

Mobilizing the Vietnamese Body: Dance Theory, Critical Refugee Studies, and the Aftermaths of War in Andrew X. Pham's *Catfish and Mandala*

By Quynh Nhu Le and Ying Zhu

Scholars in Vietnamese American Studies have long discussed the centrality of the Vietnamese body as a conduit through which issues about geopolitics, nation, and identity emerge. During the 1960s-1970s, the Vietnamese body (displayed, immolated, and in pain) circulated in cultural productions as visual rhetoric for and against the American War in Vietnam. With the "Fall of Saigon" in 1975, these figurations transformed with the renewed purpose of reckoning with the aftermaths of war, particularly in response to reconstructions of U.S. national identity. For example, scholar YẾN Lê Espiritu argues that depictions of the South Vietnamese refugee body in particular (as transformed from abject and stateless to living the "American Dream") works to re-narrate U.S. geopolitical loss into U.S. moral victory.¹ For Vietnamese diasporic cultural producers, these spectral images haunt and inflect their own memories and prefigure the representational politics central to Vietnamese American identity formations. The

¹ See YẾN Lê Espiritu's "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon.'"

Quynh Nhu Le is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of South Florida. She specializes in critical ethnic studies, settler colonial studies, critical refugee studies, and theories of affect and embodiment. Her work has appeared in interdisciplinary journals such as *Amerasia Journal*, *Journal of Asian American Studies*, and *Dance Chronicle*. Her first monograph, *Unsettled Solidarities: Asian and Indigenous Cross-Representations in the Américas* is forthcoming with Temple University Press (2019).

Ying Zhu holds a PhD in critical dance studies from the University of California, Riverside. Her scholarly interests converge at the intersection of bodies, space, architecture, and memory. Her scholarship appears in *Participatory Urbanism*, *Dance Chronicle*, *Verge: Studies in Global Asia*, *The Journal of Space and Culture*, *Journal of American Studies*, and is forthcoming in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Competition*.

contestation over the body as discursive matter thus seems to overdetermine the identity formation of the Vietnamese refugee subject in the postwar era.²

These critical invocations of the body, however, are primarily construed as a concept or an image onto which meaning is revealed and applied. The images of the Vietnamese body disseminated to the viewing public in the era of the Vietnam War and thereafter are often conceived as static (images).³ However, all bodies move. There is additional meaning to be excavated when these displayed, immolated, in-pain bodies are put into motion. In her essay "Choreographing History," dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster makes a case for conceiving the body-in-motion as a text, arguing for the body's meaning making power: "a body, whether sitting writing or standing thinking or walking talking or running screaming, is a bodily writing" (3). As such, Foster theorizes the meaning-making capacity of the body, which writes in motion (and stillness). From this vantage, this essay suggests an additional encounter: the dancing, gesturing, moving body, as embodied practices, are crucial to the construction and analysis of identity formation.

Our foregrounding of the meaning making attached to the body-in-motion intervenes in scholarship that render the refugee subject as an inert figure beholden to articulations of nation, community, and identity in the postwar era. As such, we situate this essay amongst scholarship in Vietnamese American Studies which has long centered the Vietnamese refugee as (often ambivalently) participatory in postwar geopolitical dynamics. In *Race and Resistance*, scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen discusses how Vietnamese American cultural producers deploy and negotiate the discursive legibility of the Vietnamese body-in-pain. As a form of cultural

² For discussions of the centrality of visual media images during the Vietnam War, see also Susan Jeffords, Marita Sturken, and Katherine Kinney. For a gendered analysis of visual media images in a larger Southeast Asian diasporic context, see Eds. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, Lan Duong, Mariam B. Lam, and Kathy L. Nguyen.

³ For a discussion on these iconic images as "movement-images," see Sylvia Shin Huey Chong's *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era*. While the images have gained wide circulation as static images, Chong complicates this idea in examining "the interplay between still and moving images of the same event." In addition, Chong writes that in "dealing with still photographs of these three iconic events, [she treats] them as movement-images in a larger sense, as a stylized *tableaux vivants* that gesture toward the continuation of movement outside their frame" (80).

capital, this body signals the fraught means through which the Vietnamese American articulates a form of political legibility — an articulation that reverberates within the nexus of Vietnamese American individual and group formations and U.S. power relations. For example, Nguyen reflects on how memoirist Le Ly Hayslip performs “the figure of the victim” in order to participate in dominant geopolitical discourses on postwar Vietnam. Nguyen writes: “the body that Hayslip uses has a voice, demonstrating her integral importance to these movements [of armies, national, and capital] and becoming a subject of politics” (108). Nguyen concludes that Hayslip’s engagement with the discourse of the victim, staged through her own embodied pain, comprises the kind of “flexible strategy” she utilizes to assert her own identity and its merger with dominant apparatuses of power. Ultimately, Nguyen’s analysis of Hayslip’s body politics works to destabilize binaries that render the refugee subject as either resisting or accommodating to systems of power.⁴ This paper adds onto Nguyen’s and other scholars’ critical inquiries by attending to the literal motion inherent in represented and contested bodies. We seek to explore the dialogic of identity formation — of power and the complex negotiations — that are distilled and yet performed in the movement and the comportment of the Vietnamese figure.

