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"It's oil and water": Race, Gender, Power, and Trauma in Vu Tran's *Dragonfish*

By Quan-Manh Ha and Chase Greenfield

Trauma, an immediate effect of the Vietnam War and its aftermath, becomes a leitmotif within the corpus of Vietnamese American literature. Although countless volumes have been published in the United States on nearly every aspect of the war, the immense sufferings and losses of the Vietnamese people often remain marginalized or mentioned only as a footnote to American losses. When the Vietnamese are mentioned, their victimization generally serves as a foil for American rationalizations of their own political discourse on the war (Nguyen, *Race* 108). After the reunification of Vietnam in 1975 under the Hanoi-based communist government, over two million Vietnamese people fled their homeland to seek asylum across the world, and a large proportion of these refugees (estimated at over one million people) braved the perilous Pacific Ocean on small, overcrowded fishing boats and other vessels to escape the country. Only about half of these "boat people" ever made it to shore, and for the survivors, the struggles and losses did not end after making landfall (Vo 38). The subsequent events and the lifetime of recovery for a group of these Vietnamese "boat people" structure the plot of Vu Tran's debut novel *Dragonfish*, which, according to its author's website, is an attempt to "weave elements of his own life into [his characters'] personal histories, [and] to tell the overarching story of what connects these characters to each other and what tears them apart." *Dragonfish* focuses on the relationships, desires, and conflicts among its three protagonists—Robert, Suzy, and Sonny—to highlight how their postwar interactions complicate race, gender, trauma, and remembrance. The three protagonists engage in an intense socio-political struggle for dominance and control, which is riddled with irony, heart-wrenching pain, and misleading appearances. They experience hardship and loss, but they rely on each other for recovery from past and present trauma, and to advance their own varying personal priorities and agendas. While both of the male

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characters, Robert and Sonny, attempt individually to exercise control over Suzy, she in fact embodies the *femme fatale* archetype, typical of the noir fiction genre, who subverts their dominance in order to act independently of their wills.

Race, Gender, Trauma, and Remembrance

Robert, the first-person narrator of *Dragonfish* and an under-informed white Oakland police officer, has limited access to the shared traumatic memories of Suzy and Sonny, both of whom are Vietnamese "boat people" refugees. Robert is aware of his peripheral position within the social order of the novel, and he expresses his feelings of alienation as follows: "as bad as it is to have no memory of something significant you were a part of, it's much worse to know you were never part of it at all" (Tran 155). Robert is unable to connect fully to the Vietnamese characters, psychologically, behaviorally, and mentally. Intriguingly, it is because of his whiteness that he is distanced from the Vietnamese characters and events that he discovers and narrates in *Dragonfish*. Robert is neither Vietnamese nor a refugee. Therefore, he is unable to relate to Suzy and Sonny's traumatic memories of the loss of beloved family members, existential crises at sea, and harsh conditions in refugee camps. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman observes that, in war, combatants "[cling] together under prolonged conditions of danger" and firmly believe that "their mutual loyalty and devotion can protect them from harm" (62). Although Sonny and Suzy were not soldiers in the war, their perilous "boat people" experience and subsequent hardships bond them together, and it is this bond, established in common experience, that alienates Robert from the Vietnamese refugee community. Robert is not the stereotypical beneficiary of white privilege in *Dragonfish*; he is, in fact, portrayed as an outsider within the Vietnamese American society configured in the middle of Las Vegas. He is a naïve narrator whose investigative mind assembles, only gradually, the complex relationships that constitute the Vietnamese group into which circumstance has drawn him. Robert, despite his central role, fails to develop a harmonious relationship with the Vietnamese Americans with whom he interacts.

In the Introduction to *Memory & Cultural Politics*, Amritjit Singh, *et al*., problematize the concept of *assimilation* by examining the nexus between memory and cultural politics in ethnic American literatures. Generally, assimilation refers to one's ability to adapt and adjust to the dominant culture. In ethnic studies and sociology, this concept evokes controversy and even criticism in that it promotes historical amnesia and assumes the superiority of the dominant culture. Assimilation or acculturation is likely unachievable because immigrants and refugees do

