

Being With:
Place, Memory, Silence in Young Saigon

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Preface: Weight	4
Chapter One: A Beginning	8
Intervention: Notes on a Methodology	18
Chapter Two: The Café Apartment	25
<i>The Visitor</i>	30
<i>Ownership</i>	32
<i>Fun</i>	35
<i>Flashy</i>	38
<i>Forgetting</i>	39
<i>Beautiful</i>	41
<i>Nostalgic and the Not</i>	45
<i>Something Old</i>	48
Chapter Three: Nguyen Hue Street	57
<i>Social Distancing</i>	61
<i>Opening</i>	64
<i>Seeing</i>	66
<i>Seeing, Too</i>	70
<i>Cleaning</i>	75
<i>Stopping by</i>	78
<i>Noticing</i>	82
<i>Possibility</i>	85
Chapter Four: Saigon	89
<i>Haunts</i>	95
<i>More</i>	98
<i>Deeper</i>	104
<i>Translating</i>	111
<i>Home</i>	116
Chapter Five: Redux	118
Bibliography	130

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Preface

Weight

How do you walk heavily with subject matter on your back, without trampling all the meadows?

—Victoria Chang, *Obit*

The pieces of a life stay pieces / at the end

—Arthur Sze, “The Gift”

When I was nineteen, my mother gave me notes my father had written sometime long ago. They were translations, Vietnamese to English, of some phrases Vietnamese immigrants might find useful on their way to the United States. My fingers ran along the delicate curve of a ‘y’ my father had lightly penciled on notebook paper, folded and refolded many times over now. *So similar to my own*, I thought. I studied the letters his hand made, the writings that kept going after he ended. My inheritance is this collection of notes that once belonged to my father, every one of them filed away in a manila folder bulging with birth certificates, WIC papers, marriage documents, newborn feeding guides for new Vietnamese parents, certificates of his death, copies of them.

It’s hard not to feel that the hand that had made those soft indents wasn’t my own, that they could be filled by another. And the truth is, I did fill them. Each time I returned to his notes, I felt in each of his letters the time he took to write them. I imagined him going back and forth between Vietnamese and English, trying to get each word just right. I filled them with the belief that they were about a vision he saw for the four of us: him, his wife, and his son and daughter, aged five and two. These letters were filled with anticipation, I imagined. They were full of me thinking about him thinking, about a man who could already hear himself ask in perfect English for our seats, for a glass of water, for someone to help us with our bags. I imagined my way through his words to what he saw when he wrote them: an America spread out underneath the wingtip of our plane, a place he wanted his family to see. It’s hard to tell where he ends, and I begin.

It’s easy to imagine the man, make up stories about him. But imagine the daughter who

knows her father's papers more than she does her father. Imagine that the pieces of himself that he left behind will be touched and loved longer than the father himself. This is a thesis about what a person leaves behind, the silences we come into, how we work and bring into being the lives and histories we never knew — or rather, how we make them possible again, and then again.

The weight of each tiny letter converges with the weight of the story itself. When I spend time with his notes, I feel the weight of my memories, of migration, of moving from Saigon to San Francisco to Florida, from one city to another. I feel the weight of the meanings carried for a place, even one we've never seen before. Sometimes though, I wonder how much *lighter* that meaning must have been for him to have left the city both he and I were born in, the places and family I could have grown up with. Saigon — a place heavy with what remains an unfathomable mystery for me and for many others my age, a place with matter heavy enough to settle unseen like wreckage at the bottom of the sea.

I also feel the weight of other memories that my memories are connected to, the long history of migrations that precede me, the procession of graveless burials that trail my present. That history is an inheritance that I was born into, of all the things that brought me to this moment of my life. But the catalog of emotions and stories disappears when someone dies, and there is a degree to which we rely on a few people to remember something of what life was to them.

Over the years, my mother would tell me about those who fled north Vietnam along its eastern coast in the wake of the Geneva Accords, which drew a line across the country in 1954. She would tell me about the ocean voyage her grandparents took, her six-year-old mother who outlived many others crowded on the ship to become Bà Ngoại, my grandmother. The stories I listened to turned “war” into some day in April 1975 when my mother fled her home in Da Lat, the small town her parents and grandparents settled in twenty or so years earlier. In a truck sagging with all the pigs the family had, they traveled further south that day, believing safety might be found in Saigon. They

travelled a long time, waiting for a decision, for an end to another war, the day they could come home.