Dance scholars engage in the work of movement description as part of the collection of methodologies deployed to theorize about the body. Movement description within such scholarship encompasses the careful and deliberate accounting for and assessing of the meaning(s) embedded in the moves, quality of movement, rhythm, timing, number and type of dancing bodies in a dance performance.⁵ Thus, movement description itself functions as a theorizing mechanism. Logo-centric discourses, including Vietnamese refugee memoirs, fiction, and nonfiction texts, are not only rife with references to the body, but also house written tracings elaborating on the motions and “dancing,” of the body-as-text. In other words, a form of

⁴ For a nuanced analysis of how charges of resistance or accommodation to power, through narratives of “collaboration” or “treachery,” undergird national and community formation, see Lan Duong’s *Treacherous Subjects: Gender, Culture, and Trans-Vietnamese Feminism*.

⁵ One approach to describing and reading (analyzing) concert dance has been formulated by Susan Leigh Foster in her book *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*.

dance description appears within the terrain of written narratives, and as such harbor the presence of corporeality, built from textual discourse. This collaboration thus also seeks to understand how these bodily texts, mediated through the written word, participate in the shaping of identity formation. More specifically, we ask how our attention to the articulation and meaning making of this moving body as materialized via the written word — of inserting a dance studies lens into the discourse about the politics of the body as unfolding within literature — can complicate discussions of identity formation within the refugee, Vietnamese American context.

Through an analysis of Andrew X. Pham's *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam*, this collaboration between a dance scholar and literary scholar provides cross-disciplinary methodologies with which to explore the politicized dimensions of the Vietnamese refugee body-in-motion. Published in 1999, *Catfish and Mandala* documents, through narrative flashbacks, Pham and his family's experience during and after the war in Vietnam, their escape as boat people, and their lives in the United States. These flashbacks are woven into the depiction of his return to Vietnam on a bicycle. Pham places, at the forefront of his account, an emphasis on the moving, meaning-making body. Indeed, Pham's memoir is a cartography of Vietnamese refugee experiences performed through the body and transferred and construed into words. His attentiveness to the body, in its kinesthetic and textual mobilization, comprises a refugee literary aesthetics that does much of the heavy theoretical lifting in highlighting and decentering dominant discourses around postwar Việt Kiều identities.

On the one hand, Pham's identity is marked from the outside by external factors/observers and differently contextualized within the space to which and within which he travels, moves, and operates. On the other hand, such an identity is also self-constructed — a self-construction that hinges not only on the motions of his body in different spaces, but also on how he narrates and makes meaning from such motions. It is thus his "dancing" across different geo-politicized spaces that signal his unevenly politicized corporeality. We argue that through the literal and theoretical mobilization of his body, and his documentation of such, Pham animates the Vietnamese body as making meaning within and in excess of geopolitical formations

and the dyad of resistance and accommodation that have often been the too narrow focus of critical inquiries into power.

Power and Identity through the Lens of Choreography and Dance

Our intervention into discourses addressing power and identity in Vietnamese American diasporic communities via Pham's work is grounded in an introduction of choreography — a term significant to dance and dance studies — to illuminate the inscriptive power of Pham's body as he traverses multiple geopolitical spaces. Choreography, in the broadest sense, refers to the conscious design of corporeal moves carried out in specific spatial and temporal planes. Conventionally, the choreographic act is understood as that which is carried out by a choreographer — a maker who manipulates bodies in the service of cultural, historical, political, and/or artistic expression. In the last decade, dance scholars have breached a more traditional understanding of choreography to shed light on how non-human, spatial agents also shape the body's comportment and actions. Here, we invoke Sansan Kwan's complex definition of the term, as she imbues the built environment with choreographic force:

Another way to think about choreography, however, centers on the ways that space can be an agent that determines movement. For example, in cities, bodies and other movable objects, such as cars, can have choreography imposed on them — they can *be* choreographed — by both the predetermined and the unpredictable shapings of space made by streets, buildings, and even other moving objects. In this case, there is no direct or deliberate author of the choreography that happens; rather, bodies become choreographed by a collectivity of animate and inanimate objects in space. (4)

Within this definition Kwan also asserts the body and space as mutually constitutive in producing choreographies.

Dance, like the idea of choreography, has also taken an expansive theoretical turn in the field of dance studies as scholars recognize embodied actions typically not included in a normative construction of "dance" as significant for critical investigation. For example, David Gere in *How To Make Dance in an Epidemic* frames a public funerary procession in the streets of San Francisco and the unfurling of the NAMES Project AIDS quilt as legible texts to be included within the purview of dance, what he terms "danced acts of intervention" (144). Similarly, scholar Jens Giersdorf accounts for and analyzes the politically charged act of walking towards and past the East Berlin checkpoint during the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall.⁶ He refers to his own physicality and that of walkers around him during this historically significant moment as "the choreography of pedestrian movement," which is also determined by the "stage" or space upon which these actions occur (417). Choreography, in this case refers to the movements that are mutually designed by the actor, the site of performance, and the historical-political context. In other words, Giersdorf enacts a pedestrian dance as he moves across the guarded checkpoint delineating East from West Berlin. Dance scholars are deploying "dance" and "choreography" as theoretical apparatuses, disrupting arenas where the body is present, but not fully accounted for. As such, these two terms have transgressed the confines of the proscenium or concert stage, from the arena of anthropology, from sources typically and easily recognizable as such.

