

Walking and Wandering: Reconstructing Diasporic Subjectivity in T.C. Huo's *Land of Smiles* and Lê Thi Diem Thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*

By **Brian G. Chen**

The absence of Asian Americans in the literary scholarship on American mobility must be deemed a serious, if historically explainable, omission. For Asian American literature, from its very inception, has also been "a literature of movement, of motion."

---Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (119-120)

From the beginnings of literature, poets and writers have based their narratives on crossing borders, on wandering, on exile, on encounters beyond the familiar. The stranger is an archetype in epic poetry, in novels. The tension between alienation and assimilation has always been a basic theme.

---Jhumpa Lahiri (219)

This article explores the shifting subjectivity of the Southeast Asian diasporic members, especially those from Laos and Vietnam, and their redefinition of home, through literary representations in T.C. Huo's *Land of Smiles* (2000) and Lê Thi Diem Thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003). Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the physical presence of the Southeast Asian refugees in the United States has changed the image of Asian Americans.¹ The ways in which they grapple with their diasporic subjectivity by adopting the host country as their new home are fraught with resistance and ambivalence. According to Ngô, Nguyen, and Lam, the presence of the Southeast Asian refugees is "proof of the postcolonial truism 'we are here because you were there'" (672), which

¹ Many refugee groups relocate and resettle in their respective adoptive countries, and their condition of dispersal is diasporic, so "refugee" sometimes can be reconfigured as "migrant diaspora" (Van Hear 180). Due to political turbulence in many parts of the world, refugees have formed a new diaspora in the contemporary era. Therefore, I refer to members of the Southeast Asian diaspora as "refugees" in this article.

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dismantles the United States' self-heroicized role as a peacemaker that it insisted on playing until its troops withdrew from mainland Southeast Asia after the war ended in defeat. Namely, the Southeast Asian refugees in the United States are a historiographic reminder of the tarnished wars which had led hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asians and their ancestral homes to catastrophe.² By analyzing the Southeast Asian refugees' diasporic subjectivity in the novels, this article asks the following seminal questions: How do members of the Southeast Asian diaspora use their physical movement as a trope, such as walking and wandering, to reinscribe their refugee experiences and to disprove the idea of a static subjectivity? How does their physical movement remold their state of being and reconstruct their subjectivity? I claim that they reconstruct their subjectivity by making contact with their living surroundings. The body in motion validates their physical presence in the new homeland and contests the collective understanding of *diaspora*. In the wake of reestablishing their diasporic subjectivity, they purport to be active, visible individuals, not passive, temporary guests always seeking to return to their native countries.

To conceptualize, walking and wandering in my article refer to an ostensibly divergent yet inseparable state in which the Southeast Asian refugees in the novels are situated. In most cases, walking represents their physical transitions on a refugee journey while wandering designates their mentally precarious state of drifting. Generally we see more physical movement of walking in the protagonist of *Land of Smiles* while the state of wandering is more prominent in *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (hereafter *The Gangster*). However, walking and wandering are somehow interchangeable on a figurative level. I would argue that whenever the characters are physically engaged in walking, they are simultaneously in a mental state of wandering. Additionally, American writer Rebecca Solnit also remarks that walking elicits not only physical, but also emotional and psychological, responses, for it creates "a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord" (3). For this reason, it can be concluded that walking and wandering are not completely settled but discursive concepts. Therefore, I apply the term "psychosomatic" in this article to refer to this mind-body enmeshment in this peripatetic trope. Moreover, as the body is one of the key components of one's identity—"both chosen identities and those imposed by institutions" (Weedon 14), the diasporic body encompasses various forms

² Generally, Southeast Asians refer to Vietnamese, Laotians, Hmong, and Cambodians, who were evacuated from their homelands when the Communists took over the political power after the WWII and the Vietnam War.

of subjectivities. Some typical attributes of diasporic members imposed by institutions are their homelessness, passivity, and powerlessness, which have almost shaped a “racialized form” of diasporic subjectivity. The representations of refugee migration in the novels thus frame my argument that challenges the institutional racializing labels by showing evidence of the Southeast Asian refugees’ resilience and capabilities to survive in a new land and to reconstruct their diasporic subjectivity. As the two physical movements represent these Southeast Asian refugees’ shifting conditions of body and mind, they simultaneously carry the notion that the diasporic subjectivity is fluid and subject to change.