not unlearn the pain, sorrow, and bewilderment associated with their past trauma and racial status as the excluded Others in the United States. Ethnic memory, therefore, "represents a real challenge to hegemonic constructions of nation, culture, and history" (4-6). Suzy's interracial marriage to Robert and Sonny's financial success reject the simplistic understanding of the term *assimilation*. In his most recent book, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Viet Thanh Nguyen argues that Vietnamese Americans' gaining a voice in national U.S. literature represents the "form," while their trauma and sorrow caused by the Vietnam War represent the "troubling content" in the cultural "box" in which they live. Nguyen adds, "The ethnic is what America can assimilate, while the racial is what America cannot digest" (199). In *Dragonfish*, Junior (a.k.a. Jonathan), Sonny's son and Suzy's stepson, describes the intrinsic disconnection between Robert and the Vietnamese characters: "America, Mr. Robert, is not the melting pot you Americans like to say it is. It's oil and water. Things get stirred, sure, but they eventually separate and settle, and the like things always go back to each other." Junior also warns Robert that the Vietnamese "will always return to where they belong" and that Robert's interracial marriage and love for his ex-wife are insignificant, essentially discarding the former bond between Robert and Suzy (Tran 45). In *Dragonfish*, Robert is completely alone, the sole drop of oil in an aquarium of Vietnamese culture, in which emulsion is not permitted. Ultimately, because of his status as an outsider, racially and culturally, Robert never had a fully satisfactory marriage with Suzy (or her culture), and he never understands or empathizes with her in the way that the Vietnamese characters can and do. Suzy's distant concern for her Vietnamese daughter Mai and her adamant refusal to consider having children with Robert are indicative of her affinity for Vietnamese water and lack of affinity for the American oil that her ex-husband represents.

As an American who lacks a native understanding of Vietnamese American society and culture, Robert struggles to understand and interact with the Vietnamese American society that is circumscribed by the metaphor of *Dragonfish*. In typical U.S. or Vietnamese American literary representations, white characters oftentimes enjoy privilege and dominion over the minority characters. However, Robert's isolation from the Vietnamese American culture reverses the racial mobility that "whites maneuver more comfortably than those who are not ascribed whiteness" (Applebaum 294). Robert must struggle, rather, to navigate through the close-kit culture of a group in which he, by virtue of his whiteness, is the minority figure. Stephanie Wildman argues that there are many different assertions of white privilege, including many that the Vietnamese people instead control in *Dragonfish*: "Material forces rooted in the physical

world, such as the distribution of societal goods and resources, the division of labor, and immigration policies, create a world that privileges whiteness" (248). The Vietnamese characters in *Dragonfish* dominate the resource pool within the "aquarium" of their sphere of influence, including both information and monetary wealth, and Robert has access only to what the other characters extend to him. The Vietnamese male-subordinates who work for Sonny script Robert's role and assignments in their search for Suzy, and Robert is unable to leave until his captors grant him permission. The Vietnamese men use information about Robert's ex-wife, Suzy, as leverage, which coerces him to serve their cause. They dangle Suzy over Robert's head, knowing how desperate he is to find out what happened to her. Finally, these men refuse to dismiss Robert until he no longer is useful to them, emphasizing the degree to which Robert is manipulated to serve their needs.

In the novel, Tran's reversal of the typical racial roles enacted suggests a decentralization of the typical postwar American view of Vietnam, as he forces his American narrator, Robert, to reconsider his America-centric perspective and expectations. In this way, Tran places the Vietnamese experience at the center of his novel and forces Robert into a position in which he must focus predominantly upon the sufferings, actions, and trauma of the Vietnamese characters, rather than upon his own regrets about his dysfunctional marriage to Suzy. In contrast to Robert's generally inept endeavors, Sonny Nguyen (a.k.a. Son) commands true authority as the kingpin operator in *Dragonfish*. Sonny's role as the patriarchal figure in the small Vietnamese American community in Las Vegas allows him to wield a powerful influence over the other characters. It should be noted that Sonny's financial success distances him from representations of the stereotypically impoverished refugee. Nevertheless, his mood swings are manic in nature, so he does not project the image of a successfully assimilated refugee, despite his wealth, indicating that Sonny's abusive behavior could result from his traumatic memories.

Karin Aguilar-San Juan, in her book *Little Saigon: Staying Vietnamese in America*, notes that "Vietnamese Americans were slipped into existing accounts of belonging and nationality without the discussions of ideology and history that are necessary to contextualize that experience" (123-24). *Dragonfish* complicates the Vietnamese diasporic experience by emphasizing both its Vietnamese American characters' upward mobility and their psychological problems resulting from their war experiences, forcing the reader to re-conceptualize the "meanings associated with exile": on one hand, their diligence reinforces the hope that derives from the American Dream; on the other hand, the trauma generated by war and its aftermath prevents them from acculturation, which distinguishes the Vietnamese "third world" from the American "first world" (Lieu xix).