Of course, the emphasis on bodily movement and comportment is not solely consigned to the fields of dance and adjacent disciplines such as theater. Indeed, gender and queer studies scholars such as Judith Butler have emphasized how bodily comportment and movement are central to gender performativity. Movement descriptions are also linked to filmic analysis, where bodily comportment and placement are central in the meaning making attributed in a *mise-en-scène* or frame. In addition, in race and ethnic studies, scholars such as Henry Yu have highlighted the ways in which analyses of body movements and bodily comportment were central to the social and scientific theories of racial difference and racial

⁶ See Giersdorf's "Border Crossings and Intra-National Trespasses: East German Bodies in Sasha Waltz's and JoFabian's Choreographies."

demarcations.⁷ Adding onto this rich archive, we suggest that the employment of “choreography” and “dance” as a lens through which to analyze the movement description in Pham’s text provides a meaningful framework that consistently places the moving body in relationship to a constructed (indeed, a choreographed, geopolitical or cultural) space. This emphasis is particularly appropriate given Pham’s movements across geographic spaces. The employment of dance or choreography also places into the center the recognition of place and bodily movements therein as social constructions but with a palpable material/fleshly resonance. Such emphasis is evident in the works we cite above, but we suggest that the emphasis on dance/choreography in analyzing Pham’s work continually places such construct in continual purview.

Following such elastic framing of “dance,” we employ both “choreography” and “dance” when referring to Pham’s written account of the moves and movements of his body in order to underscore the centrality of the body in his negotiations of an unsettled Việt Kiều/refugee identity. Furthermore, this critical framing also works to highlight how environments are interactive in determining (choreographing) his corporeality. In referring to the dances/choreographies that Pham re-performs in text form, we claim these dances-by way of-text reveal and perform the cultural densities of the Vietnam War as it reverberates, transforms, and makes meaning in the present. That is, as a body-centered text housed within the structure of the written narrative, *Catfish and Mandala* reveals the vexed dialogic of national/imperial scripts (choreographies) of the refugee body and the refugee subject’s own bodily and verbal rewritings (dances). As a body theorist in his own right, Pham demonstrates how his unstable identity, one that travels from place to place, is produced and reproduced through the relationship between the ways others gauge and assess his place and embodiment in the world and his own kinesthetic placement of his own body in space (his “moves”).

Refiguring the Corporealities of the Vietnam War

⁷ See Henry Yu’s “Orientalizing the Pacific Rim.”

Pham opens his memoir with a body-conscious narration of his encounter with a Vietnam War veteran named Tyle in the Mexican desert of *Agua Caliente*. His engagement with Tyle reveals how the Vietnamese refugee body and the white Western body persist as overdetermined sites for negotiating the aftermaths of the Vietnam War. As dance scholars have argued, the body is a legible text which, when in performance, reveal, reinforce, and resist the cultural formation of social identities. In her article "Embodying Difference," Jane Desmond maintains that "social relations are both enacted and produced through the body, and not merely inscribed upon it" (38). In the book's opening scene, Pham explores and acknowledges this facet of the body's external legibility through his reading of Tyle in relation to his physical actions. He makes assumptions about Tyle by the way he is easily able to contort his body into 'non-Western' shape ("The first thing I notice about Tyle is that he can squat on his haunches Third-World-style, indefinitely. He is a giant, an anachronistic Thor in rasta drag, bare chested, barefoot and desert-baked golden" (5)), evidencing both the possibility and instability of attending to bodily action as a means for constructing someone else's identity.

Interestingly, while Tyle's bodily comportment is at odds with dominant perceptions of the white male U.S. soldier, Pham apprehends Tyle's inquiry about his origins as the preamble to a hostile confrontation. Pham is surprised when instead of "declarations, accusations, boasts, demands, obligations, challenges, and curses," Tyle asks for forgiveness (8). This moment of misapprehension reveals how the significations embodied in the figure of the Vietnam War veteran carries with it a history that is not completely overwritten by Tyle's own bodily rewriting, and may indeed be arguably abetted by his "Third-World-style" physicality. Such significations arise out of the historical experiences, cultural reproductions, and U.S. national anxieties around the violent white male body in Vietnam's theater of war. One need only look at the intensity of white masculine rage as represented in films such as Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* to see the confluence of Western imperial violence distilled in the figures of white male soldiers "going native." An update of Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, the film's depiction of Marlon Brando's Kurtz having gone "savage" in Cambodia consolidates U.S. national horrors over the effects of

the war in Vietnam. Pham's reactions to Tyle's comportment and movements, perhaps expressive of his concerted renegotiations of his own identity postwar, are layered with the violent implications of the white male soldier gone "savage."

The significations of the Asian body, particularly in a post-Vietnam War juncture, can also overpower Pham's own bodily self-construction and self-perception. Pham's body-as-text is reciprocally mined by Tyle. While Tyle asks Pham the oft-repeated question "Where are you from" he already has a foreclosed answer to the inquiry given the historical overdeterminations of the Asian body as foreign to the Americas, and given Tyle's particular attentiveness to locating the Vietnamese refugee body. As Vietnamese American Studies critics have articulated, the Vietnamese refugee body has been conflated with the Vietnam War, leaving little room for expressions of the "complex personhood" of Vietnamese diasporic communities, whose subjectivities are simultaneously attached to and yet in excess of this war.⁸ These connections between the Vietnamese body to war "over there," simultaneously positions the Vietnamese refugee subject outside the temporal/spatial presence of the present. In many ways, this critical mooring of body to event iterates the persistent trope of the perpetual foreigner that inducted and abjected the Asian immigrant/laborer into the racialized U.S. national body politic. By reading Pham as representative of Vietnam, and the wounds of war, Tyle forecloses considerations of Pham's experiences and reconstructions of identity in the post-war era.