But my mother's stories also turned "boat people" into an aunt and uncle who somehow made it to the United States in the years after Saigon fell, who would — in more than three decades — assist the younger brother they left behind in Saigon with his immigration paperwork. That younger brother is my father.

These are my mother's memories and her memories of the memories of others. Now they are something of my own, a kind of memory that bears the intimacy and pressure of a personal one. But memories are not watertight. Silence trickles in everywhere. The edges of memory — their blurred and eroded boundaries — open to a space made of silence where questions are dragged out into the unknown, no answer in sight. Everything here carries in it the sentiment of something more, a depth Homi Bhabha (1994, 48) writes in *The Location of Culture*, "that provides the language of Identity with its sense of reality." The wearing away is not a function of an absent practice, of working and making in unfamiliar territories. The edges are worn because they have been worked, opened and reopened — like the notes my mother had given me. The edges are worn because a part of the past was remembered, then remembered differently.

For most of my life I claimed that my earliest memory took place in the window seat of an airplane, tightly curled up next to my mother and brother. The seat next to him was occupied by a man none of us knew. But if I'm to be honest, the first thing I learned and kept with me over the years was the feeling of loss. My ethnographic practice and lines of questioning are formed through the lens of loss. Or rather, what is left behind when something or someone passes away, when they slip out of the everyday and into the unknowable. Nothing's lost. Not really. Everything that's ever happened has left its little tear. A wound that travels across the generations.

This ethnography is shaped by me still learning to feel my way among and through the

silences in Saigon, an ocean of heavy subject matter. Always, still, am I coming upon unexpected shadows and incredible connections, things floating near the surface pointed to by photographs, memories told and retold, brief yet intense sensations — a father's notes. Everything the city had seen, experienced, endured, comes to the surface in pieces. Those fragments embed themselves in streets and buildings. They are shrunken and harbored in the people still alive today. And when they are stitched together, they make the city's history. They make its collective memory.

My writing and thinking in this work are textured by the experiences I've lived through, the memories I carry. I try to be as specific as possible in every work that I do, but sometimes vagueness about the past — and more specifically loss — is more accurate and precise than the exactness commonly desired in ethnography. And when it comes to talking about Saigon, I had the sense that questions raised about its present do not need to be answered by war, or maybe do not need to be answered at all. So, I stay in the present. I work with ghosts, the afterlives of the living. I follow the shadows that trail them, plunge into them. And I know the adventures they lead me to encounter will be experiences of necessity. And those experiences will carry risk, a depth that can only return to the present different ways of seeing it. But I also know that each of these experiences, in their own small ways, will bear weight.

Chapter One

A Beginning

Every history has more than one thread, each thread a story of division.

—Ocean Vuong, “A Letter to my Mother That She Will Never Read”

Every moment happens twice: inside and outside, and they are two different histories.

—Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*

There is a boxy nine-story apartment building occupying Saigon’s financial center that looks at once bleaker and stranger than everything around it. The low-roofed shops and older buildings around the apartment are mostly gone, each side of the street it’s on now lined with fancy twenty- and thirty-story buildings. I’ve forgotten how exactly I came across the building, only that I was surprised that it exists in the middle of District One, or rather, that it exists at the heart of the city’s “golden land” — good locations for urban redevelopment and the construction of new high-rises.

The apartment building was constructed sometime in the early 1960s along a main street called Nguyen Hue, little side streets departing from it at tidy right angles. But the street was once called Charner Boulevard, and before that, the Kinh Lon Canal. Once there had been vendors who sold fabric and flowers along the canal. As the French arrived throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the street was widened, given sidewalks. Hotels, shopping malls, apartments, garages, imported Cadillacs and Renaults began to appear up and down the boulevard. Most of the buildings have been demolished and replaced not too long ago though, like the Tax Center in 2014, that big shopping mall on the street corner Graham Greene mentions in *The Quiet American*.