Sonny, the eldest male, is perceived as the very warped *pater familias* figure in the novel, which accounts for his success in exerting dominion over the others. The *pater familias* power enforced by Sonny derives from a Vietnamese version of Confucian social customs. Until the end of the novel, Sonny maintains control over the power structure, while the other characters are all either younger, subservient, female, or outsiders (as in Robert's case). Sonny is the most feared and privileged man in *Dragonfish*, enforcing his alpha-male dominance through a chain of subalterns who are obedient to him. As his operative Victor states, "'I rarely know [Sonny's] reasons for doing anything. I do what I'm told, I don't ask questions. Me and my brothers, we've been doing that for years now'" (Tran 150). Sonny enjoys the benefits of power, and he controls others through his henchmen and his lack of moral constraint: he is, as his son Junior says, "a man who remembers everything and forgives nothing" (Tran 64). Sonny uses his social position to stifle his wife's voice in this novel, and his influence pushes Suzy to flee to the only place in Las Vegas where Sonny cannot reach her—the Coronado Hotel, where her husband is blacklisted and subject to arrest if found on the premises. The mere presence of her husband forces Suzy to withdraw into the refuge of silence through fear of chastisement and abuse.

Sonny also restrains Robert's hope of retrieving Suzy through his past and present affiliations with the Vietnamese characters, with whom Robert has no real historical, cultural, or ethnic affinities. Robert, in turn, views Sonny as a tyrannical don whom he, as a trained law officer, must confront in order to contain the violence that Sonny is so capable of perpetrating. Robert perceives his role as the "white knight" in Las Vegas who must save Suzy from a "dragon," her cruel new husband, Sonny. In reality, Robert's self-serving actions demonstrate how shockingly unrealistic and poorly advised his agenda is. Jessica Yang, in her review of *Dragonfish*, asserts that Robert is an overaggressive hero without a complete understanding of his actions: "Bob [Robert] is the stereotypical white savior: he is actively trying to find out the truth about Suzy; he's the hero swooping in, hotheaded and with a tendency toward violence during conflicts" (n.pag.). Robert is a police officer, but he seemingly has little trouble crossing the narrow boundary between aggressive detective work and criminal misconduct in order to gain his own personal ends in seeking Suzy. Robert commits burglary, larceny, assault, and battery through the course of the novel, all in the name of saving Suzy from the danger that he has perceived: nevertheless, says Jonathan, "You [Robert] want to come here and be a hero and save your former wife from a bad man [… but] the only thing you really want is to know why she would leave you for slapping her and then stay with a man who threw her down a staircase" (Tran 44). Robert's professional work as a police officer is

what fuels his desire to maintain as much control as possible over the violent situations that he confronts, and in some situations, initiates.

Generally, policemen are supposed to be arbiters of justice who moderate and diffuse complicated and dangerous interactions. However, in Tran's *Dragonfish*, the role of the police officer is reversed: Robert confronts a situation over which he can exercise little influence and into which he is unable to effect any restraint or civility. Robert's actions actually cause more violence and criminal action than they prevent, which emphasizes how insidious the network of violence in which he becomes ensnared truly is. Ultimately, Robert commits himself to rescuing his ex-wife because he needs to understand what mistakes he had made that caused Suzy to leave him. Throughout the novel, Robert resists the suggestions, wishes, and commands of the other characters in order to arrive at some level of closure in his own developing narrative, which links the events of the plot. Robert desires to punish Sonny "while he [is] still alive to feel it" because Robert views Sonny as the seemingly inexplicable barrier between himself and reunion with his ex-wife (Tran 282), and due to a complex of cultural, ethnic, and historical forces, this intuition does not lack foundation. The narrator's final battle with Sonny demonstrates that Robert was motivated more by a subjective, personal desire for revenge against that barrier than by any objective moral or legal standard of justice. It is Robert who views himself as a knight in shining armor and unconsciously has estranged Suzy from the illusive dream that she cherishes--a dream of her past life, which was lost to the historical and political realities of war and its aftermath. Similarly, Sonny's more conscious cruelties have estranged her from that same illusive dream.

