



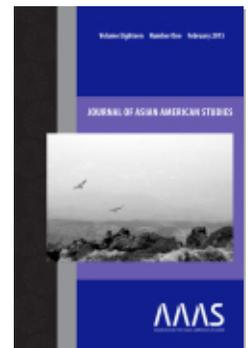
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The Debts of Memory: Historical Amnesia and Refugee Knowledge in The Reeducation of Cherry Truong

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THE DEBTS OF MEMORY

*Historical Amnesia and Refugee Knowledge in
The Reeducation of Cherry Truong*

Long T. Bui

ABSTRACT. This article explores the challenges of memorywork for Vietnamese diasporic subjects in the face of postwar historical amnesia and trauma. It analyzes Aimee Phan's *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong*, which tells the story of two families that fled from the Vietnam War still grappling with the messiness of their war-torn past. The main character, Cherry, attempts to "reeducate" herself about her wayward kin, and while the novel may be read simply as a coming-of-age text, this major fictional work illustrates the ways second-generation subjects must recuperate convoluted histories of war to understand the causes of their own precarious life and uncertain future in the world. Offering a powerful analytic for situating gendered practices of remembering and forgetting, the term "reeducation" suggests that refugee memorywork never simply takes the form of nostalgia or denial of the past but a constant negotiation of history as interpreted through past wrongs or obligations. It raises epistemological and moral dilemmas related to refugee subject formation, characterized by more than the condition of exile from the homeland but the active processing of postwar economic bonds and demands. As a hermeneutic for critically reading the refugee as a figure of debt, "reeducation" links the programmatic indoctrination of South Vietnamese political prisoners by communists to the Western pedagogical program to civilize refugees from South Vietnam, recognizing the psychic and material debt survivors of war owe to the sacrifices and suffering of others, and the political agency found in that recognition.

This essay explores the challenges of historical knowledge production and recovery of memory for postwar subjects. Using the novel *The Reeduca-*

tion of *Cherry Truong* (2013) as my main site of investigation, I examine the secret demons and ghosts of war to limn the experiences of many in the Vietnamese diaspora. In this fictional work by Vietnamese American writer Aimee Phan, the author employs a multiperspectival, nonlinear mode of storytelling to impart the sense of chaos and confusion experienced by refugees who had left their homeland after the war, unable to form close familial bonds after being dispersed far and wide. An intergenerational story spanning the countries of Vietnam, France, and the United States, *Reeducation* impresses upon readers the deterritorialized, mobile forms of belonging and consciousness distinctive to stateless peoples who have been cast adrift in the world.¹ It is very much an Asian American literary text that charts familiar themes of migration, acculturation problems, and culture clashes. The novel provides a U.S.-based construction of Vietnamese American identity, generative in approaching Vietnamese diasporic formation broadly in terms of exploring how overseas Vietnamese adapt to new social circumstances. More specifically, the novel conceptually develops the connection between the filial duty of daughters to their conjugal families and the debt owed by refugees to the host countries, where gendered familial dynamics are a synecdoche for the neocolonial relationship between the refugee and the nation.

Like so many other diasporic writers, Phan stresses the collective pain, anguish, and strength of refugee families striving to stay intact while boldfacing the estrangement of family members from one another. The novel opens with a letter from Tuyet, Cherry's mother, written from a Malaysian refugee camp in 1978 to Cherry's maternal grandmother back in Vietnam, explaining why she left her family to follow her husband to the United States. Tuyet pleads the following case, "I tried to find the words, but they would not come. How can you tell your own mother that you are abandoning her? What kind of daughter would do that? I am not that kind of daughter. I will make this up to you ... your devoted daughter."² As a sort of reeducation in family responsibility, Tuyet, the former bad daughter, strives to compensate for the mistake of leaving her family. Tuyet's letter demonstrates the need of daughters to be good filial subjects and prop up traditional family structures, a demand that needs to be recalibrated in times of war. This admission of guilt sutures the personal actions of individuals to the enduring bonds of family. Tuyet's failure to save her mother leads her to tout the tenets of pious daughterhood, a private endeavor since the letters scribbled by Tuyet were never read by Kim-Ly. Tuyet admits she could not find the words to explain why she betrayed her mother dealing with this guilt in silence. "This is what I struggle with now," Tuyet writes, and she vows to make everything right and honor Kim-Ly from then on.

Such carefully crafted words point to the pains of committing to heart the responsibilities of the family.

Beyond telling another refugee narrative of flight and rescue, *The Re-education of Cherry Truong* unsettles the normative ideas and narration of the Vietnamese diaspora as one of escape from death and destruction to an apolitical space of democracy and freedom, especially given the ways diasporic communities remain entrenched within nationalist, heteropatriarchal, and capitalist systems of power. The term “reeducation” serves as a useful *hermeneutic* or method of reading Vietnamese postwar subject formation. Deemphasizing tropes of the “family,” “community,” or “identity” as the foundations for ontological security, reeducation gestures toward the refugee diasporic subject finding his or her sense of identity as always already linked to inescapable histories of war. Remembering family also means remembering war, and refugee memorywork presents a violent memoryscape evoking the camps where many South Vietnamese political prisoners perished as the ultimate “losers” of the war in Vietnam, imprisoned by the victorious communists, and abandoned by the Americans. Inasmuch as the broken refugee family serves as the metonym of the fragmented diaspora, postwar “refugee reeducation” foregrounds familial dysfunction and personal rifts as the expression and byproduct of war’s legacy. Reeducation offers a robust conceptual framework and creative device for reading texts, whether fictional or epistolary, a method of interpreting “truth” that cannot find easy solutions in political innocence or emotional catharsis. Through a more politicized framing of postwar memorywork, reeducation reveals the troublesome act of deciphering and representing the postwar experience without flattening what it truly means to be a refugee. Put another way, reeducation conceptually provides the blueprint for diagnosing the limitations as well as possibilities of doing refugee memorywork. While harkening back to the terrible abuse of South Vietnamese political prisoners, the novel primarily throws light on Cherry’s own captivity and reeducation in family matters related to life, love, and loss.

Refugee Baggage and the Nonluxury of Forgetting

The Reeducation of Cherry Truong posits an archetypal refugee story based in a very familiar history tracing the Fall of Saigon in 1975 to communism, the mass exodus of refugees, and their resettlement in faraway places like France and the United States. However, this refugee story resists a simple chronological account of exile and despair so typical of many popular commentaries in the United States on the Vietnamese “boat people.” Centered on the recovery of hidden family histories and secrets, the novel provides

multiple plot threads narrated in such a knotted manner that refugees are depicted neither as noble humble beings or damaged traumatized subjects but as complicated people with both good and bad traits. This complex story begs the following questions addressed in this essay: What does it mean to use a politically charged term like “reeducation” to describe the mental and social development of second-generation youth like Cherry Truong who never experienced war directly but whose life story remains attached to war? What lessons are to be learned by utilizing the term “re-education” and framing the family story through it? How do individuals cultivate new lives in the face of historical trauma and silence? Who is allowed the privilege to own or possess memory? How is dignity maintained under a shameful history of loss, betrayal, and abandonment?