Meanwhile, as both novels are among the first literary production depicting the lives of second-generation Southeast Asian refugees in the United States, the authors’ characterization seems intentional to gear toward shaping a positive image of the Southeast Asian refugees whose “American Dream” materializes despite all the struggles and hardships.³ Recovering material possessions is one of the underpinnings in the formation of these characters’ new social identity from refugees to residents. In regard to the refugee condition, Mimi Thi Nguyen contests the reports and studies of refugee ethnographers, many of whom impute to refugees as being passive and powerless, and argues that when the refugee condition is reduced to “a generalizable state of abnormality, shorthand for deprivation, deindividuation, and deficiency” (55), this condition equally underestimates the human viability of refugees. Such generalizations systemically devalue the capabilities of refugees and all the possibilities they can create to improve their lives. Whether *Southeast Asians* or *refugees*, their presence in the United States has become “a signifier for the living legacies of war, genocide, forced severance, and, not the least, the indomitable human capacity for resilience” (Um 831). Granted, these refugees have little material capital, but the human and social capital from families and communities cannot be ignored (Võ 90). Accordingly, it is my conviction that having shared opportunities to obtain material security and proprietary rights helps refugees reconstruct their subjectivity and social identity, which, when applied to the Southeast Asian refugees in the novels, is salient. Not until they regain the ownership of *things* that they have lost through displacement and relocation do they feel empowered by their reconstructed diasporic subjectivity and rise to the occasion.

In *Land of Smiles*, the narrator Boontakorn starts his walking routine in the refugee camp in Thailand after fleeing his home country, Laos,

³ Linda Trinh Võ indicates that Vietnamese refugees’ success earns themselves the title of “model minority” refugees who have attained the “American Dream.” However, she argues that such essentialized characterization ignores the “circumstantial and structural conditions during the time of their arrival and the ongoing resistance to their presence” (86).

while losing most of his family members. His walking is driven by the lack of privacy in his living space. His “home” in the refugee camp is simply an annex poorly made up of barracks shared with a Catholic nun, Madame Françoise. Boontakorn resents this negative living condition, for it has nothing like his old home in Laos but is “merely a place to stay, to sleep in, nothing more” (Huo 14). This poses a lived reality of his changed status from an individual with a home and state to a stateless escapee fostered by another country. Unable to have an uninterrupted life with his remaining family, Boontakorn dreams of building his future home in the United States. Ironically, as a carpenter by trade, Boontakorn’s father builds houses for others but fails to provide his family with a stable living space. His insouciance about improving his family’s living condition worsens when he allows Madame Françoise to use the shared living room as a classroom for teaching French. As a result, when students gather in the living room/classroom, not only do they turn the space into a riotous jungle and destroy the serenity of a home with their noise, but they also invade Boontakorn’s privacy at the same time. In terms of home space, David Morley remarks that privacy is highly valued as “a key feature of home life, enabling family members to live as they please without the scrutiny of others,” on which he elaborates, “Our psychic dependence on this ability to control the physical borders of our living space is most clearly dramatized in the feelings of violation” (29). For Boontakorn, after his mother and sister drowned in the Mekong River during their escape, his home life is never the same, not to mention the living space in the refugee camp, where he has no control of the physical borders between the private and the public. Like many refugees in the camp, feeling displaced and disoriented, he no longer possesses a physical space of his own. When his private space becomes a public arena, Boontakorn seeks an outlet through walking to escape the hustle-bustle. Therefore, strolling alone in the open is the only way by which he can find a space to retain privacy and locate a psychic space that nobody can violate.

Bipedalism is a harmonious psychosomatic movement that can make a powerful political means to demonstrate one’s *raison d’être*. Walking alone is generally associated with liberating an individual from psychological distress by focusing on one single body movement. Some consider walking as an exercise and a lifestyle for better health and fitness, and to a certain extent, it can also be “a vehicle to make a political statement” (Amato 255). For example, in history, people have utilized parades in public space as a means to express their political agenda or call for changes. The Southeast Asian refugees’ perambulation on the streets is by no means an organized activity, but their existence, as previously noted, is a powerful political critique of the U.S. government’s military presence in Southeast Asia. In addition, Henry David Thoreau alludes to

the original definition of walking as *sauntering*, which derives from the Latin phrase *sans terre*: without land or a home (93). Despite its implication of the homeless, nomadic condition associated with diasporic members, Thoreau's notion of walking suitably explains that their home is nowhere yet *everywhere*. Here, my emphasis on *everywhere* indicates that diasporic members' notion of home is negotiable by virtue of their mobile flexibility, which allows them to claim any place as their home as long as this place suffices shelter and belonging from communal solidarity. It is important to clarify that, given the historical context, socioeconomic status, motivations, and various determinants attached to his identity, Thoreau saunters freely in an environment where he belongs to escape corruption in urban civilization. By contrast, the Southeast Asian refugees' walking exhibits their frustration caused by the forced exile from their native countries and the anxiety of transitioning from place to place.