Despite her central position in the plot, Suzy is never physically present in the novel. The accounts by her male partners and the translated excerpts of her journal entries are only indirect expressions of Suzy's voice, which should not be taken at face value. As Viet Thanh Nguyen states so clearly, "We have never lacked the valuable stories and the recorded experience of witnesses to conflicts and atrocities, but we should not read these stories naively […]. We need to read these stories […] beyond their own self-positioning and their repositioning by others" (Nguyen, *Race*, 124). Suzy's own story is "repositioned," as it is represented both through her writings and through stories narrated by other characters, which are usually conveyed in English. Suzy's own writings supposedly were written in Vietnamese, but when they appear in the novel, they are transcribed into English. Tran describes the pages as "brittle and yellowed," written in tiny Vietnamese cursive, that can only be ascribed to Suzy (27). The translation of Suzy's journals into English suggests an imperfect representation of her character, and the reader sees Suzy only through linguistic mediation. Inarguably, some nuances of

meaning and tone will be lost during the process of translation due to linguistic and cultural differences. This fact helps to clarify how Suzy's writings lose a portion of immediacy through factors of mediation.

Non-Vietnamese characters have given Suzy a false name, which effectively transforms her character into a more Americanized and reconstructed version of herself. Suzy's ex-husband Robert believed that the name Hong "sounded a bit piggish" (Tran 24); thus, he decided that it would be best for her to have a new, more conventional American name. It also provides insight into the gendered conflicts in the novel. Sonny and Robert struggle to regain control over Hong, or Suzy, who must run away from them in order to secure her freedom of identity. The male characters consistently overlook Suzy's thoughts and desires in their attempts to possess her. Unfortunately, the reader never is able to hear Suzy's voice because it always is mediated through a male voice or through translation from her native Vietnamese into English. The connection between gender, power, and language is well explained in "Language and Power" by Robin Tolmach Lakoff: "the forms of language found in the discourse of public institutions tend to be extreme versions of male communicative patterns. […] Until recently, women entering public discourse could either learn men's speech patterns or risk not being taken seriously" (1). Suzy's actual words are contained only in her Vietnamese notes to her daughter, Mai, which, even in translation, convey a sensitive and intimate voice. Indeed, the stylistic *tour de force* of Tran's narration is found in his success in making the voice in Suzy's notes to her daughter Mai so distinct from all other voices articulated in *Dragonfish*. The notes addressed to Mai appear in extended passages printed in italic type. To read the notes is to enter a realm of consciousness far removed from either the northern-California world of the police detective Robert or the Las Vegas world of the corrupt restaurateur Sonny. To read the notes is to enter a realm of Suzy's disappointed resignation to the loss of a Vietnam in which life and love were simple and sincere. It is a Vietnam that perhaps never existed in fact, but a Vietnam that is cherished in the memories that Suzy hopes to convey to Mai. Although presented indirectly, the images appearing periodically throughout the novel provide some insight into the way she is characterized by the men around her.

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman observes that traumatized women tend to experience more psychological difficulties than men do due to the "narrow tolerance of those closest to them." Herman adds that society constrains women's "sense of autonomy" and their freedom in evincing their innermost feelings (64-65). In Tran's *Dragonfish*, Suzy is similar to the mother figure Thanh in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*: both are victims of trauma, and both use journal writing as a means to "unlock their depressed feelings and transform unarticulated confusion into

understanding" (Ha 3). In fact, Marian M. MacCurdy argues that traumatized women may rely on writing as a form of therapy, so that they can control their unspeakable past and achieve liberation (2). In Suzy's situation, she refuses to disclose her emotional intensity to her male partners because, to borrow Herman's lucid explanation, she is afraid of their misunderstanding and reactions. The emotional and psychological burdens that Suzy releases in her writing, as Maureen Ryan argues in *The Other Side of Grief*, indicates how the Vietnam War is brought back to the American soil, as the "collective story of refugees and their descendants who fled their war-torn country to create new lives in the land of their vanquished invaders" (254).