Given this conflation of Vietnamese body to war, and despite Pham's initial answer that he is from the Bay Area, Tyle asks for clarification, "No. Where are you from? Originally" (6). Pham is compelled to verbally swerve Tyle's desire for a singular, reductive solution to what and who he is, "Something about him [Tyle] makes me *dance around the truth*. I chuckle, painfully aware that 'I'm an American' carries little weight with him" (our italics, 6). This particular moment reveals the fraught collision between external, internal, embodied, and verbal constructions of the self. Indeed, Pham's responses can be viewed as a discursive choreography that deconstructs essentialist notions of his identity as he "dance[s] around the

⁸ Complex personhood is a phrase coined by Avery Gordon in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*.

truth" of his origin, which is contained in multiple places, claiming simultaneously the Bay Area, California, America, and finally Vietnam as home. This reference to "dance," alongside Pham's careful attention and description of his body's actions and legibility seems to align his movement descriptions with the very idea of dance and choreography, illustrating Pham's textual design of his memoir. These accounts of his physical experiences are as much "choreographed" or consciously integrated into the architecture of the book as the narrative shifts he makes between his memories of his childhood in Vietnam and his descriptions of his adult peripateticism. While Pham's response works to destabilize what he perceives as Tyle's overdetermined constructions of his own identity, he ultimately feels that he "owes" it to Tyle to tell him that he's "from Vietnam" (6). Furthermore, this moment suggests Pham's valuing of the body as a discursive approach. His choice to open his memoir with this encounter, one that overtly evidences his body and its kinetics as markers of subjectivity signals Pham's deliberate deployment of an embodied lens as he mediates his construction of self through motion across multiple countries.

Complicating the Refugee Body: White Masculinity and Asian American Abjection in the U.S.

While his encounter with Tyle exposes Pham as bristling against the persistence of the Vietnamese body as inextricably linked to the Vietnam War, his literal movements across various geopolitical sites further destabilizes such a foreclosed construction of Pham's identity. A key scene describing Pham's (bodily) choreographies, which occurs along the coast of Oregon, testifies to the layered and politicized national constructions of (Asian) bodies in motion, and the circuitous maneuvers through which Pham negotiates such constructions. His bodily movements and the verbal and material marking of it from external forces reveal how the woundings of war converges with the woundings of racialization in U.S. national spaces where all Asian bodies are conflated in spite of ethnic differences. As such Pham iterates what SanSan Kwan positions as the mutually constitutive entities of body and space as congruent to the forging of identity:

Bodily motion is defined by space and time, and space and time are defined, in part, by bodily motion. ... In addition, identity is structured, to a degree, through a dialectical relationship with the body in space, made meaningful through time. In other words, where we are and when we are help to determine who we are. (2)

Pham's memoir, like Kwan's scholarship, suggests geography, space, and context shapes (choreographs) his identity – an identity that is like his body: unstable and always in motion.

In the scenes preceding his bike trip along the U.S. pacific coast, Pham makes multiple remarks on the way in which his trip gestures to narratives of "going on the road," a narrative of rugged individuality often attached to forms of white masculinity: "It appeals to me. Riding out my front door on a bicycle for the defining event in my life. It is so American, pioneering, courageous, romantic, self-indulgent" (29).⁹ Such a construction of the moving body as "pioneering" partially informs his construction of himself as American masculine, a kind of masculinity wrapped up in the significations of heteronormativity and whiteness.¹⁰ These narratives exposing intrepid, white, male bodies attached to rickety bicycles, as a force through which to conquer the world, is both prevalent in the medium of literature and

⁹ In so stating, Pham places his narrative along a line of travel narratives. According to Sau-ling Wong "Travel literature and its cousin, nature writing (Lyong, 1989), are important narrative subgenres in American letters, as is the Western, populated by men on horseback roaming about expansive spaces" (119).

¹⁰ In her book *This Is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature*, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud analyzes Pham's alignment with constructions of white masculinity. She writes: "with a sense of not belonging to any nation and unable to accept support from his family because of domestic violence, An seeks a way to protect himself from his fears. To do this, he surrounds himself with a shield of masculinity to help him manage and hide the anger and guilt that derive from his fears ... he is attracted to what he regards as the masculinity of white men. The identity he claims for himself reflects romanticized Hollywood images of lone, rugged, adventurous men" (76). As such, the bike ride becomes part and parcel of this attempt to perform and enact this a version of masculinity that resembles the version documented by Mike Dion in *Reveal the Path*, but one that is ultimately undercutting the racial slurs of the passing truck drivers. Citing Gail Bederman, Pelaud gestures towards the centrality of the body when it comes to asserting and claiming masculine authority. While Pham's body engages similarly in the work of pedaling across transnational spaces, his racially marked body, while ultimately successful at climbing mountains and navigating urban streetscapes, simultaneously reveals his revising of Việt Kiều identity as well as failure at achieving the status of masculinity accompanied with white, male privilege that he links to the bicycle.

recently as the basis from which documentaries are made. The 2012 release of *Reveal the Path*, a documentary by Mike Dion, charts the adventures of four white men (in many ways, contemporaries of Pham in age and privilege) who deploy the bicycle as medium through which to explore and discover the globe. While this grouping of audacious, white bodies are not mapping a journey of “homecoming” as Pham does in the book, this documentary exists in in/congruence with Pham’s cycling memoir in that both documents attempt to understand how travel, journey, and a changing spatial and cultural landscape reveal complexities in one’s identity. Juxtaposing this documentary film with Pham’s own work, in this article as well as pedagogically in the classroom space, can make all the more apparent both the desires and limits of Pham’s struggles for an American masculine identity.