Boontakorn's peripatetic routine reflects his anxiety of being a refugee and his solution to coping with it. Driven by the need to walk, Boontakorn finds himself a way to pass time—walking in the camp to find “a place to simply station [his] body” (Huo 25). As mentioned previously, walking is a subliminal movement that engages mind, body, and emotion, to reach a psychosomatic collaboration and to form a close connection with the environment. His walking helps transfer his psychological distress to physical strength by finding a place to settle his nerves. Walking becomes not only a newfound habit to allay himself but also a means to explore the camp and spare him from dissonance in the house. Since his private space is encroached upon, Boontakorn decides to take a long walk until the French class ends. The change of living space does not defeat Boontakorn but allows him to develop his survival strategies by connecting his presence with his living environment. Faced with frenzies of life, rather than feeling devastated, Boontakorn finds a way to sustain himself through walking. To accomplish a psychosomatic balance, his innate desire to survive even in an uninviting situation enables him to turn negative conditions into a positive force.

Despite his sense of isolation and alienation, Boontakorn shows different ways in which he connects with various places throughout his transitional life. When Boontakorn wanders around the camp, he feels his presence like an estranged phantom. The want of home drives him to walk and wander like a ghost when he thinks, “I wouldn't have to put up with so much if I had a home” (Huo 69). The instability of a refugee's life makes Boontakorn feel like a ghost wandering around with no home to return to. Oddly enough, he admits the solace from walking in dark alleys because no one could recognize him; he wishes that “the camp had more alleys, more hospitals, more markets, more shops, so [he] could walk endlessly” (Huo 25). In this regard, walking gives Boontakorn a sense of

freedom. In *A Philosophy of Walking*, French philosopher Frédéric Gros remarks that walking, whether a long excursion or simply a short stroll, can help us leave our everyday worries behind. In other words, walking is a form of mental liberation that can put oneself aside for a moment, just like what Gros suggests, “[B]y walking you are not going to meet yourself. By walking, you escape from the very idea of identity, the temptation to be someone, to have a name and a history...The freedom in walking lies in not being anyone; for the walking body has no history, it is just an eddy in the stream of immemorial life” (6-7). Boontakorn’s walking in the camp brings him temporary freedom from thinking about his traumatic past and his uncertain future. All the issues that he has to deal with after becoming a refugee are so intense that, by walking, he can take a break momentarily from worrying about them. The darkness in his walks provides shelter for Boontakorn to conceal himself so that he need not fret about his identity and history. To some extent, the freedom that Boontakorn receives from walking gives him a therapeutic relief from his anxiety. Concurrently, he feels as if he were a phantom with no identity for an absence of home, or rather, a liminal identity. Contrary to Gros’s idea, however, Boontakorn’s walking body is the most evident material history that records every piece of memory on his refugee journey. As long as his body lives, the history coexists with it. Even though he finally enrolls in an English class to station his body, Boontakorn’s walking routine does not cease but reemerges in his life as a coping mechanism for his anxiety.

Walking and wandering also represent different stages of Boontakorn’s internal changes and his negotiation with the ideas of home. In the beginning of resettlement, his new American life is nothing but disappointment. His “American Dream” of building a home with his father does not immediately transpire when he constantly moves from one sponsor’s house to the next under his father’s command, for which Boontakorn complains, “He always shoved me over to other families. I had no sense of home anymore” (Huo 132). Without the family life that he dreams of having with his father in the United States, Boontakorn continues living like a refugee, going through multiple transitions. The unwelcoming living conditions in the sponsors’ houses force him to resort to walking to unwind. His urge to walk from time to time becomes an indispensable coping mechanism to vent his frustration and relieve his anxiety.

It is during one of his walks that Boontakorn comes to realize what “home” means to diasporic members when he observes how they lead their lives in a foreign land. When Boontakorn and his father first arrive in the United States, they stay with Lilian, the father’s girlfriend, in her apartment in San Francisco. Annoyed by the noise from the guests at

Lilian's dinner party, he goes out for a walk—a habit that always brings him positive sensations. Meanwhile, he starts to wonder why Lilian's guests, who are also refugees from Laos, could feel so much at home in a foreign land as if they were not refugees at all. Then it dawns on him that home is what one makes of it and that being a refugee does not have to be miserable. This is a pivotal moment that challenges Boontakorn's notion of a "foreign home"—a place away from one's birth country and ancestral home but still with the possibility to build a community in a foreign land. For Southeast Asian refugees, their feelings of "home" are ambivalent toward the notion of "home-land," which is "hyphenated, distinct, and disconnected" (Um 845). In reality their "home" is now in the United States while their "land," or their ancestral home, is no way to return. They have to sever the two in order to reconstruct their new subjectivity that is not necessarily bound by birthplaces and nationalities.