Sonny, as a survivor of war, like Suzy, attempts to recover from his past traumas, though unlike Suzy, Sonny's new American life focuses on a constant desire to gain or regain control over people and situations. In the novel, Sonny's obsession with domination ostensibly stems from his traumatic past experiences in Vietnam, his subsequent experiences in his flight from Vietnam, and his life as a refugee. Sonny's early extreme poverty, weakness, and loss shaped his character into a bold, assertive, and defiant figure in the face of hardship. Sonny welds his experiences and sufferings as a veteran and former gang-member into a suit of armor to protect him, giving him strength for the future, as he attempts to control his friends and adversaries alike. Sonny also maintains an almost obsessive gambling habit, which symbolizes the too-often poorly advised chances he takes with uncontrollable fate. Sonny describes his fixation with poker as his way to steal power from other individuals: "I love play poker with American. […] It's like I broke their dream, man. It's like I take their money *and* their voice" (Tran 277). Sonny first started playing cards when his father was severely wounded after a poker game, which is indicative of his desire to replace earlier apparent weaknesses with later exaggerated displays of power. His obsession with his childhood past might be linked to a possible distortion of time. Robert David Stolorow argues that, in the realm of trauma, the past becomes the present, and the future loses all meaning other than an endless repetition (39). Such repetition, as symbolized in Sonny's gambling obsession, can be seen as Sonny's desperate attempt to challenge past displays of weakness with futile attempts to control the present and future. His earlier trauma seems to underlie his obsession with control in his later life. The "kingpin" Sonny becomes an extremely hardened and abrasive man. After being caught ransacking an older enemy's house, he was told that weakness, half-heartedness, and passivity have no place in the masculine sphere: "'*Don't be sorry, you idiot. Be a man. Next time you want to get back at another man, stab him in the heart. Don't piss in his rice*'" (Tran 207). This encounter, in which a teenage Sonny was caught vandalizing a gambler's home,

taught him that hesitation and compassion were not ideals that he should value. His traumatic memories define who he is, and they fuel his urge to reverse the course of his life from a position of weakness to one of dominance. Tran indicates Sonny's deep desire for an unattainable tranquility when Junior brings Robert into Sonny's secret retreat, "tiny topical ocean here in the middle of the desert" (39). The hideaway beneath Sonny's elegant restaurant represents his private Eden—an Eden in which past weaknesses and present overcompensating assertions of power might balance out. It might represent the mythical America that Sonny abandoned an all-too-real Vietnam to find.

Sonny's belligerence causes social and domestic disruptions that his son, Junior, is obligated to neutralize: like a sponge, Junior absorbs the emotional blood that seeps from the festering wounds inflicted by his father's violent deeds. Jennifer Courtney's observations on attachment theory apply to Junior, who unlike his father, could be categorized as a "dismissing avoidant individual," who are "low in relational anxiety but high in avoidance. They view relational intimacy as relatively unimportant, value self-reliance and have low expectations for responsiveness from others" (36). Junior remains levelheaded and composed throughout *Dragonfish*, even when he deals with highly stressful situations, but he avoids dealing directly with his father in order to maintain the semblance of harmony in their relationship:

> "Do you know what its like to spend your entire life with someone who must always be held back? Muzzled? Contained? The worst part is that you understand it—you understand everything about them. You're the only one in the world who does. So you live with it. You live with the … It's not fear really. It's futility. You know they're always on the verge of something you cannot control." (Tran 286)

By the end of the novel, Junior has given up on restraining his father. He focuses his attention instead upon minimizing damage subsequent to the actions of the unchained beast that his father too often becomes. Junior's attitude devolves from experience, from his recognition of his father as a lost cause. Junior's filial attitude is defined by his avoidance of confrontation with his father, as Junior serves as the primary manager not only of his father's business life but also of his personal life, doing everything in support of Sonny, including attempting to track down his runaway wife, Suzy. Junior is the mediator of conflict until the end of *Dragonfish*, when he chooses to save only Robert from a burning house while allowing his father to die in the flames. Thereafter, there is no reason left for any of the characters to pursue Suzy further, and she is at

liberty to escape into an unknown future. Junior has played his role as mediator to the end, shielding as many as possible from the violent or traumatic encounters throughout *Dragonfish* (Courtney 33).

