons . . . [meanwhile] one finger of Tnú bursts into fire. Two fingers, [then] three fingers. Nothing is as easy to catch fire, to enter deep, to inundate—đượm—as the sap of xà nu. The fire catches fast. Ten fingers become ten torches. (26)

This passage, understandably, gives a rise to the ambivalence of the figure of nature, especially for those who claim that the forest is unequivocal in its alliance with the communists. Our generations

growing up in the 1990s and early 2000s were taught, for instance, that the forest is pro-Vietnamese and pro-communist by nature. But the communist populist logic is more complex than ours perhaps. The appropriation of xà nu sap by the 'enemy' is working: "Tnú feels the spread of fire into his chest and his belly, he is in pain but he will not moan. He shouts, just one sound," then the people rise up (26-7). The village rhetoric is of course the same: it is time to turn on the fire on the 'enemy.' Its difference lies elsewhere in the ability to blend in with nature as one expanded whole, as opposed to the enemy's mere functional use of nature as a weapon in the hope of turning nature against the people. Cụ Mết's teaching words to Tnú and others are illuminating of the Party's policy:

> Remember, Tnú? You did not save your wife [and your child]. And you, you are caught, you have only two empty hands . . . I see them tie the ropes around you. I don't jump out to save you. I only have two empty hands, too. I don't come out. I turn back to the forest, I go find the younglings. The younglings go into the forests, they go find spears. Listen well my children, clear yet? Remember, write in your head. After I die, you all still live and must tell it to your own offspring: they hold the guns, we must hold the spears. (24-25)

The increasingly blurry boundary between the human and the forest, significant from the start of the story, now advances another step. Nature provides the extension of the human, which is to say, the two are in a symbiotic relationship—the former passive, lending a hand, literally and figuratively to the latter, whereas the latter active, asking for help from nature. Both save themselves from a common enemy. The enemy does appropriate nature, but in appropriating nature the enemy destroys it with fire and burning. This side then must turn to nature in a more constructive manner. Tnú's fingers are transformed into a figure of *lack* that can be filled by nature transformed into weapons and by the community transformed into unity. The village and the forest share two common traits: they are both the victim of the enemy's fire power, and they rely on each other for survival, against the attempt of the enemy to co-opt either of them into their destruction.

What we detect here is the very ambivalent figure of nature as a floating signifier that can be appropriated by either side to either camp. The communist, seen to assimilate itself, even at the strategic loss of itself, into nature, incorporates nature by becoming it while retaining its singular autonomy. No act of vengeance is sought upon nature, for it is not the enemy. It is the Party; they are one and rely on each other for survival. The Enemy abuses nature, seeing it as a weapon of destruction that must destroy itself in the process. It is the communist side in the story then that manages to enlarge itself into nature, blending itself into the forest. In doing so, it gains the affect of nature for its legitimacy. It is the self of the people, the source of life for the Việt people on this Earth, the victim of senseless capitalist, dehumanizing, and war crimes. To destroy nature is to destroy the Party and the people whose affect is invested in both. To become nature, the Party loses itself and become (the vanguard of) the people.

So far we have seen the Party's ironic work of losing itself to enlarge itself. By becoming an empty signifier, it attempts to absorb as many forces sympathetic to it and becomes a truly populist movement. Its success in defining itself relies heavily on the construction of an antagonistic camp that is strictly Vietnamese and anti-Vietnamese. Such a camp allows the Party to draw the frontier between what is the Vietnamese/communist way and what is the anti-communist and therefore anti-Vietnamese way. I now turn to the last section in this chapter in which I investigate the treatment of the truly heterogeneous other that threatens to foreclose the Party's work of self-definition.

Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Sympathizer*: Beyond Vietnam and Other Vietnamese

Despite the large volumes of *VKĐ*, the content evolves quite gradually, if not very slowly, and the language is inherently repetitive. This, I was taught during my pre-service education as a teacher in Việt Nam, is actually a method called spiral progress (phát triển theo hình xoắn ốc) in

which repetition with addition resembles the dialectical methods adopted in Marx-Engels' work. It helps memorize, internalize, and organically process knowledge. Admittedly, content and language patterns are repeated, allowing one to travel through texts easily. This is why I chose to highlight two foundational texts published in 1930 as the background to my analysis of Nguyên Ngọc's 1965 story. The two texts are fundamental and their core message (that the leading role comes to the proletariat and the Party) cannot be changed easily. But along the passage of time, certain important documents did come along as their appearances are more opportune and requisite, so careful reading of all repetitions is still recommended. One such important document is "The Outline of Vietnamese Culture" [Đề cương về văn hóa Việt Nam], published in 1943 and serving as the formal guidelines of the Party in matters of culture and literature. The documents list three fundamental rules in mobilizing Vietnamese culture: nationalize it [dân tộc hóa], mainstream it [đại chúng hóa], and make it scientific (in the Marxist sense, of course, or *khoa học hóa*). The new culture therefore must be a Socialist Culture, nationalist in form and democratic in content. Importantly, the work is to radically remove [đánh tan] the philosophical influences of Confucius, Mencius, Descartes (known for his idealism), Bergson, Kant, Nietzsche, etc. and to promote dialectical materialism and historical materialism above all other theories. The sole theoretical tool of Vietnamese culture, then, is socialist realism whereas the sole language of Vietnamese culture then is the Việt language (chữ quốc ngữ), which needs to be unified and enriched (*VKĐ* Tập 7, 315-316).

What the reader can realize here is that the movement towards nationalist purity had been well under way since 1943, before Hồ Chí Minh declared Independence for the North of Vietnam and long before 1975 when Vietnam was unified into its modern nation-state. Yet, what is purely Vietnamese and traditional here warrants some clarification: it is not simply anything foreign and

non-Vietnamese. Marx, Engels, Lenin, and even Mao are all foreigners, as much as Confucius, Kant, or Nietzsche. Communism after all is imported. What marks something as properly Vietnamese is its compatibility with the Party's communist guidelines of ideology (namely, dialectical materialism and historical materialism). In order to do so, the Party must achieve two consecutive goals. First, it must Vietnamize communism in order internalize it and make it felt in the blood of Việt people as much as it is felt in the land and the water of Vietnam. Vietnamese history then has always been communist in nature, if not in name. This requires not just making the communist present but also rewriting a communist past. Second, once communism has become a trademark of Vietnamese-ness, it can be utilized as a benchmark of anything that is or is not Vietnamese. The job of all artistic comrades then is to find that communist spirit within their work and their thoughts. Hồ Chí Minh is Vietnamese because he is communist and follows the Party. Ironically, Vietnamese-ness now becomes something beyond Vietnam (its foreign origins) and allows for both greater flexibility and stricter exclusivity (its selective foreign origins only) than other criteria bound by blood, kin, kind, language, or geography.

The Sympathizer, understood in the 1943 document's light, is a novel that crisscrosses that boundary between Vietnam and beyond Vietnam. Its narrator, later known as Vo Danh (Vô Danh) in *The Committed*, is both named and unnamed, both Vietnamese and beyond Vietnamese (Vô Danh means without a name in Vietnamese). Through that narrator, the reader comes to glimpse into a Vietnam that excludes many Việt people that do not fall neatly into its categories of communist. The rest of this chapter will survey two groups of such people—those beyond Vietnam and those othered Vietnamese—and argue that they, too, sing Việt Nam.[51] While the Party's ironic discourse spits them out of history and representation, their own ironic discourse rewrites

[51] Langston Huges inspires these words. See "I, too."

themselves in an alternative, and counter, mode of history that is emerging both within and without Vietnam. Together with the Vietnamese communists, they represent a fuller account of Vietnamese-ness in all its contradictions.

The unnamed narrator in *The Sympathizer* is "a man of two minds," both an evocation of his affiliation with Ralph Ellison's invisible black narrator and Dubois' double consciousness (361).[52] His nature allows him to be an ironist and to see the world ironically, meaning that he can see and put together the incompatible, the enmity, the contradictions. It also means he can see love in hate and hate in love, sympathy in losses and sadness in victories. And finally, it allows him to see the fuller Vietnamese-ness in those considered the least Vietnamese of all because of their anti-communist sentiments. For people like him, a "bastard" born of a Vietnamese maid and a French priest, Việt people "are nothing if not inconsistent," which is to say that they are understandable, accessible via ironic reading, rather than logical, dissectible via analytical reading (12).

And our narrator is the prime example of this understandable, yet unanalyzable, inconsistency. Upon witnessing the fall of Saigon, he feels "a need both to mourn and to celebrate" (13). Looking at the young soldiers of the falling South, he feels for them all,

> lost in their sense that within days they would be dead, or wounded, or imprisoned, or humiliated, or abandoned, or forgotten. They were my enemies, and yet they were also brothers-in-arms. Their beloved city was about to fall, but mine was soon to be liberated. It was the end of their world, but only a shifting of worlds for me. (17)

Originally from the North, and trained as a communist spy, he came to the South with a communist mind but also developed a deep affinity with the Southern side, making himself a great spy, hence a useful agent, hence a good communist, hence a good man. He is a spy who lives so authentically that he is a no-spy at all, which is the same thing as to say he is a great spy. Yet, being a bastard,

[52] *Sympathizer* contains many non-Vietnamese references in its sub-text, making it somewhat Vietnamese in this aspect too. See Caroline Rody's "Between 'I' and 'We': Viet Thanh Nguyen's Interethnic Multitudes."

contaminated at birth, and being a spy, contaminated at work, he is viewed by the communists and the Southern side as inherently not good enough, hence not Vietnamese enough. For him only, the world is an irony where everything, like water, is always reaching beyond its container. Even truth, the best kind of truth, for him is "the one that [means] at least two things" (121). For those in the Party then, who believe the truth is singular and can only be glimpsed from the perspective of communism, such ironic truth can only be anti-communist.

Being able to see truths that mean more than one thing, he portrays himself also as an earnest man who can empathize with others, be they his enemies in names or torturers in fact. For instance, in witnessing the torture of a "Wiry Montagnard, an elder of the Bru minority," who allegedly works as "a liaison agent for the Viet Cong," he feels a deep empathy for the man because he is unable to save him from his captain's "wrapping a strand of rusted barbed wire around his throat, the necklace tight enough so that each time he swallowed, the wire tickled his Adam's apple" (131). Even though his language is ironic, the action is earnest: in his mind, he screams for the Montagnard because he does not, or maybe cannot, scream for himself. From his empathy, the narrator cultivates a desire to scream, not speak, for others, a desire to represent their screams faithfully. Because he believes that "the absurd often has its seed in a truth," perhaps he sees representing scream, a non-verbal action, as a way to both avoid the treacherous terrain of worded representation and capture something more essential about voice of the silenced and their bodies in unison with their voices (178). Thanks to his ironic worldview, he sees Việt people everywhere, from all sides, including himself.

But also because of his insistence on seeing a Vietnam beyond communism, his confessions are deemed ingenuine, and he not Vietnamese enough. The charge here, importantly, is one of inauthenticity and lack of genuineness, both of which have to do with how irony is

commonly perceived as both inauthentic and flippant. Because confessions too are memory work, they partake in revising personal memory as much as national history. And because they are memory work "built on war," they too "might, in general, be called ironic (Nguyen *Nothing Ever Dies* 179). [53] During the cross examination, the Commandant is not happy with what the narrator writes, calling the confession ingenuine, to which the narrator responds, "haven't I confessed to many things, Commandant?" The reply, which is also a verdict, is both clear and vague: "*In content, perhaps, but not in style*. Confessions are as much about style as content . . . . All we ask for is a certain way with words" (312, emphasis added). To be properly educated, the narrator needs to change not just the content, which is not communist enough, but also the style, which is, I argue, too ironic: the Commandant senses sarcasm in Vo Danh's answers, which is why he cannot accept the confessions (314). To divide confessions, or any discourse for that matter, into content and style is by all means to ignore their organic relations. After all, style is in content and content needs style to be content proper. The reader notices here the gradual fossilization of Vietnamese-ness in both content and style after the Vietnam War. Fossilization is against irony which demands constant change.

In terms of content, the Commandant appears to have a checklist at hand. The narrator must mention To Huu [Tố Hữu] and his famous poem "Since Then" [Từ ấy], *How the Steel was Tempered* [Thép đã tôi thế đấy], all of which are typical works that children in communist Việt Nam grow up being exposed to. He failed that part. More seriously, the narrator failed to quote Uncle Ho or even the fundamental folk saying:

> The good deeds of Father are as great as Mount Thai Son
> The virtue of Mother is as bountiful as springwater gushing from its source
> Wholeheartedly is Mother to be revered and Father respected
> So that the child's way may be accomplished. (313)

[53] Viet Thanh Nguyen elsewhere has also suggested that *Sympathizer* is the aesthetic realization of his theoretical visions in *Nothing Ever Dies*. See Michael LeMahieu's "An Interview with VIET THANH NGUYEN" 444.

> [Công cha như núi Thái Sơn
> Nghĩa mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra
> Một lòng thờ mẹ kính cha
> Cho tròn chữ hiếu mới là đạo con]

The folk saying is Vietnamese in both content and style. It stressed the importance of a mother and a father and of a child's fidelity to them. In style, it boasts the Vietnamese rhythm in six-eight meter [thể thơ lục bát] which is strict in rules. The translation into English has lost that style, which is, after all, what the Commandant means: something is absolutely Vietnamese, non-foreign, that only the Việt people can possess and be. Because the narrator does not respect his father, who is non-Vietnamese anyway, he cannot apply the poem without being unfaithful to either communist teaching or Vietnamese tradition, even when the two are one and the same thing to the Commandant. Lastly, the narrator failed to quote Nguyen Du and his famous *Tale of Kiều* [Nguyễn Du and *Truyện Kiều*], the story in which the main character, Kiều, leads a tragic life because she is a talented person: the Vietnamese words "talent" [tài] and "misfortune" [tai] closely rhyme ["Chữ tài liền với chữ tai một vần"]. Similarly, the narrator's talent is also his downfall: he is a bastard that is more than a Vietnamese person, and he can see things beyond Communist Việt Nam; the two traits make him ironic, beyond Vietnamese and therefore not Vietnamese. Therefore, the Commandant comes to the final conclusion: "You would be better off if you only saw things from one side. The only cure for being a bastard is to take a side" (314).

The logic of exclusion becomes clear the moment it turns upon itself. According to the Commandant, to be Vietnamese now is not to be anti-American anymore:

> The anti-American already includes the American, he said. Don't you see that the Americans need the anti-American? While it is better to be loved than hated, it is also far better to be hated than ignored. To be anti-American only makes you a reactionary. In our case, having defeated the Americans, we no longer define ourselves as anti-American. *We are simply one hundred percent Vietnamese*. (319, emphasis added)

Now, unlike during the war, the Vietnamese appear to shred off its reliance on an external enemy for its identity. To be Vietnamese now is to eliminate anything and anybody that is less than purely Vietnamese, meaning that anything or anybody that does not conform to a strict definition of Communist Việt Nam. While historically speaking, to be anti-American continues to be part of Vietnamese-ness for quite a while after 1975, and to some extent even up to now, the need to be Vietnamese has indeed moved beyond that. Ironically, in order to have a fully defined Vietnamese national identity, there is a need now to exclude certain groups of Việt people from within rather than repel certain foreign people from without like before.

What marks the narrator as not Vietnamese is his ironic style that allows him to see the contradictions in the most absolute thing and the meaninglessness in the most meaningful thing. Irony, the ability to *thu phục* [enlist via argumentation] contradictory forces into the service of the revolution, the country, and union of the North and the South, has ceased to be part of Vietnamese-ness. For instance, he deconstructs the famous slogan by Hồ Chí Minh by turning it upside down as follows:

> while nothing is more precious than independence and freedom, *nothing is also more precious than independence and freedom*! These two slogans are almost the same, but not quite. The first inspiring slogan was Hồ Chí Minh's empty suit, which he no longer wore. How could he? He was dead. The second slogan was the tricky one, the joke. It was Uncle Ho's empty suit turned inside out, a sartorial sensation that only a man of two minds, or a man with no face, dared to wear. This odd suit suited me, for it was of a cutting-edge cut. Wearing this inside-out suit, my seams exposed in an unseemly way, I understood, at last, how our revolution had gone from being the vanguard of political change to the rearguard hoarding power . . . Having liberated ourselves in the name of independence and freedom . . . we then deprived our defeated brethren of the same. (375-6)

While the focus should be on the value of independence and freedom, he highlights the nothing, now more precisely understood as nothing-ness. While the content is supposed to be full, he empties it. And while it is uttered in the utmost serious tone of a communist revolutionary, it is

uttered in an ironic tone of a narrator who cannot help but cut across boundaries. Irony as a liberating force now becomes too cutting-edge, too revolutionary for the Commandant, whose Việt Nam has already been liberated and no longer requires songs of ironic liberation.[54] His Việt Nam without that irony cannot bear to include people like the narrator if it wants to stabilize its new form that it has longed for since time immemorial. The narrator then is not an anti-Vietnamese like the protagonist Dục in Nguyên Ngọc's story that constructs Việt Nam in a negative sense; the narrator is a Việt person beyond Việt Nam that Communist Việt Nam cannot contain. He is both for and against Việt Nam, for and against Communism, Vietnamese and foreign in blood, in education, and in tongue. All these, however, make him more fully Vietnamese than his Commandant. In this sense, he is the element of heterogeneity that the newly independent Party-led nation needs to juxtapose itself to, in order to make its Communist Việt Nam full and complete. In the end, the narrator has to rely on irony yet again, only this time for his own survival. As he is spit out of his homeland, he contemplates upon everything so far:

> What cause had they died for? For what reason had millions more died in our great war to unify our country and liberate ourselves, often through no choice of their own? Like them, we had sacrificed everything, but at least we still had a sense of humor. If one really thought about it, with just a little bit of distance, *with even the faintest sense of irony, one could laugh at this joke played on us, those who had so willingly sacrificed ourselves and others*. (378, emphasis added)

The reader then, by reading the end, is reminded of the beginning when our narrator says the same thing, just not quite, that irony is "the only thing salvageable from the tragedy that had befallen us, or that we had brought on ourselves" (86). Irony for survival will be treated more carefully in chapters three and four. For our purpose in this chapter, it suffices to turn to the truly heterogenous

[54] Ironic songs about the aftermath of the Vietnam War are many. One, for instance, is Vietnamese singer Khánh Ly's "Một chú quà cho quê hương," one in which she gives the following voice-over, intended to the father: "leaving the home and the country does not mean I leave hometown, forget the people . . . there will be one day Việt people look at each other with hatred no longer in their eyes; prisons will become schools, teaching again the lessons of love … That day I will return to visit you in your grave." It precedes the lyrics of the song, highly ironic in themselves.

Vietnamese groups that Communist Việt Nam claims to represent but can never give voice to, for a simple reason that it does not need them in reality to make its own identity. They are in a way similar to Spivak's subaltern, to Hegel's peoples without history, to Marx's lumpenproletariat, or to Laclau's idea of the truly heterogeneous that is opposed to the truly communist Việt people, in the sense of being left aside, because it does not "in any sense shape the identity of what is inside" (*On Populist Reason* 140). Since no-one can represent them, by definition no-one can even talk about them. All one can do is to allude to their vanishing presence in any narrative that cannot not address them in the most ignorant manner possible. The narrator, for once, relies on his personal link to his dead mother to provoke the presence of the Vietnamese other:

> I could not help but feel moved by the plight of these poor people. Perhaps it was not correct, politically speaking, for me to feel sympathy for them, but my mother would have been one of them if she were alive. She was a poor person, I was her poor child, and *no one asks poor people if they want war*. Nor had anyone asked these poor people *if they wanted to die of thirst and exposure on the coastal sea*, or *if they wanted to be robbed and raped by their own soldiers*. If those thousands still lived, they would not have believed how they had died. (3-4, emphasis added).

It is sensitive of the narrator to address them as 'them' rather than us, even though all are Việt people. His othering of those truly unnamed Vietnamese civilians, their presence undeniable, is an act of respect from someone who does not know and cannot represent them. For this he is perhaps the most communist Việt person, for he is able to continue the work of the Party even in times of peace, or perhaps more correctly speaking, in times of non-war. He can count beyond the official line of what Việt people are and what Việt people should mean. Their evoked presence then is an instance of an ethical response and responsibility to remind one that lack of representation does not necessarily mean absolute death. The mere fact of their presence out there, confronting anyone writing with an intent on being faithful to what they record, imposes itself upon narrative.

However, for a more fully fleshed representation of those other Vietnamese to arise, something more needs to be done.

Yet, for his insistence on being both outside and inside the Vietnamese spectrum, on being always less than the truly communist Vietnamese and always more than any official Vietnamese labels, he is deemed by the Party Commandant as not being Vietnamese enough. One of his charges is none other than this shifting use of pronouns, reflecting his shifting alliances:

> You [the Commandant] have asked me what I mean when I say "we" or "us," as in those moments when I identify with the southern soldiers and evacuees on whom I was sent to spy. Should I not refer to those people, my enemies, as "them"? I confess that after having spent almost my whole life in their company I cannot help but sympathize with them, as I do with many others. (36)

This difference, between the flexible and the rigid use of pronouns, marks the narrator as somehow more Vietnamese than the Commandant. That communist "we" somehow becomes much less encompassing than the Vietnamese "they" that the narrator employs sometimes.

This chapter has attempted to highlight two versions of irony. The first irony is mobilized by the Communist Party when it attempts to become the empty signifier of nation/nature. This empty signifier deployed before 1975 allows it to construct a populist notion of the people that flexibly includes most forces other than communism. The Party, in doing so, is willing to lose much of itself to become the forces it wants to recruit, and to make those forces realize that they have elements of communism in them all along. The epitome of this flexibility is shown in the Party's collapse of its own nature with nature as such: it has become the nation it wants to represent. This irony, however, is passed on to the other Việt people, the excluded ones, who employ it to challenge the Party's attempt, after the Vietnam War, to consolidate its image of a purist Việt Nam by excluding those it deems inessential in constructing its newly independent form. Those excluded are the people who are more than communist Vietnamese, whose lives

encompass more than lives envisioned in a communist country, whose ironic way of reading their Vietnamese world is deemed not compatible with the way the Party sees as a realistic version of living in, and seeing, Việt Nam in a newly independent era. The non-Vietnamese continue to build Việt Nam, in their critique and their ways of living, both partly colored in irony.

Chapter 2: The Political and the Personal: Irony in the Poetic Language of Constructing a Nation and its Citizens

"[C]ái hắn muốn đánh, trước hết, là chữ. Chữ, chứ không phải người"
[What he wants to beat, first and foremost, is the letter. Letter, not human]
(Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, "Tiếng Việt: Mày, Tao, Mi, Tớ . . .")

"Vào nghề thì văn học không thể thiếu ta. Bỏ nghề chẳng được, hoá ra chính là ta không thể thiếu văn học."
[Entering the profession, literature cannot lack me/us. Unable to leave the profession, turns out it is I/we that cannot lack literature]
(Phạm Thị Hoài, "Văn và Số")

Vietnamese students learning English as a Foreign Language in the 1990s, at the elementary level, will need to learn to differentiate between the accusative-cum-objective pronoun *us* and The US—capitalized T and capitalized US. One word denotes, as I was carefully taught, the foreign word that grants me access to who I am and who we are: Vietnamese. It must be forced to be close to our identity, to be familial and familiar for the Vietnamese in us to use with ease. No wonder it was taught early on when we were only in grade three at eight years old. The pronoun *us* shone above all of our Northern dominant pronouns that were equivalent to it: *chúng tôi, bọn tôi, chúng ta, ta, chúng tớ, bọn tớ, chúng mình, bọn mình, tụi mình,* and so on and so forth as I tried to expand Vietnamese to all Vietnam. The other US, however, we were strictly told in history and English lessons, is *not* us, categorically and antagonistically so. It means The United States of America, America, The US of America, or The US of A; it is the Other US, a/n US we were taught both to love and to hate, to welcome and to beware, to desire and to disgust, a place from which to embrace a friendly Othered Martin Luther King that wrote "Beyond Vietnam" or Othered student protests, civil rights movement protests, Asian American Protests that helped us feel we were part of that international network of an other. Our common interests lay in our mutual suffering from the interdict—to speak in-between, to speak across the divide, to intervene into that which speaks,

to forbid—to speak.[55] Both the English pronoun *us* and that capitalized US that denotes an entity of collective ones gave us our cause: to be able to express yourselves in the modern world of the twenty-first century. Speak English! Ne parlez plus en Français! So that English is our cause. It causes us, gives us our being, and our voice! It allows us to accuse and to be accused. The contamination of that accusative case as both causative and accusatory is revealing here because it fits us. Because we young children were cognitively unable to process the linguistic and political difference between that generic *us* and the specific US, our teacher would help us remember the difference by making us recite daily: ớt nhỏ là ớt Việt Nam, ớt to là ớt Mỹ, ớt nhỏ mới là ớt cay, ớt to là ớt trang trí thôi [small chili is Vietnamese chili, big chili is US chili, only small chili is truly spicy, big chili is only for decoration]. Because *us* is homonymic with *ớt*, a word meaning chili in Vietnamese, she was making sexual innuendos about the virile masculinity of us while belittling our enemies at the same time. The analogy was lost to us, but the distinction she taught remained.

Why should I as a learner of English need to grow sensitive to the confusing pronoun in English? Is it not simple that all we need to do to distinguish *us* from the US is to capitalize the latter, rendering it larger than life, than language, and than us? Is it not ironic that whatever we try to do, or whenever we try to speak, the lurk of our most recent enemy and the haunt of our most treasured friend are always present? Can we talk about us without remembering the US? The nationalistic among us often scream: can we just use Vietnamese, purist, unadulterated, uninvaded, unconquered, a-historical? When we secretly changed the abbreviation of Ban Chấp Hành **Trung Ương** Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam [The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam] into BCH**TW**, instead of BCH**TƯ**, are we not borrowing the foreign letter *W* to hide the haunt of

[55] As for "interdiction," see Derrida's *Monolingualism* 30-2.

privatization in our very name? It is perhaps an ironic twist of linguistic fate that the word *Central* [Trung Ương] in the name of the most powerful body of the Communist Party, when abbreviated, turns into *TƯ*, the word in Vietnamese that means "privatized," a meaning that is so unpleasant to the Vietnamese communist ideology that we must avoid that taboo word at all costs and borrow an unconventional letter *W*, non-existent in our Vietnamese alphabet to represent ourselves as TW instead of TƯ? Look how foreign it is, how impure it is, how un-Vietnamese, and un-nationalistic it is to call ourselves, or the party, by a foreign character: *TW* instead of *TƯ*! Which taboo is greater here, to use a letter that is not Vietnamese and therefore we betray the command for patriotism and linguistic purism or to risk a misunderstanding of *TƯ* capitalized into *tư* privatized?[56] If there is a comeback of *TƯ* and a gradual phasing out of *TW*, should I interpret it as a positive sign of a traditional return to Vietnamese purism or a negative sign of the guilty admission that communism is a private thing for a few privileged? The only thing we know, perhaps, is that we cannot be ourselves in all we desire no matter how hard we try. The language invades. It haunts. And it hurts.

The obsession with pronouns naturally takes place whenever Việt people are forced to confront the "unnaturalness" of their proliferative system of pronouns, as opposed to the equalization or rendering equal as effect of the "I versus you" system of English. That proliferative system marks the Vietnamese language, Vietnamese literature, and Việt people as forever different from English of the West, encoded English of the US of A in the twenty-first century; it also marks our language, literature, and people as forever playing into the game of différance that Derrida describes.[57] We need to stop thinking, because the moment we stop to think, we do not even know

[56] See Phạm Thị Hoài "Văn và Số" for more details on the "exodus of the Việt letters."
[57] The West here remains to be problematized. It is decidedly not the task of this chapter to do so. In the spirit of Stuart Hall, the West is a construct I conjure up in here, in its undeniable ontic existence, despite its ontological dispute, to serve the work of collapsing, not contrasting, the dichotomy of East-West into East-East. See Hall's "The West and the Rest." For difference, see Derrida's "Difference."

who we are talking to or about anymore, as can be seen in the pronoun *ai* in the last line taken from our famous *Tale of Kiều*:

> Sinh rằng: Gió mát trăng trong,
> Bấy lâu nay một chút lòng chưa cam.
> Chày sương chưa nện cầu Lam,
> Sợ lần khân quá ra sàm sỡ chăng?
> Nàng rằng: Hồng diệp xích thằng,
> Một lời cũng đã tiếng rằng tương tri.
> đừng điều nguyệt nọ hoa kia.
> *Ngoài ra ai lại tiếc gì với ai.* (Nguyễn Du, *Truyện Kiều* 455-62, emphasis added)
> [The breeze blows cool, the moon shines clear," he said,
> "but in my heart still burns a thirst unquenched.
> The pestle's yet to pound on the Blue Bridge—
> I fear my bold request might give offense."
> She said: "By the red leaf, the crimson thread,
> we're bound for life—our oath proves mutual faith.
> Of love make not a sport, a dalliance,
> and what would I begrudge you otherwise?]