Mainstream academic studies tend to characterize Vietnamese refugees in terms of a “deficit,” objects of public sympathy needing to be adopted and lifted up by Westerners. By marking Cherry as someone needing “reeducation,” Aimee Phan follows Youngsuk Chae’s recommendation to politicize Asian American literature and recognize the political dimensions of migrant communities of color.³ Toward this end, *Reeducation* articulates the “Vietnamese American experience” as something not limited to the cartography of the U.S. nation-state but a political venture that crosses various geographic and ideological boundaries. The author is one of the most celebrated members of a new generation of Vietnamese American writers. Born and raised in the United States, Aimee Phan needed to conduct research on her own extended family in France to build enough background material to write her novel. For Phan, the Vietnamese refugee is not a sad, pathetic figure needing to be filled with useful “knowledge” to be a productive capitalist worker and citizen-subject, but an always already politicized subjectivity produced through a deficit of information about his or her history, a dearth of knowledge that forces individuals to search for answers rather than depending on institutionalized sources of education. In an interview for the book, she comments on the novel’s purpose in retelling the refugee story differently.

The younger generation is trying to understand the older generation. People are trying to create this space for history. There’s tension and push and pull in how that history gets represented. For me, I really cast Cherry as this detective. She’s discovering her family’s secrets and trying to understand them. The letters that she’s discovering contain what (the family members) are keeping from each other.⁴

Similar to other Asian American novels like *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Woman Warrior*, the uncovering of family secrets is the key formula for tell-

ing immigrant stories, although many Vietnamese are not immigrants but refugees, an important distinction. Cherry as the main “detective” must dig up these secrets as a means to learn about the history of her community and identity as a Vietnamese American woman. The “Little Saigon” ethnic enclave in Orange County, California, where Phan grew up, provides the setting for understanding the different life opportunities conferred to boys and girls, older generations and their assimilated children, between the haves and have-nots. *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* tells a story about one person’s journey through the past, but it also relays a collective story of how people oppress or hurt one another even if they share the same historical experience. Finally, it is a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of memory as well as what or who gets to be remembered in history.

The novel’s title alludes to the notorious reeducation camps created for former South Vietnamese soldiers by the reunification government after the Fall of Saigon in 1975, places of confinement, where thousands of individuals were kept for years to be starved, abused, and tortured. Having the word “reeducation” in the title refuses to forget the violence of authoritarian states, recalling the hypocrisy of institutions of authority to actually help everyday people and citizens. While the novel pays homage to this more historical-political meaning of reeducation, the text itself does not really delve too much into the actual conditions of reeducation camps. Rather, the camps provide the main point of departure for describing the all-encompassing forms of violence encountered by Cherry’s family.

The camp is mentioned several times in the novel as when Grandma Vo discusses the death of her eldest, Thang, and how she had to bribe communist officers to get her son-in-law, Chinh, released from a “correctional facility,” where he was being “deprogrammed” from the brainwashing of the Americans.⁵ The camps are later on mentioned in other flashbacks referencing the trade-offs and compromises made by prisoners in the camps, where strangers were like fictive kin as everyone “had to get along” somehow despite tensions.⁶ The “familial” constitution of the reeducation camp provides some explanation for why the structure of Cherry’s family appears so much like a camp—where certain members try to outdo and steal from others, passing resources back and forth like contraband, based on notions of who suffered or sacrificed the most and who are most deserving of gifts and perhaps freedom.

The novel sheds light on the racialized gender and class formation of postwar families in France and the United States. Since childhood, Lum and Cherry were treated unequally by their parents, and this gendered divide puts into perspective how Vietnamese boys and girls are both taught to completely obey their families, but girls bear the weight of tradition, car-

rying less social privilege and less right to challenge their family than their male siblings have. Their cousins' relatively egalitarian upbringing in France throws light on contradistinctive gender and class systems between two Vietnamese diasporic communities. Rather than privilege the conventional militaristic perspective of the male soldier or men in general, Phan's story directs attention to the female gaze, the way women see one another as well as the men in their lives. Women are the central figures of postwar historical recall and recollection. As Nathalie Huynh Nguyen observes, they keep and guard secrets as the main facilitators of their families' reeducation, transmitting the social scripts necessary for collective survival.⁷ Reeducation provides the semantic and symbolic grounds for a fruitful discussion of how young women like Cherry must still locate themselves in the war's legacy and all the problems it created for her family.

On Critical Illiteracy and the Camp as Ethical Memory

The Reeducation of Cherry Truong gives heft to poignant observations made by literary critic Isabelle Thuy Pelaud in her major study of Vietnamese American literature. She asks how diasporic Vietnamese identities so freighted with memories of the war "be disassociated from the systems of representation and history of that event without eradicating its legacy."⁸ She answers by claiming the war *can never* be dissociated from Vietnamese diasporic identity and that the way one reads Vietnamese American literature and memorywork is always therefore political in nature.⁹ The novel brings to life what Pelaud describes as a "a deep sense of vulnerability that leads to survival strategies heavy with contradictions that manifest themselves differently along gender and ethnic lines and are heightened by lack of financial resources."¹⁰ The novel demonstrates this by underscoring how postwar "family problems" are inherently "political" because of the splintered conditions of survival set forth by the war and its aftermath. The crushing blow of war brackets and attenuates postwar subject formation, setting up the kind of shocking experiences later encounter by refugees in their new adopted homelands. Postwar traumas gets passed down the generations, but the forms of war trauma that get disseminated do not often express themselves as holistic narratives of past suffering but rather as deep silences produced within families still trying to heal from their past. In this way, Cherry's reeducation expresses the second generation's "postmemory" and absorption of feelings and experiences not their own but those of their parents and kin.¹¹ Remembering in this context takes shape in terms of how the subject's sense of self is "bound up with his or her view of life," but also the crucial insights the subject gathers from others.¹²

At a minimum, the novel instructs readers to grasp the manifold ways postwar memories and memory *making* are limited by historical amnesia. It sets forth the project of memory recovery as more than a matter of gaining fluency in reading historical experience but a matter of what we can call “critical illiteracy” found in the *productive failure* and “teachable moments” of never fully grasping the diverse experiences of war-ravaged populations. In other words, reeducation postulates the concurrent impossibility of fully reviving or reading the past correctly and the possibility of discovering more information about the past and learning from it.