We can see a distinct transition in Boontakorn's attitude through his change of shoes and learn how he negotiates his identity from a refugee to a resident. His worn-out sneakers are the material objects that have made the most direct contact with the soil of every temporary stop throughout his journey. Therefore, they have become part of his identity and the script of his refugee travelogue recording different places he marks with his footprints during his journey. He refuses to buy new shoes, for the old ones are reminiscent of his life in the refugee camp. As British writer Geoff Nicholson comments, walking is an activity of creating texts: "The pace of words is the pace of walking, and the pace of walking is also the pace of thought" (256). French philosopher Michel de Certeau also remarks that a walker is marking texts in motion (103). In other words, walking is a figurative way of producing texts through physical movement—a prime example for a psychosomatic coordination. Boontakorn has been holding on to negative feelings for his past in the refugee camp as it reminds him of his tough moments in life where he has to cope with the loss of family and home, and learn to live like a sojourner. Rather than denying this past, he keeps it close to his heart because after all it represents his identity of once a refugee. Consequently, instead of new sneakers, Boontakorn purchases a pair of roller skates. One can argue that changing shoes symbolizes Boontakorn's negotiation with his identity and his notion of home. His choice of roller skates expresses his eagerness to merge himself into a new culture. The first step is to learn how to roller-skate—a typical Western exercise that he believes can make him "American." The roller skates represent Boontakorn's swift transition from a refugee who knows little about American culture to a resident who acquires proficient language abilities and makes friends with other refugee children, capable of communicating in English and accepting challenges in his new social life.

Boontakorn is constantly in the process of making, unmaking, and remaking his diasporic subjectivity.⁴ At the outset, he is caught up with a provincial notion of home until he realizes that home can be redefined and his identity can be liminal and pluralistic, beyond borders and boundaries. Even though there is an ideal image of home in his mind, different places in which he relocates harbor multiple identities that are never one and the same. His home is his mother's beauty parlor in Laos, the refugee camps in Thailand, different sponsors' houses, and the apartment that he and his father eventually move into in California. Boontakorn's negotiated notion of home responds to what Parreñas and Siu argue about the versatile, hybrid dimensions of the Asian American diasporic identity, for "[b]eing diasporic is not a static, monolithic identity, nor does it denote an unchanging past or some kind of preserved ethnicity or primordial essence that needs to be rediscovered or untapped" (12). Furthermore, according to Ngô, Nguyen, and Lam, Southeast Asia is "a postcolonial imaginary...a dream of homeland or sometimes nightmare...a war or series of wars or a series of images about war" (672). These critics raise an instrumental point that, for diasporic members coming from war-worn countries, the damage caused by the historical trauma is indelible, and the contentious idea of home has shifted from a geopolitical entity to a nostalgic fantasy. As a common shift, this nostalgic fantasy is conducive to the fact that refugees idealize their past and their home countries for which they are longing, yet to which they can never return. This "distorted image" of a homeland can dangerously hinder them from moving forward (Dao 714). Fortunately, for many Southeast Asian refugees, over years of living in the United States, as the material security in their new homeland has stabilized, this nostalgic fantasy has also dwindled. As shown in *Land of Smiles*, in lieu of this fantasy, the flexibility of diasporic subjectivity facilitates Boontakorn's reincorporation into a new society.⁵

This flexibility of diasporic subjectivity transforms Boontakorn from a refugee to a resident, from an emigrant to a returnee. As a refugee traumatized by the plight of childhood, over the years, going back to the

⁴ I apply the definition by Paul Tiyambe Zeleza that *diaspora* refers to "a process, a condition, a space, and a discourse: the continuous processes by which a diaspora is made, unmade, and remade; the changing conditions in which it lives and expresses itself; the places where it is molded and imagined; and the contentious ways in which it is studied and discussed" (32). This definition reinforces the fluidity of diasporic subjectivity throughout my discussion of the Southeast Asian refugees in these novels.