Built for high-ranking officials, the old apartment building at 42 Nguyen Hue has recently been given the name “Café Apartment,” and for good reason. Over the past decade, more than thirty of its residential units have been rented out to aspiring young entrepreneurs who then turned the units into businesses: clothing stores, restaurants, coffeeshops, teashops, art and co-working



Figure 1. *The Cafe Apartment. Photo by Saigoneer.*

spaces, among others. The businesses occasionally change, like any place. One thing swaps for another. But the layout stays the same: businesses remain close to the main street, which was turned into *phố đi bộ* in 2015, a walking street. The frontside seems almost pre-packaged for Instagram. The colors are eaten by the sun during the day. But at night, everything is lit from top to bottom by a curtain of colorful electric signs, lanterns hung across the small, square terraces softening those colors with their warm golden glow.

The building has changed in one other important way: it now has more people who've left than people who've stayed. There are people, a small number, who still live in the Café Apartment, a place that perhaps carries, instead, the name of home.

"It's a bizarre, weird old building with a plaza inside," Hoàng tells me one afternoon. He's a

self-confident young Saigonese who recently moved to the United States. I met him for the first time in 2019, bonding over music, his talent with the ukulele, and a chunky book I had with me at the time. The word “History” was on its cover in bold white lettering. I never read past page three.

It is illegal, by law, for households to carry out business in apartments. But that is what happens here. And there is little to hide the slow disintegration of the building — a state of decline that is a visible reference not just to the failures of the developmental promises of state socialism, that breaks the perception of the ordered and beautiful future. The building also carries with it a reminder of times of war and colonialism, that the past exists in the present, breathing up and down its moldered walls, stocking the silences.

It is not so shocking then that city authorities marked the building for demolition in February 2017. Yet it remains, after all — a colonial construct that persists, structurally intact amid the necropolis of colonial debris. Without the businesses and attractive façades that pull in young local and foreign visitors, and the excitement over them on social media, the building might not be standing today. The building is seen as a well of perversity and suspicion by authorities. And it seems its staying-on is a matter of popular opinion; there is a strange kind of peril in this. A living place some might call home is reliant upon the consideration of strangers who perhaps know little — or care little — about its ongoing history and silent happenings, the meanings inscribed within the building, except where it intersects with their own lives in the present.

But centerpiece to that present in Saigon is Vietnam’s 1986 economic reform: *Doi Moi* (Renovation). For years after the end of the war, the country was subject to failed, postwar collectivist economic policies, hyperinflation, a U.S. embargo that lasted until the mid-1990s. Rice, food, was in short supply. Doi Moi opened cities across the country to foreign investment and a socialist-oriented market economy in a move towards reintegration into the global market. The reform made possible and encouraged innovation and places like the Café Apartment. Things began

to look better, economically.

Saigon carries an annual GDP growth goal of over eight percent.¹ In 2019, the state even required the city to make more revenue than the country's next four largest cities combined. The city is one of the fastest growing economies in the world, even during a pandemic. Wrapped around the city are promising stories of rising personal wealth and poverty reduction. Pictures and stories of economic growth are generally supported by the young Saigoneses I spoke with. But images are recourses we insist upon to keep a story afloat. Images of progress are incredibly precarious and contingent.

In Aimee Phan's (2012) *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong*, there's a fictional housing development called the "New Little Saigon Community Project" in Ho Chi Minh City, an expensive, guard-gated development fit with its own private golf course that takes up hundreds of acres. It's a community project made for and by Saigoneses, a plan in which any opportunity for critique is undone by optimism. "The words sounded pretty," the main character Cherry thinks, "the space looks idyllic" (34). But everything, she realizes, is still a business, one her brother Lum departs the U.S. for to reeducate already wealthy Saigoneses on capitalism and the American dream.

Like the Café Apartment or the community project, what the city is and what its history amounts to, is being sublimated, suppressed by its outward appearance, pushed beyond the reach of memory. The vision of economic growth and widespread prosperity looks good. Billboards and blown up posters and advertisements of emerging developments depict a dream that is clearly big and close, palpable in certain areas of the city. There's another territory altogether on the other side of the present, the generation after reality. But there is nothing on that other side, only the past.