Critical illiteracy is needed as a way to prevent the desire to turn Vietnamese refugees into transparent subjects of representation, brought into and recognized within the “modern” way of life.¹³ The pedagogical project to rescue and reform refugees aims to “civilize” Third World populations by giving them asylum, transforming these former colonial subalterns into modern liberal subjects.¹⁴ This is inherently an imperialist project to deny them political rights and agency as many in refugee camps were forced to adopt a white cultural mind-set and Eurocentric standards of family, cleansing, working, dating, and living.¹⁵ Where the “refugee camp” stands as the spectral double of the political reeducation camp, the novel contemplates the *coupled fates* of “freed” subjects and captive prisoners, the simultaneity of dwelling in safe harbors of legal protection *and* extralegal “states of exception” in a moment in time when the concentration “camp” is the fundamental paradigm of sovereignty.¹⁶

For Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, terms like “citizen,” “refugee,” and “stateless peoples” do not fully explain the differential production of biopolitical subjects or how people become subjects of power/knowledge. In his theorization of the camp as a paradigmatic space for modern governmentality, Agamben claims whole populations are nowadays made vulnerable to the modern state’s political calculations. The Vietnamese refugee does not exist in some abstract state of exception, but occupies an array of material spaces defined by the absence or abrogation of law, from war zones to refugee camps to reeducation camps, such that it is apt to say they are both subject to the biopolitical management of “life” by the state but also maintained within postcolonial regimes of death in the way that Achille Mbembé describes “necropolitics.”¹⁷

Despite the call to respect the racial Other in Western societies as part of a new discourse of multicultural humanitarianism, it is often the case that the immigrant/refugee/asylum seeker falls or slips easily into the same category of the outlaw or criminal, occupying a liminal position within the nation-state, thus needing to be forcibly assimilated into proper forms of cultural citizenship through a coercive naturalization process and curricu-

lum for educating refugees on how to be “American.”¹⁸ Despite capitalizing on their newfound citizenship status, Vietnamese refugees never really attain true freedoms or the “good life” in Eurocentric societies as they inhabit a precarious social status and space of exception analogous somewhat to the South Vietnamese national in communist Vietnam. Following Agamben and Mbembé, it becomes necessary to consider the way in which the “camp” serves as a central metaphor for the ubiquitous violence of modern history. Aimee Phan’s creative use of the term “reeducation” explicitly injects the politicized practice of torture, killing, and genocide found in “illiberal” pockets of the world like Vietnam into the comforts of Western modernity and American domesticity.

Since the end of the Vietnam War, more than two million Vietnamese along with many other Southeast Asians have left their country and after being processed in refugee camps settled in a number of sponsor countries. Today, there are close to four million Vietnamese living around the world in a hundred countries.¹⁹ While the term “overseas Vietnamese” or *Việt Kiều* came to prominence as a somewhat derogatory description of Vietnamese living outside Vietnam, these days the connotation of overseas Vietnamese has undergone enormous changes, no longer strictly meaning those exiled from the home country but also including those diasporic populations existing within a matrix of social relations.²⁰

To approach Vietnamese postwar existence in singular terms such as melancholia, trauma, or assimilation reduces the intricacies of diasporic subject making to isomorphic affective states. Reeducation provides the critical grammar and vocabulary for reckoning with the polyvalence of refugee life absent of the wish to erase the many incarnations of the hurtful past for a sanitized totalizing future. It serves as the site of reclamation of knowledge for the survivor, the unfinished contract or bond the living owes to the dead, a call to search for those missing stories not memorialized in official history. As Viet Nguyen observes, Vietnamese Americans as subjects of war are yoked to an ethical memory of the past, haunted by the forgotten and dead, bound to a future without moral salvation and a past without innocence.²¹ Given this, Vietnamese Americans do not always possess what Kim Nguyen calls “the luxury of historical amnesia.”²² For Vietnamese refugees and their foreign-born children, the nostalgic remembrance of the homeland activates an “archive of feeling” that also brings back raw emotions and insights about what they had endured in the homeland under the shadow of war.²³ Nguyen says the refugee’s proud desire to “never forget” their history rubs up against their very *need to forget* to relieve the pain of actually recalling that same history.

Historical amnesia is never really absolute ignorance or forgetfulness; it is a selective partial memory based on the shrewd curation of history. It denotes an active refusal by people to remember history properly, not just the simple act of forgetting the past. As a mode of survival, historical amnesia transforms what is usually perceived as refugee “lack” in knowledge or emotional baggage left from the war into cultural assets and capital for enduring or succeeding in postwar economies. While many overseas Vietnamese today live in material excess and abundance, many diasporic subjects do not have the privilege to forget the war that tore their families apart. Aimee Phan’s judicious use of the term “reeducation” to describe refugee experience defuses the hyperpoliticization of Vietnamese diasporic communities under the anticommunist cause, giving room for alternate readings of the ways Vietnamese subjectivities come into their own politics not bound to any particular ideological framework. To achieve this venture, the novel focuses on the lives of women to “imagine otherwise” the figure of the Vietnamese diasporic subject, one not beholden to the militarized masculinity characteristic of the ethnonationalist project to forever “remember South Vietnam.”²⁴

The Price of Family Pride and Prejudice

The Reeducation of Cherry Truong tells the interwoven story of two families, the Truongs and the Vos, bound together by a young couple, Sanh and Tuyet, Cherry’s parents. Similar to her debut collection of short stories *We Shall Never Meet*, Aimee Phan’s novel recounts the hardship of families during the Vietnam War and their escape from Saigon in 1975, their challenges in Malaysian refugee camps, and their resettlement in foreign countries. The Truong family comprises Sanh, Tuyet, Cherry, and her older brother, Lum, all of whom ended up in the United States, while the maternal side of Cherry’s family, the Vos, found sponsorship in France. Grappling with the messiness of her family’s past and uncertain futures, Cherry uncovers dark secrets on both sides of her family and, in the process, learns much more than she bargained for. While the novel may be read as another addition to the genre of immigrant fiction or “ethnic American literature,” I draw out some major lessons found in this fictional work to comment on the inherent volatility of refugee writing practices and literary production.