Unlike Pham however, the men framed in Dion’s documentary manifest white bodies as always already asserting a status of privilege, a marking that overcomes any environment and obstacle. Aside from the burdens of landscape and geography, their place in the world is not questioned, not even in geopolitical contexts in which they are clearly the minority. Theirs is a narrative successfully reproducing what Pham imagines as a distinctly “American,” “pioneering,” and masculine confrontation of body with environment. More specifically, *Reveal the Path* exposes an embodied experience reinforcing the bikers’ already secure understanding of identity signification. Theirs is an affirming journey, while Pham’s bike adventure is one of instability and constant re-construction. As such, Pham’s journey reveals what scholar Sau-ling Wong considers the differences between mainstream versus Asian American narratives of mobility. Wong writes:

One striking difference presents itself upon even the most cursory comparison between mainstream and Asian American discourses on mobility. In the former, horizontal movement across the North American continent regularly connotes independence, freedom, an opportunity for individual actualization and/or societal renewal—in short, Extravagance. In the latter, however, it is usually associated with subjugation, coercion, impossibility of fulfillment for self or community—in short, Necessity” (121).

Caught between his marked Asian body and his familiarity with and membership to America and its culture, Pham's memoir reveals his body's racialization as it kinesthetically travels, undercuts, and transforms his construction of himself as American masculine in the vein of early "pioneers." His encounters in and with different environments and people recalibrates, often unexpectedly and unwillingly, Pham's narrative of masculinist reconstruction. In so doing, the narrative reveals Pham's journey as one marked not as one of "extravagance" but as "necessity."

While pedaling through Oregon, Pham is verbally and physically assaulted by a trucker whose own movements and protected positionality within a large truck physically signify the conditions of racialization permeating his surroundings: "The next day, a logging truck slows down and pulls alongside me. 'Hey Jap,' a man in the passenger seat shouts. Still charging onward, I look and fluid gushes out the cab's window and gets me full in the face. ... The passenger sticks his head out the window and pushes the corner of his eyes, making 'Chinese eyes' at me" (37-38). His body, made mobile by a bike, is vulnerable to outside assumptions and characterizations of how he fits, or rather does not fit, into the racial presuppositions of the U.S. national body. The trucker and passenger contradictorily mark his body as both "Japanese" and "Chinese"—racialized constructions that conflate different nationalities into one. These verbal epithets are coupled with a tangible act of marking: the truck passenger, to accompany his verbal slurs, dumps a mysterious fluid on Pham's head.¹¹ The water/urine/soda becomes a visible and literal marker that is "painted" onto him. His movement description of pedaling and suffering material and verbal impositions on his corpus and identity signals a wider and consistent pattern of external figures reading his bodily text for clues into his cultural, racial, and ethnic origins. Thus, while Pham's body attempts, through his bike ride along the coast, something akin to the white masculine pioneer, his experience with the trucker reveals, as theater studies scholar Karen Shimakawa articulates, "the

¹¹ Isabelle Thuy Pelaud argues in her book, *This Is All That I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature*, that Pham as a "survivor of the violence of the United States and Vietnam" is misconstrued in all the environments in which he inhabits. We suggest this pattern of being defined "as someone he is not everywhere he goes," as a consequence of the body (79). There is exists an instability in how his moving body (as a text) across different geopolitical sphere subverts or undermines his intended representation of self.

densely populated ... phantasms of orientalism through and against which an Asian American performer must struggle to be seen" (17). Here, bodily movement and comportment on Pham's part fails amidst the stage upon which his identity is constructed.

Writing more broadly about Asian American identity formation as constructed and performed on the concert stage Shimakawa argues that this identity "functions as abject in relation to Americanness" (3). The historical processes through which the U.S. state both expels and necessarily incorporates the Asian American subject reveals the dynamic ambivalences that shape U.S. national and racial formation. The trucker's dousing of Pham with fluid suggests his abject status that is, compellingly, performed on, and *through*, Pham's body and dances. Pham is not simply verbally labeled, but physically categorized with fluid as other and his embodied reaction to the trucker's framing of abjection suggests the simultaneity through which he accommodates to and resists these formations of power. Indeed, Pham exhibits an inclination to fight back. He mentally calls forth a "dance" representing assertive masculinity that overcomes his relegation to a voiceless, subservient Asian/Vietnamese/refugee body and that challenges the verbal and physical degradation of his body, "Part of me wants to go inside and confront the truckers. Part of me wants to slash their tires. I want to feel my fists smacking into their fleshy red faces. Giving them the full force of my righteous fury" (38). Here, Pham is constructing a version of self that aligns with the pioneering (masculine) spirit he envisions for himself as he sets out on his bike from Northern California. In imagining a choreography of resistance, however, he mentally performs the dance of white masculinity, a masculinity that consistently hinges on the abjection of the Asian body as demonstrated by the trucker. It is in these moments of layered movements, across literal and metaphoric terrains, that Pham's bodily choreographies reveal and complicate his own racialized desires for whiteness.

Amidst this desire to physically engage with the trucker, and thus perform his notion of white masculinity, Pham recalls his brother's struggles with both racism and homophobia. In so doing, Pham briefly establishes his affinities across race and sexualities and revises his own identity formation, a status that doesn't quite fit with the physically dominant man he imagines in the mental scenario of physical retaliation against the truckers. By closing

the chapter and the incident with his brother's anxieties about being Asian and gay outside the more manageable sphere of San Francisco, and more widely California, Pham signals a temporary surrender of his identification with the "pioneering" American.

Not only has Pham located himself outside the California safety zone, but he intends to stray even further from this regional and national orientation by heading towards Vietnam. These psychological movements between his urge to fight, his impulse to capitulate, and finally his affinity with others deemed abject reveals the ambivalence embedded in his identity formation propelled by his bike ride. That is, while the binary between challenging or giving ground to externally constructed categories of the refugee/Vietnamese American/abject body exists, Pham's body and bodily movements contain and perform these multiple constructions, revealing such negotiations as process.