The inscribing of this story of growth and development onto the frontside of history in place of stories (memories, photographs) expressing, or attempting to express, the reality of a city being

¹ Note that overall Vietnam's goal is seven percent.

turned into something brand-new, felt — continues to feel — like a rush to closure, in the likeness of hope. It is a city that seems to conflate the present with the future, that appropriates the hopes of the living and moves us further from the plains of memory and closer to the threshold of myth.

New high-rises and apartment complexes with names like Sky Garden or Horizon Tower do not make me think of people in Saigon, living or dead, or the wars. They do not offer any sense of the past or the necessity of memory, but rather an indication that what should be remembered is the injunction itself: remember to not remember. And what is history if not memory? If people can be “complaisant hostages of the pasts they create,” Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2015, xxii) once wrote, I think that people can also be hostages of the futures they imagine.

For many, writes anthropologist Erik Harms (2013, 345), “the city’s future is being built on stalled time.” Saigon grows taller and further away. In the meantime, the lives of many are spent always in expectation. Much of the media say the city is in a construction boom, pointing to images of old buildings being torn apart and replaced with huge infrastructure projects. But projects constantly hit by lack of funding and small resistances (Harms 2012) have made the transition a spectacle.² Locals, young and old, are watching development drag on, the years go by. Change and loss and shortcomings are not just prolonged but witnessed and re-witnessed in public. Still, everything is carried forward by top-down visions of a beautiful post-socialist city of glass structures and modern amenities that pressure the people who must bear it to wait for the image to be real — or be displaced to get there.

The threads of millions of personal histories seem to be disentangling from the city’s history, moving just fast enough to fray, to wear on memory. And memory is pulled on, worked, in the “need to express or define who we are in the present and, in turn, what we could possibly become”

² For example, the city’s first metro line, which will link Ben Thanh at the city’s center and Suoi Tien in the northeast. The opening date was set for 2017, 2018, 2020, and now, the end of 2021.

(Arias and del Campo 2009, 10-11). With the gaze set on some distant spot and a city poised to race forward, someone's history is being forgotten, chased away. Someone's home is disappearing, familiar forms of the past being dragged into the deep space of silence — a space where memory moves, ferments with things yet to come.

I come into this project thinking about questions of place, memory, and silence for Saigon's young adults today, people around my age. They are those whom most would say are part of Generation Z. But I think of this generation as one defined by the absence of war memories, people who have never experienced that past — a generation that has the potential to be the advent of a city not loosened from memories of war, but unstrung from them.

Yet, even as much of the city seems focused on moving ahead, this generation is also one in which quite a few are turning towards the “old” (places, practices, people) to repair that relationship between past and present, between the generations. And here it is possible to feel, as Eva Hoffman (2004, 238) writes in *After Such Knowledge*, “consoled by this near-touching of the time before, this near-meeting of parallel lines that, after all these years, seem to be bending towards each other again.”

When endless change is visible wherever they turn, and a city is funneled through the image of one unified and too specific future, what does it mean for experience and memory keep pace? How do the young keep that strange sense of sacredness that they know, as if by inheritance, in the old? When there is much surface matter, how do they live with and attend to the something deeper?

I center myself in places because, for me, the places we carry with us, that we remember, are always the strangest places we'll ever encounter because they are the only places where we recognize how many silences and mysteries there are in people's lives. Underneath the mesh of sounds, the clinking of chisels and the drumming of jackhammers that seem to never cease, is a strangeness, an other reality, the roiling of silent matter. It is a silence inside the people we see, the places we move

through and carry with us far and long after their visible life ends. That silence is weighted with the city's history. It is the preparation of things to come.

I think with anthropologist Paul Connerton (2009) and his notion of place memory in *How Modernity Forgets*. I focus on his description of memory's locus, that point at which the places that are "inconspicuously familiar" to us carry through our ways of living, our work of creating, in the present (34). The locus is every moment and place we have folded meaning into, that we walk with in our ongoing history. And we take what we need of it, handpick from the preserves of what we know was once present to think — or make it — through *this* present. The locus is our history's dark pantry.