The opening letter by Tuyet to Kim-Vo quickly segues into modern-day Saigon, where Cherry is trying to convince her brother to come back to the states. As a kind of First World “refugee” in exile from the United States forced to return to his homeland—albeit as a rich expat with enormous

economic privileges—Lum promotes entrepreneurial efforts to develop French-style residential duplexes and U.S. suburban homes for wealthy Vietnamese diasporans wanting to live in Vietnam. Such projects literally and figuratively insert the “American Dream” and the presence of overseas South Vietnamese (formerly vilified as traitors to the nation) into the newly built environs of free-market socialist Vietnam. Fleeing temporarily to Vietnam to avoid being labeled an academic failure by her parents, Cherry conflates the foreign bourgeois neighborhoods built by her brother with the American suburban environs in which she grew up. “It’s Orange County,” she says, to which her older brother responds, “No. . . . It’s better.” On a billboard, she notices a sign with the message: “The Future Site of New Little Saigon . . . The Comforts of America, In Your True Home, Vietnam.”²⁵ In this scene, diasporic imaginaries and desires are superimposed over the globalizing local geographies of Vietnam. The political identity term attached to diasporic ethnic enclaves (“Little Saigon”) to keep alive the painful memory of their defunct South Vietnamese past is defused by the neoliberal phenomenon of Vietnamese refugees coming back “home” as elite transplants. This transnational crossing is enabled by renewed diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the United States since the 1990s, and the Vietnamese government’s tolerance as well as solicitation of well-off overseas Vietnamese communities to invest in money-strapped Vietnam. Unable to educate himself in the Vietnamese/American Dream with its own subtle form of political indoctrination, Lum finds a more prosperous future in his ancestral land by forsaking his refugee past and minority status as a Vietnamese American, only to exploit his global privileges and status as a U.S. citizen. As Lum sees it, he is a refugee who “escaped” the small enclosure of his family and the provincialism of the Vietnamese American community to reeducate himself in the bourgeois ways of global capital. Lum’s urban planning in Saigon serves as a kind of memorywork, overwriting the war’s spatial effects on the city by bringing over a cosmopolitan gentrified diasporic consciousness based on opportunism, materialism, and Westernized notions of industrial progress—a double movement centered on forgetting the problems of “Little Saigon” by reconstituting a better Americanized version of it in the real Saigon, or Ho Chi Minh City as it is officially called in Vietnam.

This prologue posits the Vietnamese diaspora as a confusing network of intermeshed conflicting desires, where the wish to return to the homeland is fraught with both anguish and hope, mediated by the “reeducated” diasporic subject’s own move to erect new “encampments” in the homeland. It is this neocolonial context in which Cherry is visiting her brother Lum, a troublemaker back home in the United States, exiled by his parents

and ordered to stay with distant relatives because the parents “thought Vietnam could reshape his perspective, remind him of his humble roots, so when he returned to America, to them, he could have a fresh start.”²⁶ Trying unsuccessfully to convince Lum to come back home to the United States, Cherry suspects her parents’ longings for their eldest son’s reeducation was really about guilting Lum into leaving the family since “no one can force you from your home unless they make you believe you didn’t deserve to be there.”²⁷ Enjoying his newfound life too much, Lum refuses to return the United States as he makes a successful living as a planner in Vietnam, a major change from his status as a disappointment back home. Vietnam offers Lum a great future and a steady place to settle down with his girlfriend and child away from the disapproving eyes of his nuclear family.

In *Reeducation*, Vietnamese refugees and their children born outside of Vietnam continue to maintain a connection to the homeland where Vietnam figures as more than a source for finding one’s roots, also a contested political site for negotiating social identity and class in the age of globalization. Lum is a disaffected subject and descendant of the South Vietnamese diaspora, a quintessential loser who comes from a people viewed as the ultimate losers of history. His incapacity to live up to the middle-class ideals and upwardly mobile values espoused by so many Vietnamese Americans today is transfigured in postsocialist Vietnam, where overseas Vietnamese like him return to colonize, modernize, and reeducate South Vietnamese people on capitalism, a people who were previously reeducated in communism after the war when the government tried to wean the Saigonese off capitalist habits. Despite so many types of reeducation occurring, the question remains whether it is possible for diasporic youth to ever escape the encampments of their community and history.

As Nhi Lieu explains, many Vietnamese Americans have worked diligently to propagate the ideals of the American Dream, resulting in their recognition as a new “model minority” moving away from past associations as helpless victims of war or refugees.²⁸ *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* ruptures this paradigm of the Vietnamese model minority subject by attending to the differential privileges accorded to individuals. The developmental trajectory of poor South Vietnamese refugees turned prosperous Vietnamese American citizens is upset by Lum’s “return” to Vietnam after failing to become a model minority in the United States. This allegory of failure and triumph exemplified by the opening montage reiterates Lum’s opinion of his U.S.-based coethnic community as a closed-minded camp with petty values, whose unrealistic demands for success ironically pushed him to recycle those same demands to maximum effect in Vietnam.

From the 2000s, the novel quickly jumps back in time to the Truong family's escape in the late 1970s as refugees purged from post-reunification Vietnam due to economic and political pressures. Cherry's maternal grandparents, Hung and Hoa Truong, pay for their family's boat passage to a Malaysian refugee camp, where they wait for an extended time for sponsorship, until a wealthy French family named the Bourdains help them to reunite with their oldest son, Yen, a lawyer now living in Paris. Rather than joining his biological family in France, Cherry's father immigrated to the United States to have a better chance of sponsoring his wife's family, the Vos, who were left behind in Vietnam because Hung did not deliver on his promise to bring his daughter-in-law's family over. It is later discovered that Hung chose to bring his mistress instead.

Though Cherry's family resides in California and her other family members live in Paris, the separate clans remain in touch, tied together by what anthropologist Nazli Kibria calls family "patchworking," where uneven family dynamics and gendered kinship forms interact to generate a complex support network for sustaining immigrant households.²⁹ In these households, survival strategies are intimately yoked to collective debt. For instance, Grandma Kim-Ly's meddling in her family's affairs includes funding Cherry Truong's college tuition through black market investments, cheating other people, and dealing with criminals. Kim-Ly's tough measures to "rescue" her grandson Lum from a life of gambling addiction by making a deal with unsavory street thugs evidences the "dutifully" work of a family-oriented woman willing to help out her kin by unethical means.

In the postwar refugee household, Vietnamese women commonly take on new responsibilities as breadwinners or informal leaders of their families even while they might uphold the traditional gender norms of the heteropatriarchal family system. Vietnamese refugee subjectivity is historically synonymous with the emasculation and trauma of male soldiers. Phan pushes against the male-centered public construction of Vietnamese postwar subjectivity by speaking to the ways families endure and survive because of the power of women. Proudful Sanh for instance winds up despondent, working as a school janitor to raise Lum and Cherry, despite his high education and fluency in multiple languages. Burdened by the feeling of "leeching off a welfare system" in the United States,³⁰ Tuyet, the wife, becomes the decision maker in the family, a leading role first initiated when she asked Sanh to marry her to thwart her mother's plans to marry her off to a seventy-year-old American soldier, a possible foreign sponsor for the family to help them leave the country.