⁵ As the novel evolves, Boontakorn succeeds in his own hairdressing business in San José, California, a city revived by Southeast Asian refugees in the 1970s with their determination to rebuild their community in a foreign land and a place many Southeast Asian refugees started to call home (Takaki 460).

refugee state has grown into a fear so great that the thought of returning to his native country has never occurred to him. Later on he learns that the diasporic subjectivity and mobility are not limited within geopolitical boundaries; with the socioeconomic status he has established and the citizenship he has been granted, he has total mobile freedom between the United States and Laos. Despite his initial reluctance to return to Laos, he admits having made the right decision to reconnect with his native country. Encouraged by his friends, his return to Laos makes him reacquaint himself with his birthplace and rethink his multilayered cultural identities based upon his refugee experiences. After having lived in the San Francisco Bay Area for years with the support of the human and social capital from the Southeast Asian community, he eventually looks *beyond* cultural binarism and struggles no more with the either-or dichotomy. His homeward journey reassures his belief in a negotiated identity between the old country, which reminds him of his ethnic heritage, and the new country, which helps him establish material security and socioeconomic status, as well as many other sites in between that reinvigorate his identities.

Walking and wandering demonstrate the protagonist's refugee experiences in *Land of Smiles* while similarly foregrounding the lived reality of the Vietnamese refugees in *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. Throughout their journey to the United States, water is the major medium representing the wandering state of the Vietnamese refugees' drifting lives in *The Gangster*. From the novel's epigraph: "In Vietnamese, the word for water and the word for a nation, a country, and a homeland are one and the same: *nu'ô'c*," water encapsulates significant cultural symbolism and sentimentality, and wandering in the water also illustrates complex psychological turmoil that these refugees have encountered throughout their exodus. In other words, water shapes their diasporic subjectivity, for it symbolizes not only a country of people in exile but also a collective experience of escaping from communist persecution by risking their lives and wandering aimlessly in open seas. Since these refugees used to fish for a living, they believe that the water will safeguard them in the end. In the unnamed narrator's vague memory, the water is connected with her family's fishing village back in South Vietnam. However, leaving Vietnam at a young age, she barely establishes any connection with her native country. At school, when the teacher points at Vietnam on the map as "an S-shaped curve near a body of water," the narrator feels foreign to this abstract geographical shape, thinking: "Was that where I had come from?" (Lê 19). Despite the uncertainty about her native land, it is certain that the narrator's wandering experience in the water, shared among other refugees on the same boat, has formed a bond stronger than their family ties, as she says, "Ba and I were connected to the four uncles, not by blood

but by water" (Lê 3). One can argue that water becomes central in the materiality of their diasporic bodies substantially and ideologically. That is to say, water is not merely an element in the natural world but also a substantial participant in the catastrophic journey of these diasporic members. This strong affinity with water subsequently builds their hydrodynamic malleability in life and their perseverance to survive and thrive in a foreign land.

Water is not only an unfathomable material with which the narrator's family develops an ambivalent relation but also a metaphor for their wandering state of mind that oscillates between their old memories back in Vietnam and their new identities in the United States. Formed in a symbolic relation with boat and voice, water morphs into an audible element of the narrator's native language that connects her with her father. When the houseguests are given the task of painting the house, as the head of the team, the narrator's father tries to mimic the host Melvin's voice of command. However, without the same authoritative tone, his voice sounds like "water moving through a reed pipe in the middle of a sad tune. And the sad voice is always asking and answering itself" (Lê 10). In this regard, the narrator associates the sound of flowing water with her father's sad, roaming voice and the poignant memories of the boat people "floating around in his head. Boats full of people trying to get somewhere" (Lê 10). As a cultural signifier, water is not only reflective of the father's traumatic experience but also embedded in the collective consciousness of these Vietnamese refugees with ambivalence. While they identify the water with their native land, the water also takes them away from it. This involuntary wandering in the water, for the exiled members of the Vietnamese diaspora, is their way of (re)telling stories of an historical trauma.

Wandering signifies not only the physical movement but also the psychological flow of memory in these refugees' minds. As the novel progresses, the figurative meaning of water turns from collective to personal when the narrator unfolds the family trauma about her brother's drowning in Vietnam. Their mourning reflects the unpredictable nature of water, which the family depends on for a good living but which also kills an innocent life. After being informed of his son's death, the narrator's father Ba returns home and sees the young narrator leaning over the family well: "The stillness of my body led Ba to understand that I had just lost something in the water, something I could not see much less retrieve" (Lê 144). Contrarily, the mother blames her son's death on the water, mumbling: "He couldn't have been heavy. He was just a little boy. It was the water, isn't it? It was the water. The water was heavy" (Lê 139). Moreover, when Ma offers to help Ba in his garden but worries about "watering the plants wrong," Ba responds, "How could you water the

plants wrong?" (Lê 133). Ma's self-consciousness of having lost her son proves the water fearful, for which she forbids the narrator from nearing the community swimming pool. The weight of water symbolizes the heaviness of their life struggle and tragic loss. What the water ultimately carries is not merely the physical weight of this refugee family but also their psychological gravity on a personal level. Physically, their bodies are trying to cope with changes of living situations; psychologically, their personal trauma persists and comes back periodically to haunt them.