This is a thesis about the possibilities within the long, weighted shadow of the past for young Saigonese to rewrite the history of the city and their own history, to imagine and bring into being alternative futures. And what is the future, if not this present? Everything I think and write about, then, is about a present — one that already was and may yet still be. I write about the ways some of the young are forming a kind of practice, a practice Denise Ferreira da Silva (2016) might describe as differentiation without separation, which is necessarily social and aesthetic. It is a practice that depends not on their ability to repair contradictions between the past and the present. But it relies, instead, on making them disappear, the way the gaps between trees disappear when we look down a long line of them. It is a practice that relies, in a city of enduring flux, on a willingness to continually revise their vantage points, aligning themselves in the direction where differences or otherness give way to depth, and where a kind of affinity between each generation might be felt — and remembered.

The following chapters of this thesis take one space of the city as an opening into a distinctive mode of experience. The second of these chapters begins in the Café Apartment where I think with Edward Soja's notion of thirdspace to consider the ways young people approach and fold

meaning into visible forms of the past, or at least those parts that catch and concentrate in places. In a city where much of the visible past remains, I argue for new understandings of old and new that are centered on experiences of space, that invent an expanded or contracted present. For the young, that which is old, in many ways, serves as a portal into the ongoingness of a history. Places like old apartments open up avenues for participating in that history, making something of it — making the past new and present. The remains of history silently packed in old buildings are differently encountered and envisioned by every person who visits. But each, in their own way, is bringing into new focus realities otherwise unseen and forgotten within Doi Moi, holding them up to critical shades of presence and possibility.

The third chapter goes further outwards to the streets of Saigon and begins with Nguyen Hue, now a walking street. It considers the myths and episodes of power that accompany public spaces that look “new” and “developed” like Nguyen Hue, the theme of a future already here. These spaces restructure how we see and relate to another, be with *an other*. They relieve visitors of the weight of a shared but inscrutable past. People, old and young, become not strange but strangers, contingent beings. In this is the loss of the possibility for affinities, the making of an absence. And absence is a form of silence, the space from which language vanishes and answers disappear. But it is not necessarily a void. Memory is the constant companion of emptiness, a quiet presence that reminds the young that they could conceive a different present by living the future they want to see, while inhabiting its potential ending at the same time.

The fourth chapter looks towards Saigon itself, or rather, to what gives the city its weight. I turn to the relationships between the young and the old. I explore the ways that memory becomes the connective tissue between generations, holding the city together as a place where lives are brought close not by a common dream of the future, but the sense of a long and entwined history. Memory is the city’s history. But the past is not memory; memory draws from it. There is more to it

than memory. This chapter takes on a lens of unknowability in order to speak about what surrounds the remembered: silence. And to tend to silence is to point out what older generations leave out and leave behind, to see their lives and their residues deepened with unknowable time. In that strangeness or mystery is the potential for translation, a continuance of something in alteration. To translate is to make another beginning, a history that opens differently in the retelling — a city that begins again in the re-membling. And in the constant rearrangement of the pieces of personal and collective past is the possibility of experiencing home.

This collection of chapters is about how things enter existence, then do not last. Silence is the shadow of whatever exists, that follows everything which presents itself in the world. Saigon grows older each day, its shadows longer and silences louder as people and places dissolve into memory, populate the spaces heavy with time between. But those spaces can be a site of active imagining. The cracks between memory are spaces where the young can collaborate and aspire and create with the generations that precede them, that have somehow brought them to this moment of their lives. Or, to see it differently, every generation they bring with them into this present. And in this with-ness is an alternate way of coming together as a city, of being with the past in all its horror and beauty.

“The truth is memory has not forgotten us,” Little Dog tells his dead friend in Ocean Vuong’s (2016, 189) *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*. Saigon’s history is full of loss, full of people and places once here then simply gone — a loss quickened by a city that is closing the door, or wanting to, on the war-filled past in favor of the future, of accumulation in the name of wealth and innocence. But people leave in their place reminders of themselves, pieces tucked away in old things, like slips of paper between the pages of a book that tell us where to stop, pay closer attention. And we will need to pay attention to memory in order to think realistically about the future, to look at it as if we were five, ten, generations ahead looking back at this present — the past of the future

young. We will need to remember to bring *that* future to life, as if it were a reality we inhabit now.

Intervention

Notes on a Methodology

And yet I can't think of a way to engage more faithfully with a discipline devoted to the value of circumstances as we find them, to the significance of incipient and emergent things.