Suzy's harrowing experiences and periods of quiet reflection direct her character, wounded and divided by trauma. Suzy describes herself as a "lost traveler" who has had to wander or be herded from place to place to survive on an unfamiliar and unwelcoming continent (Tran 200). Suzy endures long periods of isolation and grief, and she even abandons her own daughter and multiple husbands out of despair and an existential need for solitude. For Suzy, isolation and flight comprise her mechanisms for mediating her untenable problems—primarily the haunting memories of traumatic losses and her own inability to face the postwar realities that threaten to compromise her need for personal freedom:

> I [Robert] once asked her, apropos of nothing, if she believed in ghosts, and she replied that everyone believes in ghosts because everyone has memories. […] she told me about the visions she had at night, ever since she left Vietnam. It'd be a man or a woman, never more than one person. Sometimes she knew them. Sometimes they were too far away to recognize. […] they never looked at her or acknowledged her in any way, like she was the ghost in their world. (Tran 264-265)

These ghosts press Suzy forward on her excursions and dictate the terms of progress in her life. She has to negotiate her relationships in the present to manage the violence of her past. As Isabelle Thuy Pelaud suggests, self-reflection is the key to survival after traumatic experiences: "The act of returning to fragmented memories reflects what Derrida calls 'learning to live with ghosts,' a condition that disrupts normative fixed binaries and oppositions such as the 'other' versus the assimilated, [or] individualism versus collectivism" (64-65). Suzy's periods of deep self-examination and reflection lead her toward isolation and flight to protect her individuality rather than toward the collectivism and compromise that assimilation demands.

Suzy is clearly affected by her traumatic experiences in Vietnam and in the aftermath of the war, including her exodus by boat and the loss of her husband, which pressed her to become a reclusive and lonely person. The lack of control in the historical processes that Suzy has survived likely prompted her fruitless attempts to regain the prelapsarian innocence she lost (the Vietnam of her memories and imaginings) and eventually to escape the Western American desert (the U.S. that never has existed in reality). In her journal, she writes to Mai,

"*I was crying for myself, for everything I had lost, for your father, your ridiculous father, who would never hold me or forgive me anything ever again*" (Tran 112). Thus, Suzy lives in a fractured reality: her memories of a Vietnam that probably never was mix with hopes for an America that probably never will be. Suzy realizes that her attempts to find a place to belong in America have been a "long dream" (Tran 243), and she ultimately decides to take flight from the life that she had led, both in the American and the Vietnamese American communities, over her last twenty years. The disjointed connection between past and present, between one lost and one unrealized dream, mandates a long period of self-reflection for Suzy to deal with the many disappointments in her life.

Both Sonny and Suzy share similar traumatic experiences: they lost their spouses, fled their homeland, raised children as single parents, and found solace in each other; but the ways in which they handle their pasts are quite different. Sonny actively uses violence and intimidation in his attempt to realize his dream of America's promise, which includes his dominant possession of Suzy in his Las Vegas home, and ironically, tranquil thoughts occasionally enjoyed in his subterranean aquatic retreat beneath Nevada's arid desert. Suzy passively uses hope in her attempt to regain her lost dream of happiness in Vietnam. Both Sonny and Suzy seek to find peaceful waters in an American desert. Feelings of grief surround both Sonny and Suzy, who are haunted by the inescapable memories of their losses. Sonny becomes defensive and withdrawn while detained in a Malaysian refugee camp in order to cope with the painful trauma he had endured during his escape from Vietnam. Tran describes Sonny as unforgiving and aggressive, characteristics that are compounded by the way he handles his distressful past through drinking, gambling, and violence. Suzy uses aloofness as her own mechanism for coping with the disappointments she has suffered. Unlike Sonny, Suzy runs away from conflict rather than confronting it violently, as exemplified by her tendency suddenly to drop everything and disappear: for instance, "finally [Robert] came home to a dark and empty house one afternoon and discovered that [Suzy's] suitcase was gone from the closet along with half her clothes" (Tran 267-68). Suzy showed that she was capable of abandoning everything and everyone, including her two husbands and daughter, in order to avoid confrontation. For a time, Suzy and Sonny were bound together by their similar hardships as exiles, but their differing personalities eventually drove them apart. Sonny needed to control and obedience, while Suzy needed freedom and isolation. Sonny's violent and defensive personality is exemplified in the masculine "fight" response to danger; Suzy's personality is exemplified in the

individualistic, detached, and feminine "flight" response to adversity.