Moreover, wandering illustrates the difficulties for these refugees to reconstruct their subjectivity when they possess no autonomy for their housing situations or proprietary rights. Like their journey in the water, their housing situations continue to stumble in the new country. When Melvin takes over these refugees after his father's death, the young narrator is deeply aggravated by his reluctance and animosity. Confined in a house where she has no wish to live, her mind starts to wander, and she projects herself onto the specimen of the butterfly and other glass animals in the house: "The glass animals didn't blink. They didn't laugh. They never raised an eyebrow or tilted their heads as they listened. They didn't nod in agreement or stomp the ground to object. They didn't ask questions. They didn't seem to want to know anything" (Lê 30). Wandering becomes her mental shelter where she fantasizes the encased butterfly rustles its wings, eager to fly out of the glass paperweight. One of her uncles tells her: "Even if its body was alive, I'm sure that butterfly's soul has long since flown away" (Lê 27). The narrator decides to unfetter the encased butterfly, which reviewer Barbara Hoffert interprets as "a symbol for the young protagonist herself, who eventually flutters away from her prison" (199). Instead of living like a glass-sealed animal, the narrator unleashes the butterfly to express her longing to escape from a soulless life—a gesture that reflects the recognition of her subjectivity and her eagerness to take control of it. Unfortunately, she breaks a picture frame by accident, for which Melvin evicts her family from the house. As she refuses to be treated like a static glass animal and starts having her own opinions, she, together with her family, is penalized for violating the host's rules. Tired of living in a place where they are viewed as unwelcome guests, these refugees wish for a place of their own to reinstate their subjectivity in a new homeland instead of staying subordinate under someone's control.

For the narrator's family, the unstable housing situations in the beginning of their resettlement exemplify their troubled psychosomatic condition. Physically it manifests their drifting existence, while psychologically it intensifies their frustration as well as anxiety through wandering in a foreign neighborhood. In the narrator's recollection, the

color-coded housing complexes for immigrants and refugees can best represent her drifting existence:

Linda Vista, with its rows of yellow houses, is where we eventually washed to shore. Before Linda Vista, we lived in the Green Apartment on Thirtieth and Adams, in Normal Heights. Before the Green Apartment, we lived in the Red Apartment on Forty-ninth and Orange, in East San Diego. Before the Red Apartment we weren't a family like we are a family now. We were in separate places, waiting for each other. Ma was standing on a beach in Vietnam while Ba and I were in California with four men who had escaped with us on the same boat. (Lê 28)

These colors vividly demonstrate numerous locations in the narrator's nomadic life from one place to another. After Ma arrives to reunite with her and Ba, they move into another apartment complex, which is then to be demolished for building condominiums. They are forced to move out in a rush and sneak back and forth to retrieve their belongings before finding a new place. The narrator describes her family's eviction: "We tumble out the window like people tumbling across continents. We are time traveling, weighed down by heavy furniture and bags of precious junk" (Lê 97). This eviction reminds the family of their traumatic exit from Vietnam, which resurfaces to haunt them like an endless nightmare and frustrates Ma, who cries, "Why are we always leaving like this?" (Lê 97). These transitions and relocations cause all the uncertainty and impermanence in their already-precarious life, but these experiences also strengthen their endurance against tough situations and prepare themselves for the betterment in the host country. Their search of a new home may be jolting and intimidating; however, when the entire family sticks together, they manage to overcome the daunting fear of a new reality.