— Andan Pandian, *A Possible Anthropology*

We are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people.

— Fred Moten, *The Undercommons*

The world shuttered in 2020, a country at a time. Near the end of March, Vietnam closed its borders to foreign visitors in an effort to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As I wrote the first draft of these words in Florida, December 7th of that same year, those borders remained closed. Today, I can still recall what I felt for much of the past year — what I still feel from time to time. To do an ethnography about Saigon without being in the country at first struck me as an incredibly fraught effort. It crossed my mind throughout the summer of 2020 how this form of thinking and writing may be given to charges of inadequate reason and completion. I sat in doubt, deciding whether to keep going or give up, holding my breath for the end of the pandemic. With almost every word I wrote, I was weighing the silences between them, thinking about the colonial violence that gave rise to, and still remains in, the field of anthropology. Because, what did I know about anything?

But there was a small feeling I had, and I think many who are of Vietnamese descent have also had: that our stories were not being told or were otherwise not being heard. I read enough literature on Vietnam, sensing that something — or rather, someone — was missing. Often it could feel as though the experiences of the young Vietnamese whom I had the chance to connect with over the years were not reflected in many of the works I read, which centered themselves in the experiences of older generations during and after war. These are important, of course. But they are not this generation's own stories.

To continue with a project that grapples with silence, then, takes what Angela Garcia (2010,

35) calls “writing with care,” that is, a form of expression that allows in “the possibility of letting things be vulnerable and uncertain.” While the ideas drawn out in this thesis take shape through a thinking with — and careful imagining into — the experiences shared with me, this work still sits with the possibility that there are things I cannot know, things left speculative by necessity. What my methodology works towards is an ethnography that grows from an anthropology structured on the not knowing, an openness to opacity. My writing aspires to put forward, as honestly and palpably as possible, the worlds lived and imagined by my interlocutors. And still, I attend to what remains on the precipice of possibility.

In pursuit of this vision, I carried out what I have taken to calling “vernacular observation.” Much as I view Saigon as part of home, I was aware early on that I was still an outsider to the city, either to its serious problems or its real potential. And so many others have become part of this work, part of my listening to silence. I asked five young Saigoneese to engage with the Café Apartment and Nguyen Hue, do their own detailed study. I limited my guidance and subtly encouraged them to create their own ethnographic practice, asking them to spend some time in the urban milieu familiar to them and take a closer look. What makes a “good” ethnography then is based on what they believe was worth telling, the moments that were meaningful to them. The fieldnotes they shared with me are the medium that I work on and with.

The substance of this thesis, too, are conversations I had with young people within and outside of Saigon.³ I connected with them via Instagram, exchanged messages over Facebook and WhatsApp, talked over long Zoom video chats, checked and rechecked emails. Modern technology and the digital have their problems. But amid the isolation of a global lockdown, I believe that they offer a glimpse of the ability in anthropology to work with the present, to grow with it. And that

³ All interviews/observations were carried out from September 2020 to January 2021. The names from these conversations are pseudonyms for ethical reasons. However, for those carrying out observations, I chose to keep the name preferred — whether it be in their observations or in interviews — to give credit to their words and work.

they are not an inconsiderable source of human connection, but instead a source, sometimes, able to produce meaningful ethnographies from impossible distances.⁴

In an effort towards a more expansive anthropology, one that might articulate the world that “pulses at the edges of things,” as Kathleen Stewart (2007, 44) describes it, I placed my interlocutors’ stories in the company of others. I fold into this ethnography some short and long fictions written by writers of Vietnamese descent. Both writers and ethnographers share an endeavor to bridge “life and words,” as anthropologist Veena Das (2006) puts it. Both attend closely to the small and unsayable details of life that speak to its opaqueness and singularity. But fiction might remind us of the many other possibilities that lie within our own personal present, make them tangible. There is an *us* who might have been, if only our parents or grandparents had made slightly different choices, even going further into time, into a big tree of other choices that branch off into their own little world of people who are not us, but a possible us. And it seems to me that this truth — that we could have just as easily been any one of a hundred of other people — is at the heart of being with others unlike ourselves, of seeing difference without the impetus for separation.