A woman-centered story of sharing family responsibilities and burdens, the novel moves beyond Cherry to follow Grandmother Hoa, described as

a beloved, nurturing, long-suffering, and naïve woman who “only knew how to protect and forgive.”³¹ While her abusive husband begins to lose his memory and slip into a debilitating state, she learns to take ownership of the family he had been running with an iron fist. For decades, Hoa lets her children watch as she is taunted, controlled, and physically abused by her tyrannical husband, Hung. She remains the silent, strong female head of house as the Vos move from Vietnam to France with the sponsorship of the affluent Bourdains, to whom Hung says the family should be grateful since “they do so much for the community.”³² While Hoa plays the part of a good wife and mother as tradition would expect back in Vietnam, Hung claims that Monsieur Bourdain was the type of modern Western man he aspired to be. Now, he expects his lawyer son Yen to reach Bourdain’s status and thus carry out Hung’s Western colonial dreams.

Able to finally delve into her ill husband’s office files for the first time without him knowing, Hoa discovers a batch of letters Hung had been keeping private from her all these years written in French to his mistress, Ba Cuc, whom Hoa recalled had been on the boat with the family. Interspersed throughout the novel’s chapters are personal letters of unrequited adulterous love between Hung and Ba Cuc. Hoa does not get angry, accepting the truth of this affair as small compensation for all those years of abuse she endured under her husband. As she later admits, “the information of his past would be hers, just as his knowledge slipped away. After all these years, she believed she’d earned it.”³³ Unable to read French and too embarrassed to ask her children to translate them, Hoa’s problems in reading the letters signals the challenges of translation and literacy. Hoa’s lack of education prevents her from accessing a troublesome history that is *her* right to know. Meanwhile, her husband always held power through the educational and linguistic privileges accorded to men like him. Hoa quickly realizes the discovery of these letters did not make her any stronger and that “with his mind half gone, Hung still won . . . because while he was allowed to forget everything he’d done [to her], she had no choice but to remember.”³⁴ Hoa’s dilemma shows how the female refugee does not have the luxury to forget *history*. Hung’s liberation from guilt and his shameful past forgotten under Alzheimer’s is a burden she must bear as someone who cannot *forget*, the scorned women without the luxury of historical amnesia. In this manner, the politics of remembering doubles as the gendered “politics of forgetting,” insofar as women are not allowed to forget easily the past as men sometimes can.³⁵ Hoa’s reeducation is tied to female humiliation and captivity rather than emotional release.

The subordinate position of women like Hoa to their husband finds resonance with the infantilized status of sponsored refugees who must

always be subservient and grateful to their white patrons. When they first arrived in France, the Bourdains welcome the Vo family with a toast featuring a patronizing statement indicative of the French colonial attitude and “benevolent paternalism” toward the Vietnamese: “We should have never left you with the communists. We abandoned you then, but we will not do it again. We are honored to help the people of our former colony.”³⁶ Hung instructs his family to forget their differences with the French in order to repay their former colonizer the debt incurred for the “freedom” they all enjoy now. As Mimi Thi Nguyen reminds us, Vietnamese refugees bear the weight of the “gift of freedom” that holds them responsible to the “structures of feeling and social forms through which encampment” still regulates their postwar “better-off” lives.³⁷ Hoa’s daughter-in-law, Trinh, likes to speak up against her elders, but Hung tells Hoa to control the foolish woman’s speech in front of the Europeans. When Hoa tells Hung that Madame Bourdain talks all the time, he tells her Ms. Bourdain “has an education. She earned her privilege to speak.”³⁸ Western education held by white women holds the tongue of Vietnamese women (and men) in check. This high-class education is reserved for whites, while the Vietnamese are consigned to the silence of reeducation and subaltern position of minorities.

In a family where members do not talk to one another directly about their feelings, the weighty silence that fills Cherry’s family life offers little in the way of communal dialogue about what people have gone through. Indeed, there is an affective disjuncture or break between the openly honest letters written by individuals to significant others and the stilted, elusive manner through which family members verbally engage one another on an everyday basis. As one reviewer complained, “Instead of adding layers to the family history, the letters and fractured chronology does more than symbolize the fractured Truong family—it splinters the novel so that no one character or plotline becomes essential, least of all the title character’s. Phan’s family saga has many riches, but it lacks the clear focus.”³⁹ However, the book’s fractured chronology and shifting narrative voice speaks volumes about the disorienting nature of the postwar refugee condition. The family’s divided loyalties and identities arise from the fragmented experiences of being displaced peoples, told through a splintered plotline without a neat one-directional exposition. In this way, *Reeducation* observes the tumultuous reality of diasporic “writing to evoke the past [which] is not always about creativity, nor is it always a matter of choice.”⁴⁰

The experiences of early Vietnamese refugees who migrated to France by “choice” and attained more secure economic positions like the Vos contrast with those of poorer refugees who later came to the United States, sponsored primarily by their own family members and often forced to labor

in nail salons for a living. Cherry and her brother spent their working-class childhood playing inside their mother's beauty salon, a hub for Grandmother Vos illicit financial activities, a place where the old matron kept a watchful eye over her family members. Every day this grandma reminds Cherry that the girl has looks, brains, and an education, which she paid for.⁴¹ This matriarch tells Cherry to always be grateful, never wasting all of her gifts by running away from responsibilities like her brother, Lum. Expressed here is a familial economy of debt tied to emotional injury and female virtue. If Cherry wants to honor her family's hardship and struggles, she must work hard on her education, pushing herself to become a successful doctor oriented toward the future never the past. Yet, the unearthing of family secrets when Cherry visits her Grandmother in France gives her the courage to break out of the role of a respectable Vietnamese girl. She receives letters from Hoa and later finds more letters from her grandmother in the United States, and the awful truths contained in these writings reeducated Cherry on how truly dishonorable her family can be.

The Humble Act of Receiving Gifts and the Value of a Reeducation

Despite learning more details about her family, Cherry never finds any real satisfaction or enlightenment from reading the many letters written by her mother, grandmothers, grandfather, and father. The bequeathal of these secret writings to her by her two grandmothers (without the consent of her parents or grandfather) symbolizes inheritances from female ancestors, but also the ethical issues of possessing others' private memories. Thus, Cherry's reeducation is not the simple act of reclaiming or relearning the past but offers a vexed interpretative lens for translating, collating, and piecing together fragmented bits of knowledge, all geared toward the question about what this all means for *her* own uncertain future.

While the book's title, *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong*, suggests the titular character is the main figure of interest, one requiring some kind of personal rehabilitation or acquisition of knowledge, the novel actually does not exclusively revolve around the Cherry (whose story is actually minor) but follows all the other various members of her extended family. Acting almost like a fictionalized memoir of the author's own life, Aimee Phan crafts a successful academically inclined character able to remember things perfectly, but who would rather put her mental skills toward investigating her family's background rather than practice rote memorization in medical school. Despite having an amazing photographic memory, Cherry comes to the realization there is no such thing really as a "perfect memory," since

her own family cannot even remember or account for everything that has happened to them. Cherry is soon starting medical school at the University of California, Irvine, and the family is proud of her career ambitions. From the central premise of Cherry attending prestigious schools as the road to happiness, the novel quickly moves into a centrifugal story about the internal strife, conflicts, and affairs of other family members. *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* is really about the reeducation of Cherry's family, shuttling and shuffling through their multifarious experiences.