Huỳnh Sanh Thông's smooth translation deletes vagueness in the language itself. It helps a non-Vietnamese reader understand the lines without the need to understand the context. A Việt reader reading in Việt language will need to read the whole expert to understand that last line: "Ngoài ra ai lại tiếc gì với ai," because otherwise they would not know ai means "you" or "me" or somebody else. Or perhaps, we can take a look at a more modern poem that plays on that irony of the self versus other in Tản Đà's poem "Nói truyện với ảnh" [Talking to the image/self]:

> Người đâu cũng giống đa tình
> Ngỡ là ai, lại là mình với ta
> Mình với ta dẫu hai như một
> Ta với mình sao một mà hai?
> [Such a polyamorous kind of person
> Who's that? Turns out it's just you and me
> You and I, though two, are one.
> I and you, why one but two?]

The proliferation of dualities between pronouns is all the more troubling as they become de-familiarized. In Vietnamese, the pronoun *mình* can mean anything, depending on the context and

the intention/understanding of the speakers. *Mình* can be I and me, we and us, you singular and intimate, he and him, she and her, they and them. *Mình* can also be the physical body itself. What it means can be made clear during conversations and within contexts, but what it means can also be made *unclear* in poetic or dramatic contexts. The questions are less about whether the global English(es) of the West can serve the Vietnamese language's complex system of pronouns, or whether the Hegelian dialectics can be made to serve that forever compromised distinction between the self-cum-Spirit and the other-cum-Ideal, or between the self-cum-Spirit and the unnamed Subject we call History, Necessity, or Fate. They are more about whether something distinctive and yet more universal can be revealed, enabled, made useful, and brought up to serve the need of the Other that chooses to use Vietnamese English, or English Vietnamese, in its everyday combat.

In this chapter, I intend to investigate one single duality of pronouns in Vietnamese—that between *Người* and *Ta/Tôi*, *Người* and *Ta, Người Ta*—in the poetry of Chế Lan Viên. In Vietnamese, *tôi* and *ta* can be equivalent to both the nominative and accusative cases of first-person pronouns in English (I, we, me, us).[58] *Ta* is more formal than *tôi*, and *ta* can refer to plural first-person pronouns on its own (*tôi* needs another adjunct *chúng* to become plural *chúng tôi)*. *Người*, on the other hand, is more complex: it means humans in general, the physical body, you, or a person of high status or respect. In recent Vietnamese communist literature, Người capitalized often refers to Hồ Chí Minh. *Người* and *ta*, when compounded, becomes *người ta*, and can mean everyone, first person pronoun (I), or humans in general.

In Chế Lan Viên's poetry, I trace the movement of that *ta* [I, we] in instances where it (1) becomes opposed to *người* [you, He/She, humans] all the while desiring in vain to consume n*gười*,

[58] All pronouns in Việt language can serve both the nominative and accusative cases without the need for inflection. From now on, I will only list the pronouns in their nominative equivalents, for the sake of reading convenience.

(2) becomes lost within *người* by erasing itself, and finally (3) attempts to compromise with *người*, into a synthetic abnegation of the Self. I hope to show, by the end of the chapter, that in the first phase, the desire of *ta* to consume *người* and the concomitant failure to do so marks an annihilating and empowering self that realizes its life force in the excess and the inconsumable—and as such it provides an ironic model of the self that in turn critiques that Hegel's Spirit and its progressive journey towards the Ideal and self-realization. In the second phase, during the period when the poet discovered communism, that *ta* is utterly consumed by *người*, giving rise to a *ta* (we/I/collective I) emptied out of *tôi* (singular I), but full of forms and content that mark it, ironically, complete and incomplete at the same time—an ironic self both so full of itself and so far away from its individual self. And in the last phase, towards the end of the poet's life, I investigate Chế Lan Viên's struggle to fill the missing lacuna between *ta* and *người* and by so doing his poetry brings about a politics of movement, an awareness of History, and a possibility for a politics of ironic deconstruction from the Vietnamese nation-making project.[59] The self of the poet throughout his life and the conception, the birth, and the after-birth of his communist nation co-exist in a self-object relationship, in which the nation already threatens to consume the self while the self always struggles to take in the object without losing itself in it. [60]

Chế Lan Viên was born in Quảng Trị province, Việt Nam, in 1920, before the foundation of the Communist Party of Indochina. His first poetry collection, called *Điêu Tàn* [Decrepit] was published when he was 17 years old. In its preface, the young CLV published his artistic manifesto

[59] From now on, I use CLV to refer to Chế Lan Viên.

[60] The object-relations group of psychoanalysis here are, mutatis mutandis, transferable. The self, the transitional object and its object; the self, selfobject, and its object are concepts that break the traditional Freudian self-centered individualism and exceptionalism of the early twentieth century. See Fonagy and Target's *Psychoanalytic Theories* for an overview of psychoanalysis from Freud to object-relations and self psychology. For a more important aspect of selfobject functioning, see Heinz Kohut's *The Restoration of the Self* and *How does Analysis Cure?*

called “Trường thơ loạn” [Chaotic poetry].[61] Quảng Trị, his birthday, influenced the content of his first poetry heavily. Confronted with the past of Việt Nam as the colonizer of the ancient kingdom of Champa, he would often show this conflicted relationship between his identity as a modern Việt person and his hometown, which is also a lost kingdom whose haunting and overwhelming traces it left behind showed no sign of surrendering just yet. The history of the Champa kingdom and its relation to Việt Nam is fraught with a tumultuous 800 year-period of endless wars and fragile peace with losses and victories on both sides. The year 1832 marked the final assimilation of Champa into Việt Nam by the Minh Mạng emperor as the result of a failed Champa uprising.[62]

Chế Lan Viên joined the communist forces when the August Revolution broke out in 1945, after which his works reflected genuine affinities with the communist forces of Việt Nam. Nguyễn Bá Thành’s work on CLV divides the evolution of his ideology into three stages: before 1945, from 1945 to 1975, and after 1975.[63] CLV’s own political, critical, and personal essays show a consistent faith in Communism from 1945 until at least the early 1980s, even though that faith may become increasingly limited to a less comprehensive role in a larger life whose problems require something else other than the political to address.[64] His poetry towards the very end of his life shows more clearly this ambivalence towards problems in life that only arts can portray more adequately. While Nguyễn Bá Thành will argue that after 1975, CLV’s poetry returns partly to his pre-1945 period of *Điêu tàn*, I argue that it is much more complex than a simple return to that

[61] Basic facts about Chế Lan Viên can be found in the Bảo Tàng Văn Học Việt Nam’s [Vietnam Literature Museum] Website, “Nhà thơ Chế Lan Viên”
[62] See Trần Trọng Kim’s *Việt Nam sử lược*.
[63] See Nguyễn Bá Thành’s *Thơ Chế Lan Viên với phong cách suy tưởng*
[64] See CLV’s essay collection *Nghĩ cạnh dòng thơ*

grandiose self inspired by the Romantic and Modernist literary figures of the west like Baudelaire or Hegel.[65]

CLV's first poetry collection *Điêu Tàn* [Decrepit] marks the young poet's strong influence by a French Romanticism that is Vietnamized by its own past of settler colonialism and invasion of the Champa people. At the beginning of the collection, the 17-year-old Chế Lan Viên launches his own poetic manifesto in which the confusion in *người ta* reaches a reeling height for both the readers and perhaps the poet itself:

> Thi sĩ không phải là Người. Nó là Người Mơ, Người Say, Người Điên. Nó là Tiên, là Ma, là Quỷ, là Tinh, là Yêu . . . Người ta không hiểu được nó vì nó nói những cái vô nghĩa, tuy rằng những cái vô nghĩa hợp lý. Nhưng thường nó không nói. Nó gào, nó thét, nó khóc, nó cười. . . . Thế mà có người tự cho là hiểu được nó, rồi đem nó so sánh với Người, và chê nó là giả dối, không chân thật. Vâng ! Nó không chân thật, nó giả dối với Người. Với nó, cái gì nó nói đều có cả. (Chế Lan Viên 7)
> [The poet is not human. He/It is a dreamy person, a drunk person, a crazy person. It is a fairy, a ghost, a ghost that cannot be reincarnated in the next life, a spirit, a spirit from another world . . . Humans do not understand it because it says nonsense, though the nonsense makes sense. But oftentimes it does not speak. It shouts, it screams, it cries, it laughs. . . . How, then, can humans think they can understand it, and then compare it to Humans and say it's lying, dishonest. Yes. It is not honest to humans. To itself, everything it says exists.]

The poet's use of pronouns *người ta* here bears investigation. First, the poet is *not người*—capitalized and generalized. *Người* can mean both humanity as a species, *loài người*, or people in general. The poet, according to the manifesto, is not human, not *a* human, not human in general, not a being of this earthly realm; it is rather a specific sort of condition applicable to more than just human—dreaming, drunken, mad—or a specific kind of non-human being—a ghost, a bad ghost that is turned into a servant of the underworld, or a spirit than turns into a being through

[65] For a brief review of the influence of French Romanticism on Vietnamese poetry movement in the early twentieth century, see Trần Khánh Thành's *Khuynh hướng tượng trưng và siêu thực trong thơ Việt Nam hiện đại* [Symbolism and Surrealism in Modern Vietnamese poetry] and Phan Cự Đệ's *Phong trào thơ mới* [The New Poetry Movement].

meditative training.[66] A poet in these two categories then seems to exceed humanity and human conditions; this is why CLV refuses to give the poet a human-marked and gender-marked pronoun and instead gives it a being-marked one: *nó* [it]. In Vietnamese, *nó* is normally a pronoun reserved for non-human animals, objects, abstract entities, or informally to a person. CLV claims here that we are supposed to force our belief into a system of categorizing the poet into the Othered human and the Other of human. But one of its ostensible qualities is its refusal to speak, or refusal to speak in an intelligible manner, to the extent that *người ta*, here meaning other people, cannot comprehend it. It requires cognitive processing to be regarded as logical, *sens*ible, and therefore closer to justice. It has a voice and a sound instead of a speech: "it shouts, it screams, it cries, it laughs," and therefore it cannot be compared to *Người*.[67] If *Người* can tell a lie or a truth, a poet can only tell a thing that is and that it has. Because of its self-contained field of intelligibility, *người ta* cannot comprehend it. But *người ta* is composed of both người and ta, and it cannot *not* remind us, self-consciously, of that othered couplet mình-ta as body-I (both *người* and *mình* can also mean the body or the *main* part of the body, which, obviously for the Vietnamese, is the feeling trunk, not the Western thinking brain).[68] [69] CLV's poet then, an excess of humanity, or the inconsumable of something other than humanity, cannot be apprehended either by the other-cum-human, the self-cum-Spirit, or the body-cum-feeling.

[66] The problem of translation, from Vietnamese to English, from Vietnamese to Vietnamese, is a fraught and productive one. In this case, it also avoids gendering the poet. There is no way to know the sex of the poet from here. See the problems of translating Beauvoir's famed claim "On ne nait pas femme: on le deviant," for instance, in Emily Apter's *Against World Literature* 156-74. Is the claim translatable, as One is not born, but rather one becomes woman? Or a woman? Or one? (159-60)

[67] Again, for a transferable case, mutatis mutandis, see Butler's treatment of the Levinas face-voice, not always necessarily physical, in Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*.

[68] See Bình Nguyên Lộc's *Lột Trần Việt Ngữ*, chapter VII on the pronoun couple Mình-Ta for an etymological tracing of the word-idea that "Mình với ta tuy hai mà một/Ta với mình tuy một mà hai. Nhưng trong ngôn ngữ Việt Nam thì MÌNH với TA, tuy hai mà vẫn cứ là hai" [Mình and Ta are two but one. Ta and Mình, though one, are actually two].

[69] See D. H. Lawrence's *Fantasia of the Unconscious* for an illuminating and entertaining, indeed, alternative psychoanalytic view of the solar nexus behind the stomach.

In that framework, the poet is *ta*, or *ta* is the poet, who claims that if what it writes in this poetry collection can make the reader feel across the divide, the *ta*-I will be satisfied enough to laugh: "Ha, ha! Bay ôi! Loài người thành thi sĩ như ta cả rồi" [Ha! Humanity has become poets like me] (8). If humans understand what it writes, the human race has all indeed become poets. The *ta*-I here seems insignificant, always in the singular, and always a little selfish and megalomaniac; yet, it is the *ta*-I that proves transcendental in its manifesto as the poet—in the singular and plural *at once*, in the particularistic and universalistic *at once*, in the non-representable and yet representative *at once*, in its arrogance at its ability to collapse time past-present-future to immortalize that which is lost, and in its capacity to be on its own, in its own world—consumes the Other(ed) world via its transformation. Is it not this transcendental over-empowering of the *ta* as I-We-Humanity-Non-Human that can claim to reclaim History?

> Trong thơ ta dân Chàm luôn sống mãi,
> Trong thơ ta xương máu khóc không thôi. (8)
> [In my/our poetry, the Champa people live forever
> In my/our poetry, bone and blood cry forever.]

Should we be concerned about the attempt to apprehend Chàm people forever within an art form of that *ta*, or should we be grateful that Chàm people will remain, at best, as the trace of excess and surplus within a colonizing presence too full of itself? The desire betrays its intention: it abducts the Other, and the condition to release is precisely a promise to yield, for a lack of a better word, knowledge, or self-making material:

> Hãy về đây! Về bên ta mi hỡi!
> Đem cho ta những phút rỡn kinh hồn,
> Những phút mộng điên cuồng, mơ dữ dội!
> Ta sẽ vui giao trả khớp xương tàn. (30)
> [Come back! By my/our side, you!
> Bring me/us terrifying moments
> Minutes of mad dreams and shaking nightmares!
> I/we will be glad to return broken joint bones]

Yet, if we were to stop at this point, we could not avoid the silent admission that the politics of self-making here is somewhat a negative, or perhaps derivative, version of Hegelian dialectics. The poet after all suffers and enjoys certain influences from the West, especially from the Francophone world, in such figures as Baudelaire and Poe. And its poetry seems to retain that comparable desire to consume the Other in its journey to self-realization. The question now is whether its *ta* can lend itself conveniently to the ideal of the Hegelian spirit. Even though CVL's works are heavily influenced by Romanticism, I argue here that they retain enough Vietnamese-ness in their specific content, within their specific geo-political location, that they differ significantly from Hegel's dialectical concept of Spirit.

A brief discussion of Hegel's *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Volume 1 and *Phenomenology of Spirit* will reveal both the potential for compromise and the incompatibility of that Hegelian spirit with the spirit of *ta*. First, in *Aesthetics*, Hegel acknowledges a risk in the Spirit's journey towards self-realization: in its movement, Spirit, "complete and whole . . . abandons its repose vis à vis itself and enters the oppositions of this chaotic universe, where in this rift it can now no longer escape the misfortune and calamity of the finite realm" (178). The Spirit can contaminate itself in its journey out there, so only a strong Spirit can succeed. We should note also that this "chaotic universe," in Otmaston's translation, is the "broken and confused medley of *earthly existence*" (97, emphasis added). The double aim, as stated then, is to foreclose impurification of the Spirit and ascertain purification of the finite prior to its being consumed into the Spirit. In order to do so, one requires the will—asymmetrical, independent, and free—to stand against the silent and forever silencing object.[70] It is the transcendental capacity to override the code of culture and history that helps the will, albeit located within Culture and History, to move

[70] For the silence of the object, see Bruno Latour's *We have Never been Modern*, especially Chapter 1, "Crisis"

forward towards its freedom. Ironically for Hegel, only the spirits of the ruling class—the class of Princes—can remain pure and move forward in this dialectical process.[71] On the other hand, the lower classes for Hegel are like the lumpenproletariat for Marx: they, the othered spirits, scattered, lower, disorganized, caught too deep within their social strands and subjected to Spirit of the time, remain trapped forever within non-self-realization.

Along with Hegel's intentional dismissal of spirits unworthy and incapable of self-realization, Hegel provides two categories of the Other that cannot be consumed by the Spirit. The first category is the purely negative evil: "evil as such, envy, cowardice, and baseness are and remain purely repugnant. Thus the devil in himself is a bad figure, aesthetically impracticable; for he is nothing but the father of lies and therefore an extremely prosaic person" (*Aesthetics* 222). Here, pure negative, or pure evil, is inconsumable, impracticable, and inaccessible because of its non-relatability, or its total abstraction and emptiness of relation. It lies outside the Spirit because it cannot be consumed. In CLV's *Điêu Tàn*, it is this very pure negative, inconsumable, impracticable, and inaccessible within History that *ta* cannot relate to. Yet, *ta* yearns for it all the while pushing it to the realm of non-representable. Champa's lost history, along with its invaded race, carves out the boundary for that poet's self that wants to be itself by reaching out beyond itself. Its failure to reach out is therefore ultimately also the failure to reach within. In CLV's beyond-human poet, which he labels as "it," the Vietnamese history of Southward colonialism is erased and romanticized, a Vietnamese history is drowned in some French Baudelaire and some German Hegel, and a youthful ignorance and failure to engage with the histories out there reflects a youthful ignorance and failure to look within the self.

[71] See Hegel's *Aesthetics* 192.

The second category of the inconsumable Other can be found in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, encoded as alien necessity, or "lifeless actuality." In the section named "The Actualization of Rational Self-Consciousness through its own Activity," Hegel lays out two types of Necessity. The first one is Necessity as such of the object, which is inaccessible to self-consciousness because it lies beyond the triad of "empty essentialities of *pure unity*, of *pure difference*, and *their relation* [between pure unity and pure difference there needs a mediating agency encoded self-consciousness]" (219, emphasis added). This fixed non-relation, or empty relation, between the impossible object in and for itself and self-consciousness renders the former's content content*less*. While there is a disregard of the inconsumable evil in the first category of the inaccessible in Hegel, here there is a negation of the incomprehensible content of the Other as such. Only the relational, the relatable, the pure categories of being whose condition for being lies in relationality are accessible to self-consciousness. What happens to the self-consciousness that attempts the impossible, that is, to consume Necessity as such into itself is a precipitation of itself "into consciousness of its own lifelessness, and has as its lot only empty and alien necessity, a *dead* actuality" (220).

So far, we have traced two types of the inconsumable—the unforgivable evil and the dead necessity—that mark the failure of the Spirit to become universal by universalizing beyond History and Necessity. For Hegel, while the unforgivable evil abuses the self, dead necessity is useless to it. The gap, no matter how much agape is required, is unbridgeable. If we coerce Hegelian dialectics now into the game of linguistics, we see, mutatis mutandis, the similar impossible containment of *người* within *ta*—after all, the inculcated intuition follows that *người* [you, humanity] is larger than *ta* [I]—when it comes to consuming the absolute other that is lost, past, dead, otherworldly, irrational, and relationless in CLV's *Điêu Tàn*. The outcomes of such an

attempt are either the total occupation and contamination of *ta* or the realization that *ta* (singular) is, after all, less than *Ta* (plural). The poet as it, ambitious and young, wants to take in all the contradictions of Vietnamese histories into itself—and fails.

> Biết làm sao giữ mãi được Ta đây?
> Thịt cứ chiều theo thú dục chua cay!
> Máu cứ nhảy theo nhịp cuồng kẻ khác!
> Đau đớn thay cho đến cả linh hồn
> Cứ bay tìm Chán Nản với U Buồn
> Để đỉnh sọ chơ vơ tràn ý thịt!
> Mà phải đâu đã đến ngày tiêu diệt!
> *Ai bảo giùm: Ta có Ta không?* (16, emphasis added)
> [How to keep Me forever?
> Flesh follows bitter desires!
> Blood dances along others' mad steps!
> How painful, even the soul
> Flies away finding Boredom and Sadness
> Leaving the Skull full of flesh ideas!
> But it is not yet the annihilating day!
> Somebody please tell me: Do I/we have me/us?)

If the whole philosophy of Hegel rests upon the irreducible distinction between the self and the other, the Spirit and the World, the one and the One, we see such an irreducible distinction here imbedded from within a linguistic structure of irony that simply refuses to separate and differentiate. The only similarity here is the movement, between the one and the One, between *Ta* as I, divine, singular and yet plural and *Người* as the Other, humans in general, or we/us as in *người ta*. The productive, communal quality of Vietnamese pronouns, which has probably been co-opted into the communitarian and communist Spirit, has never been something that Việt language speakers can feel comfortable using often. It is not merely the impossibility of truly gaining a confident sense of the two meanings of *ta*, as same and different, separated and united, the two meanings that resist the logical structures of containment.

The tricky last line is hard to read—and hard to interpret: "Ta có Ta không?" The first *Ta* means I/we; the second *Ta* means me/us. Both *Ta*'s are capitalized, rendering it all the more

grandiose and megalomaniac. *Có* in Vietnamese means "to have," "to possess," to "show ownership." *Có* and its opposite *không* (*không* in Vietnamese means zero, negative, or no) are also used in an interrogative structure for affirmative/negative questions.[72] How are we supposed to read this? The most intuitive way to read this will be Ta / có / có Ta / không? In this way, it is a question, Do I/we have me/us (or not)? Am I me or not? Are We us? Is there a me, or an us, in me, or in us, at all? It is both a marked structure of possessive and an interrogative sign—to possess is the only possible question. The second, less intuitive way of reading the line is as follows: Ta có / có / Ta không. This way of reading turns the clause into a yes/no question: The I/We that have / *have* / the I/We that have not, the I-have / *have* / the I-have-not. Do the I/We that exist possess the Othered I/We that do not exist? And the question mark is left for the "Ai bảo giùm" [Somebody please tell me], whose double function is both to confirm or assure and to doubt and suspect.[73] *Ai* in Vietnamese is suspect and full of self-betrayal. It can act as an indefinite pronoun, indicating an unknown entity, a random entity, or the self choosing to stay anonymous and selfless. Can that *ai* be the lost Champa people and their history? Can that *ai* be the I-have-not itself? Because *ai bảo giùm*, with a specific tone of voice, can also suggest "nobody says that," *ai* can become nobody too. In a young poet, the specific histories of Vietnam's internal colonialism, its expansion southward along with the destruction of the Champa people, give only the pretext for the poet to flow into an international atmosphere of the West's nineteenth century Romanticists. To read Vietnamese specificity out of this poetry collection is challenging because the reader is actively prevented from doing so.

[72] For instance, "bạn có thời gian không?" is transcribed word by word as you-have-time -no-? It means, do you have the time?

[73] *Ai* is another sophisticated pronoun: "chỉ người nào đó, không rõ (thường dùng để hỏi)" or "chỉ người nào đó, bất kì" or "chỉ người nào đó, có khi là *chính mình*, mà không muốn nêu rõ ra" [*ai* refers to somebody unknown, in a question form, or to anybody, or to the self without having to state it explicitly]. See "ai" in Hoàng Phê's *Từ Điển Tiếng Viêt*.

What is the pain here? What is the excruciating pain—*đau đớn thay, đau* to the point of *đớn*, pain to the point of shame, of self-abnegation here that is being articulated by the poet as *Nó*? It may be the pain of Ta [I] not having Ta, or Ta not being able to consume Ta; it may well be the pain of this Ta-that-have/exist that do not have that Other Ta-that-have-not/exist not. Because *có* is the existential mark in the Việt language, the stamp of subject and predicate formation, similar to the verbs *be* in English, or *avoir* in French: There is (has) a *Ta* in that other *Ta*. Read in this second manner, the pain is decidedly not due to the Ta as not possessing all Ta; after all, there is only a certain type of Ta, hardly ever universal, that the poet desires to possess in his first poetry collection *Điêu Tàn*: the lost Champa empire, its people, universalized and abstractized into Người. What it truly desires is to possess the Ta-không, the *Ta* in the negative, the *Ta* as the inconsumable. All it wants to do then is for somebody to claim that I-have have I-not already.

The two ways of reading the line are ironic because they contradict each other. The line can be a statement of possession and affirmation, waiting just to be announced, to be told, to be said out loud, thereby made real, by somebody or anybody (ai). On the contrary, it can also be a radical question, and a radical questioning, of the self and its ability to become true to itself by possessing its negative side. Depending on the way of reading and on the chosen rhythm of the poem, the I/We can affirmatively possess its other I/We or the I/We can radically doubt its ability to do so. The first way, the affirmative way, of reading this line can help the self complete itself by possessing its inconsumable other. But it requires a somebody uttering a performative statement to make that self-formation real.[74] The second way, the much more negative way, of reading this line seems to be that the speaker is desperately looking for someone, anyone, or no-one that can answer its burning question: Can I/We have me/us anymore? Facing its inconsumable other, in the

[74] For performative statements, see J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*

face of the lost Champa Kingdom much grander than his own youth, the I of the Poet radically crumbles, yet it knows it must possess what destroys it to survive. We start to see the desire to counter, to disregard, to render alter- and ultra-sensical the Subject of the Southeast Asian Việt Nam named Thi sĩ-Poet here against, beyond, and incomparable with the aesthetic subject of the West, singularly encoded Hegel. Hegel is perhaps right that there is something the self cannot claim. But he forgets to assert that what the self cannot claim can be the very thing it must claim to be complete in itself. Its failure is also its dream. Its reality, an incomplete self, is stopped short on its journey to the end all the while that self is inspired to go on, to keep trying. The desperate tone of the whole poetry collection, somehow, is also the source of its infinite, albeit, negative living energy. We can also see how an ironic reading of twists and tropes can help elucidate this aspect of the young self of the poet. That young self, a Việt rising youth, soon turning into a devout communist, yearns to reflect the spirit of his time and fails. He yearns to be Vietnamese by consuming Vietnamese in all its radical differences and all the permutations of the self, and he cannot do so.

I now move to the second phase in CLV's poetry, which I regard as the mistaken search for that *Ta* in the negative at the expense of Ta in the possessive and positive: the search for *Người* as the *negative* in *Ta*. In this phrase, the reader also sees more clearly the parallel journey between the Poet and his Nation, the first finding his true self out there whereas the second finding its true form elsewhere. In his later poetry during the Vietnam War, which researchers like Trần Bá Thành characterize as the Ta-collective [We] phase of CLV, the by then staunch communist CLV had already discovered that I-not is Humans-have, Ta-không is Người-có: what *Ta* does not have, *Người* will compliment, illuminate, consolidate, and render whole. In that logic, then to be the most self is to lose that self to the other. No more individuality; only the community exists. In

"Người Đi Tìm Hình của Nước" [The Person Seeking the Form of Nation/Water] in *Ánh Sáng và Phù Sa* [Light and Alluvium], the politics of separation becomes more visible as the *Ta* acknowledges a complete lack in itself that can only be filled by *Người*. The poem makes explicit its laudatory tone of Người, who, as the poem gradually reveals, is Hồ Chí Minh, the communist leader of the North. Hồ Chí Minh is often addressed by the North with respectful titles such as Uncle, Father, or Người capitalized. Called as such, he is a generalized man, a generalized father figure of Communist Việt Nam, the human that represents all humans.

The poem focuses on Hồ Chí Minh's journey in the early twentieth century away from his homeland to find a way to save his homeland from French colonizers.[75] As such, it must deal, in all its earnestness, with the irony of a great man trying to seek a foreign way only to come back and build a nationalistic nation, a foreign ideology that transforms itself into a native conviction, a bright future that must learn to forget its past, and to use so many foreign tongues (Chinese, Sino-Vietnamese, Vietnamese, French, and American English) to make his own voice of the nation heard across the world.[76]

The journey is filled with pains caused by irony. The first pain is that very pain of an exile, traveling on a shaking boat, on a water that is not his water:

> Đêm xa nước đầu tiên, ai nỡ ngủ
> Sóng vỗ dưới thân tàu đâu phải sóng quê hương
> Trời từ đây chẳng xanh màu xứ sở
> Xa nước rồi, càng hiểu nước đau thương
> [The first night away from the nation/water, who can sleep
> The waves tapping under the boat are not the waves of the country
> The sky from here is no longer blue like the one at home
> Away from nation/water, he understands its pain all the more clearly

[75] Records vary where he had been to, but most will list four continents (Asia, Europe, America, and Africa). Countries he had been to and worked at miscellaneous manual jobs before his return to Việt Nam and work for the Communist Cause include France, the former USSR, China, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Thailand, Hong Kong. In total, he had been abroad for 30 years before returning to Việt Nam in 1941.
[76] For a public and official biography of Hồ Chí Minh, See "Tiểu sử Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh."

The waves tapping the ship in those foreign worlds are decidedly *not* our waves, our hometown waves, our native waves. When one is far removed from one's country and from one's water, one cannot, dare not, or has no heart to sleep because the water one sleeps on is not one's water. It is perhaps a cliché now to note that in Vietnamese, water and nation are homonyms. His nation/water has no shape yet, so he cannot save it. He does not know what it is meant to be, to do, so that it can be freed. It is therefore not a nation/water yet. But somehow, ironically, he intuitively knows that over there lies his nation/water, and in here lies not his nation/water. The shape of his unborn nation/water is both yet to come and sure to come.[77] His quest is difficult, for he must shape his amorphous nation/water into a specific nation/water so that it can be free. He leaves, without any definite answers, and with only a certainty that he will find it eventually. And that difficulty of the quest is the cause for praise in the poem.