Decentering Refugee Identities through Transnational Mobilities

The Việt Kiều/refugee returning to the "homeland," also carries fraught economic and politicized meanings that Pham acknowledges and explicitly negotiates through his attentiveness to the moving body.¹² In her book *Transnationalizing Viet Nam*, Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde cites multiple reasons for the return of overseas Vietnamese, including economic opportunities, familial ties, and perceptions of Vietnam being a "cultural haven" away from the racism experienced in the "host" country (18). In contrast to the Việt Kiều who fly home carting gifts for dispersal, Pham

¹² In her book *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora*, Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde discusses the economic contexts through which Vietnamese refugees are able to return to Vietnam to visit, and sometimes to stay. She writes: "overseas Vietnamese . . . benefited from global financial restructuring. With the eventual thawing of relations between Viet Nam and the United States in the mid-1990s, Viet Kieu visits to Viet Nam became more frequent. Different forms of Viet Kieu investment took place, from large industry projects to smaller ghost investments in family property. Thousands returned to Viet Nam to work, and some even opted to stay remitting their own labor to advance their careers while helping Viet Nam move toward a market economy" (17). These economic rationales, as suggested by Pham's narrative, are layered with geopolitical resonances.

arrives in his homeland empty-handed (with only his bike). His return thus revises, destabilizes, and comments upon the expectations and definitions circumscribing what it is to be Việt Kiều/refugee returning home. Pham's alternative rationale for returning home is archived and enacted through the body.

On his plane trip from Japan to Vietnam, Pham critiques the articulation of the Việt Kiều's victorious homecoming in the "gaudy" appearance of the traveling body as symbolic register. He writes: "[a]nother Vietnamese-American immigrant success story coming home all spelled out in jewelry and gaudiness. ... Their triumphant homecoming is at hand" (64). This critique continues in his description of the very embodiment and movements enacted by the travelers themselves. Pham's movement description of the Việt Kiều plane passengers is offered with an edge of derision. For example, he notes their chaotic, unwieldy, movements upon the plane's descent, which demarcates their identity, and their difference to bodies who are less mobile and physically responsive to the plane's arrival to Vietnam:

The cabin tilts in descent. Passengers, mostly Vietnamese, begin fighting their luggage out of the overhead compartments, spilling packages into aisles rallying towards the exit. ... A middle-aged pair, luggage in hand, rush up from the rear and plop down in empty seats next to me. (62-63)

This description is starkly juxtaposed with the description of the "Japanese and Koreans, all business travelers, [who] flinch, scorn thinly veiled, drawing back from the Vietnamese" (64). Pham continues: "A tall European flight attendant spearheads the assault, her smaller Korean counterparts covering her flank. With small white hands, they wrestle the Vietnamese one by one into seats" (64). As these chaotic movements continue at the airport's baggage claims, Pham proclaims, "Oh, God, if this is how I see the Vietnamese, what sorry sights they must be to Western eyes" (65). In these critiques, Pham conveys an internalized disdain for the Vietnamese body, perhaps remnants of his own desires for white masculinity, and one that he continues to grapple with as he exits the plane.

Between these two descriptions (of the perceived Vietnamese mob, and the controlled Asian passengers), Pham's own identity is rendered ambivalent, by those on the plane and by Pham himself. Pham's own seatmate queries: "*I was sure you were Japanese and Korean. Sure you're not a half-breed?*" (63). Like his encounter with the truckers in the Pacific Northwest, who peg him as both *Chinese* and *Japanese*, his body and comportment are subject to false classification. Pham ironically fulfills his seatmate's "half-breed" indictment, but not in the way his seatmate intended. As a Vietnamese American, he harbors multiple cultural affinities, to the U.S. and to Vietnam. But in response, Pham declares, "*One hundred percent Vietnamese,*" a verbal statement which also undermines his seatmate's reading of his body (63). While this assertion is correct, Pham also recognizes the irony of such a declaration given his own status as *mất gốc* or one with lost roots. The incongruence between how Pham is bodily perceived and the flexibility with which he verbally wields facets of his identity is enunciated in the very rocky nature of the plane landing and the equally rocky bike journeys.

Although Pham verbally choreographs his affinity with the Vietnamese aboard the plane, his ambivalence is most apparent through his descriptions of his own and their bodily movements. Once the plane lands, the very liminal space of the airport is a key site whereby Pham articulates and traces his own fluid positionality among the Việt Kiều returning home. Despite his derision with regards to the Việt Kiều, Pham is taken up in the bodily movements of the Việt Kiều travelers which he reiterates via his bodily choreography. He writes:

Ten minutes in line and I am no closer to the exit. This is a Vietnamese line: shove your way to the front, bumper-car your path through the mess. One Vietnamese-American woman pushes my bags back so she can move her cart forward. It is hot and claustrophobic. ... Ten more minutes. I snap. I take the offensive, amused by my ability to *summon the Vietnamese in me*, the grubbing-snatching-edging Vietnamese behavior anathema to the Western me. It doesn't get me far with this crowd so I spice it up with *a dash of American commandeering bullheadedness*. (66, italics added)

Rather than resist, Pham accedes to the multitude of Vietnamese and Việt Kiều pushing each other irrespective of identities, and “takes the offensive” by kinesthetically iterating the “grubbing-snatching-edging Vietnamese behavior.” Because these bodily movements get him nowhere in regards to his desire to leave the airport, Pham performs what he deems a commanding “American” choreography. It is through such corporeal articulations that Pham is able to disentangle from the crowd, and to leave the airport. In these embodied negotiations, Pham resists multiple external forces, and his own verbal effusions, about racial and cultural purity.