For the young in Saigon, perhaps one of those alternate possibilities is Mai in Tuyen Do’s (2019) *Summer Rolls*, who hides her relationship with her black boyfriend, hesitant to share something new and intimate with her parents who are still learning how to live with their past, a war still happening in memory. Maybe the young could have been like Cherry in Aimee Phan’s (2012) *The Reeduction of Cherry Truong*, a young Vietnamese American woman trying to make sense of her mother’s half-existence since they departed the Pulau Bidong refugee camp in Malaysia, a woman attempting to figure out the cost of fleeing Saigon, of her present. Their lives might have been that

⁴ I do want to mention that because this work requires being in touch with me, I was limited to those whom I could communicate with digitally. This has led me to work with young people who had access to smartphones and computers. And so, often, those whom I talked and worked with had more socioeconomic means than many. Of course, this does not so much affect how I write as it does what I can write about.

of Sang and Hoa's nameless and stillborn child — a child of Agent Orange — in Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai's (2020) *The Mountains Sing*. The possibility of not being born at all.

Fiction is at once memory and imagination, like some parts of this thesis. It “claims the freedom to dispense with ‘what really happened,’ or where it really happened, or when it really happened,” writes Toni Morrison (1995, 93), “and nothing in it needs to be publicly verifiable, although much in it can be verified.” To thread fiction into my ethnography is to stretch the present horizontally, which brings readers into dialogue with events, with persons and problems they have not otherwise experienced or met (Nussbaum 1990). But to use fiction is also to pull the present vertically, so to speak: for readers to notice and imagine into being the other dimensions of life that might escape the person who lives it.

I put the stories — memories — that interlocutors tell me in dialogue with the literary. I imagine my way into their fieldnotes, creating my own kind of fiction too. And this is necessarily about bringing memory close to the imagination, within touching distance. The potency of the present is in their embrace, memory and imagination. In this is perhaps the potential of seeing and thinking beyond the limits and fissures of that present, of being attuned to the experiences and possibilities buried deep in the secrecies of the past. This thesis is built on their merging, a way to explore, in more expansive terms, what it means to live in Saigon today as a young person, how one cares for and remembers a city even as much of it seems to be quickly dissolving into history, becoming silence.

Many of the Vietnamese writers whose work is central to my work acknowledge a need for a writing that is spacious enough for new ways of seeing old images. I work with images in this thesis, photographs specifically. For, photographs are portals to a dream, the writer Michelle Angwenyi (2020) reflects. “They give us a more expansive imagining of things we may not be able to hold in memory, or in our hands.”

To think about Saigon is to contend with its existing photos, its inheritance of a long visual history. A wide body of overproduced images exists to remind viewers of — or define them through — a former colonial capital, a city that has fallen, or one that seduces with the “promise of glamour,” as a city guide describes. Lives have become arranged into a series of images describing a history that is different from what was experienced, that arguably amounts to spectacle in which, as Debord (2005, 10) writes in *The Society of the Spectacle*, “what appears is good; what is good appears.”

The camera might place an equals sign between image and present: to see something is to believe that we can grasp it as it really is. But pictures are not mirrors, only windows. They do not speak. Silence is one of their preconditions. The photograph is only a suggestion of the activities unfolding within it, an opening into what we know nothing about for the most part, except that something or someone once existed. A photo is silence made visible. And to distil, or in a sense, de-still the present experienced by the young in Saigon requires registering the frequencies imperceptible to vision.

This thesis thinks with the photographs provided by interlocutors, and with those shared on Instagram by the young in Saigon. I place photographs in this work less for content than for the fact of being kept, shared with others. When a person keeps a photograph, I think it forms an odd kind of promise. And this is because, for me, the significance of the photograph is only revealed in the act of preserving it.

Photographs are doorways into the city’s present, a way to work and imagine into it. Clicking through the photos stored in my own camera, I realize that they do not bear the full weight of the moments they aspire to show. A photograph is about an instant. And there is more to personal history than its instants, those memorable bits between things left unnamed and unrecorded. But photos are good at reminding us of loss, of a present which has quickly passed. And I would like to

believe that there is a quality of dream in loss, a way to imagine what might have been, and be reminded that what might have been could yet still be.