Seeking the form of nation/water is the impossible task, which is perhaps why one who succeeds in it deserves the poet's praise. The shape of his nation-to-be can only be sought once he is so far away from his home, his hometown, his birthplace that all the villages vanish from his sight and all the shades of bamboo rows disappear from all four directions: "Khi bờ bãi dần lui làng xóm khuất/Bốn phía nhìn không một bóng hàng tre" ["When the shores recede from view, the villages fade away/All four directions he looks, without a shade of bamboos"]. The abstract feelings of being away from his undefined nation becomes increasingly absurd: he does not sleep on the boat on the first night away from home because the waves tapping the boat are not the waves

[77] This hope of certainty has always brought Hegelian dialectics towards a transcendental utopian politics and a transcendental totality in the singular: God—Hope/is sure expectancy of future bliss/to be inherited—the holy fruit of God's own *grace* and man's *precedent worth*" (Dante 539 my emphasis). The double requirements of pre-destined permission and inherent worth mark the Other always as a prior lack that cannot be compensated through homogeneous time. Devoid of negativity and uncontaminated by the inconsumable, the self reaches heaven, with an aimed love that "moves the sun and the other stars." (585)

of his hometown and the sky there cannot be as blue as the sky in his nation. He is on water, and yet he is so far away from water.

And once he is far away from it, he understands the pain his country is bearing. The condition of exile here enables him to have a more complete picture of his nation/water from the outside. The burden and the grateful attitude towards his water are both felt. The water carries the people and their earthly world: it is the source, the anchor, and the pillar of every living thing. Seeing water carry the boat away from his country, he sees all the more clearly the burden and grief water/nation bears and is determined to save it.

Water/nation does not have a physical form; it can only take the form of what contains it, imprisons it, separates it, pressures it, and localizes it. Localized feelings for one lost nation invaded by colonizers can also make one forget that all the water in the ocean cannot be contained and localized. How hard it is to imagine that the waves everywhere are the waves of his hometown? For a self-exile with a constant direction of home, is Hồ Chí Minh a global communist citizen or a nationalist communist of Việt Nam? And how hard is it to realize that when he returns years later, the waves of his hometown are no longer those waves he has left behind?

Moreover, water/nation reflects. Is it not the nationalist I that his water reflects when he looks into his water/nation? It reflects the land, the villages, the cattle, the bamboo rows, so that one sees forever moving images of one's home in it. It helps one put something concrete and tangible into something so amorphous, so treacherous, and yet so life-sustaining. Water then is the waves of memories. Reflecting on it, he gathers the memories of his country and his past. Like the waves, they come crashing but soothing, carrying him onwards while reminding him to look back and remember. Therefore, water/nation is both empty and full, or perhaps, empty to be filled. Water/nation is therefore borderless, both past and present. It is international before it is national.

In order to discover what his nation is, in all its identity, its history, and its future, he has to leave and discover what an inter-nation is. He chooses France as one of his first destinations, a Western country and his own colonizer, to learn from because he knows oppressed people are everywhere.[78] There, he finds commonality between his nation/water and other nations/waters in communism, so he wants to go back and form his own nation/water in that shape, to make it synchronize with the flow of international history, the history of oppressed people. Soon, for many people in his country, Communism will be a Vietnamese word, forced to be closer to them and their identity than any other Chinese, Sino-Vietnamese, French, or English words can ever be. Comrades, working class, workers-farmers coalitions, bourgeoisie, petite-bourgeoisie, and the party—all become Vietnamized. To any side, they become either subject of praise or objects of criticism; they distinguish friends from enemies, the right shape of water from the wrong shape of water. To free his water, then, is to mold it in a form considered to be good and international.

The *Tôi*-poet appears and disappears immediately from the beginning: "Cho tôi làm sóng dưới con tàu đưa tiễn Bác" [Let me become the waves under the boat that sees Uncle off]. We realize the double intensions of waves here as something that is both divisible and vanishing, both patriotic and treacherous, both earnest and ironic. What kinds of waves does that *Tôi*-poet want to become? The waves of the homeland perhaps that move along with Bác? Have we not already established that even the waves are divided into waves of the hometown and waves of foreign lands? When do those waves of *Tôi*-poet stop being Vietnamese and turn foreign? Or perhaps the waves under the boat of Uncle Hồ are forever rendered Vietnamese by the sole virtue of being near the father of Communist Việt Nam? In that sense, whenever Bác goes, Việt Nam is, or rather, whenever a person who is so-called properly Vietnamese is, Việt Nam is. Does it not remind one

[78] See "Hồ Chí Minh: Từ Quốc tế Cộng sản đến con đường đi lên chủ nghĩa xã hội ở Việt Nam."

of that 1996 song by Vietnamese composer Trầm Tử Thiêng, "Có tin vui giữa giờ tuyệt vọng" ["Good News in Times of Despair"], written to mark that moment when Vietnamese refugees built a Vietnamese village in a foreign land. Having left their homeland, with no immediate host countries to receive them, those stranded on the land of the Philippines decided to build a Vietnamese village right there and then, as the lyrics go, "Please tell others so that everyone can hear all together, 'Vietnamese village is building outside Vietnam'" ["Hãy nói cho mọi người cùng nghe/Làng Việt Nam đang xây thêm bên ngoài Việt Nam"]. It is then that Việt Nam as a concept of a nationality comes to overshadow Việt Nam as a concrete concept of land and water.

And in the place of *Tôi* (I/me singular), the reader witnesses the development outwards of *ta* and *chúng ta* (I/We plural) as each develops the awareness of its own insignificance:

> Lũ chúng ta ngủ trong giường chiếu hẹp
> Giấc mơ con đè nát cuộc đời con
> Hạnh phúc đựng trong một tà áo đẹp
> Một mái nhà yên rủ bóng xuống tâm hồn
> Trăm cơn mơ không chống nổi một đêm dày
> Ta lại mặc cho mưa tuôn và gió thổi
> Lòng ta thành con rối
> Cho cuộc đời giật dây
> [We sleep on small sedge mats,
> Our small dreams crushing our small lives
> Our happiness all in a lap of a beautiful dress
> A peaceful roof shedding its shade onto our souls
> Hundreds of dreams cannot withstand a thick night
> We let the rain pour and the wind howl
> Our belly/heart becomes a puppet
> Strung by fate.]

Attending the self-diminution of *Ta* into *Người* is the sublation of Bác—the figurehead of *Người,* referring to Hồ Chí Minh—that gradually comes to represent *Người* in greater totality: he goes and finds the shape of the nation/water for "hai mươi lăm triệu con người" ["twenty-five million humans"].[79] It is unclear how CLV came up with this figure. Did he mean to include Vietnam's

[79] The totality here is, by all means, totalizing and not at all inclusive of humanity; it is người, not Người.

population during Hồ Chí Minh's overseas sojourn in the early 1910s and 1920s? Did he refer to the population in 1945, when Vietnam declared its independence from France and Japan? Official numbers do not add up to such a big number. What the reader can see here is the desperation of that *Ta-có* in its search for *Người* when *Ta-không* becomes self-annihilating; that *không* [no, nothing-ness] in Ta-không returns, as Hegel has warned, to negate the Ta-có as a non-being. Unable to consume *Người*, the Ta-có offers all it has and is to become part of *Người*, or to become con người, a small human being, a child of a human being, a follower, or a part of human beings. Its dream is small, [giấc mơ con], a small and insignificant part, the part that does not have the power to give birth, bestow life, or bring significance: "Giấc mơ con đè nát cuộc đời con." Its only power as *Ta-có* here is to have a small dream, a child's dream, its own child's dream, crushed, shattered, crossed in the face of History. The subject of Ta-có is displaced, hidden from view, and yet it still reserves its creative power: once it has become *Người*, it can transform Nước/Water/Nation:

> Hiểu sao hết "Người đi tìm hình của Nước"
> Không phải hình một bài thơ đá tạc nên người
> Một góc quê hương nửa đời quen thuộc
> Hay một đấng vô hình sương khói xa xôi
>
> Mà hình đất nước hoặc còn hoặc mất
> Sắc vàng nghìn xưa, sắc đỏ tương lai
> Thế đi đứng của toàn dân tộc
> Một cách vin hoa cho hai mươi lăm triệu con người
> [How to understand completely 'The human who goes search the form of Water/Nation
> Not one poem written on the stones that carve human beings
> A small part of hometown so familiar
> Or an amorphous form so faraway lost in mist
>
> But the form of land-water still there or lost
> The hue of the past thousands of golden years, the hue of the red future
> The stance of the whole nation
> A glorious celebration for twenty-five million people]

This poetry's section starts with the difficulty in understanding how to find the shape of the nation/water. *Tìm* here in Vietnamese changes from seeking to constructing. And the creative process is not through the aesthetic human-making power of the arts—a poem that must of necessity negate its own creative role as a poem; it is not a product in poiesis—but rather through an ultra-personal sense of History. To create a nation/nước is to negate one's own memories of the very nation/hometown that one is familiar with nearly half of one's life, to negate one's own familiar and familial connections, to negate a vague divine figure somewhere else, and thereby forget one's *Ta* and one's *Tôi*. *Người ta* must be, via the use of a blinding ideology, both absolutely Other and familially Self. Nonetheless, the vision one must create is not something formless and faraway, but rather something crystalized through a staunch belief in the history of thousands of years that passed and that are to come.

Người here deals with absolutes, the beyond, the totalizing, the universalizing, and the crystallizing when it comes to the shape of the nation/water. It has only two visions of a nation lost or a nation still there. That nation/water must be shaped with a sense of thousands of golden years in the past and a red future guided by communism. It is discriminating in its self-definition, empowering everybody as *mọi người*, and yet no self as *Tôi* or *Ta*. *Người Ta* in here really becomes *người ta* as others, distanced, angry, resolute, and power-consuming. It will decide "thế đi đứng của toàn dân tộc" [the posture, the gait, the dignity of the whole nation]—the language threatens to consume everything, even itself in contradiction: "toàn dân tộc" [all the people] versus "hai mươi lăm triệu con người" [twenty-five million people]. *Ta-có*, if self-sacrificed into *Người*, becomes *ta-không*; it has and is *ta-không*, and by so doing partakes in giving birth to its own nation/water: "Lắng nghe trong màu hồng, hình đất nước phôi thai" [Listening in the red color, the embryo of the land-water]. While *Ta-có* has only its insignificant dream, brainchild, child and it

kills each and every one of those, *Ngườ̀i* as *Ta-không* bestows life, gives material birth, and assigns wonder.

The poem retains still the desire for omnipotence of creation, consumption, and realization, as do the poems in *Điêu Tàn* during the poet's young phase. While the ta-có admits failure and pain, ta-không as *Ngườ̀i* does not. Its blinding sense of itself now as the I-defeated, I-We-negated, human, Others, God, the One, the creative force, the source of all births, does not recognize its own loss and its own limitation. Hegelians may easily dismiss its movement as the failure to retain the integrity of the Spirit in its contamination with the externally inconsumable. But the externally inconsumable here is not external as such: *Ta* (I-We) and *Ngườ̀i* [You-Humans-a third person] are not external and mutually exclusive. *Ngườ̀i Ta* means both the body of *Ta*'s and others, and the inconsumable is not *Ngườ̀i* as Other, Người as *Ta-không*; the inconsumable is *Ta*-có and *Tôi*, those small I's, small me's, insignificant me's, I-haves. From the first to the second phase, the young poet has transformed himself from an individualistic *Ta*, an individual that is drowned in its own grandeur and is trying to escape into its inconsumable other, into a self-sacrificing *tôi* [singular I] that willingly becomes lost in *Ngườ̀i* [Humans/You/Uncle Hồ Chí Minh]. The individuality is completely lost, in preparation for a collective humanity to be born. Ironically, that collective humanity is represented by a single person, a leader who has become all abstract, ideal, and yet so concrete, defined in form and shape, just like the nation/water he has found.

We now turn to the last phase: Chế Lan Viên's struggle to fill the missing lacuna between *ta* and *ngườ̀i* and by so doing his poetry brings about a politics of movement, an awareness of History, and a possibility for a politics of ironic deconstruction from the Vietnamese side of us. The mistaken belief in *Ngườ̀i* as Ta-không is questioned towards the ending years of the poet that calls itself Chế Lan Viên. If in the first two phases, the desire for omnipotence has not diminished,

it does in this third phase, and in so doing it retains a strong *Tôi*-I in *Ta*-I/We, a humble *Tôi* [I singular] in the power of *Ta* (We/I plural or divine), the resigned *Tôi* in the immortality of *Ta*:

> Như nhà đóng kịch, đóng trăm vai bây giờ chán kịch
> Về cuối đời chơi con rối ngu ngơ
> Không tin vào cái thông minh của mình mà tin vào con rối dại khờ
> Nó gật đầu ư, hồn mình gật theo
> Nó chớp mắt, lòng ta chớp với
> Như nhân loại đã nghìn vạn năm nhân loại
> Bây giờ muốn đóng đứa trẻ thơ một tuổi
> Xưa tôi làm thơ, giờ thử để Thơ làm ("Kịch 2" *Di Cảo 3*)
> [Like an actor, playing in hundreds of roles, now tired of drama
> At the end of its life played with senseless puppets
> Not believing in its own wisdom but in naive puppets
> It nods its head, my soul nods to follow
> It blinks its eyes, our belly/heart blinks to follow
> Like humanity, already tens of thousands of years in its being,
> Now wants to play a one-year-old child
> Back then I created poetry, now try to let poetry create]

The dual perspective of power as self-abnegation and power as other-validation is strongly suggestive here.[80] There seems to be a tired feeling of inauthenticity and self-doubt here. Being old is being wise enough to know one knows nothing. The poet as *tôi* [humble I] realizes that World History of humanity is beyond any small events or moments in life, and that the final desire is to see the world of the just born ones. The self is resigned now completely: no longer making poetry, it wants poetry to make by itself. But it is unclear what poetry makes here. The incomplete sentence is perhaps intentional here. The poet as humble I is perhaps truly ignorant of what poetry can make by itself. Perhaps, the poet wants the poetry to create here, without control and without any mold. Or still, perhaps the poet wants poetry to make authentic roles in authentic lives. The choice still remains within the poet, but it is the choice to let go. There is no humanity here, no grand I, no Uncle anymore.

[80] Nguyễn Bá Thành compares this desire to become a one-year-old infant to the conscious desire of the elderly Lão Cai Tử [Guo Jujing]'s *Nhị Thập Tứ Hiếu* [*Twenty-four Filial Exemplar*], who dresses and acts as a baby to make his own parents happy and pleased. See Nguyễn Bá Thành 190

The conscious attempt to self-abnegate comes about as the opposite of self-empowerment, towards object-actualization, the process after which the self, via its own successful creation and maintenance of selfobject-formation, becomes, is, and has—*Tôi* as Ta-không is precisely what Ta-có needs; *Tôi-Ta* becomes *Người Ta* as such, without a blinding sight of self-annihilation, when literal self-annihilation is nearing. It is when the spirit of *Tôi* as *Ta*-không is traced, even within the poetry of the second phase, that *Ta* becomes humble: it extends itself into *Người* by recognizing itself as leaving traces of itself behind, not to become less, but to learn to detach its *Tôi* as Ta-*không* from Ta-*có*—an act of giving to become infused with the Other:

> Nhớ bản sương giăng, nhớ đèo mây phủ
> Nơi nào qua, lòng lại chẳng yêu thương?
> Khi ta ở, chỉ là nơi đất ở
> Khi ta đi, đất đã hóa tâm hồn! ("Tiếng Hát Con Tàu," *Ánh Sáng và Phù Sa*)
> [Remember the villages shrouded in mist, the mountain passes concealed in clouds
> Whichever place it passes, can the belly/heart not fall in love?
> When we/I stay on it, it is just a land to stay on
> When we/I leave it, the land's already turned into our soul!] ("The singing voice of the boat," *Light and Alluvium*)

To be humble or to intimate humility here is to be earthly, grounded, autochthonous.[81] To leave behind a part of *Ta* is to become rooted after being uprooted, because, after all, *Ta* contains plurality in its singularity and singularity in its plurality; a migrating life activates an act of planting through the self and taking from it a part that grows in the soil of humility: "đất đã hóa tâm hồn" [the land's already turned into our soul]. On the first level, the last two lines here mean we can only love the land when we have left it behind. But on closer reading, they tell the reader that the land has become the soul of those who leave it behind. It is unclear if that soul is the whole Soul of the poet or a part of his soul, or whether that soul is a newly created part of the soul or a taking away of his soul. One fact is clear: the departed, dead or alive, with or without the soul intact, love

[81] OED here proves useful in the work of etymology. 'humble' and 'humility' are cognates, deriving from *humus* as ground or earth. See OED's "humble" and "humility"

the land. The land is part of their identity, of who they are. They leave who they are to the land, to the past, behind their back, perhaps as the only permanent way of leaving themselves behind. The poet as humble I moves away constantly, to leave his soul behind and to make a new soul in a new land. The spirit of humility, recognizing its *Ta-không* in *tôi* as something that it needs, reaches its understanding towards its end, an anti-end perhaps to that Hegelian self of ultimate Idealization.

It is now that a turning away from Hegel towards Paul de Man proves useful. De Man's early treatment of irony in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" delivers three crucial notes inherent in an identitarian formation that is constantly in crisis. First, irony, for Paul de Man, seems to deal more with a problem "within the self," than with a history of an error, the error concerning "the impossibility of our being historical" (194). Second, irony necessitates a position of distance that is "constitutive of all acts of reflection" (195). And third, irony highlights the inauthenticity within the self of the subject; it "splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity" (197). In CLV's last poetic phase, the sense of the falsity of a grandiose sense of historicity, equivalent to a blinding faith in a history that extends thousands of years backward and forward, is fading away. In "Kịch 2" ["Drama 2"], the poet as *tôi* (I in singular) fails to find not just itself but humanity as such. Historical Việt Nam gives way to Việt people making history, without them knowing it, caring about it, or even dictating it, no matter who they are, where they live, and when they exist. History as such consists of ironic makings of itself in all its unpredictable turns and twists. In De Man's later understanding of irony, irony is both "curiously linked" to history and is "secondary to a historical system," already there to disrupt it and turn its directions (*Aesthetics Ideology* 183-4). It is, for De Man, "a permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes," especially the tropes of poetry, where irony can be anywhere and disrupt everything (179). Within

this ironic sense of history of a future, humanity turns into puppets, without strings and given the illusion of control. And somehow, to let poetry create, to let be, to become a way of both losing control and gaining control, of giving in to fate and unpredictability and of fading into the flow of history of the now.

In "Tiếng Hát Con Tàu" ["The Singing Voice of the Boat"], the unsustainable self-movement in reflections of movements in real life is highlighted. Authenticity is retained only in the places left behind, after one removes oneself from them. When the poet leaves a place, the land there becomes the soul. Perhaps it becomes a newly added part of an ever-expanding soul, or perhaps it enters the poet's soul, transforms it, and stays behind, leaving the poet soulless in the body, but soulful everywhere else. The fall of the soul, onto the land of Vietnam, makes the land Vietnamese, but it cannot take place while the poet is still there. A politics of physical detachment is required. Việt Nam becomes Vietnamese, but never for those who contribute to making it, ironically. It becomes Vietnam only for người, người ta, humanity, or humans in general.

In one of CLV's last poems "Tôi viết cho người" [I write to/for humans, humanity, the body, me], the pronouns become most individual, singular, and humble whereas người is no longer Hồ Chí Minh:[82]

> Tôi viết cho một người nào trong thế kỷ mai sau
> Nhặt thơ tôi lên từ trong bờ bụi
> Phủi hết bao tầng mọt mối
> Bỗng gặp tôi lòe chói ở đôi câu
> Người kia phủi bụi thêm, đọc lại từ đầu
> Bỗng chốc thương người xưa, rưng giọt lệ
> *Tôi đã hóa bọ dòi, giun dế. . .*
> *Hóa vô danh, vô ảnh, vô hình*
> *Nghe tình thương bỗng lại sinh thành*
> *Trong khoảnh khắc - lại là tôi - khoảnh khắc*
> Nhớ lại câu thơ mình mà mình quên tắp
> Nhớ lại cuộc đời đã ở trần gian
> Một cuộc đời thôi mà biết mấy đa đoan

[82] In this poem, người is not the capitalized Người

Liền sợ hãi, lại biến mình ra hạt bụi
Và lần này là không còn gì cứu nổi
Tan thành hư không. Và mong nó cùng quên mình (*Di Cảo 3*, emphasis added)
[I write for someone in some century later
Who picks up my poetry in layers of dust
Brushing away all layers of paper worms
Suddenly encountering me shining forth in one or two lines
This someone brushes some more, reads from the beginning again
Suddenly pities the human of the past, eyes tearing up
I have turned into maggots and worms. . .
Turned nameless, image-less, form-less
Listening to that pity, suddenly I am reborn
In a moment-me again-just in a moment
Remember a line I forgot
Remember a life here on Earth
Only a life, but with so many twists and turns
Frightened am I, I return to dust
And this time nothing can save [sic]
I Disintegrate into nothingness. Hoping it [sic], together with me, *forgets me*.]

This time, the admission of defeat shows not the lingering desire to consume the inconsumable, as showcased in the first two phases; rather, it shows the capacity to realize both the other and its own inconsumability all the while realizing the momentous and momentary power to come back: after the *Tôi* has gone, nameless, formless, without reflection, without self-images, without mirroring self, its re-discovery by *người* [a human being], not *Người*, with empathy, gives birth again to *Tôi* in re-memory. The utmost desire now runs in contradistinction: it desires to be forgotten, to become nothing, a space of emptiness, all the while realizing that it will not be forgotten, and showing a gratitude to be re-membered, a gratitude to a punishment that in turn validates its being of *Tôi* as *Ta-không* [I-have-not] for *Ta* as *Ta-có* [I-have].

The self now realizes for the first time that it is truly split and that it is truly inauthentic. The split between that self in real life which one day must die, along with all of its grandiose self-illusion and grandiose We/I-illusion of an all-consuming History called Communism and the self in poetic language, a language that finally becomes personal, singular, and memorial rather than

historical. Now it is true that the self takes refuge in its last place it considers true: poetic language. No more does it find solace in artistic trends of its time or in political movements of its time like in the second and third phases. Indeed, it is so afraid of living again that it wants to become dust, nothingness, while its own material poems disintegrate with time. The poet has become significantly humbler: even in its poetry, there is so little of itself left, and what is left is rendered immaterial and inauthentic. It lives only in the reader to come for a moment. It is a moment of ironic realization that the poet has finally become truly earnest in its admission of inauthenticity. No more a youth wanting to consume the inconsumable, no longer seeking the form of a nation so much loved—all that is left is the admission of its own inauthentic poetic language, its non-assuring futurity, its incurable self-alienation. Việt Nam is no more, the poet is no more, a Vietnamese person remains in others' images to be born in the future. Does it reflect a much more humble nation too, even when that nation is committed to its ideological past?

This chapter continues the attempt to seek the shape of a nation/water that has come to define itself as something undefinable. It locates that attempt in a personal journey of a poet-figure named Chế Lan Viên, to highlight the parallel journey the poet traverses along with the formation, and disintegration, of his nation. If Việt Nam is a nation yet to be defined, a Vietnamese person turns out to be something more definite, more assuring, more noticeable in all its uncertainty, inauthenticity, and ephemerality. This is perhaps the ironic trait of becoming Vietnamese. The comparison between the poet's journey to find the self and his Việt Nam also highlights the convoluted relationship between the personal and the political, a Việt person and Việt Nam as a nation-state. It emphasizes the very sense of non-belonging, self-detachment, and defamiliarization from the self, all of which ironically enable the self to define itself and its relation to its nation-state. The poet in the later stage, faithful to the spirit of auto-criticism, negates the poet in the

previous stage. The poetry that praises nation-making and those who make it comes back to negate the project and casts a shadow on those who make it. That work of permanent disruption is called irony, serving in the role of a critique. In the following two chapters, irony as critique, albeit still present, turns to irony as survival strategies for Việt subjects to survive and still retain their Vietnamese-ness.

Chapter 3: Vietnamese Refugees and the Critical Art of Living with Irony

> "Only that can fail which also has the possibility of securing. The dark fails to make visible because it can also secure sight: in the dark we see the stars." (Heidegger 46)

> "They want the world to no longer have the voice of truth, of poetry, of science, but only of bombs. . . . Bombs call on humanity and humanity must say, yes sir. We cannot accept that. 'The voice of singing overwhelms the voice of bombs'" (Chế Lan Viên, "Nền văn hóa từ cuộc sống" *Nghĩ cạnh dòng thơ* 162)[83]

We already have Hegel remark that "all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice"; we already have Marx add on to that, "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce" ("The Eighteenth Brumaire" 10). Now I want to put a twist to this so that it can turn ironic proper: all personal tragedies appear multiple times: the first time as traumatizing irony, the second time onwards as ironic trauma. This chapter is about how those non-first tragic memories of individual subjects (re)visit them and demand an ironic reading as a healing method. The focus of this ironic reading is Kim Thúy's *Ru,* although it will touch upon her other works too. Two methods that characterize this ironic reading are an intentional weaving of oppositions and a supplementary consideration of echoes. Both methods rely on the view on irony as a phenomenon rendered possible via workings of oppositions or of echoic knowledge.[84] Through this reading, I aim to forge intimate connections made possible by constitutive contradictions. Contradictions here are engendered by (1) socially, culturally, historically, and politically sanctioned binary categories and (2) echoes of forgotten past, foreclosed futures, and othered presences. As such, irony cannot work without attaching itself to history. Contradictions then are not construed as

[83] Chúng muốn thế giới không còn có tiếng nói của chân lý, thơ ca, khoa học mà chỉ có tiếng nói của bom. Bom bảo mai là mai, bom bảo chiều là chiều. Bom gọi là nhân loại phải vâng, phải dạ. Bom và vàng! Hai vị chúa trị vì thế giới, đấy là cái mẫu văn minh mà bọn chúng muốn tặng chúng ta. Không thể nào thừa nhận điều ấy. "Tiếng hát át tiếng bom."

[84] See Garmendia's *Irony*, especially chapter 3: "Irony as Echo"

either formalistic contraries or inherent opposites; contradictions are relations disavowed. If the previous two chapters establish the intricate link between the historico-political, the sociolinguistic and irony, this chapter asks what we miss when we refuse to read ironies into the lives of Vietnamese individuals. It argues that subjects of irony see life as full of intimate contradictions and that this ability to see life in its annulling textiles gives subjects of irony immense power to put themselves in the other space, rather than just put others in their own positions. As such, this chapter, along with chapter four, moves away from irony as a form of critique towards irony as a form of survival. Its main argument can be broken into two parts: that refugees as subjects of irony can survive by clinging to beauty, and that recognizing beauty as a strategy to survive requires an ironic worldview.

By using the term "subjects" of ironies, I want to highlight two aspects of subject-hood, necessarily ironic in their co-beings. The subjects of ironies are first and foremost those human beings who are subjected to the ironies of histories. Being sub-jected, they are thrown into the flows of events and happenings not necessary in their control. Also, being the subjects of this study, they are turned into the sacrifice every reading needs if it wants to go beyond the instances of living and into the metaphor of life. Being subjected to the flows of histories is also an unavoidable fact of an invitation to participate and to form relations. Irony needs subjects to happen, just as histories need subjects to flow. Subjection is relation, coerced and unequal; it requires subversion to be legitimate by reversal. The subjects are born out of relations, hailed into relations, and bound to relations. Second, as much as the subjects take their being from ironies and histories, the latter are predicated on the subjects for their own affirmation or negation. In their positions, subjects of irony assume agency by providing an ironic reading of their lives. By betraying themselves, they live on in confusing contradictions. To read their lives as ironic, I

propose we look into the contradictions constitutive of their subjecthood. Those contradictions will be shown to be bound to each other either by their own intimate oppositions or by echoes of their foreclosed relations that, once revealed, will link them together all again.

Intimate oppositions paint lives in their incompatible counterparts whereas echoes extend lives from the past and the future into the present. They portray the dual perspective on life as both synchronic—full of twists and turns—and diachronic—full of continuities foreclosed but never forgotten. They activate a politics of living, and as such, work directly in service of life. The specific way they advocate for the living subjects of irony is to nudge them towards beauty. Indeed, Kim Thúy's works show a persistent pursuit of beauty that touches and heals, connects and communicates. In her interview with Miléna Santory, she states her philosophy of writing:

> Writing is just about beauty. That's it. Beauty of the words, beauty of that thing that I live again. We think that in violence there is no beauty, but actually, there is. In the sense that we have to bring out the beauty that we lose in violence. We have to bring out the beauty that we lose in war. . . . I still believe that beauty is the best vehicle to talk about everything: whether it be a tragedy, or a drama, or horror. That's what is striking, that life is a paradox. There are so many pictures of the Viet Nam war, justifiably, where you see helicopters arriving in the rice fields and it's extremely beautiful. . . . [It]'s so beautiful, but there's a paradox, and it's the atrocity that's going to take place at the same time as this beauty. I believe that life always has these two sides. It's up to us to choose. . . . Do we want the beauty to last or do we maintain ugliness? (164-6)

The paradox of writing/life, as Kim Thúy sees it, offers three vital points for a politics of living. First, it requires an ironic worldview—earnest, daring, and inoffensive—to catch a glimpse of and draw attention to the passing beauty of violence. The moment that life is most desirable, most exquisite, and most permanent, is ironically the moment before its brutal end. For traumatized subjects, the ability to see beauty only, or to see beauty above the ugliness, is the most acute, once restored to them. Second, the politics of living here requires always a multi-perspectival worldview that in turn acts as a critique of simplistic escapism and of uncritical optimism. Multi-perspectivism

is a form of auto-criticism for subjects of irony. And third, it places emphasis on choices, returning agency to the beholders of beauty who are also the victims of violent histories. Rather than the receivers of established ways of living, refugees as subjects of irony determine their way of viewing life and their manner of living in the world. They exemplify what the field of Critical Refugee Studies calls "a dialectical combination of a critique of extant methods for knowing the refugee and a committed centering of refugee experiences on *refugees' own terms*" (Espiritu et al. 14). As the reader will soon realize, this focus on choice, on multi-perspectival auto-criticism, and on an ironic worldview activates within subjects of irony an immense power to see life in its multitude, to recognize their own limitations, and above all, to live with meanings and in healing. In other words, irony serves refugee studies precisely by offering itself as a refuge for some refugees, a mode of moving home, of chasing and catching a home forever promised to be destroyed.