Interestingly, while his bodily movements erect and break down binaries and categories of Western/non-Western bodily movements, his verbal descriptions of such categories still compose rigid dichotomies and essentialist understandings of movements. This gap, between Pham’s discursive/verbal choreography and the script that he writes through body reveals more than his fraught identity position. In fact, by housing these gaps, within the written memoir, Pham exposes the complex construction of identity formation itself, which relies unevenly on the dance (or dialogic) between verbal and embodied choreographies. That is, in order to reveal the contestation and deep and problematic ambivalence of his identity, Pham’s journey relied not only on the very embodied movements biking across Vietnam, but also its subsequent written inscription.

As the previous scenes illustrate, the misidentifications that are engendered in Pham’s travels are inflected by the choreographies embedded in place. The liminal circuits through which Pham arrives at different spaces in Vietnam (such as Saigon, Vung Tau, and Ham Tan) instigates even more dramatically moments of misrecognition and reconstructions of his identity. These moments of misrecognition arise not only due to his ambiguous ethnic appearance and comportment, his own ambivalent relation to his Vietnamese American identity, but also through the unlikely fact that a Việt Kiều would ride and/or arrive at such spaces in Vietnam. For instance, on a bus to Chau Doc and Rach Dia, the bus driver recognizes Pham as Việt Kiều only when he hears his accent. Upon making the discovery, the driver exclaims “You’re the first Viet-kieu on our bus [,] why don’t you rent a car instead” (145). When Pham responds that it is too expensive for him, the driver “looks at [him] incredulously,” making

determinations between his Việt Kiều status and his economic access and mobility. Given the differential choreography of place, wherein spaces, as Kwan has argued, choreograph the means through which bodies are compelled to move, the misperception of his identity changes as he moves across different landscapes in Vietnam. For example, on his way to Ninh Binh, he encounters those who see him as Eastern European: “Lieng-Xo! Lieng-Xo — Russian! Russian! — the kids shout at me as they come rolling out of the school yard, a moving carpet of little black heads.... In America, I was a Jap, a Chink, a gook; in Vietnam, a Russian” (244). In this way, the treatment that Pham receives from Vietnamese locals runs in parallel to his experience biking through the Northwest. His body, propelled by a bike, neither fits into an American nor a Vietnamese context. While Pham is financially unable to “tour” Vietnam the way that most economically ascendant Việt Kiều could and would, his concerted mode of transportation and the unexpected detours that he takes reveal how his assertion of identity and subsequent experiences, arise out of an on the ground dialectic between embodied self-construction and external impositions. Given this, Pham’s identity is revealed to be persistently in flux.

Pham’s displacement from his “homeland” and from a firm, entrenched construction of his Vietnamese self is more clearly evoked as he aims his bike towards, ironically, the place of his birth, Phan Thiết, which would presumably allow him tangible claim to Vietnam as “homeland.” However, it is on route to his birthplace that Pham’s positionality is questioned. Looking to satiate a gnawing hunger, he wanders from his inn in Ham Tan village to a restaurant. There he encounters a drunk Vietnamese patron who addresses Pham in English, “‘Oy! You,’ a man slurs in English. He sits up front and is obviously drunk and talking to me. I groan pretending not to hear” (174). Upon interaction, in the Vietnamese language, the drunk stranger questions why Pham can speak Vietnamese so well. Pham’s response, “I grin. This is easy. *‘I’m Vietnamese,’*” is immediately contradicted by the drunk Vietnamese man. The latter proclaims: *“Liar. You’re Korean, aren’t you?”* (174). In this instance, as Pham is being marked as Korean (then Japanese and Chinese) by intoxicated Vietnamese patrons, he forges an alliance with their very citizenship, claiming that he too is “Vietnamese,” only qualifying his American experience when his accent is called into question.

This accusation of his identity as Chinese/Korean/Japanese echoes his earlier confrontation with American truckers and with fellow Việt Kiều on the plane ride to Vietnam, but with a critical difference. The power relations and dynamics are distinctly different, where Việt Kiều occupy a geopolitical kind of privilege in regards to their status as U.S. citizens. Yet, ironically, Pham is similarly misconstrued by both Americans and Vietnamese. In the Pacific Northwest, he is rendered abject by a splash of fluid from a passing truck, and in Vietnam he is equally reminded of his otherness through his body as a cultural signifier, but in this instance, by a Vietnamese national: "I am the tallest one present, my skin the palest. My wire-rimmed eyeglasses make me look foreign. Worse, I have a closely cropped crew cut. My hair is straight and spiky. Vietnamese call it 'nail hair,' a style commonly seen on Korean expatriates working in Vietnam" (175). In attempt to subvert confrontation and dissolve hostility, Pham responds in Vietnamese and simultaneously makes a verbal declaration of his identity, "I'm Vietnamese." These misidentifications, and Pham's own (incorrect) verbal reification of his identity reveals the limits of discourses about Vietnamese diasporic identities in the post-war era.