So, to what extent are walking and wandering related to Southeast Asian diasporic members' pursuit of material security? I would return to my argument that obtaining material possessions facilitates the refugees' resettlement and reestablishes their sense of home in a foreign land. Their perambulation represents this slow yet sure process of their adaptation and connection to a new environment and culture. As a recurring trope in both novels, strolling in an urban space has close relevance to commercial activities upon which the Southeast Asian refugees reconstruct their subjectivity. In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin observes the *flâneur* in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century, whom he calls the urban performer in a city that offers him "a theatrical display, an arena" (347)

while the *flâneur's* presence in the marketplace is like the “strolling commodity” (367). The *flâneur* appears as an active shopper, but at the same time he is also a passive consumer under capitalism on account that he has the freedom to purchase but he is also given only certain options for purchase. He becomes part of the landscape of an urban space—he coexists with the city. Moreover, the existence of the *flâneur* is closely attached to the marketplace—the major center of commercialism (Benjamin 21). The *flâneur* seeks to merge in the crowd so that he can complete his *flânerie*—his shopping chores. This merge, when applied to the Southeast Asian refugees in the novels, is a metaphor for their reincorporation into the host society. In this regard, walking and wandering are congruous with commercial activities to form the very foundation of a bourgeois identity.

For example, in *Land of Smiles*, walking connects Boontakorn with his father to start a new life in a culture based heavily on materials and helps him recognize his new social identity. After Boontakorn and his father finally move into their own apartment, their daily walks after dinner become a routine. During his walks, Boontakorn observes the people in an automobile-reliant culture where walking is a missing part in their lives, on which he comments, “It amazed us that people in America did not take a walk to facilitate their digestion. Walking not only helped digestion, it also put us into a situation that forced us to talk to each other” (Huo 156). Moreover, they use their walks to complete grocery shopping and for other utilitarian purposes. For Boontakorn and his father as the new walkers/performers in the American urban culture, walking is not just a healthful physical exercise and a convenient way of accomplishing their errands; it improves both bodily functionality and familial/social interactions. Every time they bring back material objects purchased during their walks, they are one step further toward completing their home. It is a self-fulfilling experience for them to work piecemeal and eventually restart their family life in the United States.

Likewise, in *The Gangster*, the narrator and Ba engage in their routine walks on weekday mornings and midnights. However, the purpose of their jaunt around the neighborhood is not for any particular commercial activity but to merge themselves into their new material reality. To further elaborate, the father and the daughter use physical mobility to discover their host society and to validate their existence through their bipedal adventures as active diasporic subjects. Feeling snared and longing to explore the outside world, they would tiptoe from the house in order not to disturb their host family, and start an excursion to familiarize themselves with American material culture. Their excursion is meant to create a psychosomatic balance, for walking connects them with their new neighborhood while wandering satisfies their yearning for

liberation from constrained mobility. Meanwhile, the narrator remembers roving around the streets with her father in the midnight hour. Marveled at the material abundance that feeds their eyes, they enjoy modern window displays in the dark and experience culture shock together. This routine of theirs becomes such a bizarre behavior to the public that it even receives the local news coverage:

NEIGHBORHOOD NEWS: A Vietnamese man and a young girl were seen wandering the aisle of the Safeway Supermarket on University Avenue between the hours of midnight and 1 a.m.

According to the store manager, their behavior was “strange” but not in any way threatening. When asked to clarify, the manager explained, “Everything seemed to interest them. I mean, everything, from the TV dinners to the 10-pound bags of dog food.”

[...]

From the random way they went through the store, it was clear they were not looking for anything in particular. They made no purchases and left shortly before 1 a.m., after the child, who was perhaps his daughter, lay down in the spice aisle while the man was absorbed with the different varieties of salt available. (Lê 110)

They repeat such aimless roaming, wandering in the middle of the night and looking for a place to sedate themselves. The grocery store, like a wonderland, represents the wealth of material life that they have never experienced in Vietnam. At the same time, as they place themselves in a new neighborhood, their visibility confirms their active contact with the new homeland via their bipedalism. In the eyes of the store manager, who is used to the material wealth, the narrator and Ba’s wandering in the store is definitely eccentric. However, instead of simply being viewers gauging the material wealth on the outside, they become the potential *flâneurs* having access to the inside. As part of the reconstruction of their diasporic subjectivity, this switch from the outsider to the insider grants positive prospects for their new life. Not only do they relish the multiple options of grocery as if they were in the museum of American foods, but they are also presented with numerous paths and choices in their new life. As Gros suggests, “Walking is a matter not just of truth, but also of reality. To walk is to experience the real” (94); walking reflects the visceral connections between their refugee identity and their new homeland and facilitate their reconstruction of diasporic subjectivity. For them, their new homeland and new presence is not imaginary but real, and this reality is

conducive to their physical participation in the environment. Walking deep in the night is their way of initiating a connection with, and an attachment to, the new reality in which they are situated.