Ru starts with three modes of life giving entangled with life taking: coming into the world of people ["Je suis venue au monde"], seeing the day ["J'ai vu le jour"], and being born "in the shadow of skies adorned with fireworks" [Je suis née à l'ombre de ces cieux ornés de feux d'artifice"] (1) [11].[85] The first mode of life is celebrated during the new year of 1968 Tết Offensive, with the sound of firecrackers and machine guns. The second mode of life begins with the new year painted red by both "petals of cherry blossoms" and "the blood of the two million soldiers deployed and scattered throughout the villages and cities of a Vietnam that had been ripped in two" (11). Both modes entertain the ironically intimate oppositions between life and death, living and dying, and the blurry line that separates their signification: the birth during the night brightened by the light of fireworks, and the celebratory sounds of firecrackers mingle,

[85] Translations into English by Fischman are cited, but modified when necessary. Original French citations are provided in the square brackets.

undetectable, with the terrifying sounds of machine guns. What I want to highlight is the ubiquitous flow of life that traverses at ease—albeit in pain—through those contradictions: "the long chains of firecrackers" come along with the continuous sounds of machine guns whereas the blood of two million soldiers flows freely across the land divided into two. It is not just that contradictions come together; rather, they flow from one into another. It is not just that—simultaneously—one lives and dies, or that one is humane and brutal, or that one can both give life and take it away. More than that simultaneity, one lives by dying, one is humane by being brutal, and one gives life precisely by taking life. When the celebration of life mingles into the celebration of death and the taking away of life provides the blood to color the red soil of a living nation, a lullaby is sung so that life of a crying baby begins immediately with a sleep: "in French, *ru* means a small stream and, figuratively, a flow, a discharge—of tears, of blood, of money. In Vietnamese, *ru* means a lullaby, to lull" (9). *Ru*'s view of life in its double edges (with the edge of the living always triumphing) is a typical Vietnamese strategy during the Vietnam War. The poet Chế Lan Viên in his speech in the event called "The day French intellectuals support Việt-Nam" in Paris, March 1968, states,

> When you come to Việt Nam you can see between two bombings, people still go watch dance performances. Poets perform their poems around canons. . . . Here people need weaponry. But they need more than just weaponry; they need culture. It's not true that in Việt Nam all you hear is the sounds of bombs and guns. The Americans can't be everywhere all the time. . . . Even if they bomb 24/24 hours, the only sound that triumphs in the end is the sound of life, of singing voices, of learning, of working from the people who will defeat them. (*Nghĩ cạnh dòng thơ* 165)

The beginning of *Ru* then starts with ironic living, not as a fact of life, but as an active, responsive attitude towards describing it and a persistent attempt to bring it into light. In its own multivalent definition, ru is both an answer to contradictions in life and an escape from them;

perhaps, it is the transition from the answer to the escape prior to a return.[86] Like in many other cultures, Vietnamese lullabies invite sleep in their melodies rather than in their content. After all, the content is for the singing parent to contemplate upon whereas the form is for the baby to sleep within. In this configuration of the lullaby, the form indeed delivers its formless messages: those of love, of peace, of growth, of the future, and of life, all of which cannot be articulated in its content, whose words dictate brutal life, wars, death, the past and the present. The flow of blood and tears disguises itself in the form of water/nation to nurture life and to tell its truth: "the purpose of my birth was to replace lives that had been lost. My life's duty was to continue [continuer] that of my mother" (11). The echoes of lost lives supplement meanings to each breath of a new life endowed with duties before it knows what and how to think for itself. A lullaby then acts as a bestowal of responsibility across generations. It delivers life in both melodies and content, together at the same time, but disjointed from one another.

This ironic recognition of extended life re-appears in *Mãn* too. While *Ru* starts with the narrator's birth, Kim Thúy's second novel starts with the narrator's many mothers and holes. Her first mother has "a hole in her head" [un trou dans la tête] (1) [9]. Her second mother has "a hole in her faith" [un trou dans la foi] (1) [9]. Her third mother, one she calls dearly as her Maman, has "a hole in her calf" [un trou dans le mollet] (1) [9]. The narrator herself has a hole in her heart [un trou dans le coeur] (1) [9]. Because of so many holes and gaps in her life, she is named *Mãn,* meaning a state of being fully satisfied, fully happy, fully at peace in Vietnamese. Or perhaps it is the other way around: because of her name, she has so many holes and gaps in her life, or else how can there be fullness without any holes to fill in the first place? But by the end of the novel, those gaps and holes have been transformed into dots and points that, in silence [silence], when

[86] Escapism can be a positive force in the world full of nightmares and sufferings. For a brilliant essay on the value of escapism, see Tolkien's "Tree and Leaf."

connected, can reveal the map of destiny on one's body. Holes, once filled and connected, portray a life fulfilled.

It is within this ironic context of contradictions and echoes that I propose a reading of Kim Thuy's works, especially *Ru.* To read *Ru* as a lullaby in its contradictions of form and content is to acknowledge what Kim Thúy describes, in her interview with Valérie Dusaillant-Fernandes, as her own experience of living contradictory lives: "We do not see what we are currently living. We always see the positive side of things" [On ne voit pas ce qu'on est en train de vivre. On a toujours vu le côté positif des choses] (167). If a refugee's life is dictated by a certain way of seeing that renders one insane and afraid, a refugee's life is nurtured by another way of seeing that enables one to survive. The manner of seeing, like the form of a lullaby, reinforces life whereas the content of seeing, like the content of a lullaby, remains faithful to life and critical of it. The mind sleeps to live and awakes to critique.

The mind in this sleeping mode should not be confused with a mind that stays blind to the very existence of the other side of life. Any cursory reading of *Ru* will see that plentiful are the details of life that offer critique of various kinds. What marks this mode of sleeping mind subversive lies in its active refusal to succumb to another dictated mode of seeing those details of life in a fixed pattern: ones see the puddle of mud, then one imagines the ocean.[87] To stay blind on purpose is never to be truly blind. To imagine on purpose is to control ironic contradictions to survive. Indeed, the power to manufacture sleep at will is the power to life and love.

Sleeping for life and living in the reality of life as a constant flow of sorrowful lullabies, the female protagonist of *Ru,* Nguyễn An Tịnh, gradually possesses the ability to see life connected by its intimate oppositions:

[87] To evoke Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* of course.

> As a child, I thought that war and peace were two antonyms. Yet I lived in peace when Vietnam was in flames, and I learnt about the war only after Vietnam had laid down its weapons. I now think that war and peace are actually friends and they play with us and trick us [elles se moquent de nous]. They treat us like enemies when it suits them, with no concern for the definition or the role we give them. Perhaps, then, we shouldn't take too much stock in the appearance of one or the other to decide our views [regard]. I was lucky to have parents who could preserve their view [preserver leur regard] regardless of the color of time and of moment. My mother often recited the proverb . . . Đời là chiến trận, nếu buồn là thua. Life is a battle; sorrow leads to defeat" (22).

The young child here possesses a remarkable capacity to see beyond binary oppositions into the very systemic structure that formulates peace within a temporary moment *and* a quarantined space. Peace is the momentary laying down of weapons that are still down there. Peace now is war later. Peace here is war there. The bombs come here and leave there. Peace is the space accorded to the child by lullabies that shield her from the flames of war still in operation. Peace is, in that sense, both a suspended period of a constant war, a different coloring of what remains the same under. But more than that, to live in peace is to be in anticipation of war, in preparation for war—life itself is a total war, and peace is our marked refusal to submit to it and succumb to sorrow. On the other hand, as much as war leads to peace, and peace leads to war, the two are deceptively interchangeable. We are at war in times of supposed peace; and we are at peace in times of supposed war. Whether it is war or peace, the child understands: it is the child, or we, that are *at it*, are facing It, are faced with it. The common enemy of war and peace then is what faces them: humans. The backward reflection that she was at war and at peace simultaneously allows Tịnh to avoid the endless cycle of opposite binaries: she does not look away from war, and she does not look forward to peace. She looks forward to living. Living is the focus of peace/war. A new view that transcends that cycle is rendered possible: to live in peace, and to live in war. An ironic view in that case promises to give birth, not knowing what offspring will come out.

And an ironic view in that case decides resolutely to be optimistic: being sorrowful equals being defeated. Indeed, as the Vietnamese saying goes, the gate of birth is the gate of death [cửa sinh là cửa tử], life from the moment it begins already invites death, and only a refusal of life leads to a refusal of death. The optimistic attitude allows both life to form and death to come. What matters is attitude. That attitude is both constant and ever-changing, something she learns from her parents who can preserve their view beyond the changing moments and see the relations in those contradictions of life. That Việt view is, again, common during the war. Chế Lan Viên, again, states that, after each bombing,

> The Việt farmers will come to the explosion crater to divide among themselves this 'volcano's mouth,' everyone will fight for the most challenging crater and turn it into a pond. In the pond, they raise fish, on the bank they grow vegetables, around the pond they plant banana trees. Those people, you put them on the moon, they will create life on the moon, with their hearts full of energy. (*Nghĩ cạnh dòng thơ* 163*)*

Knowing that war and peace are friends, life and death go hand in hand, Việt human beings who occupy both intimate (op)positions of life and death, peace and war, optimistically resort to irony as a negative strategy of living on, of *sur*viving. *Ru* is the accounting in form rather than in content of that ironic strategy to survive: in the words of its writer, "*Ru,* it was to survive. *À toi*, . . . it was to live. *Mãn*, it is to love" ["*Ru*, c'était survivre. *À toi* [la correspondance qu'elle a entretenue avec l'écrivain franco-suisse Pascal Janovjak], c'était vivre. *Mãn*, c'est aimer"] (Lapoint, "Kim Thúy: Survivre Vivre Aimer"). To survive, as witnessed in *Ru*, is not quite to be reduced to the barest state of life, to living conditions bared to the most fundamentals of human lives that deprive refugees and immigrants of humanity, dignity, and value. Life at its barest state lays bare life in its fullest, and to sur-vive, to live on, is as much to go beyond the living as to go under the living. Bare life in its fullest is arts, or an aesthetic way of living. It refuses to be reduced to nothing, even

as it is on the way to nothingness. It refuses to see itself and others as either disconnected and isolated or together and absolutely the same: to remain within relation is to view beings precisely in this double act—not disconnected, but not the same; not isolated, but never together.[88]

It is this bare life in its fullest that offers the ironic beauty in the arts of refugee living. In one characteristically light-hearted description of refugees' camp life, the narrator describes the construction work of a cabin and a shared bathroom by the refugees themselves:

> Together, the two structures resembled a museum installation by a contemporary artist. . . . If a choreographer had been underneath the plastic sheet on a rainy day or night, he would certainly have reproduced the scene: twenty-five people, short and tall, on their feet, each holding a tin can to collect the water that dripped off the roof, sometimes in torrents, sometimes drop by drop. If a musician had been there, he would have heard the orchestration of all that water striking the sides of the tins. If a filmmaker had been there, he would have captured the beauty of the silent and spontaneous complicity between [miserable] people. But there was only us, standing on a floor that was slowly sinking into the clay. After three months, it tilted so severely to one side that we all had to find new positions so sleeping women and children wouldn't slip onto the plump bellies of their neighbors. (*Ru* 25-6)

The narrator Tịnh here sees arts in living. Life here is not just potential materials for arts; it does not even need an artistic transformation. All that is required is a different take on life. If refugee living is a condition in which anything meaningful about life is brutally removed from life to reduce it to bare existence, to realize that refugee-living is art as such which possesses beauty as such is a revolutionary way of seeing bare life—1"revolutionary" here consisting of both the general sense and the communist sense of the word. 1Indeed, on the other side of the war, the side of the North who wins the war and helps create the situation of refugees, the reader will see the identical perspective:

> What can be the useful thing to do for those people? For the mothers who carry their babies down to the underground shelters at night and who still manage to gather the spirits to work on the fields the next day. For the wives and mothers

[88] It is in literature that we see the ironic fact: those heroes without the barest conditions for life somehow exude the most life and inspire the willing to live in others.

> seeing their men off to battles and yet still love on with hearts full of hopes and life. For the soldiers who between two battles still fall in love with life and kiss the flowers next to their cannons. What can be done here so that out there in life is the sound of bombs but inside their souls the singing voices still remain? (*Nghĩ cạnh dòng thơ* 164)

Art here is not an artistic re-processing of life that aims to preserve its beauty and winnow out its ugliness. Art here is life in its totality, activated by an ironic perspectivism. All that is needed to see that life is art is to ask for a change of perspective. That perspective, the reader will soon realize, is the constant search for and recognition of the beauty of life and of living. All the artists need to do is to be there, materially and physically there to capture them with their inner eyes and ears. Yet, there are no artists there for the refugees, so the refugees themselves must possess that capacity to both live in arts/life and see arts/life. Such a task may be too challenging for them, so arts and beauty only come to them as an after-fact via the constant work of re-memory and ironic perspectivism.

Here, in *Ru*, the one who does the work of remembering is the artist as such. She can put herself into the position of a choreographer, a musician, a filmmaker. She can notice the beauty of the composition, the movements, the imagery, and the sound of life. The connection between bare life and full arts is complete through her, a refugee as a subject of irony. She forces again what has been lost in modern times, namely the complete connection between arts and life. Through life and all its beauty, life as art restores what Adorno calls the self-evidence of art: its inner life, its relation to the world, and its right to exist.[89] *Ru* then operates on the Jamesonian concept of the Irony of form that allows an impersonal consciousness to move freely between perspectives, in and out of the text, from a first-person to a third-person pronoun. This Irony allows for a kind of moral judgement not necessarily coming to the reader from the text itself or from outside the text; it

[89] See Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*.

radically blurs the line between the writer of fiction named Kim Thúy and the autobiographical I named Tịnh.[90]

To characterize *Ru* into any genre is to fall into the negative of labeling and to always aspire to that something more that invariably eludes the lips: it is hard to say what the text is whereas it is always more convenient to say what it is not. Irony works precisely in its refusal to settle for what there is, all the while eating itself up for a lack of positive identification. Pascal Riendeau therefore comes closest to describing what *Ru* is precisely by arguing for what it is not:

> *On the whole, Ru* is *not* a triumphant story of one immigrant—even if she has fully succeeded in integrating herself—*nor* a story of the harsh reality of the receiving society [Quebec, Canada]. *Nor* is it a nostalgic testimony of a lost country, because the protagonist could return to live in Vietnam, at least twenty years later, to work there [ironically of course] as a diplomat. ("Chacun en son exil" 137-8, emphasis added)
> [Dans l'ensemble, *Ru* n'est ni le récit triumphant d'une immigrée—même si elle a pleinement réussi à s'intégrer—ni une histoire de la dure réalité dans la société d'accueil. Ce n'est pas non plus le témoignage d'une nostalgique du pays perdu, car la protagoniste a pu retourner vivre au Vietnam, au moins deux décennies plus tard, pour y travailler comme avocate]

Any other attempt to pin *Ru* down to a definite pattern fails: like the flow of life, the textility of memories refuses to stop for a linear meaning. Just as particularities trouble universal frameworks, any attention to close reading troubles an overview of *Ru* as something progressive. Ching Selao, for instance, in her attempt to push Kim Thúy and Linda Lê to two opposite extremes—the former of optimism and humor, the latter of morbidity and pain—brings *Ru* to almost a non-contradictory text. The aim of her article "L'expérience exilique chez Kim Thúy et Linda Lê" is to show that "the exilic experience in Kim Thúy allows her protagonist to be reborn and find her place . . . to [enjoy] a total integration, a 're-memberment,' certainly not devoid of pain, but that which leads

[90] See Jameson's *Antinomies of Realism*, chapter VIII, entitled "The Swollen Third Person, or, Realism after Realism."

to the formation of a new identity" [l'expérience exilique chez Kim Thuy permet finalement à son personnage principal de renaitre et de trouver sa place . . . chez Kim Thuy, l'exil permet une intégration totale, un ≪ re-membrement ≫, certes non dénué de douleur, mais qui about it a la formation d'une nouvelle identité] (151). In order to contrast Kim Thúy with Linda Lê, Selao understandably places Kim Thúy on the pedestal of positivity and success, where there is no place for contradictions, doubts, critiques of linearity, or erratic movements of identities undone.

In her most edifying part, Selao labels the protagonist of *Ru* as the phoenix that is reborn from the ashes. Selao by all means forgets to add that any phoenix also returns to its ashes. To insist on the point of departure that starts with the moment the phoenix returns to its ashes is not to insist on cynicism or pessimism. Rather, such an insistence asks what wonders are engendered in the phoenix's return to its ashes, what modes of life the phoenix activates in its return to death, and most importantly what *beauty and happiness* it comes across in its return to ashes and in its anticipation of life. By forgetting to add the return to ashes, Selao cannot yet ask those questions and does not allow Tịnh within her lullabies to flow forward to her past traumas. In that forgetfulness, the protagonist Nguyễn An Tịnh is progressively portrayed by Selao as one of the wretched of the sea, surviving through hell, and arriving at heaven on Earth, coded Canada.

Apparently having achieved the American dream at the end of the text, where only paradise is mentioned and hell forgotten, Tịnh lays her text to an ever-lasting rest—the phoenix seemingly ceases to die, and to live for that matter—in its pinnacle of success in assimilation, in contrast with the past-present, where the "dream of the future fights against the hell of present" [où le rêve du futur lutte contre l'enfer du présent] (Selao 155). Earlier passages of hell in *Ru* such as the following find no place, for Selao, in the future of An Tịnh, the phoenix undone by being reborn in Canada:

> The people sitting on deck told us there was no line of demarcation between the blue of the sky and the blue of the sea. No one knew if we were heading towards the sky or if we were plunging into the depths of water. Heaven and hell embraced in the womb [ventre] of our boat. Heaven promised a turning point in our life, a new future, a new story [une nouvelle histoire]. Hell, laid out our fears: fear of pirates, fear of starvation, fear of poisoning by biscuits soaked in motor oil, fear of running out of water, fear of being unable to stand up, fear of having to urinate in the red pot that was passed from hand to hand, fear that the scabies on the baby's head was contagious, fear of never again setting foot on solid ground, fear of never again seeing the faces of our parents, who were sitting in the darkness surrounded by two hundred people. (13-4)

It is hard to see in *Ru* only the good dreams in the future, or the nightmares in the past-present here, as Selao proposes. Between heaven and hell, life and death (again, to repeat, the gate of life is the gate of death), the people seeking to be reborn do not look for only the good dreams in the future. Their fears lie equally in the future as in the present and past; they are not merely running away from old fears, but towards new fears too.[91] Just as hell is equally there in the future, heaven is always here in the present-past. Rather than just a mere look towards the future, heaven is a turning point of the now, both a future and a new (his)tory [une nouvelle histoire]. In that womb of the boat in the middle of the sea, refugees are left open, vulnerable, and undecided. Their life has not started yet, but it is full of possibilities. Their life needs protection from both "the sea and the sky" around them, yet their life is still heading towards the sea and the sky for a new beginning (3). As the reader will see again soon below, that recurring French word, the womb [ventre] of the boat will connect the past to the present, with all its silences, leakages, and murmurs of hell exploding again, blaspheming themselves into the present of a Canada quite non-complicit in the Vietnam War.[92]

[91] Similarly, the reader may find similar ideas echoed elsewhere. It is the slow and cautious walking into the threshold of the future in lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We are All Looking for*, or Yến Lê Espiritu's reminder that not all refugees rush towards the American dream. See *Body Counts* 2 and note 6 on page 189.

[92] See Vinh Nguyen's "Refugee Gratitude: Narrating Success and Intersubjectivity in Kim Thúy's Ru" for a brief discussion of Canada's (non)involvement with the Vietnam War.

The rhetorical emphasis of the now that includes both the past and the future is strong in Kim Thúy's works and her own Vietnamese-derived view of writing. In her interview with Santoro, Kim Thúy states that because Vietnamese does not really have a tense, for her at least, it is an ever-present language:

> if you still remember, if you still are carrying something today, it's because it is in the present. And when I write, it's not about going into my past. It's about what is still here. What is still in the present. . . . we always associate memory as something in the past, but no, memory is what you have *now*. . . . That's why it's very difficult to separate the past from the present. It's one block. (160)

Arriving in their future, Quebec, Canada, Tịnh and her people still refuse to let go of the hell in the future as well as the heaven of the past. They are, again, at another undoing of their identity. There is no sense of finality or a new absolute beginning here, as Selao suggests: "Once the plane touches down on Mirabel, hell *forever* [définitivement] leaves place for 'paradise'" [Une fois l'avion atterri à Mirabel, l'enfer laisse définitivement la place au ≪ paradis ≫] (154 emphasis added). Here is a closer look at *Ru* and at the present fears of the future in Canada:

> When I saw my first snowbanks through the porthole of the plane at Mirabel Airport, I too felt as if I was stripped naked, if not bare [dénudée, sinon nue] . . . After such a long time in places without light, a landscape so white, so virginal, could only dazzle us, blind us, intoxicate us. (*Ru* 18)

This is the second time Tịnh feels stripped naked. The first time, the feeling is in the present tense, in Canada, in the present: "Already, I am defeated, stripped bare [dénudée], beaten down" (17). Stripped naked, and bare again in the country of the future, the newly coming refugees find no easy refuge that heals and settles and makes them forget. Instead, the refuge numbs them, blinds them, and paralyses them. Because they cannot live towards the future, they cannot live in the present either; in other words, their present leads nowhere and therefore stops being present for them. A new beginning that cannot begin—this is a more proper description of the refugees' status

in their refuge. At that beginning that cannot begin, Tịnh moves forward by falling back into the womb of the past, another time being un-born, another day being in a lullaby:

> I was surprised by all the unfamiliar sounds that greeted us as by the size of the ice sculpture watching over a table covered with canapés, hors d'oeuvre, tasty morsels, each more colorful than the last. I recognized none of the dishes, but I knew that this was a place of delights, a country of dream [un pays de rêve]. I was like my son Henri: I could not talk or listen, even though I was neither deaf nor mute. I had no more points of reference, no tools to allow me to dream, to project me into the future, to live [vivre] the present, in the present. (18)

Hell never leaves for good. The conditions of life, embodied in the singular instances of refugees, do not just return—they are *forever* there. What the refugees need is not progress, but mobility, not to go there, but to go anywhere.

With some echoes of the womb [ventre] of the boat that contains the refugees heading towards both heaven and hell that I cited above, the reader can now re-visit the *irony* in the following sentence that opens up that ironic space of the ostensibly more welcoming country of the future: "The town of Granby was the warm *womb* [ventre] that hatched us during our first year in Canada" (21 emphasis added). The boat and the town are both the womb [ventre] that gives birth. The place of the present-future, written in the past tense, marks the refugees' condition as both past and present. That womb [ventre] is precisely the echo that links the two places of birth, of life and death, of movements, of the past in the present and the presence of the past. The irony lies precisely in that heaven called Granby, Canada that is forever haunted by that hell called the boat.

In that so-called heaven, it is even more ironic to see that the refugees are given the dream before throwing it away. In their new birthplace, despite the goodness of the locals in inviting them for free meals, the young kids cannot eat any of the rice of love because the new rice is not sticky enough and the singular fork is not the double chopstick (*Ru* 21).

The irony does not just lie in the idea that the refugees can have any dream they want. The model minority myth has much to say about that already.[93] What is ironic is that the refugees, once they achieve those dreams, enact the affirmative sabotage of the dreams already so desirable, so formed and so filled. At first, the American dream to them is like a piece of property or belonging that is limited and therefore cannot be shared:

> My father traced Monsieur Girard thirty years later. He no longer lived in the same house, his wife had left him and his daughter was on sabbatical, in search of a purpose, a life. When my father brought me this news, I almost felt guilty. I wondered if we hadn't unintentionally stolen Monsieur Girard's American dream from having wanted it too badly. (72)

Living always in the lack of things never taken for granted to be there, and thinking that American dreams are strictly numbered and rationed, Tịnh assumes that if the other over there has lost their American dream, she and her family must have stolen it, but only to throw the dream away later, because they cannot use it, because they just want it badly rather than know what it is for. Because the idea of having the dream seems to them more precious than enjoying it, the second-hand dream, once achieved, can only be thrown away for its lack of use in content. The dream, in other words, is just an empty desire for them. What matters is their efforts and their survival worldview [regard].

First, by stealing and throwing away their American dreams, Tịnh and her people show that those dreams are in fact never meant for the Americans already there, but rather always already meant for the Americans never to be. How ironic it is that the American dreams need their Un-American people, and how un-patriotic it seems that the most American thing must depend on some un-American-ness. Should it be the same for Vietnamese-ness, especially if for some the most Vietnamese dream to have is the dream of freedom and independence and the only way they

[93] See Keith Osajima's "Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and 1980s" and Victor Bascara's *Model-Minority Imperialism*. For the Vietnamese refugees as model minority, see Yến Lê Espiritu's *Body Counts*, chapter 4. For real cases recorded, see Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin's *The Myth of the Model Minority*.

can have it is to become un-Vietnamese? And how even more ironic it is that those Un-Americans dare to have and throw those dreams away:

> Nowadays [t]hey [Tịnh's Aunt and step-uncle Six] travel first class and have to stick a sign on the back of their seat so the hostesses will stop offering them chocolates and champagne. Thirty years ago, in our Malaysian refugee camp, the same Step-uncle Six crawled more slowly than his eight-month-old daughter because he was suffering from malnutrition." (74)

When Tịnh recognizes that her "slanting eyes automatically [place] her in a separate category" from her employer's Québécois nation, she realizes that the nation that those Caucasians claim to be their own have ironically "given [her *her*] American dream" (79). The possessive pronoun reclaims the dream from the source and transforms its owner into a subject of ironic fullness-cum-emptiness. If American-ness can be given away to those un-American, then the very qualities that define the self can be given unto the other. Or perhaps the very qualities that define the self come precisely from the others. Việt refugees, those who are neither Vietnamese nor American, have something uniquely both Vietnamese and American to contribute to both cultures.

Losing the self, giving the self to the other, turning the other into part of the self—all of these acts can be done, and they should be done with intended love rather than via chance and accidents because being neither or being both can sometimes bring about hostility to the refugees as subjects of irony. This decision to love everyone, to give the self to everyone is a unique characteristic of Tịnh as a refugee here, and it is a choice to be made, not a trait to be born with:

> Who to love then? No one or everyone? [*I chose to love them all, without belonging to any.*[94]] I chose to love the gentlemen from Saint-Félicien who asked me in English to grant him a dance . . . I also love the xích lô driver in Da Nang who asked me how much I was paid as an escort for my "white" husband. (79, emphasis added)

[94] It is unfortunate that the English translation misses this important sentence. It is, however, discovered in the French version: "J'ai choisi de les aimer tous, sans appartenir à aucun" (87)

Without belonging to those she loves, Tịnh remains within her active position to bestow love, to give when giving is unexpected and when giving to others is a betrayal of the self.