Much like Sonny, Robert also takes a highly masculine and forceful approach to regain his lost Suzy, the feminine object, the *femme fatale*, of both Robert's and Sonny's desires. Both Robert and Sonny blame each other for Suzy's flights. Robert, a man without the devastating past or racial and cultural commonality of the other characters, has to stay within the parameters that the Vietnamese men (namely Junior and Sonny) set up for him. Sonny, motivated by his need to control, has the authority to direct the search for Suzy from afar. As the most informed and aggressive character in the novel, Sonny does not have to involve himself directly in recovering Suzy's disappearance, while Robert, the perpetual outsider, must struggle defensively with his advantaged Vietnamese opponent. Robert and Sonny are possessive, tough, and capable of violent acts as they seek to locate and recover Suzy, but Robert is disadvantaged, interestingly, by his whiteness, which bars him from the common suffering and culture that Suzy and Sonny, as well as other Vietnamese characters, share. However, Robert and Sonny's implacable desire and competition blind them both from perceiving the simple reality that Suzy does not want to be found or possessed by either man.

Suzy as a *Femme Fatale*

Dragonfish offers a twist on the iconic noir-fiction genre: its protagonist is a police officer who delves into the violent underbelly of Las Vegas not to solve crimes but to take revenge on his ex-wife's new husband and reconstruct his fragmented, lonely life. George Tuttle's essay "What Is Noir?" argues that "[in noir-fiction] the protagonist is usually not a detective, but instead either a victim, a suspect, or a perpetrator. He is someone tied directly to the crime, not an outsider called to solve or fix the situation" (36). Tran complicates the common characteristics of the genre by creating a protagonist who is an officer of the law and an outsider to the novel's central, Vietnamese American community, but one who also is capable of acting lawlessly and is considerably entwined in the aggressive, criminal network that steers *Dragonfish*. Robert, as the narrator, conveys his "feelings of emptiness, loneliness, loss […] to evoke a sense of an alienated voice," which, according to Christopher Mallon, are core expressions of the noir voice (n.pag.). Robert perpetually isolates himself from the other characters and views himself as exemplary and superior: "It occurred to me that I was supposed to be the good guy in all this whether I was wearing that badge or not" (Tran 127). As is typical in the noir genre, Robert's own sexual, personal, and criminal agendas fuse to bring destruction to his

surroundings, the other characters, and to himself in one gritty, uncensored end. Robert's actions during his final grappling with Sonny do not reflect the attitude of a law-enforcement officer, but rather a violence-hungry, self-serving individual: "It wasn't fear or hesitation that kept me from pulling the trigger this time. Just an animal need to hurt him much more while he was still alive to feel it" (Tran 282). As Christopher Orr states, "[Noir] narrators, regardless of how they see themselves, are nevertheless victims of forces beyond their control" (49). In this scene, Robert demonstrates that his self-perception as the hero was easily overpowered by his possessive and animalistic needs.

Suzy's character can be examined in an ironically powerful light as a representation of a classic *femme fatale*—another central figure in the noir genre. Elizabeth Menon defines a *femme fatale* as "an archetypal woman whose evil characteristics cause her to either unconsciously bring destruction or consciously seek vengeance" (4). This archetypal figure has existed for centuries, and Menon discerns her main qualities in the characterization of the biblical figure Eve, who causes Adam's fall from grace due to her appetitive nature (4). Some other socially constructed representations of *femmes fatales* include Pandora (the Greek figure whose box unleashed evil in the world), Cleopatra (an infamously seductive Egyptian Queen), and in the modern era, Marilyn Monroe (who allegedly lead John F. Kennedy into scandal in the 1960s) (Menon 20). Tran portrays Suzy as such a *femme fatale* in *Dragonfish*, as she almost enchantingly captivates the men in her life before leading them into a pitfall of violence. Without malice, she brings danger along with her beauty into the lives of the men whom she attracts.

Suzy, as described by the characters who surround her, is alluring and mysterious, and both Robert and Sonny become enthralled by her. Robert describes his first encounter with Suzy in transparently erotic terms, despite the seemingly unromantic setting of a crime scene: "I knew I liked her. That petite sprightly body. Her lips, her cheekbones: full and bold. Firecracker eyes that glared at people with the urgency of a lit fuse. […] Suzy and I married four months later" (Tran 23). Robert objectifies Suzy in this description, emphasizing his physical, rather than emotional, attraction to her, as her physical body is so evident while her emotions are, and will remain, hermetically sealed. Robert assumes that Suzy is in need of protection due to her flighty tendencies, and this assumption leads Robert to underestimate her innate strength and independence, which has been true of the archetype of the *femme fatale* since the characterization of Eve (Yang n.pag.). Similarly, Sonny feels an inexplicably physical attraction toward Suzy, but his attraction is based upon a gratification of his sexual desire. A quotation from Suzy's journal gives a snapshot of Sonny's vehemence: "*He would take me the second we*

were alone. He would not ask. He would not say a word […] *until he had finished and come up for air*" (Tran 200). Robert and Sonny are led into direct conflict with each other after their intimate relationships with Suzy have ended, as each attempts to repossess the *femme fatale*, the illusive Suzy, which leads ultimately to Sonny's death, and to much physical injury for Robert.