Titled as the reeducation rather than memoir of Cherry Truong, Phan's book echoes on the first level how Vietnamese refugee experience and literature are being redefined "to serve sometimes a myriad of simultaneous and sometimes contradictory social and historical functions."⁴² Reeducation underscores the complications of life after war, as Erin Ninh puts it, "in which living is not a debtor's prison and one's most cherished wish is not escape," suggesting that the debt one owes to one's history and family need not be reduced to a permanent sentence of guilt but a quiet sense of ownership over the guilty past.⁴³ Despite the sinister connotations of reeducation, the novel articulates a flexible poetics and politics of belonging, recognizing that the family can be both a safe place as well as a violent space full of personal wrongs and indignities.

Dignity is hard to maintain when all the characters are humiliated in some manner by their own loved ones, and it is a challenge to "save face" under regimes of blame, shame, and punishment. In the communist reeducation camps, South Vietnamese political prisoners were forced to renounce ties to their own families and incriminate friends in a never-ending game of lies. Yet, the camps made individuals more likely to realize their complicity with institutions of power and their moral obligation to others, who could be friend and/or enemy, collaborator and/or accuser. After a gang shooting accident involving her brother, Cherry falls into coma, but once she recovers she fails to remember much of anything that happened to her. Without memory, our heroine's "perfect narration falls apart" and she must call upon others to "take over the story for her ... [as] Cherry does not trust these fragments [of memory as they] ... contain perspectives that have been fed to her after the fact, and perhaps they are not her own at all, just other people's opinions, insistent truths."⁴⁴

Whenever Cherry or her brother would ask their father to describe his experience in the reeducation camps, Sanh would give them little information, as though his memory was a gift to be earned as well as something he wished to hide. For Sanh, the words "reeducation" and "camp" were not a proper translation of the prison in which he was placed as the two conjoined terms compounded "a lie that still tasted vile in Sanh's mouth."⁴⁵

Though he did not wish to scare his children regarding his tortured past, Sanh realized that the socialist regime's refusal to use the correct term for what "they were doing to soldiers further demonstrated hypocrisy."⁴⁶ The victorious government had promised to embrace and reintegrate the country's former traitors but instead meted out punishment, instilling more agony rather than real reform or "reeducation." Sanh's reeducation consisted of watching others suffer and die without justice. The positive undertone of "reeducation" denies a cruel reality as the term lies about postwar realities. The false illusion of reeducation prevents Sanh from divulging information to his children, who are totally uneducated about the war. In this way, reeducation bears a double function: it can evoke a history of violence and simultaneously deny it.

What is the logic of the term or process of reeducation that gives it the power to produce contestation against conformist thinking of various kinds? Reeducation camps purportedly turned ARVN soldiers into lovers of communism but turned out to be sites of human captivity. However, realization of the state's hypocrisy does not alone produce a kind of critical consciousness of power's excesses and abuses, since soldiers like Sanh knew they were essentially in a prison. The *prima facie* innocence of the term "reeducation"—defined as the process of being educated again for new purposes (reform) or resumption of normal activities (rehabilitation)—obscures evil practices (repression). For this reason, reeducation is not really education in the sense of moral uplift, intellectual enlightenment, and social development. It is a term that exists solely to veil ideology's work upon individuals and society, despite the glaring recognition by many that reeducation is code for punishment for past deeds and political affiliations. As the source for a kind of critical "double consciousness," reeducation signifies debt to a higher authority (state, family, society) that makes one free and unfree, bound up to the indeterminacy of the potential future, an unrealized liberation from a past from which one cannot flee. In this way, reeducation enables and disables a proper reading of texts and experience. It invites much discretion toward information kept under the shroud of secrecy and fear of public exposure. In this vein, one can be *reeducated* without being properly *educated*.

A Black Market of Choice

Differentiating between those who might harm or exploit and those are supposed to protect is made confusing within the thick interpersonal relations of the family. In the letters written to Ba Cu, Hung tells his mistress how he envies the youth in France with their "liberated thinking," marrying

for love and not following the bonds of tradition or parental expectations.⁴⁷ We see this demand for blind obedience when Kim-Vo, ever the manipulator, tries to arrange the marriage of her teenage daughter to an old American officer who according to Tuyet “looked at her and her sisters like they were prostitutes.”⁴⁸ Cherry’s two grandmothers are two separate character studies. One is a single mother who raised her children through devious schemes and plotting, while the other is a cloistered mother and wife who dutifully provides for her family at the expense of her own individual happiness. As two contrasting feminine archetypes, the grandmothers epitomize the refugee will to survive by any means necessary. Cherry’s mother, Tuyet, was a rebel against her own mother, but now tries to control Cherry in a repetition of maternal violence/love. Dealing with their historic “humiliation and suffering” within public discourse, Qui-Phiet Tran says Vietnamese women in exile do not often write stories about official political history, but their political struggles can be found in “ordinary life, the difficulties of adaptation to the new society, or the problems of the human heart such as their loneliness, their remembrance of things past, and their longing for home.”⁴⁹

The novel is dominated by the voices of female characters whom readers get to know through a third-person view. In a letter written by Tuyet, the rebellious daughter who left her family for her husband finally shows repentance by sponsoring her mother to come to the United States. While her mother is waiting in an Indonesian refugee camp, Tuyet composes a letter with glowing comments about the “Little Saigon” community, which she claims is like “Saigon before the war” or even “better than Saigon ever was.”⁵⁰ As she writes, “Our years of suffering are soon coming to an end. They have taught me a valuable lesson: families are not supposed to be separated. While our circumstances were dictated by war, we are free to do as we choose in America. Our family shall never be apart again.”⁵¹

Reading these private memos written by her mother, Cherry could barely recognize the same strong-willed, domineering woman she grew up with as the scribbled handwritings showcased an insecure girl always giving deference to her mother. Cherry soon comes to embrace her mother as a more complex person rather than a one-dimensional figure of austerity. The letters however present a dilemma: “A good daughter would return these letters to her mother,”⁵² Cherry reasons, but her mother would have been angry at her taking and reading them in the first place. Cherry wanted to keep them, but would this make her a bad daughter? “After digesting these words—feeling how they scratched at her pride, her heart—Cherry realized that they no longer belonged to her mother” but to her. Her mother’s memories were *hers* to possess, Cherry concluded.⁵³