As represented in both novels, walking and wandering not only reflect the Southeast Asian refugees' process of becoming residents but also initiate material connections with their new homeland, which, in many ways, appears like their first step to obtain a membership for being American. Material security frees them from fear and makes them believe in the possibility of safety and hope. Their rambling demonstrates how they cope with surviving in a new place; it is through physical movement that they come to grips with alternative notions about a foreign home and material accessibility. However, some critics still lay emphasis on the either-or dichotomy in the identity formation of diasporic members. For example, Robert Proudfoot remarks that the Lao refugees suffer a great deal of adjustment issues after relocating in the United States, one of which is "coming to grips with the ultimate probability of never going home, never fully being 'Lao' again, and never being quite like 'Americans'" (63). His account, however, still rests on the systemic abnormalization of refugees and fails to view their resilience and capabilities in a broad spectrum. Southeast Asian refugees' negotiated notion of home acknowledges their flexible diasporic identity. This flexible identity affirms Homi Bhabha's idea that we are now living in the realm of "the beyond" that is not confined by any artificial boundaries and that we exist "in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond'" (2). This state of living is a substantial account of the identification of today's diasporas. Stuart Hall also contends that instead of a product, identity is "never complete, always in process, and always constituted within" (222), which testifies to the idea that diasporic identity is a fluid construct. Particularly, second-generation Southeast Asian refugees, like Boontakorn in *Land of Smiles* and the unnamed narrator in *The Gangster*, are becoming comfortable enough to embrace multilayered identities as their ties to their ancestral homelands have loosened after years of acculturation in the United States. They are able to establish their material security with the support of the human and social capital in their communities and practice their ethnic traditions despite being in a different nation-state. After relocating in the United States, they manage to merge their presence in the combat of claiming a new identity in order to attain success and share this proverbial pie called American materialism. By gradually improving their material life, the refugees are accepted in the category of the bourgeoisie, or the "ideal citizen," like the mainstream populace that meets this

country's bourgeois ideology (Ong 7), which is the recognition that these Southeast Asian refugees work with due diligence to receive. This is an ambivalent tradeoff between losses and gains—material possessions secure not only their life necessities but also esteemed social distinctions and membership in this country.

The conflation of walking and wandering in both novels reflects the shift of identity formation for diasporic members and challenges our perception of diaspora, allowing us to rethink the relations among home, identity, and a place of residence beyond geopolitical boundaries. Initially, survival is the top priority for these refugees to escape their home countries in which they are divested of their material possessions and bourgeois identity under communist regimes. They flee their ancestral homes but discover another terrain on which to anchor their material security. Instead of feeling uprooted from their native countries, they find a happy medium in the negotiations of home and identity. For the Southeast Asian refugees in the novels, home is a notion less to do with their birthplace or ancestral homeland and more to do with a place where they can find belonging and acceptance, as well as where they can maintain their ethnicities and cultural practices. Because a place of residence or a birthplace is no longer the sole determinant for their identity, diaspora formation in the new millennium demands attention to “its multi-locational qualities, or the interaction between homes and abroads which cannot be reduced to one place or another” (Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 17). No longer built upon the classic notion about the diasporic member's immobility and inability to return home, the shifting definitions of home and subjectivity also constantly modify the way we conceptualize *diaspora*.

Indeed, as the quotes illuminate in the beginning of my article, walking and wandering are common but overlooked themes in literature that reflect diasporic members' physical mobility and psychological conflict between acculturation and alienation. Thus, as a microscopic contribution to the scholarship of Southeast Asian American literature, this article provides a critical lens through which the Southeast Asian diasporic members' itinerant routine represents their determination to reestablish their subjectivity in a new homeland. For them, the urge to walk and wander is a psychosomatic response to their agony of displacement, functioning therapeutically to vent their frustration and relieve their anxiety from unstable life situations. After leaving their native countries, they learn to accept the idea of a new home in a foreign land. The trope of walking and wandering exemplifies their negotiated identities, providing solace to their traumatic lives and proving their active participation in improving their livelihoods by all possible means. They walk and wander out of necessity to survive. This mobility also

confirms themselves as active subjects with a strong motivation to find a better place for their new homes. They initiate this connection by marking their new homeland with footprints, which, I contend, is one distinct way to demonstrate these Southeast Asian refugees' perseverance and creativity. Verily not all Southeast Asian refugees consider their condition as diasporic, nor do they reconstruct their diasporic subjectivity in the same way. However, walking and wandering in both *Land of Smiles* and *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* reflect the Southeast Asian refugees' unique experience prominently. Rather than looking to return to their "ideal" ancestral homes, they resolve to stay in their host country, redefine their notion of home, and embrace their new identities. They transform themselves from refugees exiled from Southeast Asia into active subjects dedicated to creating a new home in a foreign land.

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