While the drunk man's assertion of Pham as Korean/Chinese/ Japanese is incorrect, he has indeed correctly pegged Pham's status as an "outsider." Pham's pedestrian dances-as-text betray his verbal proclamations of being Vietnamese, like the other patrons in the restaurant. It is not only in his exterior appearance, but also in his very comportment that cues the drunk man to this difference. As body theorist, Pham makes mention of his ill-at-ease bodily maneuvers as it settles into the furniture of the restaurant. Upon his entering, the restaurant owner directs Pham to a table wherein Pham remarks that "I sit obediently, wondering yet again why Vietnamese prefer kindergarten furniture. I haven't acquired the penchant to sit with my butt lower than my knees. With the tabletop so low, whenever I eat I feel as though I am licking myself like a dog" (173). As Jane Desmond highlights by way of Pierre Bourdieu,

movement style is an important mode of distinction between social groups and is usually actively learned or passively absorbed in the home and community. So ubiquitous, so "naturalized" as to be nearly unnoticed as a symbolic system, movement is a primary not

secondary social “text”-complex, polysemous, always already meaningful, yet continuously changing. Its articulation signals group affiliation and group differences, whether consciously performed or not. (36)

The moment between Pham and the drunk man reveals both conscious and unconscious cues of “group affiliations” and “group differences,” that Pham makes clear is conveyed through his bodily movements. Indeed, while readers cannot be privy to the full disclosures that his bodily comportment betrays in the restaurant, Pham’s description of it reveal his persistent repulsion to the very people he claims as his own. Indeed, his commentary about his sitting on the chair both infantilizes and dehumanizes the very people in the restaurant as he ponders the animalistic qualities of their dining habits. While his feelings are not made known to the patrons of the restaurant, Pham’s comments to the reader suggest that his body betrays Pham’s affiliations to differently embodied communities, communities that may indeed read the Vietnamese as “backwards.” It is right after Pham’s movement description that the drunk man confronts him. In response, Pham’s choreography, again, seems to escalate rather than diffuse the situation. He writes that “I show him my friendliest smile and nod, fingering my pocket for the tiny canister of pepper spray” (174).

The drunken Vietnamese man’s suspicion about Pham’s identity similarly gesture to the body, “He starts speling his body of knowledge on the matter: ‘I’ve been to the City (Saigon). I know what’s going in the world. All you foreigners come into the country to work’” (175). This drunk man’s “body of knowledge” *is* indeed a bodily knowledge, as he assesses Pham’s physicality and determines his cultural membership through his corporeal document. The tension that is established by the drunk man’s aggressive accusations, which is also illuminated by Pham’s physical and mental discomfort in an environment where animosity is unexpected, can at first glance be a repetition of his experience of abjection made so palpable in the Pacific coast.

Yet, the memoir’s emphasis on the dialogic between national/imperial scripts and Pham’s bodily and verbal choreography uncovers a more complicated movement and consideration of abjection. While Pham’s narrative voice attests to his own abjection under the gaze of the drunken

Vietnamese man (thus creating a parallel between this experience and his abjection in the Pacific West Coast), his bodily comportment conversely reveals Pham's embodied abjection of the local Vietnamese patrons. We have earlier introduced, via Karen Shimakawa, Pham's abject status as partially staged vis-a-vis American identity. We would like to add onto Shimakawa's optic of U.S.-based abjection of the Asian "other," to explore how Pham's abjection moves outside of the U.S. national context to other spaces, and one that Pham performs through his own bodily "dances." The "danced" scene between Pham and the drunk Vietnamese patron betrays Pham's U.S.-centric abjection of Vietnam as a backwards country. His bodily rewriting as American masculine, which was not legible in the case of his bike ride along the coast, has made a negative impact in Vietnam. In this instance, Pham's bodily movements ironically wield the weight of a U.S. imperial legacy that has abjected him in the U.S. context. The tension in the very scene, when read through a dance lens, conveys the asymmetry of power in the post-Vietnam War era, and the workings and vexed agents of power as Pham moves and is made to move for empire.

Conclusion

In her book *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*, Yến Lê Espiritu calls for the engagement of the Vietnamese body that is attentive to and yet moves beyond the Vietnam War as an overdetermined site of meaning making. She reclaims the term "body counts," as it was used to express "the number of confirmed Vietnamese kills—to chart U.S. progress in the war," to assert that the Vietnamese (diasporic) body does count, in relation to and in excess of the context of the Vietnam War (2). She writes:

Although this book recounts the wounds of social life caused by the violence both before and after the Vietnam War, its primary objective is to reveal the social practices that have emerged to attend to these wounds. *Body Counts* thus moves decisively away from the "damage-centered" approach so prevalent in the field of refugee studies and

focuses instead on how first- and second-generation Vietnamese have created alternative memories and epistemologies that unsettle but at times also confirm the established public narratives of the Vietnam War and Vietnamese people. (3)

Pham's kinesthetic narrative as he choreographs himself and is choreographed by the geopolitical spaces of Mexico, the Pacific Coast, Japan, and finally Vietnam, produces an "alternative epistemology" that destabilizes simple equations of Vietnamese refugee identity with war. Activating the moving body as a meaning-making entity, Pham crucially expands discussions of the aftermaths of the Vietnam War as he literally moves across the different geographies, revealing through his dances, the geopolitical traces of post-war memorialization, and identity formation, but also the thick subjectivities that are expressed and performed via the movements of the body. Thus, while the Vietnamese body is an entity that has always been written upon, externally assessed and categorized as minority, rendered abject, and marginalized, Pham's dances reveal this process of abjection across different geographies and its contingency upon differentially registered bodily moves/comportments.

His memoir can be seen as an effort in writing his own body (and subjectivity) on his terms. In making evident the articulations of his body, Andrew X. Pham begins the work of what dance scholars maintain as illuminating that the body itself is always already writing. His memoir is thus an act of recuperation, a recuperation of his body and more specifically a figuring of embodiment as a means for recuperating his Vietnamese American subjectivity for his own use. He exposes his body as a site of tension, and destabilizes the binary of accommodation and resistance constitutive of an emergent refugee literature where the body produces theoretical possibilities. Pham's transnational dances perform the reality that pure resistance of external and imposed assumptions of his subjectivity is not entirely possible, but neither is comprehensive surrender. In taking his body back, he shows it is never fully his.

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