In her study of the figure of the duty-bound daughter in Asian American literature, Erin Ninh notes the demands placed on Asian daughters to be both servants and saviors of their families. This female subject in filial bondage speaks to an expression of self that finds “speech only in the borrowed language of misrepresentation.”⁵⁴ For Ninh, the melancholic “lack” that haunts the Asian American feminine experience generates its own value from the material deprivation and state of debt that remains impossible to be repaid to the family. The ungrateful daughter who refuses to follow her elders and societal expectations is not simply displaying ingratitude, but inhabits “a state of being resistant to the call of debt—the ability to receive without acknowledgement or return.”⁵⁵ The filial debt owed by the duty-bound daughter to her family/community creates docile gendered subjects just as refugee and reeducation camps create docile feminized subjects. In Phan’s book, reeducation plays with the twinned concepts of family debt and family duty by allowing Cherry to become aware of her own disciplining as a compliant subject of the family, and the family as duty-bound to the state. *Reeducation* spins an intergenerational story of women (and men) learning to juggle and accommodate various gendered forms of debt/docility/duty within asymmetrical power relations and disciplinary structures.

Despite this call to female gratitude, the unruliness of diasporic kinship formation breaks down family relations to reveal slippages in the reproduction of domesticity. As Trinh Minh-Ha notes, the mother is the proprietor and protector of family knowledge; she holds secrets to maintain the public face of the family. Maternal knowledge offers the word of truth but fails in speech within the patriarchal sociosymbolic order. As Minh-Ha finds, “In the politics of memory, public opinion maintains a reduced conception of memory ... [but the mother’s knowledge is] always opposed to oblivion and identified with the power to recall what has been learned.”⁵⁶ The silent power of the mother’s knowledge to help one to recall what has already been learned is evident in the case of Aunt Trinh, who begins to slowly lose her mind, turned into a deranged religious seeker wandering Paris. Trinh’s demented actions are indicative of a strange ailment. It soon comes to Grandmother Hoa’s attention that the source of her daughter’s psychological delusions and emotional disturbances is the young girl’s rape by Malaysian guards during the family’s refuge passage—a daily occurrence witnessed by Trinh’s young son, who remembers such incidents through his psychosomatic associations with the mother. On certain days, Xuan would be able vividly recall the pungent smell of the guards, and this memory makes him lose his sense of direction and purpose in life. He would ask, “Was this her memory or his? He felt it was his—he could see,

taste, hear, and feel the hopelessness of that night ... or was it because his mother reminded him of every detail for so many years? He supposed it didn't matter if it was her memory or his. ... A person could not invent that sort of memory."⁵⁷ From these episodes of nightly rape, Xuan would remember the way guards directed their lusty gaze toward his mother and sometimes to him, a sexual pedophilic threat thwarted by Trinh, who tried to shield her young child from the men's carnal lust. In this intergenerational reproduction of memory, mother and son are united in tactile, visceral ways. The recurring sexual violence of this shared history leads Xuan's usual photographic memory to fail one day, forcing the rising academic star student to give up on his rigorous French *bac* (baccalaureate) examinations. With no time left to complete an essay for the philosophy portion of this important test, concerned as he was with personal problems, Xuan made no effort to compose a well-considered answer to exam questions such as "Why do we want to be free?" He then comes to the conclusion that while philosophers could ask such lofty questions, delighting in abstract intellectual games, he could not. The apolitical nature of academia fails to recognize the merit of a refugee boy's reeducation in life-and-death matters, which largely come from his vivid experiences in the dangerous licentious spaces of the camp. Xuan resigns to the quiet fact that "he had other subjects to study,"⁵⁸ refusing to participate in the delicate act of balancing his mental-emotional distress with present professional commitments. In refusing to perform his academic duties, Xuan is not refusing family expectations of success but quietly honoring the life of his mother, thus tackling another important *bac* question: "Must political action be guided by the knowledge of history?"⁵⁹ Xuan's political act in resisting the demands of higher education dramatizes the agony and necessity of remembering horrific events and migrant experiences made invisible in French history.

Xuan's critical reeducation in what truly matters stops him from equivocating too much over the right response to other exam questions, such as "Is dialogue the path to truth?"⁶⁰ when truth is guided not by verbal dialogue or exchange but by quiet wisdom found in silence. Tapping into his own intellectual and cultural sovereignty, Xuan is the portrait of an anti-model minority Vietnamese subject, exposing the failure of the French public schools to teach him something valuable for his life, resisting the imperatives of a postcolonial reeducation that requires him to fit into white European society by forsaking his Vietnamese history and refugee identity. Xuan thinks to himself, "Memories are hard to quantify and impossible to reason with. People forget all the time and then the past returns, unexpectedly, disturbing the present."⁶¹ Memory then serves as more than a reprocessing or recounting of historical violence but a deeply self-reflexive

practice dealing with historical violence on one's own terms.⁶² Unlike other female-oriented novels where men stand outside or antithetical to the main perspectives of women, *Reeducation* incorporates and inculcates men into maternal memorywork and female experiences with sexual violence. This intersubjectivity highlights what sociologist Avery Gordon calls "complex personhood" and how all people "remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others."⁶³

Conclusion: Learning to Unlearn the Past

Thang Dao states that diaspora is not the static condition of achieving freedom but a radical site that fosters a reimagining of freedom itself.⁶⁴ Acknowledging war diasporas as grounded in the refugee's perpetual move toward potential freedom rather than the outright possession of freedom, one can recognize how the refugee's potential for freedom comes to form the perceptual signifier in what Kaja Silverman calls the "dispiriting apprehension of the otherness of one's self, and the ecstatic discovery, at the site of the other, of one's utmost 'ownness.'"⁶⁵ *Reeducation* as an oblique method of reading postwar refugee experience and writing aims to make sense of the strained circumstances in which people try to "do the right thing" under the wrong conditions. Refugee families carry all sorts of secrets, dirty laundry not usually meant to be aired out, and so opening the secret box of history carries both rewards and risks for the subject wanting to be reeducated. The Vietnam War was a major event in which no Vietnamese person was left unscathed, a conflict where there were no clear winners and losers either. This is especially true in Cherry's family, where no one is the victor, yet no one is simply a victim. The reeducated subject is ultimately an indebted subject, chained to the suffering but also strength of others. *Reeducation* gives political meaning and urgency to the axiom that everyone must hold one other accountable for their actions, giving an active verb form to memorywork and politicizing the act of remembering history.⁶⁶

Refugees and their children are never truly free from what happened in the past, and this is all the more reason why reeducation is important in helping individuals learn more about the effects of war upon their present existence. To the disapproval of her parents, Cherry suspends her college education to embark on a personal journey piecing together the forgotten parts of her family's history—a voyage that conjures the history of South Vietnamese soldiers sentenced to detention. In the reeducation camps like the kind where her father and uncles had been sent, convicts had to "rat out" or incriminate fellow inmates by identifying those who lacked a

“good education.” As a different kind of “prisoner of consciousness,” Cherry learns that life means more than getting a good education and feeling bad about the poor starving children left in Saigon constantly mentioned by her mother. Education is a gift, Tuyet tells Cherry, and in “America, when you improve, you get anything you want.”⁶⁷ Cherry was always encouraged to want this kind of good life by way of higher education, but she never wanted success enough and wonders if this makes her weak or disrespectful to the sacrifices of her parents. Receiving an education fulfills the burden of family expectations, she surmises, but undertaking a reeducation in refugee history fulfills filial duties of another sort.