Here, the reader may well ask, how can one become a good ironist? One betrays oneself by imagining oneself to be in the other position.[95] How does one imagine oneself to be in the other position? First, one establishes relationships on a grander scale of commonality: human beings, just like ourselves, all love to see beauty. Differences here are initially cast aside in favor of a common manner of viewing the world. Then, only after one has already affirmed that unbreakable bond of humanity via a love for aesthetics, only after one has to make sure to oneself that to enter the other territories is not to degrade them with one's own visions and contaminate them with one's own wishes, can one really risk imagining oneself in that othered position.[96]

Nguyễn An Tịnh, *Ru*'s protagonist, practices translating different contents while appealing to that same grander manner of looking at the world. Tịnh focuses not on equivalencing the specific and distinct circumstances of those soldiers from the North and those soldiers from the South; she instead chooses to highlight the fact that those differences of circumstances belie a grander *common* picture of humanity as something beautiful for those brothers and sisters born out of joint in time and space. In other words, putting their specific different circumstances aside, Tịnh sees the common humanity manifested in superficially different acts: both sides have a family to fight for, a mother to return to, belief to cling to, and a relative on the other side to "save." The narrative

[95] Let me digress to W. E. B. DuBois to arrive at this point. In "The Coming of the Lord," DuBois highlights the need to say of "what freedom meant to the freed; of the sudden wave of glory that rose and burst above four million people, and of the echoing shout that brought joy to four hundred thousand fellows of African blood in the North" (*Black Reconstruction* 121). The condition for this imagination across the divide, so that both the white and black free people of the North can understand the meaning of freedom to their common human ex-slave of the South, is that "we think of these people as human beings like ourselves . . . [Assuming] this common humanity, we conceive ourselves in a position where we are chattels and real estate, and then suddenly in a night become 'thenceforward and forever free.'" (121)

[96] For the refugees' politics of living in refugee camps, see Yến Lê Espiritu's *Body Counts*, chapter 3. Here, I focus on the aesthetics of living, which is a part of the politics of living, if politics is understood as the work in service of life and the living.

that comes out of that practice is an utmost earnest irony. Tịnh narrates her "enemy's stories" not purely from her perspective but from a learned perspective of the other side too, the side that views her as an enemy. Her account shows no resentment and no forgiveness; instead, it shows a learned imagination of the other side, an Imagination activated by a profound yearning to connect and to bond. Irony bonds earnestly. It evokes love for the enemy.

Following the soldiers of the North around when they seize her house, Tịnh observes that the soldiers have failed to mention the contents of those "big chests of drawers filled with the brassieres of [her grandmother] and her six daughters" (28-9). She imagines those young men, so long without women's company in the jungle, so "embarrassed at the thought of all those round-breasted girls in the living room" that they cannot write "without trembling" (30). But she is wrong: the soldiers from the North simply have no idea what brassieres are for. This, however, does not matter. What is remarkable here, in all these attempts to think of the others, is precisely this: she still tries to imagine beauty on the other side, even if it is her enemy's.

One soldier mistakes those brassieres for some weird double coffee filters, something that he has grown up with while watching his mother selling coffee to passersby "at the foot of the Long Biên bridge that crosses the Red River in Hanoi" (29). He, too, is looking at them in his eyes and using them as a source of re-imagination of the beauty of home at peace. He, too, like Tịnh, cannot yet put himself in the other position to see what the brassieres are for. But once Tịnh sees his mistake, she sees the sight of humanity in him. His mistakes activate her story of the other, just like they activate his story in him. His mistaken belief that the brassieres are the coffee filters is precisely the clue to his common humanity, buried under different specific circumstances:

> At the foot of the Long Biên bridge that crosses the river in Hanoi . . . In the winter [typical of Hanoi], [his mother] placed glasses containing barely three sips into a bowl filled with hot water to keep them warm during conversations between the men sitting on benches raised just a bit above the ground. Her customers spotted

> her by the flame of her tiny oil lamp sitting on the tiny work table, next to three cigarettes displayed on a plate. Every morning, the young inspector, still a child, woke up with the oft-mended brown cloth coffee filter, sometimes still wet and hanging from a nail above his head. (*Ru* 29)

The scene can only bring home a Hanoian person of a certain poor working class, growing up in the early 1980s onwards, someone who knows the winter of Hanoi, the conversations of men, the light of the oil lamp, the smoke, and the child running around helping his mom earn a living. Described by that other person not from Hanoi, the scene shows how a learned imagination of the other sometimes works. It works to activate immense love that in turn desire to imagine stories untold and unheard from the enemy. Tịnh does not have to love her enemy, nor does she need to imagine their humanity. Yet she still does because she loves everyone and she needs beauty. These are her two connected ways to survive, or more precisely, the way in which her humanity is kept intact against the twists and turns of life. She can imagine their common humanity even when that humanity is manifested in different circumstances: some childhood in a faraway cold land, some lonely motherly figure making ends meet, and some twenty years hiding and fighting in the jungle of dream and ideals. She can imagine their love too:

> The young inspector has been marching in the jungle since the age of twelve to free South Vietnam from the "hairy hands" of the Americans. He had slept in underground tunnels, spent days at a time in a pond, under a water lily, seen the bodies of comrades sacrificed to prevent cannons from sliding, lived through nights of malaria amidst the sound of helicopters and explosions. Aside from this mother's teeth lacquered jet black, he had forgotten his parents' faces. . . . An inventory of their belongings took three seconds, unlike ours, which lasted for a year. . . . They needed to be sure that we had only the essentials, like them. (31)

If there is a mode of full integration, as any more positive reader of *Ru* is wont to argue for, I maintain that this is the one most worthy of mentioning, more worthy than the reading of successful Vietnamese assimilation into North American society and its dreams. Tịnh does not become her

supposed enemy: the pronoun remains third-person singular. The words become intimate in their details. Their humanity is still gradually lost, as are the faces of their parents. War remains dehumanizing in reality. Another token of self-betrayal manifests itself when she admits the injuries of the other side and tolerates its attempt to make her suffer, too. This means she can imagine hatred from the other side, and understand that hatred is as close to humanity as love. Tịnh in *Ru* does not simply forgive because it is not rightful to do so on the larger framework of common historical suffering, nor does it forget or blame. Via the use of an earnest irony, she simply understands in order to stand among other sufferings, to stand before them, to stand close to them, to offer herself a chance to exile herself to be at home in another self, also Vietnamese but not her Vietnamese, in a beautiful Việt Nam but not her Việt Nam, also a beautiful memory but not her memory, also a love, just not for her. In shifting her aim in finding that large manner of looking at life that renders all the same rather than different, she forces secondary differences up close, bonds them together, and explodes them into constitutive contradictions. The danger of Tịnh's passage is that a soldier from the North as much as a soldier from the South may find his or her humanity in that passage of circumstantial differences and that the very specificity of that cold night, perhaps closing upon Tết, the benches so low as to touch the ground, the cigarettes with smoke mystifying the whitened dark night, the dimming light of the oil lamp, and of course, the gossip, the warmth, and the absence of war, conjures up that vivid image of Hà Nội, and by extension and metonymy, of a Việt Nam that does not demand love from only a Hà Nội native.

Echoes in *Ru* do not just operate on the level of words like the womb [ventre]. To read the text and what the narrator in it says with echoic irony in order to expose constitutive contradictions is to resist any linear reading of refugees' journey from riches to rags to riches, any straightforward taking of refugees' achievement of *their* American dream as an exemplification of their "perfect

immigrant" and perfect refugee status as they are often portrayed by the media.[97] On the other hand, it is also to resist progressivist readings of their status either as only collective traumatized victims in need of rescue or as individual grateful refugees desperately searching for a future ahead in the forms of psychological forgetting and somatic remembering that tame the past before assimilating it in the present-future. I have already shown some signs of echoic reading of irony in the case of the word "womb" [ventre] as a signal that connects contradictions and contaminates the lacuna between past and present. I will continue below to show some more instances of echoic ironies that deal with remembering and forgetting.

Literatures on the pernicious perils of the representation of Asian Americans as a model minority are available, as well as other forms of co-opting minority narratives into the service of imperialism, neo-liberalism, and the state. I am here more concerned with a somewhat linear way of reading the past as either something to overcome or even tame, especially when that past is of war and militarism. What I want to argue is that the recalcitrant haunting of the past—untamed, insurmountable—can be made to serve the spirits of the present and future as a discomfiting critique of the present and future. In maintaining so, I do place more trust in the deconstructive power of the inassimilable, inconsolable, and incompatible past in its workings of irony on the present-future than writers of irony like Hutcheon would. The conditions to realize this critique power lie in deep learning and serious training of imagination, two criteria that can be achieved via an active engagement with echoic irony.

Research on tackling a traumatic past like Valérie Dusaillant-Fernandes's "Du Vietnam au Québec: Fragmentation Textuelle et Travail de Mémoire Chez Kim Thúy" rests on assumptions concerning success and failure of surmounting trauma: "This state of crisis [brought about by exile,

[97] See, for instance, Jim Bartley's "From Riches to Rags to Riches" and John Barber's "Kim Thúy's River of Life."

refuge, or immigration] . . . leads to a phase of psychic disorganization that requires a subsequent reorganization that can be a success or a failure" [Cet état de crise . . . entraine une phase de désorganisation psychique qui nécessite une réorganisation ultérieure qui peut être un succès ou un échec] (77). Detached from both the past as something traumatic to overcome and the present as something idealized meant for the recuperative formation of the self, the refugee ceases to live either in the past or in the present as an actual subject out there, constantly drawn back into the psychic struggle with trauma and ideals. Dusaillant-Fernandes would stand to reason if she indeed suggested this detachment from reality. What I intend to critique here nonetheless is the neat demarcation of the *past over there* and the *present over here*. It is not that throughout *Ru* the narrative flow is unidirectional from the past to the present-future as Dusaillant-Fernandes correctly observes. Yet, it is far from the truth to maintain that the past is always traumatizing or the present always idealized. To go in this direction would entail ignoring the violent enabling structures of the past into the future that in turn allows an unrelenting critique of the present-future.

Let us start with the unrelenting critique of the present-future as activated by echoic irony. Dusaillant-Fernandes indeed sees only the "euphoric stage" in Tịnh's arrival in Montréal, a paradise on earth to the refugees: "The exiled does not seem to be present in the reality of her space; everything appears irreal" [L'exilée semble n'être pas présente dans la réalité de son espace; tout apparaît irréel] (80). Yet, the euphoric stage has been present earlier, in the traumatic past and the boat of heaven and hell itself, as a strategic tool used to counter, always, the untamable threat of the present-future. Here is the early passage revealing the euphoric stage of the refugees in the womb of the boat that should not be missed by a French reader.

> The story of the little girl who was swallowed by the sea after having lost her steps walking along the edge spread through the odorous womb [ventre odorant] of the boat like an *anaesthetic or euphoric gas* [un gaz anesthésiant ou euphorique], which transforms the singly bulb into a polar star and the biscuits soaked in motor oil into butter cookies. The

> taste of oil in our throats, on our tongues, in our heads lulled us to sleep to the rhythm of the lullaby sung by the woman beside me. (5, emphasis added)

Yet another case of loss in translation presents itself: In Fischman's English version, "un gaz anesthésiant ou euphorique" is translated as "an anaesthetic or laughing gas" (5, emphasis added). The word "euphoric" is easily lost in the English version; echoes are therefore deactivated there. But it is not lost in the original French version. Either during their boat journey or in Canada, the euphoric stage is not something for the refugees to bypass, but a strategy to summon, always in service of the present—for the refugee's self, as a counter-viewpoint; and for the refugee's other, as an anti-assimilative critique of success and recovery. The refugee sees *different things in the same way* more often that any progressivist accounts allow them to.[98] A focus on the superficially differential nature of things rather than on the commonly structured manner of looking at them damages both lived experiences and faithful accounts of them. That commonly structured manner of looking at different things is what I call perspectival strategies utilized by refugees who know how to actively resort to the *enabling* effects of trauma.[99] Again, the difference between the traumatizing boat journey and the healing destination of the present-future does not matter as much as the transcendental approach to both places as, ironically, *the same*. Lastly, this manner of same-ness oriented speaks considerably more to the specific subject position of refugees than to the nature of different things out there: Canada is by all means no sea, and the womb of the boat is by

[98] Let me borrow Castro's brilliant analogy here: both a human and the jaguar think they drink beer, but jaguar's beer is blood to human (6). See Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's "Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation."

[99] Trauma is always futuristic because it is anticipated as always a return-to-come, what returns [revenant] always returns [revenir] in the future. Trauma therefore is both *present* and futuristic, untimely and *belated*. Trauma is inherently ironic, especially in its unexpected arrival. To expect trauma to come is always to re-live in its absence, but to forget trauma is always to suffer its visits in the most unfortunate times. For more on trauma studies, see Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, especially "Introduction."

all means no womb of the town of Granby. Differences matter only *after* we see this same-ness orientation in the ironic manner of living refugees.

The same manner of looking at different contents of things provides the link for ostensibly unbridgeable distances between opposites. Arguments such as Vinh Nguyen's are convincing as long as they list all the contradictory sides of the refugees' minds in *Ru*. But as long as these sides are not shown to be strongly interwoven into the text that we call refugee lives, we risk taking their lives apart again and reducing them to monist narratives that do not come together. By so doing, we also reinforce the idea that refugees must forever sunder their selves into incompatible parts that destroy each other and annihilate their whole selves. In his article on *Ru* treated positively—with a different focus away from that of imperial, neoliberal, and state apparatus structures—as a success for the individual refugee, the essay portion focusing on oblivion and American Dream seems to dominate over the portion on somatic remembrance. Nguyen states that

> [i]n *Ru*, forgetting is a fraught process, both crucial to survival and reinvention and lamented as a kind of loss. The erasure of the past contrasts starkly with the accumulative pursuit of the American Dream. Ru's narrator characterizes this dream, this ideal of success, which sits on the horizon for new immigrants, as something material and tangible that can eventually be grasped, put on (to the body), and occupied.

It is true that forgetting is a fraught process, but it is fraught because forgetting and remembering both fall into that constant flow of identity done and undone. It is indeed hard to imagine anything in a novella entitled *Ru*—a flow, a lullaby, and a river—to be starkly contrasting. If the flow of memory passes something that contaminates it, when will it become pure again, if ever? Will it not carry within it the haunt of everything it passes by, even when it already moves on and becomes pure again? It is significantly easier to realize that *Ru* is challenging precisely because it reveals that what one assumes to be starkly contrasting is actually in a constant conflux *of currents* flowing

towards each other, along with each other, against each other. Again, taking the example of Tịnh's Aunt and step-uncle Six, Nguyen highlights the contrast—extreme to the point of ironic exaggeration and perhaps of guilty laughter—in their past and present lives:

> Nowadays [t]hey travel first class and have to stick a sign on the back of their seat so the hostesses will stop offering them chocolates and champagne. Thirty years ago, in our Malaysian refugee camp, the same Step-uncle Six crawled more slowly than his eight-month-old daughter because he was suffering from malnutrition." (74)

Forgetting then, Nguyen continues to suggest, "mitigates these contradictions" and "offers the possibility of a subjectivity that is legible to the subject who must negotiate and live it herself." I already provide another reading of this passage as an instance of the American dream achieved and thrown away. Here, however, why assume that one cannot live with contradictions, that one must mitigate contradictions because they are damaging to the coherent conception of the self, and that one cannot entertain contradictions and coherences at the same time? What will happen if the self demands incoherence to stay coherent, or insists on contradictions to live a life of a subject? And what is the link that coheres all incoherences and contradictions?

It is the answer to these questions that metaphor can help provide. A metaphor, like one of the womb or that euphoric gas, speaks as powerfully as a concept of connecting, transcending, equivalating differences as it does as a concept of producing, imposing, and introducing similarities. In both functions, the metaphor works as much by analogizing as by displacing. And it is the displacement side of metaphors that one forgets to be the foundation for all workings of metaphors. Where there are no similarities between the tenor and its vehicle, metaphors displace and supply similarities, extrinsic but internalized into the attributes of the tenor itself. Furthermore, where there are no differences between the tenor and its vehicle, metaphors displace and supply differences, extrinsic but internalized as the gap between the tenor and the vehicle themselves. Displacement is as integral to the workings of metaphor as comparability and translatability. It is

hard to truly decide if the differences between the womb of the mother, the womb of the boat, and the womb of Canada are indeed extrinsic and substantial, just as it is hard to truly decide if the similarities between the euphoric stage summoned to face death and one summoned to face the unknown future are indeed intrinsic and substantial. The irony in metaphors lies in their residues of unintended meanings, excesses of attributed meanings, and potential to backfire.

It is in the ironic manner of excess—born out of metaphor as an intended mistake that enables—that we must read the past and the present. No one seems to truly forget here, as Nguyen suggests, but rather one takes forgetting as a convenient strategy to repeat without representing what needs to be forgotten itself. On the first-class plane or on the soil of the refugee camp, one cannot rest either because one has too much of what one does not need or because one has too little of what one does need. Any sign of positive success lies in that past in which having too little of what one needs means that to give away is always to give too much, just as any sign of critique of the present is indicated by that refusal to have too much of what one does not need. We have here another cycle of excess all over again:

> Every gift we offered was a genuine gift, because it represented a sacrifice and it answered a need, a desire or a dream. We were well acquainted with the dreams of our nearest and dearest: those with whom we were packed in tightly for nights at a time. Back then, we all had the same dreams. For a long time, we were obliged to have the same one, the American dream. (*Ru* 75)

A lack of need leads to genuine gift, a lack of space on camp leads to compulsory intimacy, and a lack of dreams leads to a univocal one. A dream on popular demand, under a dire obligation—who is to say that it is good to dream of *the dream*, and that it remains good once achieved? —Nguyen stands to reason to maintain that the dream "latches onto the body and weighs the subject down even as it propels her 'upward.'" Downward or upward—either means the same thing in here, at

the same time, and within the same space. The American dream for Tịnh herself is like "a graft or an excrescence" (77), and an excrescence is hardly something taken lightly for positive success.

Indeed, it is *not* simply that the idea of the American dream is forever tainted by its other's past:

> [My ten-year-old cousins] described to me, sniggering, how they had masturbated men in exchange for a bowl of soup at two thousand dongs. Holding nothing back, they described those sex acts with a naturalness and purity of those who consider prostitution is only a matter of adults and money, a matter that does not involve children of six or seven years old like them, who devoted themselves to it in exchange for a fifteen-cent meal. I listened to them without turning around, still sewing, without commenting, because I wanted to protect the innocence in their words, not tarnish their candor by my view [regard].[100] It was certainly thanks to that innocence that they became engineers after ten years of studies in Montreal and Sherbrooke. (*Ru* 131)

There is also something in common between the past and the present that hovers above the content of the acts and the views of them. It is the manner of looking at them in the same way: innocently, ironically so, if you will. To acknowledge that common manner across time and space requires Tịnh to suspend her view for a moment and then to learn to enter the position of them, the innocent ones. Something left in that so-called shameful past is carried over to engender the success of the dream. The process of narrating here is upstream and against the grain. They are not tricking themselves into believing in something of an already defined nature, and Tịnh is learning this process too. They are actively maintaining the innocent view of things *after* the advent of knowledge and sin. To remain a child to view the world even after the arrival of sins is a choice nearly impossible to make. One is not born innocent; one remains—or becomes—innocent by arranging one's way of looking at life. The manufacturing of innocence is another process of

[100] Le regard of life and of living life is the persistent one in *Ru*. It is the only thing that does not seem to change and needs to be preserved. I would later argue that le regard of life and of living is one of earnest irony, as irony turned ironic itself to betray its own edginess and to transform itself into an irony that can show empathy, sympathy, and love.

making meanings that sustain life; the other instance, to echo my earlier part, is the manufacturing of sleep via a lullaby. The choice for the ironic mind now is either to discard the "perfect" dream (of being a successful engineer) as forever dislodged from its proper definition by its "tainted" past or to compel all dreams to pay tribute to their nightmares. The refugees, however, refuse these two choices: they just do not see it these ways. They owe it all to their *common* ways of seeing things. In the dreams of refugees, nightmares are beautiful and terrible. In the nightmares of refugees, innocence and beauty still reside resolutely.

Again, the refugee dreams during the day and visits their nightmares during the night, and sometimes vice versa. One cannot forget, even when one enacts the rituals of verbal forgetting. One does not forget that one's dream has been the same: to engineer one's life, mustering all the innocence that one possesses. Tịnh tries to do what is perhaps impossible for the politics of interventions and actions: to try to resist imposing pre-established meanings, titles, and labels upon acts of survival, and therefore to leave the subjects of irony themselves with the right to mobilize their actions towards sur-vival. In their innocent story-telling, the subjects of irony do not forget; they interweave their past into the present, rendering their success stories ironically un-American in that sense. How many American dreams indeed, once exposed, reveal their nightmares? How many American dreams can pay tributes to their nightmares? And most importantly, how few of us can understand that American dreams/nightmares are just a way of looking at different things in a common way?

Forgetting in this common manner is a ritualized act that is far from one of "selling-out" or "bastardization" of the past that renders it tamable, as Nguyen suggests. Forgetting is that same act of cleansing the ethical self so that it can tolerate the constant return of all echoic and contradictory views of being. In forgetting, Tịnh remembers most things most clearly:

> When I sit in that smoky lounge, I forget that I'm one of the Asians who lack the dehydrogenase enzyme for metabolizing alcohol, I forget that I'm marked with a blue spot on my backside, like the Inuit, like my sons, like all those with Asian blood. I forget the mongoloid spot that reveals the genetic memory because it vanished during the early years of childhood, and my emotional memory has been lost, dissolving, snarling with time. (136)

By all means, one does not forget anything via a repetition of forgetting and a rehearsal of things to forget. Secretly, there is that great fear of unwilling forgetting to come that conditions one to repeat, "do not forget." In that great fear of forgetting, one indeed honors remembering. One forgets in the present just as one remembers in the present—both acts are within a common plane of time. Purposeful forgetting is at work here that in turns binds both conscious forgetting with unconscious remembering. Purposeful forgetting both betrays and reinforces the self as it enters the territory of the other—as Tịnh forgets, she (forgets and therefore) becomes the Asians, the Inuit, her sons, her younger self, etc. This active way of forgetting is markedly different from involuntary forgetting, the loss of emotional memory as time elapses. One does indeed forget—that is the fact of life that has little to do with selling out or bastardizing the past. And to counter that forgetting, one must always actively rehearse what one forgets. Active forgetting is therefore the most conscious and conscientious act of remembering because it fulfils the double command—to forget the self and to remember others:

> That estrangement, that detachment, that distance allow me to buy, *without any qualms and with full awareness* of what I'm doing, a pair of shoes whose price in my native land would be enough to feed a family of five for one whole year. (137)

One cannot simply confidently forget without being aware of the power accorded by forgetting. This is the most trenchant auto-critique that leaks its condemning power to the structure of the other side. She becomes her other: from a Vietnamese to a refugee, from a refugee to a successful Western capitalist consumer, and from anything always back to an ironist. By becoming the

successful other and by remembering to forget her many roots, Tịnh provides an auto-critique that includes both the self and its other in the condemnation: she knows but she does not feel bad, and this is what estrangement and detachment really do to the self. To play a role of the other most seriously and to echo persistently the other roles she can also play is to play ironically. Irony leaves neither side blameless, yet it leaves both sides an opportunity to play the role of the other. What irony itself shows then in the end is simply its very own presence, in any role. Its critique power lies in the awareness of forced detachment in the place of foreclosed connection. One needs only connect to have any qualms. To have any qualms about the inequity of life and still live in beauty, one must become an ironist.

I now run to the conclusion of this chapter, which, without parts and sections, I hope mirrors the way a lullaby, *ru*, works. In his most serious ironic intention, DuBois begins his *Dusk of Dawn* with the claim that "Negroes must live and eat and strive, and still hold unfaltering commerce with the stars" (3). In Việt Nam during the war, we have "the singing voice soars above the sound of bombs" [tiếng hát át tiếng bom]. Similarly, in *Ru*'s concluding remarks, we have that unfaltering communication with the stars and the spirits:

> alone as much as together, all those individuals from my past have shaken the grime off their backs in order to spread their wings with plumage of red and gold, before thrusting themselves sharply towards the great blue space, decorating my children's sky, showing them that *one horizon always hides another and it goes on like that to infinity, to the unspeakable beauty of renewal, to intangible rapture*. (140 emphasis added)

It is convenient to advocate for a progressivist reading of the refugee narrative in here, if only Tịnh forgot to start this very end with her ironic comparison: "Sao Mai resurfaced like a phoenix reborn from its ashes, like Vietnam from its iron curtain and my parents from the toilet bowls they had to scrub" (140). The ashes' part is all too present to just remember the final success. And just like the

cinder is always part of that Cinderella story, the ashes [cendres] are integral to the rise of these phoenixes. If all sides can progress, one exposes the problematics of the conventional meaning of progress, one of exclusivity rather than inclusivity: rather than from the past to the present-future, one has all past-present-future progress towards an infinite circle of renewal—not betterment, not improvement, not perfection, but making new yet again in each movement and moment. So rather than progress, we have the future coming from behind the layers or under them, and we have forward movements "in the *trace* of their footsteps like a waking dream" [Je me suis avancée dans la trace de leurs pas comme dans un rêve éveillé] of the people in the past (140, emphasis added). We return to the earlier chapter in which I discuss the past, 'quá khứ' in Vietnamese as something to be walked through, bit by bit, away from the native land, in anticipation of the future ever to return. If a country is a lullaby, it flows; and sometimes it flows over and spreads beyond. Like that "outstretched hand" is "a moment of love," an overflowing country crosses borders and boundaries, and by so doing, undoes itself (140).

The subjects of irony that abound in *Ru* affirm that circular process of doing and undoing the self, of making and remaking their country, and of looking backward to move forward—like that two faced Janus of irony. For the other side, irony can act as a site of critique that highlights what Kierkegaard calls "the higher lunacy" of things made to stay in their place rather than to move around in collision of others (257). For the refugee's side, irony can act as a transcendental manner of viewing the world negatively, content-lessly, stylistically so as to expose all the different things in binding relations:

> Irony is free from this [historical actuality]. It knows it has the power to start all over again if it so pleases; anything that happened before is not binding, and just as irony in infinite freedom enjoys its critical gratification in the theoretical realm, so it enjoys in the realm of practice a similar divine freedom that knows no bonds, no chains, but plays with abandon and unrestraint, gambols like a leviathan in the sea. Irony is indeed free, free from the sorrows of actuality, but also free from its joys,

> free from its blessing . . . This is the freedom that irony craves. . . . [As] is well known, irony's great requirement was to live poetically. (Kierkegaard 279-80)

To live poetically for irony is to work constantly on that poetic "misrelation" that insists on the constant slippage between views, and between irony itself to the idea that it still locates from within (Kierkegaard 131). A poetic misrelation is a relation with something amiss, similar to that common manner of seeing something deeply similar out of more superficial differences. A poetic misrelation then, the nature of all ironies, is the foundation of differences and their bond. I shall turn to the last misrelation to conclude this essay. In thinking about the younger generation's lack of interest in history, Tịnh thinks about the older generation who were "too preoccupied by their day-to-day survival to take the time to write their collective history" (50). Both miss their chance at a story, a memory, a commemoration, and a history, all of which constitute a chance for beauty. And then Tịnh proceeds to share with the reader a fleeting scene of beauty in a moment of pain, a collective history that springs forth from one story of one specific unknown old woman

> who lived near my great-grandfather's grave in the Mekong Delta. She was very old, so old that the sweat ran down her wrinkles like a brook that traces a furrow in the earth. Her back was hunched, so hunched that she had to go down staircases backwards so as not to lose her balance and fall headfirst. How many grains of rice had she planted? How long had she spent with her feet in the mud? How many suns had she watched set over her rice fields? How many dreams had she set aside only to find herself bent in two, thirty years, forty years later?
>
> We often forget about the existence of all those women who carried Vietnam on their backs while their husbands and sons carried weapons on theirs. We forget them because under their cone-shaped hats they did not look up at the sky. They waited only for the sun to set on them so they could faint instead of falling asleep. Had they taken the time to let sleep come, they would have imagined their sons blown into a thousand pieces or the bodies of their husbands drifting along a river like flotsam. American slaves were able to sing about their sorrow in the cotton fields. Those women let their sadness grow in the chambers of their hearts. They were so weighed down by all their grief that they couldn't pull themselves up, couldn't straighten their hunched backs, bowed under the weight of their sorrow. When the men emerged from the jungle and started to walk again along the earthen dikes around their rice fields, the women continued to bear the weight of Vietnam's

> inaudible history on their backs. Very often they passed away under that weight, in silence. (38-9)

How many hardships in lives are unveiled in here, and how many creative manners of surmounting them are revealed in here? How can beauty explode in sadness? The focus of this long excerpt is undoubtedly the silenced women who do not even murmur their silences. They become scenes of journeys, wordless, but full of movements and life. The sun is not their source of life here, neither is a sleep without a lullaby. The powerful passage is rendered more poignant for its obvious lack of sounds in the abundance of sight. No lullaby to be sung—there is only this very lullaby of words and a rich image that they conjure up. One sudden moment of epiphany—one recognizes that silenced echo of the shape of Việt Nam, the shape of an S, also hunched, also bent, also once broken in two, and ironically, also often used to valorize the sexy curve of Việt women's bodies. When the sun sets on their backs, it sets on the land. One selectively talks about that beautiful S shape of the land and of the Việt women; one normally, unlike Tịnh here, does not talk about how weighed down and bent down they are. The women are the water that traces the earth: they summon the silenced land and they support everything on their bent backs. One cannot see them in words, for they do not speak; one can only learn to hear their stories in imagination and speak them in kind. But above all, one must re-cognize the beauty in them and the beauty that they help make. One sees both that one old hunched woman and Việt women, one sees both living Việt Nữ and war-dead Việt Nam (Nam-Nữ means Men-Women in the Việt language, so that Việt Nam reminds one of Việt men), one sees that Việt Nam is survived by those women when their men are killed in war, and one sees both so many words and the vast overwhelming silence that words cannot summon. Tịnh is right: even as a master of words, she still wonders to herself even till these

days “whether words might have tainted those moments of grace. And whether feelings are sometimes understood better in silence” (31).