Toni Bentley argues that the motivation of the *femme fatale* is power, which serves as an antidote to a lifetime of suppression (33-34). Suzy clearly exercises, either consciously or unconsciously, power over both Robert and Sonny in *Dragonfish*; sometimes nothing is so fatally attractive as perceived indifference. In Tran's novel, however, the *femme fatale*'s apparent indifference conceals Suzy's (and perhaps also Robert's and Sonny's) deep-seated but indirectly articulated need to return to a prelapsarian world, lost to her by the circumstances of a war and its aftermath. Early in the novel, Jonathan introduces Robert to the rare fish in his father's underground aquarium—his secret retreat from the stress of his licit and illicit business involvements:

> "This one here"—he pointed at a whiskered creature over two feet long, with a golden, undulating body, glimmering in the light— "is an Asian arowana. A dragonfish. Very endangered in the wild. They're supposed to bring good luck, keep evil away, bring the family together. Asians always love believing in that. Our clients will pay over ten thousand for a gold one like this." (Tran 38)

The symbolism of the dragonfish seems to define the dream that Suzy follows toward a freedom she may never attain, and toward the return to an Eden whose portals have been sealed by history. In the end, Suzy disappears into a future of unknowns. Despite the violent resolution of the novel's action, Robert is incapable of moving past his attachment to Suzy: "On the tape [a video of Suzy] was everything I knew about [Suzy] and everything I would never know. That wasn't enough, but at least it was real" (Tran 296). These concluding lines of *Dragonfish* imply that Robert views his relationship with Suzy as his own illusory dream, which will continue to influence his life. Ironically, both Robert and Sonny fail to see how they allowed Suzy to control as a *femme fatale* in their lives. Suzy's power stems from her alluring qualities, and they contrast with Robert's overriding obsession and Sonny's demand for control, originating possibly from Robert's need for a stable domestic life and from Sonny's postwar traumatic experiences.

Conclusion

Tran's *Dragonfish* extends beyond the traditional noir archetypes and examines the interactions among Vietnamese American refugees, and their interactions with European Americans in the scarred post-Vietnam War world. As victims of trauma, the numbing effects of isolation and violence plague the Vietnamese characters, and the same shared experiences exclude Robert, making him peripheral to many of the developments in the novel. The novel's title refers to the Asian arowana fish, or dragonfish, which is mentioned in the second chapter. This fish, although mentioned only once, stands as a metaphor for perhaps the position of all of the characters vis-à-vis each other. According to a commentary on this species, dragonfish are "top predators" and "have a small natural population size […] [the] adults are territorial and therefore spatially dispersed" (Rowley, *et al.* 1256). Different attributes of this fish apply to the various characters in Tran's novel: its beauty and desirability can be seen in Suzy, its aggressive and predatory behavior in Robert and Sonny, and its unifying attribute in Junior. Asian arowanas are rare, often isolated, just as the major characters are separated from each other by their clashing personalities and desires, so who then is targeted primarily by the novel's title? Perhaps no single character is distinctly targeted, in that the author gives various characteristics of the dragonfish to all of his major characters. They all inhabit waters that are equally artificial in the American desert that surrounds them. The themes of a need for solitude and a need for human interaction recur, and they derive from a complicated configuration of trauma, regret, and aspiration that differentiates each of its characters from the others. In the end, however, each character who remains alive is equally alone, still seeking the imagined waters that constitute the illusive dream of a past that is lost or a future that is unattainable, the illusive Eden that epitomizes humanity's fondest memories or dreams. Vu Tran frames his novel on the conventions of the noir-detective genre, but he does not reduce the conflict occurring in the novel to a simple struggle between good and evil. Instead, each character is a sleuth in search of ideal waters in the desert of a world in which the search for ideal can lead only to disappointment. Sonny's son, Junior, is perhaps the only realist on *Dragonfish*, whose job is to point the other characters away from their obsessive dreams, which itself is an impossible task.

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