The novel concludes with Cherry touring Vietnam with her French cousins, eventually stopping in Ha Long Bay. She takes with her the secret letters gifted to her by her grandmothers. While Cherry is discussing her poor job prospects with her cousins, a group of young children seize Cherry’s letters and scatter them into the water. Though the cousins try to stop them, Cherry could feel her heart “growing heavy” as the letters sunk to the bay floor, never to be read again. In this dramatic final scene, the youth of Vietnam with no personal attachment to these old refugee letters return them to the great beyond, a timeless place where recovery of history is impossible, but where reeducation is still possible in the void of knowledge made possible by the loss.

A semantically loaded term not easily appropriated in a celebratory manner, “reeducation” accepts the reality that there exists no true state of refuge from war or proper reparations for war.⁶⁸ Inextricable from the history of South Vietnamese political prisoners, reeducation invites the concurrent erasure and exposure of a buried history of oppression. For Vietnamese refugees, the act of passing on war memories to their Westernized children is shaped by silence, amnesia, and ambivalence toward historical truth, but the reproduction of these memories persists through the work of women and their kin. So many people are unknowingly part of the “camp”—trapped in ethnic enclaves, gated communities, rigorous universities, nail salons, terrible marriages, and so forth. In those enclosed places where refugees must learn to live, love, and labor again, *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* provides important clues into the desire for freedom lurking in the closed affairs of the heart, holding true to the feminist mantra that the personal is political.

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Notes

1. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 22–27. In short, the "boat" is not a literal or stable referent for the wooden boats on which millions of refugees fled (though that is the book's invocation) but the perfect Foucauldian model of a heterotopia with an open-ended interpretation of space, place, and time. We can think of the boat qua boat, but ultimately the image-concept unsettles its own intrinsic meaning to unravel traditional assumptions about what a book about "refugees," "Vietnamese people," and "cosmopolitanism" is supposed to look like.
2. Truong Phan, *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* (New York: St. Martin's, 2012), 131.
3. Youngsuk Chae, *Politicizing Asian American Literature: Towards a Critical Multiculturalism* (London: Routledge, 2007).
4. Richard Chang, "O.C. Native Aimee Phan Writes Novel about Reeducation Camps," *Orange County Register*, March 23, 2012, <http://www.ocregister.com/articles/phan-346022-family-vietnamese.html>.
5. Phan, *Reeducation*, 131.
6. *Ibid.*, 26.
7. Nathalie Huynh Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2009).
8. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, *This Is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 2.
9. *Ibid.*, 42.
10. *Ibid.*, 65.
11. Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 103–28.
12. Qui-Phiet Tran, "Contemporary Vietnamese American Feminine Writing: Exile and Home," *Amerasia Journal* 19, no. 3 (1993): 71–83.
13. Yen Le Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, nos. 1–2 (2006): 410–33.
14. Aihwa Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
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- "Refugee Experiences and Southeast Asian Women's Mental Health," *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 22, no. 2 (2000): 144–68.
16. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
 17. See Achille Mbembé, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40.
 18. Kathleen Knight Abowitz and Jason Harnish, "Contemporary Discourses of Citizenship," *Review of Educational Research* 76, no. 4 (2006): 653–90.
 19. Andrew T. Pham, "The Returning Diaspora: Analyzing Overseas Vietnamese (Viet Kieu): Contributions Toward Vietnam's Economic Growth" (M.Sc. thesis, London School of Economics, 2010).
 20. See Louis-Jacques Dorais, "Defining the Overseas Vietnamese," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 10, no. 1 (2001): 3–27.
 21. Viet Nguyen, "Speak of the Dead, Speak of Vietnam: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Minority Discourse," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 2 (2006): 7–37.
 22. Kim Nguyen, "Without the Luxury of Historical Amnesia: The Model Postwar Immigrant Remembering the Vietnam War through Anticommunist Protests," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no. 2 (2010): 134–50.
 23. Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).
 24. Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).
 25. Phan, *Reeducation*, 5.
 26. Phan, *Reeducation*, 295.
 27. *Ibid.*, 295.
 28. Nhi T. Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xxii.
 29. Nazli Kibria, *Family Tightrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). Phan, *Reeducation*, 163.
 30. *Ibid.*, 163.
 31. *Ibid.*, 327.
 32. *Ibid.*, 186.
 33. *Ibid.*, 259
 34. *Ibid.*
 35. For more on the politics of forgetting, see Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
 36. Phan, *Reeducation*, 94.
 37. See Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press Books, 2012).
 38. Phan, *Reeducation*, 95.
 39. "The Reeducation of Cherry Truong," *Kirkus Reviews*, March 15, 2012.
 40. Pelaud, *This Is All I Choose to Tell*, 64.

41. Phan, *Reeducation*, 340.
42. Pelaud, *This Is All I Choose to Tell*, xxvii.
43. Erin Khuê Ninh, *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 159.
44. Phan, *Reeducation*, 292.
45. *Ibid.*, 320.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*, 262.
48. *Ibid.*, 350.
49. Qui-Phiet Tran, "Contemporary Vietnamese American Feminine Writing: Exile and Home," *Amerasia Journal* 19, no. 3 (1993): 72–83.
50. Phan, *Reeducation*, 329.
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*, 342.
53. *Ibid.*
54. Ninh, *Ingratitude*, 62.
55. Ninh, *Ingratitude*, 155.
56. See Trinh Minh-Ha, *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 103.
57. Phan, *Reeducation*, 158–59.
58. *Ibid.*, 161.
59. *Ibid.*, 150.
60. *Ibid.*, 144.
61. *Ibid.*, 161.
62. See Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism: The Nation-State and Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
63. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 4.
64. Anh Thang Dao, "Exile of Freedom: The Nation-State and Exile in Linda Lê's *Slander*," *positions* 20, no. 3 (2012): 713–36.
65. Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 49.
66. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York: Random House, 1980).
67. Phan, *Reeducation*, 57.
68. We later learn that Cherry's name is derived from the French name Cherre. As a Vietnamese American, she bears the heritage of French connection even though she herself grew up not in France but rather the United States.