A wordless moment of recognition is perhaps the best, and the final, moment for irony, which resists so much the word—linguistic, historical, cultural—and yet which resigns itself to a final moment of wordlessness for its lingering effect on the body, the tangible, the haptic, and the motile. I write ‘lingering’ because in the end one still cannot know the woman, even when one feels one knows her so well, as one does all Việt women so well. Words fail, and yet we must make them count. *Ru*’s last lesson is this series of ironic earnest questions: How do we make the word count? How do we translate flesh into feeling, and wounds into words? How do images re-build injuries? And how do we turn a scene of war into a sensuality of witnessing? How do we connect the seemingly unbridgeable gap between text and life? Can we lull a life into living? How does beauty bind people? One feels a full history of murmurs and silences exactly when there is none. What is left of course is that guilt served up for a response, a thank-you note that acts more like a gentle scolding: “thank you so much for understanding the words but mostly, the silences and the murmurs” (Kim Thúy).[101]

[101] Personal conversation.

Chapter 4: Irony in Tình Đời: Modern Kiều, or Sex Workers, and Affective Labor

"Sống làm vợ khắp người ta
Khéo thay thác xuống làm ma không chồng" (*Truyện Kiều* 87-88)
[Alive, she played the wife to the world,
Ironically, she died a ghost without a husband]

In all stereotypical depictions, a Vietnamese high school student in post-war Việt Nam learns of the Greek through the *Odyssey*, the English through their Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the American through their Jack London's *Call of the Wild* and Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea," the French through Hugo's *Les Miserables*, the Chinese through Lu Xun's "Medicine" and Tang poetry, the Spanish through Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and the Russian through Gorky's *My Childhood*. That is how a Việt student comes to know the world and all nationalities in it: through what Vietnamese teachers and Vietnamese education believe to be the national canon of that people. In a similar manner, looking at themselves and wondering what their national canon is, high school students in a Vietnamese school learn of their own Vietnamese identity through Nguyễn Du's *Truyện Kiều* [*Tale of Kiều*]. What makes *Truyện Kiều* distinct from all the ostensibly national works above is that the protagonist of *Truyện Kiều* is a lowly female subject: she is an entertainment girl, a sex worker, named Thúy Kiều. Along with the overwhelming presence of men and masculinity, in those works, *Truyện Kiều* offers the reader the lifestory of a strong woman facing adversities, under the crushing weight of traditions and histories. *Truyện Kiều* marks the advent of a distinctive Vietnamese national culture that is heavily influenced by but also successfully separates itself from Chinese national culture. It is also important because of its inherent irony: a classical story, deeply entrenched in all the patriarchal traditions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, in which an entertainment girl is, or dares to be, the protagonist, the actor, and the agent of the central plotline.

Truyện Kiều is an epic poem consisting of 3254 verses, written by Nguyễn Du, in Sino-Vietnamese and in the traditional and unique Vietnamese six-eight meter. With the plot borrowed from another classical Chinese novel, Nguyễn Du totally transformed its origin into a new work of art with distinctive styles, tones, and messages. The story came from China, but was made in Vietnam. Nguyễn Du takes only the general events in the life of the character Kiều from Chinese writer Thanh Tâm Tài Nhân's *Kim Vân Kiều* and transforms it into an epic poem. The poem offers so much more in terms of style and content, so much so that Việt leading scholar on *Truyện Kiều* Trần Đình Sử claims that

> We are lucky to have *Truyện Kiều*. Thanks to it, Việt culture became brilliant, the beauty of the Việt language was exalted, and the genius of Việt people were confirmed. . . . The role of *Truyện Kiều* in Việt Nam literature is that it marked the emergence of Việt poets, the triumph of genius individuals over the teachings of dogmas and doctrines. It transformed Việt literature in the 1800s into a literature of high aesthetic value, the Việt language into a language of true literary studies, and Sino-Vietnamese literature into true arts. (*Thi pháp Truyện Kiều* 9-10)

Truyện Kiều details the painful life of Thúy Kiều, a talented and beautiful woman who is driven by the twists and turns of fate to become a kỹ nữ, or gái lầu xanh [an entertainment girl]. Subsequent events remove Kiều far away from her home, throw her life and her body into the various hands of a treacherous man, an amorous man, a heroic man, and a scholarly man. Despite all hardships in life, she maintains her integrity and reunites with her first lover, Kim Trọng, by the end of the epic.

Upon meeting her man again, she receives yet another request for a loving act of sex, which she politely refuses, to maintain her *danh tiết*, a Confucian quality that women must preserve, that consists of *danh dự*, or reputation, and *tiết tháo*, or chastity. This refusal of sex for chastity coming from an entertainment girl is by all means ironic and serious: it reflects both the ironic twists of life and the upending of all serious moral conduct. To Kiều, chastity and reputation are both

conceptual and dependent on her interlocutor. To the world, she has none, but to her first lover, she has them intact. Literal sex for her must become symbolic sex to count. Because a sexual act of the bodies for her has lost all its original meanings of a gift bestowed upon only a betrothed, it has lost all meanings altogether. A sexual act for her then must be presented symbolically by something else. Therefore, she instead agrees to perform the other part of her lifework as an entertainment girl: to play music for his ears, to offer her skills in all the classical arts instead of her body. Besides sex, an entertainment girl back then can offer talent in all the arts of music, chess, writing/calligraphy, and painting [cầm, kỳ, thi, họa]. Indeed, some choose to sell their skills instead of their bodies [bán nghệ, không bán thân]. Most train to sell both. For Kiều here, offering her skills in music for free is both a personal act of love and a showcase of her skills in her work. She does not really shun from her past and her work as an entertainment girl, perhaps reflecting also on the social condition at that time: when does a woman ever stop becoming an entertainment girl in the society?

Nonetheless, there is something unique about selling skills that keeps this specific part of her job as an entertainment girl still clean and pure, enough at least to offer them to her lover. Unlike the body that becomes tainted through acts of monetary sex, arts are forever pure even when they have been in contact with impure intentions, evil men, or money. Her music for him, however, is not free from sex. On the contrary, it evokes a type of sex shrouded in *điển tích*, or legends and myths:

> Khúc đâu đầm ấm dương hòa!
> Ấy là hồ điệp hay là Trang sinh?
> Khúc đâu êm ái xuân tình!
> Ấy hồn Thục Đế hay mình Đỗ Quyên?
> Trong sao châu nhỏ duềnh quyên,
> Trong sao châu nhỏ duềnh quyên
> Ấm sao hạt ngọc Lam Điền mới đông! (3199-3204)
> [What a section, so heart-warming in yin and yang

Was that the butterfly or Zhuangzi?
What a section, so soothing with the love in spring [youth]
Was that the ghost of Thục King or the body of the quail? [Đỗ Quyên]
Clear notes like pearls dropped on a moon-lit bay.
So warm with sunshine the Lantian Jade hardens itself.]

Here, her music conjures up for him a peaceful and harmonious form of copulation that draws him into the philosophical world of the butterfly dreams of Zhuangzi who wakes up in a dream wondering if he is Zhuangzi dreaming of butterflies or if the butterflies are still dreaming of him. Next, her music reminds him of the endless longing for the lost nation that has turned King Thục into a quail, Đỗ Quyên, that forever cries out *cuốc, cuốc, cuốc* [nation, nation, nation]. Then, she consoles him in her pearl-pure and Jade-warm music, both images conjuring up divine sexual consummation. Sex acts here are evoked along with philosophy and the nation. The impact of her music on him is both saddening and delighting, beautiful and peaceful, yet with the overall note of joy that now her tribulations are over.

As a sex professional, Kiều offers sex as a symbolic art utterly devoid of carnal transaction. Yet somehow that sex(less) service normally reserved for strangers fits the circumstances of her encounter with her first and true lover. In performing a symbolic sex act for him, in front of him, Kiều *both* works *and* lives. Her work is her life, her way of life. All the classical arts she has trained for to be a good wife and a caring mother work excellently for her as an entertainment girl, and that very training elevates her work to lifework. She is not a normal entertainment girl, but an educated and noble one! In front of her lover, after everything is over, she can be her true self again by choice, and she shows that self in her work and her talents, in withholding sex and offering it, or at least a version of it. Whether she is a sex worker at work or a talented woman in life all depends on her lover, because both labels are similar in form and content. For her lover, her symbolically sexual service is pure and appreciated. It is, in other words, beautiful and pure. Such

details allow prominent scholars on Kiều studies like Trần Đình Sử to praise Kiều's life and *Truyện Kiều* as both filled with sex and yet she and her love/life elevated it to *thanh cao* [the pure and noble].[102] Sex allows *Truyện Kiều* to move beyond the strict teachings of the classical period into what makes literature alive, true, and real; it also allows *Truyện Kiều* to move beyond its origin to portray sex as something life-sustaining, life-producing, and feeling-evoking rather than something dirty and lowly as in the original Chinese version.

"As long as *Truyền Kiều* is there, our Việt language is there. As long as our Việt language is there, our country remains." Such are the words engraved on the tomb of Việt scholar Phạm Quỳnh.[103] If it is true that one way to mark Vietnamese national culture is through *Truyện Kiều*, then it is curious how this specific culture defines itself along with, or perhaps against the background of, a woman, an entertainment girl, and a sex worker.[104] In her cited performance above, Kiều as sex-worker connects for the sympathetic reader sex to the philosophical, the national, and the historical; she manages to be deeply involved in the trading of sex and yet to deprive it of all negative connotations and instead envelop it with the cleansing aura of her life, choices, and actions. In her desperate attempt to *survive* or to live on, even after her unsuccessful suicidal attempt, Kiều connects the broken parts of herself: a noble woman in classical times and a downtrodden sex worker against fate. She offers and does not offer sex. She works and lives.

[102] See Trần Đình Sử's "Sex trong Truyện Kiều" for a fuller treatment on sex in *Tale of Kiều.*

[103] Phạm Quynh's lifestories are also full of twists and turns: a proud Việt person promoting the modern Việt language and yet was portrayed as a faithful servant of French colonial power by the Việt Minh and Communist Việt Nam. He was captured by Việt Minh and executed in 1945. His son, Phạm Tuyên, however, was a staunch communist who composed well-known pro-Communist music. Hồ Chí Minh reported said to Phạm Quỳnh's children after his execution: "Old Phạm is a person of history and will be evaluated again by history in the future. You his children should be determined to follow the revolution without doubt." Phạm Quỳnh was later indeed turned from a traitor to a historic scholar of Việt Nam by the official government. See Nguyễn Hoàng Diệu Thúy's "Nhạc sỹ Phạm Tuyên: Lịch sử sẽ công bằng với cha tôi."

[104] It is now a curious tradition that U.S. presidents coming to visit Việt Nam tend to start their speeches with some lines in *Truyện Kiều*. They are indeed following, without much understanding, the VIệt tradition of citing lines from *Truyện Kiều* in their everyday conversations. It's called lẩy Kiều in the Việt language.

She offers affective labor as a direct form of sex service without a recourse to the body. She is Kiều in all her ironic and mutually negating identities.

She is engaging in what I term affective labor below, the kind of labor that is always inherent in any work, and in sex work in particular, even when physical labor may not be present. It is curious that the Vietnamese communist government, in its attempt to keep up with traditions, allows *Truyện Kiều* to be taught at schools still to young teenagers of fourteen years old and lets Kiều herself continue to be the cultural model of many generations of Vietnamese youth. Also, it continues to let the literary, cultural, and national aspects of Vietnamese identities to be associated with Kiều and *Truyện Kiều*. And perhaps, most curiously, Kiều's identity as a sex worker has been, until recently, safely separated from the negative connotations and prejudices that other modern Vietnamese sex workers have been suffering from. If the lifestory of Kiều, a Chinese character forced into the life of a sex worker, can be elevated to a representative of national culture, modern sex workers in Vietnam have a chance to represent it too.

This chapter asks for the help of *Truyện Kiều* and its status as the promoted global representative of national Vietnamese literature to start its topic of sex workers and affective labor because *Truyện Kiều* provides a contrastive picture to what is commonly perceived and evoked within the sex work industry both in modern Vietnam and the West. The epic poem highlights not just the turmoil that a female sex worker undergoes but also her agency and her choice to survive in the face of the difficult times that a woman is born into. It evokes sympathy and redemption, acceptance and, perhaps, admiration.[105] Most importantly, it focuses on how a victim of her time,

[105] Indeed, a sympathetic reading of Kiều is a common approach in Việt Nam. See Trần Đình Sử's recent essay "Mô hình cốt truyện và chủ nghĩa cảm thương trong Truyện Kiều." A sympathetic reading will analyze why readers sympathize with and fall for the fates of Kiều. Việt literature focuses on teaching its students *tình* [which means love and the way/the path] a lot to prepare them for *đời* [life]. Hence, an understanding of *tình đời* [the way life works] is born.

a human being born into ironic twists of fate, lives on and shows her humanity in the face of it all.[106]

To write about sex and life is always to provide a justification for the need to write about them in the first place. Triviality, taboo, and ignobility condition writings about sex and life. Sex and life are inferior to arts, which is the very reason why arts are born to replace sex and elevate life. The case of Kiều offering sex(less) service to her former lover shows both the desire to replace sex and elevate life with arts. Yet, it is ironic that sex and life always come back and haunt writings and arts. To write about sex and life, then, is always a detour, an act of indirectness, a metaphor and an innuendo. But perhaps, if Vietnamese national literature can tolerate, bypass, and conveniently tame all the negative associations of the unwanted occupation of its female hero, sex and life must certainly be yet redeemable as valued objects of arts and scholarly attention.

After this initial justification, this chapter now moves on to explore the representation of the lives of sex workers in Vũ Ngọc Đãng's popular film *Lost in Paradise* to see (1) how intertwined their life is with—and seemingly disconnected from—the matrix of neoliberal capitalism in postsocialist Vietnam and, more importantly, (2) how they attempt to survive against all odds by keeping something to themselves, something I will label affectively necessary labor, which they in turn offer to others, to spread that spirit of life-sustaining work, to sustain both themselves and others. Against the fragmented life of modern Việt Nam in the first decade of the 2000s, these Việt characters try desperately to connect their broken pieces, the incompatible demands of love and life [*tình đời*] and weave them together in acts of loving and living. Their

[106] The character Kiều is by all means not without criticism. Throughout generations of interpretation, Kiều's several actions have been perceived critically by many male scholars. But the official educational policy targeted towards young generations of Vietnam is that Kiều is a woman of virtue crushed by the fate of an unjust society. For approaches to interpretation of *Truyện Kiều* from its publication in the early nineteenth century to the modern time, see Trần Đình Sử's *Thi pháp Truyện Kiều*, especially chapter 1. For reception of *Truyện Kiều* through history, see Trần Nho Thìn's "Lịch sử đánh giá nhân vật Truyện Kiều."

lives are the examples of ironic living for survival: the most wretched group is the group that is the fullest of love and life.[107] They have so little and give so much that they touch the hearts of the audience and earn their sympathy.[108] And the way they do that is by harnessing that capacity to forge connections in conditions that forbid them to do so, or in a world where fragments reign and relations lost. Their lives illustrate a simple fact that may be incomprehensible to some but may make sense to subjects of irony like those in Kim Thúy's *Ru*: those who have the least are sometimes those who are willing to give the most, if only they are not prevented from doing so. These truly great wretched people showcase the irrepressible spirits of love and life. Their mode of living is what I call ironic living.

Prostitution is a common topic in talks about Vietnam and its history perhaps because it offers great symbolic power in explaining the colonial relationship between Vietnam and other superpowers over the past thousands of years. The figure of the female sex worker throughout history has been used to conjure up the fate of a country subdued by the Northern power, by the French colonizers, and by the Americans. The sex worker appears in Vũ Trọng Phụng's *Lục Xì*, a report on prostitution during the French occupation of Vietnam. The sex worker haunts the streets of Sài Gòn during the Vietnam War, silently speaking the horrors of wars that turn its soldiers into unwitting fathers and purposeful killers, as echoed in Ocean Vuong's poetic lifelines: "An American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my mother exists./Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me" ("Notebook Fragments")

[107] It appears that an aesthetics of care is relevant here. Care is indeed prevalent in times of war, or times of trouble in general, in Vietnamese films. See, for instance, Qui-ha Hoang Nguyen's "Cinema of Care: The Child Figure, the Collective, and War in The Little Girl of Hà Nội" for how a film portrays caring during wartimes as a feminist counter-discourse to war and violence.

[108] On Việt audience's reception of the film, see, for instance, Phan Duy's "Hot boy nổi loạn: Bức chân dung thật của cuộc sống," [Lost in Paradise: A Genuine Portrayal of Life] and Việt Nữ's "Hot boy nổi loạn: Rơi nước mắt trước những mảnh đời chân thật" [Lost in Paradise: Shedding Tears for Genuine Fragments of Life].

The sex worker is therefore both a figure born out of Vietnamese identity and a product of foreign contact and of desire for the foreign. Gendered female, she is at the crossroads of Vietnamese histories and of contemporary global currencies. Works written on her are both about her and always beyond her. She belongs to that network of the prostitution industry that was "at the core of US-RVN quarrels over power during the [Vietnam] war" in Amanda Boczar's *An American Brothel: Sex and Diplomacy During the Vietnam War* (8). She is symptomatic of the way a neoliberal government in postsocialist Vietnam conducts business and re-structures its masculine class system on the bodies of women in Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương's *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam*. Her life is therefore "intricately tied to the particular ways in which the Vietnamese economy had been liberalized" (Nguyễn-võ 5). In Nguyễn-võ's analysis of the sex working industry in twenty-first century Vietnam, the sex worker's body is used to manage business transactions; her identity as a sex worker is demonized to highlight another identity of an "authentic Vietnamese tradition"; and lastly her contested identity as both a forbidden taboo and therefore an illicit desire is further capitalized on both economic and ideological levels (xiii). Similarly, the figure of the Vietnamese sex worker is moved beyond Vietnam in Kimberly Kay Hoang's *Dealing in Desire*: she belongs to both the local and global economic currencies of her time, and in return she facilitates "the flow of foreign capital and overseas remittances into the country" (24).

But written with such a global and international view in mind, books about prostitution in Vietnam situate themselves on a much grander scale than the lifestories of sex workers. The problem of prostitution appears to be the problem of neoliberalism, of the international division of gendered labor, and of war and militarism. Their most intimate life and work events are deployed to support and maintain the intricate analyses of global theories. Scholarly attention paid to sex

work, like many other topics, is conditioned upon its possibility for connections to global frameworks of analyses. When no connection is made between their lived experience and theory, their significance is much lessened, if not lost.

Vũ Ngọc Đãng's film *Lost in Paradise* is precisely about that non-significance and non-relation. Its successes and failures are the same: watching the living of those sex workers reveals no connection to international networks of exploitative capitalism whereby Vietnam, Vietnamese men, foreign countries, and foreign men all partake in the ideological and capitalist domination of the society and the women living in it. In the film, they are the truly subaltern who are denied access to all forms of social mobility and spatial representationality, disconnected, non-related, and non-significant.

Because any story about her, the sex worker, is never just about her, this chapter wants to draw attention again to the very body and life of sex workers. It asks how they survive, live, and try to remain happy against the battle of life. It asks how the bodies and life of sex workers traverse through the demands of a neoliberal economy to sustain themselves all the while trying to preserve their humanity—their affective labor on love and life—in a world where this affective labor is packaged and sold along with their bodies to create economic values.

Vũ Ngọc Đãng's film *Lost in Paradise*, released in 2011, is special for two reasons. First, it expands the sex industry to include homosexual male sex workers along with traditional female sex workers. Before *Lost in Paradise*, homosexual male characters have played mainly supporting roles for comedic effects.[109] After the success of the film, Vietnamese cinema sees a proliferation

[109] Male gay men have been assuming the role of the comedic light-hearted campy characters in Vietnamese TV shows like "Gặp nhau cuối năm" [Gatherings at the end of the year]. In films, see, for instance, the gay pimp in Lê Hoàng's *Gái nhảy* [Bar Girls, a euphemistic term for sex worker], the gay Việt kiều [a Việt person living abroad] in Charlie Nguyễn's *Để mai tính* [Fool for Love],

of films with homosexual protagonists, both male and female.[110] Second, *Lost in Paradise* manages to portray the lives of sex workers as completely cut off from all the gains of global capitalism, from foreign and Việt people living aboard, and from local rich businessmen.[111] Instead, it focuses on their own struggles to survive among themselves. They are, in a word, the truly subaltern subjects of the underworld. Denied both social mobility and all sorts of compensatory remedies, they survive on their own, among themselves, against all odds.

This chapter proposes to address the final issues of love and life in the very subjects who have been deprived of love and life the most in Sài Gòn, aka. Hồ Chí Minh city. It argues that a fruitful pathway into exploring Vietnamese identities through the lens of irony is via sex workers. Those filmic characters show versions of Vietnamese humans excluded from the norms of what a Vietnamese person should be, yet they show themselves to be Vietnamese in their will to love and to life, to a way of life disconnected from them that they must fight to get back to. Through working towards love and life, or through affectively necessary labor caught up within the hidden matrix of the neoliberal market, they offer the audience a path towards other-loving and life-sustaining living. In other words, they train the viewers on how to use affective labor to connect to fragmented lives within a total text called life.

In the Việt language, *tình đời* means the way life works, nearly always with the sad implication that it works ironically, against human will, with plenty of unexpected twists and turns. *Tình* means affection, feelings, passions, but it also means circumstances, situations, and

[110] The list is long. Some notable examples include *Lạc giới* [Lost in gender/a different world], *Cầu vồng không sắc* [Rainbows without colors], *Tao không xa mày* [I will not be apart from you], *Song lang* [a Việt musical instrument], and *Thưa mẹ con đi* [Goodbye mother]. Some rare additions including trans communities in Nguyễn Thị Thắm's documentary *Madam Phung's Last Journey* [Chuyến đi cuối cùng của chị Phụng], which was adapted into the film *Lô tô* in 2017. For films focusing on female homosexuality, there are *Mỹ nhân kế* [The Lady Assasin], *Yêu* [Love], *Chị em* [Sister sister].

[111] See, for instance, the relationship between queer Việt Kiều and Việt Nam Nguyễn Hoàng Tân's "Fooled by Love: Việt Kiều Intimacy in Charlie Nguyen's Để Mai Tính (2010)"

conditions. The Vietnamese speaker utters *tình đời nó thế* to mean "that's how life works," shooting her arms straight to the sky in a gesture of both righteous indignation and hopeless resignation. *Đời* means life. *Tình đời* is life with love in it; it also means, perhaps, that it is the presence of lawless fickle love that makes life both worth living and full of sadness. Understood liberally, it alludes to the meaningful way affections and feelings should work in life, how the love sustains the life, and how much successful living depends on successful loving.

The word *tình* [affection, feelings, love] is an important word in the Việt language and forms part of many words related to it. *Tình yêu* is love, *tình cảm* is feeling, and *tình dục* is sexual desire. Sex, therefore, in the Việt language is inextricably bound to *tình*, making it linguistically hard for someone to engage in sexual activities without having some sorts of affections involved in them. Sex work, or prostitution, however, has nothing to do with *tình* or *tình dục*. In the Việt language, *mại dâm*, or *bán dâm* [to sell excess], means prostitution. Sex workers do not sell *tình*, nor do they sell *sex*. Rather, they sell *dâm*, or excess, excessive desires, and inappropriate desires. *Dâm*, or desire, as a word in itself is not solely related to sex. To work as a prostitute in Vietnamese means to satisfy the uncontrollable desires of sex of the clients. In classical periods, women like Kiều in *Truyện Kiều* work as *kỹ nữ* [an entertainment girl] in *lầu xanh*, or green buildings, who sell their entertainment skills in music, games, poetry, and painting as well as their bodies. While the figure of the prostitute brings forth the public shame of exposure, the figure of *gái mại dâm*, or the female prostitute in Vietnamese, suggests the private shame of excess. When they sell *dâm* to their clients, they do not make love to them. To make love in Vietnamese means to establish relations through *tình* and through *dục*, through affections, feelings, love and through desires. If love is missing in the phrase "to have sexual intercourse," and sex is missing in the phrase "to make love," both love and desire must be present in the Vietnamese phrase *quan hệ tình dục*, or to

have sex. While that word *tình* haunts all sexual activities related to love and feelings, it is missing, by a wave of linguistic maneuver, from all that is related to the sex work industry.[112]

Lost in Paradise deals with that inextricable link between sex work without love and, ironically, the neoliberal demands in the sex work market for a species of sex work embedded in staged, yet authentic, love. Those characters who cannot show love in their work or to their clients are not productive sex workers, yet those who can often wonder how they can preserve that human part of themselves for those outside their work, for themselves, and for life in general. To do well at work for them is often to fare poorly in love and life. But to do poorly at work for them is also to indicate that they have no love left in life, let alone reserve some for their work. Because sex workers often, though not always, come from disadvantaged backgrounds and suffer from oppressions arising from their minority identities, their emotional well-being is already compromised before they enter the sex work industry. This chapter will survey the two couples in the film *Lost in Paradise* to investigate how they manage those incompatible demands of love and life/work. It argues that in a world where even emotional labor and authentic feelings are required for the market, the need to reserve some love for the self, what I call affectively necessary labor, seems to be a decisive factor in having a life worth living.

The film presents to the audience two couples. One involves a gay couple, Lam, a male sex worker, and Khôi, a naïve young man trying to find opportunities in Sài Gòn, a paradise only in name. The other couple involves Hạnh, a female sex worker, and Khùng, which means a crazy man in the Việt language, a neurodivergent man whose mental age is equivalent to that of a child. Both couples manage to navigate their love and life in a city that houses them but does not provide

[112] I use "sex workers" and "sex work industry" to show support for those who work in the industry. The terms "prostitutes" and "prostitution" are used when I discuss how the field is perceived in Vietnamese social discourse: an illegal industry.

them with a home. By the end of the film, the city spits them out, with Khôi returning to his hometown, Lam being beaten nearly to death by his client, and Hạnh going to prison for murdering her pimps. Khùng, a trash collector, is the only one who does not end up worse, or better, than he is at the beginning of the film.

The establishing shots and opening sequence introduce the audience to the glamorous setting of the film, Sài Gòn, the biggest city in Vietnam, during the early years of 2010s, through the excited and innocent eyes of Khôi, a gay man who has come out to his parents and gets kicked out of his home for that reason. Following Khôi, the audience sees a Sài Gòn with free birds flying in the sky and past the iconic Notre-Dame Cathedral Basilica of Saigon. The French colonial building, now a famous spot for foreign tourists to visit and local residents to hang out, stands high from an extremely low camera angle, permeating the filmic space with its spires and the central clock. The audience then explores the city with Khôi on foot as he passes manual laborers at work sitting on the pavement and international luxury brand stores like Chanel and Gucci. The camera ensures that poor manual laborers or normal people sitting together for a chat and a drink are filmed at high angles whereas those luxury brand stores at are viewed in low angles. When Khôi is shown reading the city map in front of the Gucci store, the frame composition again highlights the overwhelmingly large size of the brand name and its promotion poster compared to the people walking by or Khôi himself. Sài Gòn through Khôi's views is a paradise because it is glamorous, rich, and international. If there is anything in the film at all that hints at the connection between Sài Gòn, or Vietnam in general, and the global neoliberal capitalist market, it is this sequence of the city in broad daylight, and nothing else.

In fact, these first two minutes of the film establish a tone that is soon gone completely: the rest of the film will zoom in on the lowest and poorest corners of Sài Gòn, the dark underground

world of sex workers. The glamour of the so-called paradise vanishes as soon as it comes to the audience. It will haunt the rest of the film in its absurd absence. It sets up false expectations in the audience and disappears without a trace, banishing all connections between Sài Gòn, the international city of the new millennium, and Sài Gòn, the hellish place for its underworld creatures. What draws reviewers' attention to and also criticism of the film is precisely this note. The film feels disruptive, its sequences are disconnected, and no overall links between the two Sài Gòns, or the two parallel worlds in Sài Gòn, are made possible neither in filmic form nor in filmic sense. The effects of international neoliberalism are present so vaguely as they go down to the lowest citizens of the city that they do not feel them at all except in dreams and fantasies. This does not mean that for the subaltern class in Sài Gòn, neoliberalism does not affect them, but it does mean that the global world out there does not exist for them. In fact, because the film is shown through the eyes of minority characters, it is understandable that the world of glamour that they do not belong to ceases to appear throughout the rest of the film.

Historically, Việt Nam started to enter the age of *Đổi mới* [Reform] in 1986, initiating a program called "socialist-oriented market economy" [kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa]. It is a hybrid form of governance in which the Party manages to retain political control over the country *and* addresses economic problems brought about by failed pre-1976 economic policies. Reform has brought Việt Nam enormous economic successes, propelling it into the group of fastest developing economies in the world.[113] However, it also allows the dark sides of neoliberal markets to enter Việt Nam, especially big cities like Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh city. Nguyễn-võ, for instance, describes how the neoliberal government of a socialist party in modern Việt Nam creates a specific partnership between government officials and business owners in

[113] See Vương Đình Huệ's "Những thành tựu nổi bật trong phát triển kinh tế."

conducting business and making money. The power struggle between maintaining communist ideologies and the ideologies of the market has been intense, but it generates creative ways to benefit both the government and the businesses. The case in point for Nguyễn-võ is the proliferation of sexually charged news stories about social evils of modern Việt Nam in government-sponsored newspapers. These news stories, paradoxically enough, act as warnings against social evil on the surface but use highly sexually charged language to pique readers' interests.[114] In neoliberal Việt Nam, the gap between the rich and the poor increases by the day, something that the Communist Party is struggling to justify in terms of its ideologies.[115] After all the benefits have gone into the alliance of government officials and business owners, it is the disadvantaged who are left behind, their lives barely better than pre-1986 periods. Hồ Chí Minh city, aka. Sài Gòn, was the biggest and most economically prosperous city in Việt Nam, yet many of its citizens do not live to see, let alone enjoy, that economic prosperity brought about by the market.

Sài Gòn is the older name of the city, which officially received its new name as Hồ Chí Minh city one year after the end of Vietnam War. The idea to name the city Hồ Chí Minh was already presented to the North in August 1946 by doctor Trần Hữu Nghiệp, who urged for the change to highlight the similarity between the people in the South and Hồ Chí Minh, both of whom "fight, sacrifice, and resolve to return to the fatherland" (1).[116] In other words, the change is the commemoration of both the South and Hồ Chí Minh as the pioneers of the national liberation movement and anti-colonialism in the world. The new name then is meant to show the people's pride in being Vietnamese and in their willingness and hard work to contribute to their nation.

[114] See Nguyễn-võ's *The Ironies of Freedom*, especially chapter 8.
[115] See, for instance, Chiến Thắng's recent piece "Đối thoại chủ nhật: Khoảng cách giàu nghèo và khoảng cách số."
[116] See "Thành phố Sài-gòn từ này sẽ đổi tên là thành phố Hồ-Chí-Minh."

Khôi, an outsider to Sài Gòn, only uses its old name in his conversation with Đông: "I [Khôi] hear that Sài Gòn is a paradise city, isn't it?" Like all other characters in the film, Khôi refers to both a city in the present in which the official name does not quite stick to popular usage and a city of the past gone four decades earlier. Indeed, there is a sense of nostalgia in the establishing sequence in the blurry camera lens and the background theme music titled "Loving Each Other." Throughout the film, the name Hồ Chí Minh city is never mentioned even once.

There can be many reasons why the characters choose to use the name Sài Gòn instead of Hồ Chí Minh for the city. Perhaps, subconsciously, it sounds more convenient to associate the old name with social evils like poverty, prostitution, and all the other decadent remnants of the colonized and capitalist past, leaving the new name to suggest global vanguardism, national liberation, and anti-colonialism. Perhaps, it is also better to use the old name to refer to dreams, dreams of the past and dreams yet to be realized, and leave the new name with reality, brutal and distant. And most importantly, perhaps it is a silent attempt to commemorate the death of a city that is still living, still in the present. On the one hand, the new name Hồ Chí Minh city was proposed to the North while Hồ Chí Minh was still alive, making it both unlucky and vainglorious. It was an attempt to commemorate greatness too soon. On the other hand, the old name suggests both a social death for the living and an absence of commemoration for the dreams truly gone—a Sài Gòn of opportunities, a paradise where dreams come true. If Yến Lê Espiritu is right, in the context of the South's war dead, that commemorating them is "not the same as valorizing them" but rather is "acknowledging that they are worthy of remembrance," then commemorating a city both gone and much present serves that double function of acknowledgement and remembrance (*Body Counts* 106). The lives of those living in the lowest social strata of Sài Gòn need to be commemorated precisely because they are already the living dead, ignored, cast out and because

they are still there unseen. Those sex workers in the film then are commemorating Sài Gòn as they are commemorating themselves. They are the Việt people of the past, living in the present, still, in a way, trying to find a nation to return to.

The English title of the film, *Lost in Paradise*, therefore, is ironic. It is irony in the sense proposed by Georg Lukács, who, in the context of the novel, maintains that irony is the

> self-correction of the world fragility: inadequate relations can transform themselves into a fanciful yet well-ordered round of misunderstandings and cross-purposes, within which everything is seen as many-sided, within which *things appear as isolated and yet connected, as full of value and yet totally devoid of it, as abstract fragments and as concrete autonomous life, as flowering and as decaying, as the infliction of suffering and as suffering itself*. (75, emphasis added)

For Lukács, the irony in the novel-form is the corollary of the world already fragmented, the world that relies on the subjectivities of the author to link their disparate parts in their autonomous forms. The world of Sài Gòn as the lost paradise is already so fragmented, between the past and the present, between reality and fantasy, between the glamorous upper social strata and their wretched lower counterparts, and among heterogeneous lives of suffering so disconnected from each other that they form vastly different worlds of the city which can hardly be said to belong to each other. Unlike irony in the novel, though, the irony in the film will have all of those disconnections rely on the director and filmic techniques to connect them, a desperate attempt to forge relations between lives lost during neoliberalism. The modern city of the early 2010s somehow fits to be a golden city of past dreams, gone glamor, and promised and missed paradise. With all the good intents and purposes in naming the city after Hồ Chí Minh, that act of re-branding the city perhaps only highlights its ironic failure to bring freedom and happiness to its citizens. The city named after Hồ Chí Minh becomes an ironic reminder of what he once wrote to the people": "If the country is independent but its citizens do not enjoy happiness-freedom, then independence has no

meaning, reason, or righteousness in it" ["Nếu nước độc lập mà dân không hưởng hạnh phúc tự do, thì độc lập cũng chẳng có nghĩa lý gì"] (1).[117] If the city, the government, or powerful people up above fail to bring them happiness and insist on taking it away, it falls on the shoulders of the disadvantaged themselves to find happiness in life. This is what the film tries to portray: without resources, networks, helpers or donors, the characters try to lead lives of happiness.

Intertwined with glamour shots of the city in the opening scene are body shots of Đông, a gay male sex worker who also serves as the antagonist for the gay couple. *Đông* means the east and the host in the Việt language. In the film, every name is both a suggestion of ideals and an ironic betrayal of them. Đông is in no way a perfect host of the city: he will soon swindle everything out of Khôi. By pretending to be a perfect host who rents his apartment to Khôi for a low rent, Đông manages to gain Khôi's trust and to run away with Khôi's belongings.

In the opening scene, Đông, the host of the city, is working out in a public space; his muscles and sweat are visible on screen, suggesting sexual attraction. The camera delivers close-up shots as it tracks up Đông's defined body. The audience does not yet know Đông is a sex worker, so they do not know that working out for Đông is not just about taking care of himself but also about investing in his body, his tool, for greater value in the sex market. Sex work as represented in Đông's body, as well as in Khôi's and Lam's bodies later, shows that the line between the body of the worker as belonging to himself and to the market is becoming increasingly blurry. In addition, it becomes more challenging to separate activities that support and sustain the body as such, for its own life-producing and life-sustaining purpose, from those that support the body's fitness for the market, for its other value-producing purpose for capitalist exploitation.

[117] See Hồ Chí Minh's "Thơ của chủ-tịch Hồ-Chí-Minh cùng các ban Nhân-dân các kỳ, tỉnh, huyện và làng."

Workout for male sex workers, then, comes to represent that objectified and abstractized human labor that is materialized in the body. And because the body in sex-work as commodity now is invested with labor, it increases in exchange value for the market. Workout is not just good for the health of the sex worker; it is also good because he can ask for a higher price in the sex market for the greater desire that the body arouses. This also complicates Marx's views on labor as

> a process between man and nature, a process in which man . . . mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature . . . Through his movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. (*Capital Volume One* 283)

Yet, in this case nature is the man's body itself that belongs to man. His own nature that is changed is his body, and his own body is also related to that larger network of external nature that he acts upon. More precisely, the body as born to a man certainly has value; however, now invested with labor as materialized in muscles, which in turn symbolizes sexual prowess, the body is both naturally born and labor-intensive. Labor as workout, for the male gay sex worker, is both a process of producing utilities and creating value. He is both his own capitalist in control of his machinery and a laborer producing value through his product. He works for himself and only works as much as he wants, either to sustain himself or to accumulate wealth should he so desire. Indeed, unlike Hạnh, the female sex worker whose gender forces her to rely on pimps to protect her, Đông and Lam, as male gay sex workers, appear to work independently as their own bosses. Even though both groups can choose to work in disguised brothels that offer them protection in exchange for lower pay, only gay male sex workers have the option to work more independently. This is exemplified in Lam and Long's conversation when Long, a fellow gay male sex worker, agrees with Lam that working independently is better for its lack of exploitation and dependency on the

brothels' owners. Hạnh, as we will see later, still suffers abuse from pimps when she tries to work on the streets.

Still 4.1 Still from Lost in Paradise: Đông working out.

If sex work, like all other types of work, is exploitative and therefore destructive for the laborer, its damaging aspect lies elsewhere other than in diverting as much use value as possible from workers to the valorization process of capitalism. Indeed, in working, the sex worker's tool, the body, does not depreciate in value like the way ordinary machinery rusts and rots through use.[118] What depreciates in the sex worker is something much more symbolic: their vanishing youth, their aging looks, or their relative "inexperience" in the industry, all of which point to sex work as trading on symbolic excessive desire rather than on the body as material.

[118] See Marx's extensive treatment on tools, machinery, and the manufacturing process within capitalism in *Capital Volume One*, chapter 14.

But there is also something more concrete in them that decreases over time. Concrete and yet intangible, what depreciates in value is their time-sensitive affective labor, their own emotional pool that is there to help them stay human and happy. For Marx, there has always been something more that inheres in necessary labor for successful living. The worker uses up the body to sustain the body *and* something else, which is to find permanent meaning, to establish connections, and to be happy. In their work, workers have always expended their affectively necessary labor, included in their socially necessary labor-time, to create use- and exchange-value.

This chapter argues that what gives rise to the sufferings of sex workers is this exploitative valorization of their affective labor so that what is left of the affectively necessary labor for them is consumed in the sex industry, leaving sex workers themselves deprived of an important life-sustaining and life-producing source. At the same time, their successful living is predicated upon their struggle to re-claim their necessarily affective labor, not just to live happily and meaningfully but also to regain agency in everything they choose to do. Both couples in the film have their affectively necessary labor taken away from their well-being in distinctive ways. Lam, being homosexual and poor in a world with little acceptance for him, already enters the sex industry with little affective resources to begin with. Hạnh, being female, poor, and beaten down by life circumstances, appears to suppress her love for life to become an emotionless human being, so that she can survive her job and all its abuses. Throughout the course of the film, both sex workers will have a chance to take actions to restore their necessarily affective labor, that is, to re-establish their relations to life, with various degrees of success.

Before we go into details of the couples, it is necessary to investigate affective labor and necessarily affective labor in particular. Writing on estranged labor in "The Philosophic and Economic Manuscripts of 1844," Marx provides crucial distinctions between labor in its original

form and estranged labor under capitalism. For the workers before capitalism, their labor establishes their relation to the natural world via the products that they make. Labor here is something internal to them and part of their being, and more importantly, it connects them to nature, "with which [they] must remain in continuous intercourse if [they are] not to die" (722). Death resulting from lack of intercourse with nature here is not simply a physical death, but it is also a spiritual one.[119] Labor does not sustain human lives; it also gives them a purpose in living. The affective aspect of value in work here is implicit: the command for a connection with nature is absolute; otherwise, death happens to them.[120] The affect for nature is that physiological intensity that marks itself distinct from learned feelings or psychologically-based emotions.[121] Affect here is used to refer to those intensities that enable actors to make a choice willingly, to develop motivations towards a certain goal. The greatest source of affect then is life, which is the same as nature and body.

This conflation of the sources of affect is precisely what causes Jameson to enlarge the potential sources of affect to include not just the individual subject but also "the world": following Heidegger's "inaugural invocation of affect," Jameson will read the term *Stimmung* [very roughly equivalent to *mood* in English] as "a constitutive dimension of our being-in-the-world" (*The Antinomies of Realism* 38). Affect for Jameson is what resists language and activates the body, as opposed to feelings which activate language and are tamed by it in return; ineffable affect then, for Jameson at least, is existential, as opposed to feelings which are meaningful (32-3). If this fine distinction is true, then affect, in Marx's formulation of a pre-capitalist/non-capitalist era, was that

[119] See an instance of productive queer labor, productive for the laborers themselves rather than the capitalist market in Meg Wesling's "Queer value."
[120] The interdependent relationship between humans and their nature has been actively discussed in ecological Marxism, in which the prominent figure is John Bellamy Foster. Among many of his works, see Foster's *Marx's Ecology* and *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology*.
[121] Brief distinctions between these highly confusing concepts in Rei Terada's *Feeling in Theory*, "Introduction."

un-named, or yet to be named, quality of intensities for life and the desire for connection between its subject, the subject's body, and nature. On the contrary, in our modern time of late capitalism, affect, being named and reified, has come to mark that precise nothingness, meaninglessness, and insignificance of an eternal set of intensities that occur as a result of the final capitalization of affect itself for the market. The body in the market, being isolated, is exposed to "global waves of generalized sensations" which are tentatively named affect by Jameson (28). Affect in post-modernist capitalism is named, therefore reified, therefore tamed by language, therefore generalized and globalized. It has finally joined the long list of post-modernist absurdities.

Being introduced to language, affect works to resist it; being charged with the task of naming something positive, it names nothingness instead; and being negated as a source of life, it becomes a mere source of existence. We may deduce then that sex acts, as bodily acts motivated by affect under capitalism, come to mean nothing, as opposed to sex acts which, once motivated by affect in a pre-capitalist/non-capitalist world, came to represent the bodily intensities that aim to establish and maintain a connection to the world. Indeed, the most common question of our time for sex workers, sex clients, or the modern human in general, is this, what does sex really mean, if it means anything at all?

The body of a sex worker, being invested with intensive physical and affective labor, ideally represents that synthesized product of body as part of nature, body in nature, nature manifested within the body. The body as both product and tool of labor is a wonder to behold when it is free, and a horror to witness when it is exploited within capitalism. The pre-linguistic affect that connects humans and their surrounding nature manifests itself both psychologically and physiologically, subjectively and objectively. Because humans' position is within, rather than without, nature, an intercourse with nature is also an intercourse with themselves, with something

larger than themselves that is nevertheless part of their being and their grand understanding of themselves as part of nature. On the contrary, the body of a sex worker, or the sexualized body as such, in a capitalist society represents that well-known waning of affect proposed by Jameson: full of intensities, empty of the signified, free floating, impersonal, superficial/depthless, euphoric, hysterically sublime and therefore, if I may add, optimally ripe for capitalist valorization.[122]

Estranged labor, on the other hand, removes humans from their species and turns them into individuals: humans have lost the connection to nature, to other human beings, and therefore to themselves. Strangely and ironically, they, the newly individualistic humans, have also ceased to be singular.[123] Estranged affective labor, then, reduces the intensity that workers possess for life, for the self, and for the world. Labor ceases to be "life-activity, productive life itself," "or life-engendering life," and instead becomes mere activities that sustain human existence ("The Philosophic and Economic Manuscripts of 1844" 722). Humans therefore have been truly alienated from the world, from others, and from themselves because of estranged affective labor. What Marx emphasizes constantly here is not the loss of mere biological sustenance or physical existence via estranged labor, but rather the loss of that intense unconscious need for connection and identity. It is equally important for humans to live happily and meaningfully via affective recourses to a contemplation of their position in the world and a firm relation among others. Labor for Marx has always possessed this pre-capitalist affective dimension that sustains humans beyond their mere organic needs. It gives them, without the help of their consciousness of their own being, a chance to *want* to connect within a bound world with others and freedom to seek life-affirming activities

[122] See Jameson's well-known essay "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," republished as chapter I in the monograph of the same name.

[123] Individualism is not individuality. Individualism is, on the contrary, the end of individuality. See V. N. Volosinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, especially chapter 1, part I; and Part II: "The individual consciousness is a social-ideological fact," which connects individualism and ideology in the combined attempt to make an individual (12).

through labor. Estranged affective labor, then, creates that ironic and twisted condition in which humans exist to labor, without knowing the meaning of existence in the first place.

Hannah Arendt, in comparison, offers more improved distinctions between forms of labor than does Marx. For Arendt, labor is more strictly understood as the activity that sustains life of the human body; therefore, it "leaves nothing behind" and "the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent" (*The Human Condition* 87). Labor for Arendt satisfies one fundamental biological need of human beings; its condition is life itself. Work, on the other hand, is what sustains human beings beyond their nature of mortality; it is a desire of human beings to establish something permanent and durable beyond human time. The last part of life is action, or the activity that "goes on directly between [humans] without the intermediary of things or matter" (7). Affective labor then is more related to Arendt's concepts of work and action, the two that satisfy the need for a trace of the self in the other, for a relation among human beings and a relation to the natural world. Because of the modern condition of the social division of labor, unfortunate lives like those of servants, are left to do the laboring activities for others, who can then move on to seek work and action for themselves. In other words, the world is divided into those who must labor and those who can play, those who must lose their relations to everything, including themselves, others, and the world, and those who exploit others to seek better conditions of life for themselves. For Arendt, the world-living of humankind is reduced to the sole purpose of making a living whereas any activity disassociated with labor now becomes a play thing, a hobby. Play then loses its "worldly meaning" and its true connection to work (127). Labor, in her definition, will barely have any affective value, which lies solely in work and action. If labor is dull, work should be like play, especially in its capacity to fulfil the human needs for affective well-being. Work and play therefore are productive, not in its capitalist valorization, but in the life-

building sense that proves of most use-value to the worker-cum-player. Play, in other words, plays the *affectively* necessary role that establishes connection between the workers and themselves, and between the workers and nature as mediated via their products of work. From that connection they find the motivation to live.

Affectively necessary labor, like socially necessary labor, can be converted into value at the expense of the worker during capitalist valorization. Indeed, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt show us that what necessary labor is stripped of in capitalism is both its use-value and its affect, the former because it cannot be measured, and the latter so that labor—and by extension the worker —cannot *act*. Losing the intensities of living and working, labor within capitalism sacrifices what is left of its affect in life for capitalist valorization and is left with dead living. Living labor, instead of the worker, "is made autonomous in the capital relation, and expresses . . . its power of self-valorization" (Value and Affect" 79-80). And what marks its ineffectivity for itself, and effectivity for capital, is its location: a non-place. This non-place is a pessimistic answer offered by Negri and Hardt that proves more confining than affirmative for living labor. The failure to describe the workings of capitalism from different points of departure *affected* by different *temporalities* is what leads these authors to that fixating space of utopia for living labor.[124] But if affect —in their case and in this chapter, understood as the Spinozian power to act—is squarely defined within production, circulation, and now even in consumption [125] — what is left to guarantee the autonomy of labor-power to act or to affirm itself through play?

Indeed, such an inclusion of affectively necessary labor within the subjects, the social, and the economic, for Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose term "affectively necessary labor" this

[124] See Massimiliano Tomba's recent text *Marx's Temporalities* for a brilliant delineation of incongruous temporalities in Marxism

[125] See Michael Hardt's own essay in the same volume "Affective Labor". Also another modified version of this essay in *Empire*, entitled quite differently "Postmodernization or the Informatization of Production"

chapter borrows, is symbolized in the word-processor—a machine that serves capitalist demand for *quantity* and renders irrelevant the demands in affectively necessary labor that is translated from the "quality of writing . . . as well as the use-value of manual composition" and that serves the consumer as well as the laborer ("Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value" 229). At first glance, affectively necessary labor here does seem to refer to something beyond exchange value-cum-capital and towards the laborers via their living—or useful—labor. What makes this simple understanding of affectively necessary labor more complicated lies in her very next sentence: the after-fact that "the word-processor [after all a product of congealed living labor itself] might itself generate affective use-value" (229). In this sense, her understanding of affectively necessary labor differs from those of both Negri and Hardt, not in the location of affectively necessary labor *within* capitalism, but in that it also belongs to a realm of subjective gratification contaminated *already* by capitalist construction of exchange-value as *desiring and desired value*.[126] Yet, one crucial point they all share in common seems to be that it is important for the subjects as laborers to reclaim the affect of their labor—whether that affect is constituted by capitalism or not, the former case of which I suspect more — in order to reduce the exploitative rate of capital and increase their self-actualizing capacity.

In *Lost in Paradise*, Lam is a homosexual sex worker, who was tricked into the business by his ex-boyfriend, Đông. Đông as a host of Sài Gòn appears to contaminate everyone he touches. First it is Lam, whom Đông tricks into the life of a sex worker, and then later it is Khôi, from whom Đông takes everything and runs away. In Lam's case, what Lam thinks to be an expression of love to his partner, Đông, to engage in multiparty sexual intercourse, turns into a business

[126] See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's chapter "How Do You Make Yourself a Body without Organs?" in *A Thousand Plateaus,* for instance, but this time with the point of departure being that of a capitalist: Observe how capitalism makes a body without organs!

transaction after the act. Upon confronting his treacherous partner, Lam receives the cold reply that he has "played around enough" and now it is time to "make a living" because nothing in this life is free. To echo Arendt's remark on the modern human condition, even intimate private acts in someone's love life can be up for business transaction now. Lam is heartbroken not because his partner is a sex worker, but rather because of Đông's refusal to separate intimate life from business life. Love/life for Đông is play; it does not require labor, and certainly not any work effort. The only activity that deserves the name of work for Đông must involve money-making. Lam's immediate response and his subsequent life decisions are devastating to himself: throughout the course of the film, Lam loves rationally via actions rather than feelings. He enters the sex industry without any affective investment because he simply has none left in his non-working life. Indeed, he shows no empathy throughout the film, and nonchalantly cooperates with Đông to trick Khôi out of his belongings.

After breaking up with Đông, Lam accidentally meets Khôi again and decides to make up to Khôi by taking care of him. Seeing Khôi's pitiable state of homelessness, without money or clothes, Lam washes and kisses the bruised body of Khôi despite Khôi's initial disgust of him. This marks Lam's beginning to take actions by himself. Here the audience witnesses a bottom-up instance of forming feelings. By intentionally mimicking intimate bodily acts of social bonding, the two characters are able to develop reciprocal feelings towards each other. In other words, they act first and love later. Through their intimate acts, they start to re-invest in affectively necessary labor to restore the life-affirming qualities of their work.

Their bodily acts here re-establish intimate connections quite differently from the act of working out to improve the body's value in the sex market. First, these acts are inherently relational in that they work towards the restoration of *other* bodies to their original state of well-being. This

roundabout way is useful both to the agent and the recipient of the act: to be able to care for others and to be cared for by others enable Lam, a sex worker, and Khôi, a homosexual man kicked out by his own family, to recover affective dimensions of their life, become empathetic again, and find meanings in living. They find routes to themselves indirectly through taking care of others rather than of themselves. Second, as hinted, their acts are labor of the body, not of the mind, suggesting the interdependent nature of body and mind in labor. For cases like Lam and Khôi, whose empathy is highly damaged by social conditions, a bottom-up approach to love, from the body to the mind, seems to work better than a top-down approach, from the marriage of true minds to its manifestation in intimate bodily acts, that only the lucky ones—middle class, heterosexual, or normatively employed in the market—can afford. Their work in love starts from the work of the muscle, of skin, and of hands until that work manifests itself in affective use-value: they feel more human because they are treated like human beings, so they feel motivated to act with conscience and empathy again.

Yet, Lam and Khôi's relationship does not last because of Lam's occupation. When Khôi requires Lam to quit his job, Lam refuses, stating that he is a professional sex worker who can separate love and life, or *tình* and *đời*. Lam can divide himself into two parts: heart for love and body for life. He only agrees to utilize his body as a tool to make a living; his heart is reserved for love and Khôi. Lam's view of the body of a sex worker both follows and complicates Marx's view on labor-power and tools. For Marx, labor-power, or labor-capacity, is "the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being" (*Capital Volume One* 270). Human labor then is a "productive expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands etc." (134). For Marx, to produce use-value from labor, something must be spent, and what is spent is the human body and mind themselves. Because body and mind are

connected, and because muscles and brains are not just two organs of the body, Marx also mentions mental capabilities and "the living personality" and anchors those immaterial aspects of labor to the physical body (270). In this regard, Hardt and Negri are justified in highlighting the invisible component of labor within political science: affective labor, the type of immaterial labor, within modern capitalism that renders living labor both outside capital relation—for absolute exploitation—and inside capital relation—for the successful process of self-valorization. In other words, affective labor like that of mothers and women are forced outside of capitalism and can only be expressed via their male counterparts' labor-power, and yet, they are invisibly caught within capitalism because their labor is transformed into value and therefore capital.

What Lam says is simplistic: it is impossible for him to separate love and life, heart and body, and private and public. Lam is shown in the film to have little feelings for himself and his life. He no longer trusts love, something he believes to be fleeting and unreliable. Love for him is both something that can help him live a better life and something that does not exist forever. By doubting love, he doubts the possibility of a happy and restorative life. And because he doubts feelings, he does not bring them into his work. Ironically for Lam, to be better at his job does require him to put some authentic feelings and personal care into what he does, something that he does not believe a professional sex worker should do. Refusing to increase the value of his work by catering to his clients' emotional needs, he fails to earn much from his job and is labeled "a cheap whore." Male homosexual sex workers like Lam are kept in the lowest scale of an industry already forced underground because they do not have any love left in life, let alone to spare some for their jobs. They are not good at their work, at their personal relationships, and at the art of living. They serve to counteract the simplistic picture of sex workers who can only be bad at their job and good at living, or bad at living and good at their job. They offer a glimpse of a possibility

of sex workers who can be good at both working and living, should their conditions under capitalism allow them to be and their own personal strivings help them reach that point. What sex workers like Lam show the reader is that, like their city broken into incompatible worlds of the haves and the have-nots, the people living in it are also broken into incompatible parts of body and soul.

Emotional labor in the era of postindustrial, information-driven, digitalized, and neoliberal era is a well-theorized issue. Arlie Russell Hochschild's *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, for instance, focuses on the realm of marketized private life, in which consumers are too tired to labor emotionally for a relationship and instead prefer to buy the results of a successful relationship straightaway. They want, in other words, to buy "someone else's emotional labor" and the results of an emotion-laden relationship without all the emotional strings attached in the aftermath (207). In such a market, money becomes a shortcut to a few moments of *authentic* bodily *and* mind marriage, without the prerequisite grunt labor and the burdensome after-care. To refuse to work on their feelings then, for those sex workers, is also to accept less payment and fewer opportunities in their occupation.

Importantly, cases like Lam, and later Hạnh, are distinct in two aspects from the usual workers in the service industry like "social workers, retail sales clerks, Disneyland ride operators, waitresses, receptionists, youth shelter workers, telemarketers, personal trainers, nursing home caregivers, professors, policemen, midwives, door-to-door insurance salesmen, police detectives, hair stylists, and sheriff's interrogators," or in other words, the "emotional proletariats of the world" (200). On the one hand, they have to offer their bodies at a much more intimate and private levels than others; on the other hand, they already live in a highly damaged affective state because

of their minority identities, making it much more difficult for them to work up affective labor for the market. They are below the proletariats of the working world, the lumpenproletariat indeed.

The next issue to consider is that Lam views his body merely a tool to earn money. His body therefore belongs both to his private personal love and to his public market life. *Lam* in the Việt language is an ambivalent name: it means both the color of the blue sky above and the hardship [lam lũ] of those whose backs are so bent on working and faces so down on the ground that they can never look up to the sky. Like his name divided into a dream and a nightmare, Lam lives a life of great dreams of escape from his job and the nightmare of coming back to his job constantly for money. Because his body is now not only accessible to his partner but anyone who has capital, the body as a tool also blurs the boundary between private and public, outside and inside capitalism, humans and their tools, and humans and machines.

In *Capital Volume One*, Marx traces carefully the distinctions between tools and machinery to conclude that the machine "is a mechanism that, after being set in motion, performs with its tools the same operations as the worker formerly did with similar tools" (495). The machine, therefore, has come to replace humans completely in the production process, but it does not create value, which can only be generated by human labor. The machine therefore is human labor concentrated to make it in the first place, whose value can only be transferred from itself to the products: "[m]achinery, like every other component of constant capital, creates no new value, but yields up its own value to the product it serves to beget" (509).

Nonetheless, the danger lies in its further removal of living labor, and therefore of the living human worker, from the production process: the machine system then reveals "an entirely objective organization of production, which confronts the worker as a pre-existing material condition of production" (508). In other words, living labor of the worker now is excluded even

further from the immediate creation of value; it is transformed into abstract value in the form of machinery. Ironically, the machinery is closer to life-producing and life-engendering activities than humans are. In the most advanced stage of capitalism then, the humans have been transformed into tools as part of the machines that have been transformed into larger-than-life humans. In other words, the tools have taken over the masters. Similarly, while Khôi sees Lam's body as part of Lam, Lam's clients see Lam as part of his body. Khôi's viewing of Lam, in other words, connects Lam to his body and Khôi; Lam's clients' viewing of Lam's body violently removes it from his idea of self. With the body (as both the creator and receiver of affective labor) lost in work, Lam's affective labor is lost to himself.

For the sex worker, to reduce the body to merely a tool for the market is to further limit the integrity of the self to only its abstract components. Deprived of its physical body in the construction of its self, the self is now forced to resort to its immaterial aspects, be they the soul, the mind, or the symbolic heart-cum-love, for a vague knowledge of what it is. It is understandable therefore that Lam both desires to love in order to live and denies love as an important part of his life. Love for him as a sex worker serves as an anchor to who he is as a human being. But deprived of its material aspects, love is not something that can last. No synthesis of love and life, *tình* and *đời*, is possible for Lam, because his most private and intimate parts of the body have been finally transformed into tools for the sex market. If his body now becomes truly a tool, what body or force operates it? And what depreciates in value if not the physical body itself?

On the one hand, if the body now is a tool, it does not have desire or a will of its own. Its own source of affect, or affective labor, comes not from itself but from that aspect of the mind or the heart. What wills the body to work then is that will power to survive within every sex worker. To maintain that will power to survive and to force the body against its will to open itself up for

the market requires affective labor, an immense investment of affect to act for both the mind and the body itself. If the real machine pushes the worker into the pre-existing condition of the production process, the body as a sexed tool requires a mind that must turn itself into a sort of a machine: it must work and think like a machine, without feelings or emotions, and with only a sheer will to survive. Lam throughout the film looks and acts more like a machine that tries to balance the already limited source of its affective labor towards either restoring his human nature or fueling up his toil to survive in the sex market.

On the other hand, the body of the sex worker, like the machine, does appear to depreciate in time, though not in a similar manner. Khôi confronts Lam in this manner by asking him if he intends to keep doing this job when he becomes "a diseased, perverted and decrepit old man." This implies the fleeting nature of sex work that values youth and physical appearance and the inherently unstable idea of assessing the value of the worker's body according to capitalist logic of valorization. Lam and Khôi's relationship fails because they cannot reserve any affectively necessary labor for themselves, without which the relationship is destabilized and Lam reduced to a machine unfit for a meaningful life of happiness. It is the world of homosexual male sex workers then that is not promised a happy ending and that attracts more empathy from the audience. As the audience will see, the other non-normative heterosexual couple fares slightly better.

The other couple, Hạnh and Khùng, is portrayed slightly more positively than Lam and Khôi in the sense that they can act, because they have the opportunity to keep affectively necessary labor to themselves against the demand of the market. Hạnh is a common name in the Việt language for women. It refers to one of the four virtues that bind women to the good: their work [công], their appearance [dung], their speech [ngôn], and their virtuous conduct [hạnh]. Hạnh in the film is both an ironic and serious name. She is a sex worker and therefore by social standards

she breaks the code of virtuous conduct, casting her as the bad woman against the image of a potentially good wife. But she shows to be full of virtues when she reveals her kindness to other disadvantaged lives, including Khùng and his duck. Hạnh's journey to sex work is rather common at the time: coming from a poor family of farmers in the countryside, she moves to Sài Gòn to find work after her whole family goes bankrupt due to the 2008 avian influenza global breakout that has left farmers like her in Việt Nam with hundreds or thousands of dead ducks and nothing else to fall back on.

Unlike Lam and Đông, Hạnh throughout the film does not focus on improving her body for greater sexual attraction. She is in her mid-thirties and considered past the prime working age for a sex worker. Indeed, she is constantly harassed by her pimps for not having enough clients whereas her few clients are shown to use her aging look as an excuse to ask for a lower payment. Without her sexual appeal, she is good at exhibiting a positive and friendly attitude towards clients, smiling and talking to them with respect. She remains obedient and caring even to the abusive pimps. Despite all the misfortune, she seems better than Lam and Khôi at maintaining a life of affection.

Khùng and Hạnh's special friendship starts with one act of kindness. Seeing her sitting in the rain, smoking, without anything but a motorbike helmet to shelter herself, Khùng approaches Hạnh with a holed umbrella. He cares. The bird's eye camera angle and the slow sentimental background music emphasize both their powerlessness against life and the big hole on the umbrella. Hạnh quickly pushes Khùng away, telling him to leave before the pimps come and beat them both. He eventually departs, but leaves her with the holed umbrella. When Hạnh uses it and realizes it is ineffective against the rain, she utters the words "đồ khùng" [such a crazy guy], which is both his name and his defining character. Her tone, however, betrays her feelings: she is moved

by the action. Hạnh is right in calling Khùng crazy: his act of kindness is inherently unproductive. First, Khùng forgets to shelter himself from the rain even though it is big enough to cover them both. Second, the umbrella has a hole that makes it less effective against the rain. An act of empathy, originating from good intention but yielding no desirable outcomes, is obviously incomprehensible and unacceptable in the characters' world, where pragmatic concerns like money matter the most. But as the film progresses, it is clear that those small acts of kindness do help create affective value that, once used towards those in need, restore their life to meaning, purpose, and happiness. In other words, this type of immaterial labor does offer symbolic values in terms of affect, something that will require a careful consideration of the nature of labor to appreciate more fully. Indeed, the very irony of life and love is that sometimes, the most illogical, unproductive, and unwise acts can connect humans through the caring and thoughtful attention behind them. This irony of the meaningless shows a common fact in language and in life: like loving actions, most linguistic features are born for communicative purposes instead of semantic exchanges. Unproductive talks and actions, in other words, ironically produce affective values.

Still 4.2 Still from Lost in Paradise: Khùng sheltering Hạnh from the rain with a holed umbrella.

The classic figure of the prostitute has often been used symbolically to refer to something else, and often to the detriment of the prostitute herself because she is both mentioned and never discussed as such. Marx, for instance, writes in the deleted notes of *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* that "prostitution is only a *specific* expression of the *general* prostitution of the laborer, and since it is a relationship in which not the prostitute alone, but also the one who prostitutes, fall and the latter's abomination is still greater – the capitalist, etc., also comes under this head."[127] For Rosa Luxemburg, who reads Marx further in the conditions of accumulation, prostitutes belong to the "non-productive classes," "the hangers-on of the capitalist class" that includes, ironically enough, "king, parson, professor, *prostitute*, mercenary" (312). Because their income can only be said to be derivative, they are the "parasites of present-day society," much

[127] See the version of the text in https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm

closer to the capitalists, who survive on a transference of consumption from the working class, the only true people that "foot the bill" (435). In post-war Vietnam, prostitution is regarded by the new government as "a problem with its causes in the past," the trace of "the imperialist American presence and the southern puppet regime" (Nguyễn-võ 3-4). Again, a parallel is drawn between the puppet regime as "a whore to American imperialism" and Vietnamese women as "whores for the occupying army" (4).[128] Their work is not honest, and they are not legitimate workers. They are, as McClanahan and Settell argue, the lumpenproletariat, the refuse of all classes who are "forced to exist on the margin of society" (508).

Whatever they do, sex workers do not produce value. For Luxemburg, women's sex work is unproductive despite generating profits, as opposed to the unrecognized labor of mothers and wives:

> As long as capitalism and the wage system rule, only that kind of work is considered productive which produces surplus value, which creates capitalist profit. From this point of view, the music-hall dancer whose legs sweep profit into her employer's pocket is a productive worker, whereas all the toil of the proletarian women and mothers in the four walls of their homes is considered unproductive. This sounds brutal and insane, but corresponds exactly to the brutality and insanity of our present capitalist economy. ("Women's Suffrage and Class Struggle" 171)

Luxemburg maintains that the prostitute does not generate real value like the worker, only profits. Set as a backdrop against wives and mothers, whose unrecognized labor is all the more invisible, prostitutes only serve to illustrate the levels of exploitation good women suffer under capitalism. If they are the inevitable products of capitalism for Marx and Luxemburg, they are the victims and do not have a will of their own; if they work to highlight the sufferings of other virtuous women, they themselves are elided into oblivion. The figure of the sex worker, from Kiều of the early nineteenth century to the modern Kiều of the twenty-first century, has always been used to talk

[128] See Arlene Eisen Bergman's *Women of Vietnam* and Chính Nghĩa's *Nọc độc văn hóa nô dịch*

about something else and to highlight other sufferings. It has great symbolic power and metaphoric range, but the sex workers themselves are not worthy of consideration.

In the context of Việt Nam, the image of the sex worker is used to define a good communist Việt Nam against its colonial past, an abused Việt Nam that rises above its suffering to shine forth all its virtues, and a modern Việt Nam that yearns for global connection at all costs.[129] *Lost in Paradise*, in this context, is unique among other contemporary Vietnamese blockbusters in two aspects. First, it wants to show an ignored corner of Sài Gòn city, where its Vietnamese subjects are still living abject lives in a so-called paradise that keeps eluding them. It is a sensationalized version of the lives of sex workers as the focal point. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it shows them striving to labor affectively, to produce affectively necessary labor, for themselves against their slots in life. They are quite active, even if they fail.

Hạnh and Khùng, together in their sexless relationship, work hard to nurture and protect a duck. Khùng miraculously hatches a duck on his own and grows attached to it. Hạnh, an expert on raising ducks herself, joins Khùng and protects the fragile insignificant life all she can. Their coordinated work, again, is not productive because it does not generate any capitalist value. But it helps them build a life with a purpose and a connection. This affective value, eluding the power of language to name it precisely, is related to life as such, or at least a part of life that has yet to be consumed by the capitalist machinery. It is the moment when Hạnh risks her life to protect the newly hatched duckling that her affective labor manifests the most clearly. When she sees the duckling for herself, Hạnh starts to open up and confide in Khùng. During their conversation, Hạnh's pimps arrive and shout at her for neglecting her job, in other words, for failing to produce profits. To them, Hạnh is a person who has always been submissive; she never retaliates and only

[129] See Nguyễn-võ's *The Ironies of Freedom* and Kimberly Kay Hoang's *Dealing in Desire*

looks to the ground, listening to their verbal insults. However, this time is different. She cares enough to act. When the pimps threaten to kill the duckling, Hạnh suddenly changes and fights to protect it, threatening to stab the pimps. Only when the duck is safe does she return to her submissive self and surrender to their beating. Hạnh has become Khùng when the pimps call her crazy. She does not care about her own sufferings, but only those of a duckling. She finally chooses to act for another being, and by the choice to act, she helps herself become human again throughout the film.

At the end of the film, she is caught again with Khùng and the now grown-up duck. The pimps demand to know why she is not working, to which she replies that she is currently unproductive because she is menstruating. Forced to show proof by taking off her clothes in public, Hạnh becomes, in the reaction shots of the pimps, a disgusting worker, who is useless for capitalist profit-making. Seeing that they may have to go home with nothing, the pimps decide to take the duck and eat it instead, stealing the *other* product of affective labor that Hạnh and Khùng have. Perhaps scared for the duck soon to be turned into use-value for the pimps, or perhaps unwilling to see the only innocent creature outside of the capitalist sex exploitation network be sucked into it, Hạnh decides to stand up. She beats them to death. Later, she is shown crying while finally revealing her name to Khùng: Trần Thị Phước Hạnh. It appears that her full name, even more ironically than before, suggests not just virtues but also happiness and fortune. Phước, with its origin in Chinese 福, has all the components of a happy life in it: number one, a mouth, and a field [nhất, khẩu, điền], suggesting one life of fullness without any worries. The name aspires towards an ideal that should be a reality for all, especially if they truly live in a paradise, and she tries to live up to her name in everything she does, both in her job and outside it. Hạnh finally turns herself in and starts to serve fifteen years in prison for her crime.

Coda for a connected world

The film ends in a note of despair for both couples. Lam and Khôi break up, with Khôi returning to his hometown and preparing for his college entrance examinations and Lam continuing to work as a sex worker to save enough money to find Khôi. However, Lam is beaten and left immobilized by his clients in the end, leaving his future uncertain. Hạnh is seen driving aimlessly in the dark, crying, and finally the notes appear on screen informing the audience that she is now serving her sentence in prison. The area where the sex workers operate has been wiped out, paving a way for a new international shopping mall to come and promising to completely erase any trace of their past lives. Lo and behold! Neoliberalism comes back in the final scene in a promise of a future. The film never attempts to bring the two storylines together. Indeed, the Vietnamese name of the film is as sensational as it is disconnected: Hot Boy Nổi Loạn và Câu Chuyện về Thằng Cười, Cô Gái Điếm và Con Vịt [Rebellious Hot boys and a Story about a Smiling-Man, a Prostitute, and a Duck]. Alex Hutt, for instance, voices a slight criticism of this disconnection, wishing that, technically speaking, "the two plots could have been intercut more, as some of the scenes were too long and when we cut back to the other story, it often felt like we hadn't seen characters for extended periods of time." Yet, this final chapter aims to argue for precisely that challenging task of connecting disconnected moments via the subtle clues, the vanishing traces, and the formal aspects of arts. It asks through what reading method the readers and audience make the connections between the classical Kiều as a sex worker and the modern Kiều as either homosexual or abject sex worker. It asks how we as human beings make connections where they are the most impossible, by training ourselves for a mode of imaginative reading that dares to bind even the most contradictory or antithetical texts. It is of course potentially irreverent to a Vietnamese reader to suggest a comparison between the classical Kiều and the modern Kiều,

even though they are the same both in their fates of cosmic irony and in their active attempts to navigate their lives to happiness and meanings. The very point of the film is to get lost in it, and to work affectively to find that fragile thread that encompasses the two stories, many stories, together without connecting them. The audience learns that lives where there are no obvious connections still matter. They learn that in the end, stories are forgotten and the world moves on, so they must remember to connect the present to the deleted past. The parallel editing works best here to do that with an audience, who also needs to be active in their watching experience. The film does achieve its affective labor: it is a tear-jerker that makes the audience cry for the couples, feel empathetic with them, and want to do something for them. If the director had made the attempt to connect lives rendered disparate by the very workings of capitalism, neoliberalism, homophobia, and patriarchy, it could have been counter-productive, for one remembers that one reason they are cut off from all othered lives, from the lives of the others, is that they belong to the lumpenproletariat that lacks a workable common thread, be it class consciousness, gender, or sexual orientation, that unites them all. But an imaginative and empathetic reading of irony can view them in their separateness and recognize affective value in what they do and who they are. In this desperate attempt, this chapter tries to connect them by the mere virtue that they are the forgotten Vietnamese, caught up without belonging to the currents of their time, lending their lives but taking no positive identities for themselves in the process. By having no positive identities, by taking unproductive actions, by daring to love and live, and by simply refusing to disappear despite being disconnected from the main narrative of progress and of meaningful living, they prove to be Việt people leading ironic lives of love.

Conclusion: Skirting Vietnams of the Past and the Future

The birth of any nation after its revolution is always pre-set with lofty ideals and subtle ironies. Despite its marked moment in time, the national announcement of birth invariably refers to universal rights of human beings beyond the confines of national boundaries, beyond time and space. The United States' Declaration of Independence mentions inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen also refers to the fact that all men are born and remain free and equal in rights.

Hồ Chí Minh's Vietnamese Declaration of Independence [Tuyên ngôn độc lập Việt Nam Dân chủ Cộng hòa] in 1945 follows suit, learning from both declarations and claiming that all peoples in the world are born equal; they have the right to live, to be happy, and to be free. The ancient Vietnamese declarations of independence do not stray from this rhetoric. The oldest and perhaps most famous independence poem is "Nam quốc sơn hà" [The mountain and river of the Southern Kingdom].[130] Written by an unknown author in around the tenth century, it starts with the two lines: "Nam quốc sơn hà Nam đế cư/Tiệt nhiên định phận tại thiên thư" [The mountain and river of the Southern Kingdom is where the Southern Emperor resides /Clearly is this fact stated in the book of the heaven]. Written in the book of heaven, the king and his land assume timeless sovereign rights beyond human laws and conquests.

The rhetoric of narrating the colonized nation, whether it is for the colonialists in the United States, the downtrodden during the French Revolution, or the colonized subjects in Vietnam, takes its legitimacy in its universality. Its raison d'être is always an appeal beyond nationality in its national establishment. If its birth must be announced, its coming has always been prophesied. If it has just been born for a moment, its conception has been at work for thousands of years. It is

[130] The most well-known version is published in Ngô Sĩ Liên et al.'s *Đại Việt sử kí toàn thư*

this irony that motivates Benedict Anderson to ask: "But why do nations celebrate their hoariness, not their astonishing youth?" (qtd. in Bhabha, "DissemiNation" *Nation and Narration* 293). Specifically, the question asks for an imagination of a nation via the lens of its youth and the promise and its future. But more generally, it asks for a courage to define a nation via the untraditional, the unprecedented, and the othered perspectives.

This conclusion hints at these other possibilities in narrating the nation called Vietnam through the lens of irony. Before its end, it asks the final, yet to be more fully explored, question: what will Vietnam look like if the task of telling Vietnam and showing Vietnamese-ness is left to the othered people of Vietnam, including women of the distant past and the youth of the future? It is not by any means a question of whether readings of their works will revise the historiography of Vietnam; they surely will. It is rather a question of what the contours of Vietnam will look like if their works come to the fore.

Việt men want to stay still against foreign invasions that threaten to remove them from their ancestral lands, so their nation-building literature perhaps reflects that desire to fix the position of Vietnam, Vietnamese-ness, and Vietnamese men within a specific locus legitimized in "the book of heaven." If they ever move Southward, it is not to defend, but to invade. Such fixed locus gives them life and an identity. But Việt women of the past wanted to move away from oppressions—either domestic or foreign—that threaten to cage them in their place, so their nation-building literature perhaps reflects that desire for a constantly moving space that both haunts and liberates them. Such space gives them life and an identity too. The declaration of independence by men shouts out to their enemies: We stay here, do not come down any further. The declaration of independence by women shouts out to women themselves: We must move, do not stop moving for any moment.

That movement is initially confined within their mind-eyes, as exemplified in the music of Kiều in Nguyễn Du's *Tale of Kiều* that can help her travel through time and space, or in the poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương, a poet living in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Việt Nam. Her poetry shows the attempt at figurative transformation of women's lived experiences and life events into parallel images of the nation, thereby re-connecting their fates to their nations and re-asserting their participation in the flow of history. For Hồ Xuân Hương, a singular experience of falling while moving turns into a moment of challenge against the sky and the earth: Giơ tay với thử trời cao thấp/Xoạc cẳng đo xem đất ngắn dài [Raising the hand to reach and see how high the sky is/Splitting the legs to measure how long the earth is]. Falling, or making mistakes, allows the female speaker here an opportunity to measure her country, her sky and earth. Or an image of bánh trôi nước—a famous Vietnamese traditional everyday dessert made from white flour and brown sugar—can help her relate the fate of women to the fate of her nation:

> Thân em vừa trắng lại vừa tròn
> Bảy nổi ba chìm với nước non
> Rắn nát mặc dầu tay kẻ nặn
> Mà em vẫn giữ tấm lòng son
> [My body is both white and round (as in the shape of the dessert)
> Seven parts floating, three parts submerged along with the country
> Whether I become hard or soft, it all depends on the hand of the maker
> But I maintain my red-belly core.] ("Bánh trôi nước" 20)

In this poem, the speaker links the fate of her beautiful body to the rise and fall of her nation and the controlling hands of men. Her only choice to make is to keep her loyalty to her nation and to her man. What strikes in the poem as supremely bold is the poet's decision to compare a woman's body, and a small everyday object, to the whole water-mountain of Vietnam. Her mind dares to enlarge itself, floating with her nation in time and space.

At other times, women move—physically—beyond their homes. One Sino-Vietnamese poem that showcases this is written by Bà Huyện Thanh Quan, a poet living in the early nineteenth century. The name of the poem highlights its movement: Qua Đèo Ngang [Passing Ngang Pass]. Composed in another classic Vietnamese-Chinese poetry style *thất ngôn bát cú* [seven words, eight lines], the poem is a monologue of the speaker finding herself alone among nature during her venture outside the home.

> Bước tới Đèo Ngang, bóng xế tà,
> Cỏ cây chen đá, lá chen hoa.
> Lom khom dưới núi tiều vài chú,
> Lác đác bên sông rợ mấy nhà.
> Nhớ nước, đau lòng con cuốc,
> Thương nhà, mỏi miệng cái da.
> Dừng chân đứng lại: trời, non, nước,
> Một mảnh tình riêng, ta với ta.
> [Arriving in Pass Ngang, twilight arrives,
> Grass mixed with rocks, leaves with flowers
> Bent at work under the mountains, a couple of woodcutters
> Scattered across the river, several Chinese people
> Missing land/water, the Đỗ Quyên bird cries quốc [nation nation]
> Loving home, the Đa bird cries till it's tired: gia [home home]
> Stopping, standing still: sky, mountain, water/nation
> A slice of private feeling, me with myself.]

The speaker, traveling all the way down to the central part of Vietnam, where Pass Ngang is located, is drowned in the nostalgia of home and the sublimity of the other space. Twilight for classic Vietnamese and Chinese poetry is the time for sadness, so the adventure seems overwhelmingly lugubrious for the speaker. *Nước* [water/nation] in Vietnamese, especially in the past, did not yet necessarily denote a strong sense of a nation-state; it could also denote a piece of land, a foreign area that is not home. A nation for the speaker then is more like her usual space designated as home. In the poem, she projects that yearning for a home/nation through the cries of the Đỗ Quyên bird (the quail) and the Đa (the francolin). The loss of nation/home makes one

forever cry out for nation/home; being far away from family makes one forever utter the words family. *Gia* in Vietnamese is more than a house, a home, or a family; it denotes a genealogy, a long list of generations still connected to the present by way of blood, marriage, ideology and trade. To miss home is to miss the long and rich thread of history and time that is cut off once one is removed from home. The overwhelming sense of nostalgia and loss is overcome only in the last two lines: the speaker suddenly becomes enlightened, connected to a larger home, a larger vague sense of a nation. That larger world beyond the home allows, ironically, a sense of feeling that she can claim to be her own. She is at last with herself, the larger world reflected in herself and expanding her sense of self. That tiny human figure, in the midst of sublime Vietnamese nature, showcases the integration of the self into the figurative ideal of a nation manifested in nature. From the small confines of a home as her small nation, she learns to claim the other space out there as her own through travel.

Traveling then affords for some Vietnamese women of the past a chance to contemplate upon nationality and its connection to what they hold closer to their hearts: the home. It liberates them one step further, from a mere escapism of the mind that can only imagine what is out there to an actual escapade of the body that immerses itself in the nature of the land their men call a nation. This relative freedom of movement is a step beyond the flows of national history that sweep them away, against which they can do little but remain free in their mind.

Perhaps because of their long history of restricted movement, women writers of the past understood deeply the affinities between their bodies, their homes, and their nations. Movement then allows them to connect these three loci of belonging and identity: the body moving around the house and through the vast space marking their national boundaries. Their version of the national is somewhat more somatic, familial, and fluid than that of men. Indeed, women writers

can offer a strong contestation of men's bounded nationality. One of them is Dư Thị Hoàn, a Vietnamese poet of Chinese descent, living in Vietnam in modern days. In her poem, "Tổ Quốc" [Nation], written in 1987, the figure of Việt Nam as a nation-state is personified, masculine and unnatural.

> Tôi quỳ sụp trước hai tiếng hư vô
> Người là ai?
> Uy nghiêm trên ngai vàng tín ngưỡng
> Có giây phút nào người ái ngại
> Đất đai đóng khung vì người
> Tình yêu chật hẹp vì người
> Những lúc người thành cái chiêu bài
> Của hạng buôn máu tươi và thuốc nổ
> Đường viền của người thắt quặn trái tim tôi
> [I collapse before the two empty words (Na-tion)
> Who are you?
> Imperial on the throne of dogmas
> Is there any second you feel concerned?
> Land framed because of you.
> Love confined because of you.
> Occasions when you become the pretext
> For those who trade on blood and mines
> Your boundaries squeeze hard my heart] (23)

Perhaps the distinct position of the poet, an identity bounded by enmity between the two nations, Việt Nam and China, allows her to criticize the meaninglessness of national demarcations. In her poem, nation as a humanized concept becomes a cage that kills slowly. Unmoving and disconnected from nature and the body—it becomes a force of evil against humanity.

On the contrary, contemporary Vietnamese women who can move beyond their national borders are trying to negotiate the concept of nationality in a way that both empowers them and critiques any fixed understanding of a protean concept and reality. Perhaps the future of Việt Nam and the survival of its people depend in part on those contemporary travelers for a new articulation and a continuous narration of the past and present. They have written so many works in the past

decade, including Huyen Chip's *Xách ba lô lên và đi Tập 1 và 2* [Pick up your backpack and go Volume 1 and 2], Nguyễn Phương Mai's *Tôi là một con lừa* [I am a donkey] and *Con đường hồi giáo* [The Muslim road], Nguyễn Thị Kim Ngân's *Nào mình cùng đạp xe đến Paris* [Let's cycle to Paris], Đinh Hằng's *Quá trẻ để chết: hành trình nước Mỹ* [Too young to die: a journey in America], Đinh Phương Linh's *Đường về nhà* [The road back home], Trang Nguyễn's *Trở về nơi hoang dã* [Return to the wild], Phan Việt's *Xuyên Mỹ* [Cross America], and so on. This curious trend, mostly dominated by women traveling over the past decade in Vietnam, helps Vietnamese subjects understand Việt Nam from the outside, just as one can only see the paint color of their home from the outside. For women specifically, it also helps them visualize a world of possible living beyond the gender confines of their hometown while encouraging them to confront the crisis of their inculcated national identity.[131]

It is my belief that there is still a place for irony in the task of rewriting the past and imagining the future of Việt Nam to ensure a healthy critique of exclusionary nation-making discourses and the survival of disadvantaged subjects through history and story-telling. This dissertation has been attempting to reveal both the critical and recuperative side of irony. More specifically, the first two chapters deploy the figures of irony to unravel two important concepts in Vietnamese nation-building: the concept of nation under the eyes of its Communist Party and the concept of "me/us" under the influence of Communism. The next two chapters draw from the way refugees outside Việt Nam and dispossessed groups inside it use irony as a method of survival against trauma of the past and alienation of the present. Together, they offer irony as a reading method that shows its relevance to any post-colonial nation building projects in general, not just to Vietnam in particular.

[131] See Nguyen's "Vietnamese Contemporary Travel Writings: The Reconstruction of National Identity" for a more detailed analysis of how the younger generations travel to negotiate their sense of national identity.

It is curious that some Việt people inside Việt Nam tend to define it via the tremendously rich lens of the foreign, the outside, or the West in the abstract whereas some Việt people outside Việt Nam will prefer to define it via the tremendously rich lens of the native, the local, or the East in the abstract. Living inside Vietnam for most of my life, I cannot help but follow the first trend, all the while secretly longing for the second. But whatever the case is, perhaps this longing for the other out there is the first step to bridge different versions of Việt Nam via communication.

What is Việt Nam then? Perhaps, this question is ultimately left to the multitude of perspectives across the immense expanse of time and space. This dissertation instead will borrow the 2008 song "Bonjour Vietnam" sung by Vietnamese Belgian singer Quynh Anh Pham and composed by a non-Vietnamese singer named Marc Lavoine. An instant hit among many Vietnamese local and overseas communities—the song does not just touch upon stereotypes of Vietnamese-ness that we have come to depend on and grow tired of; it also defines Việt Nam in ways that are both recognizable and non-essentialist:

> Raconte moi ce nom étrange et difficile à prononcer
> Que je porte depuis que je suis née.
> Raconte moi le vieil empire et le trait de mes yeux brides
> Que disent mieux que moi ce que tu n'oses dire.
> . . .
> Raconte moi ma couleur, mes cheveux et mes petits pieds,
> Qui me portent depuis que je suis née.
> Raconte moi ta maison, ta rue, raconte moi cet inconnu,
> Les marchés flotants et les sampans de bois.
> [Tell me about this name that is strange and difficult to pronounce
> That I have carried since the day I was born.
> Tell me about the old empire and the line of my skin-folded eyelid
> That says more about me than you dare to say.
> . . .
> Tell me about my color, my hair, and my small feet
> That I have carried since the day I was born.
> Tell me about your house, your road, tell me about the unknown
> The floating market, the wooden sampans.]

Sung by a singer of Vietnamese descent out of touch with her homeland, the song highlights the importance of story-telling, and perhaps also the importance of that unknown raconteur, interlocutor, and audience named Việt Nam, in shaping what Việt Nam is. Vietnamese-ness for her is her name, the part of the Việt language that is strange and so difficult to pronounce and to master. It is also engraved on her body: her Vietnamese eyelids, her skin color, her black hair, and her small feet. Perhaps because she both owns Vietnamese-ness and is yet to integrate it into her identity, she wears all her Vietnamese traits like a second skin, waiting one day to truly absorb them all into who she is. As a token of love, the singer lists everything she wants to know about Vietnamese culture, not forgetting to mention the unknown quality of Vietnamese-ness. That unknown, or inconnu, is both what is ignored and what is not yet born. That unknown is that desire always to know more, always to be left unsatiated by all Việt people wanting to know who they are. The song says much about Vietnam and Vietnamese-ess, and yet it is clearly just a start. It keeps asking the listener to tell a story about Việt Nam. The whole song therefore is not a definition, but a yearning for definitions via story-telling. It starts with a bonjour, a good day, one good day, to visit Việt Nam via a song of words.

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