When shared on social media platforms like Instagram, though, even if a profile is “private,” photographs are neither public nor private. Rather, they oscillate between the intimate and the communal, navigating the universal tension between the narrated and the experienced. And in this movement emerges a constantly changing roadmap for ourselves, an entry point for others, towards some truth about the life we have lived or the life we want to live.

To have a multi-form approach to methodology is, for me, to attend to the different ways the present holds the past, the meanings of which different methods may impart. It is through these different ways of seeing that I try, along the lines of Saidiya Hartman (2008, 12), “to imagine what might not be verified” — and cannot be verified. But I work across methods to talk more expansively about the places where memories of the old and the young might touch, might blur together into a fluid, ephemeral thing we might call collective memory. Because, the memory of a place — an apartment, a street, a city — goes only so far as the memories of the groups somehow connected to it, as Maurice Halbwachs (1992) once described in *On Collective Memory*. And each group is drawn to the other, somehow, through the many threads of personal memory, a memory that assumes that of others into its meanings, a weave work that attests to a sharing of history. And that long fabric of history keeps assembling in the present, even after those who provided its threads have gone.

Any interpretation of that present, however, is a reflection of ourselves, the ways we see. A young Saigoneuse and now a good friend, Trieu, tells me early one morning over Zoom about what she believes anthropology misses, why she isn’t interested in the discipline. Anthropology, she says, isn’t “hooked” into the worlds it thinks about. “It’s too fly and up high,” she tells me. “It escapes the realm of reality.” Sometimes, this may happen. In her words is the sentiment of neglect, the

sense that there has been — and still is — an inattentiveness to deeply personal and collective experiences, an unconcern or some quality of the impersonal that leads to endings that harden cultural difference, that petrify the past.

But this isn't all that ethnography can accomplish. To think about the city and its present requires a seeing that has everything to do with humility (*humilis*, literally “on the ground”) and nothing to do with collecting information. And, to paraphrase the anthropologist Anand Pandian (2019), the stories we share from that seeing are only worth telling if they complicate the humanity of the communities those stories are fundamentally for. So, I remain reflexive throughout my thinking and writing, letting the ethnography write itself, open to the possibilities and truths produced in a time of COVID-19. I point where possible to the limits of my knowing, pay attention to where language fails and acknowledge the things that require no specificity. And if there is a story to be shared, I realize that there is always something on the back of the written page, a little ghost there to remind me that there is always more.

Chapter Two

The Café Apartment

*Some plants have nectaries / that keep secreting pollen even after the petals have gone.
Like a flower that grows only in the invisible / the whole world of its body noiselessly shaking against the dust.*
—Diana Khoi Nguyen, “A Bird in Chile, and Elsewhere”

human beings leave / signs of feeling / everywhere
—Louise Glück, “The Hawthorn Tree”

Months ago, I was flipping through Linh Dinh’s short story collection *Blood and Soap* when my mind slowed enough to stop somewhere near the end at “The Self-Portraitist of Signa.” It doesn’t have much relation to buildings, places, or Vietnam for that matter. But now, as I start to write this chapter, for one reason or another, I think of the story. It falls somewhere between quiet horror and comedy. A narrator who is a bit tipsy has been watching a woman furiously drawing a series of self-portraits for two or so hours with a concentration that shuts out everything from the world but a “tragic nostalgia for her own face.” Each portrait is made without resorting to a mirror. The really queer part, though, is that they were of faces that she had made at different points in her life, each remembered in great detail. One depicts her as a child of three; another captured her as she was that morning, just upon waking up; and yet another showed her as a corpse lying in an embellished and perfumed coffin, waiting for final nods of respect.

“Multiplied by an infinity of angles,” Dinh writes, “the human face is really a kaleidoscope, an infinity of faces, and it is truly a miracle we can recognize each other (or ourselves) at all.” Rereading this story, I pictured the face of the Café Apartment. From one angle, there was the residential building Vietnamese French writer Marcelino Truong lived in as a child during the early wartime sixties and described in his graphic memoir, *Such a Lovely Little War*. From another, it’s the hybrid commercial and residential building, which can look from a distance like a chocolate box in daylight and, at night, a game of Tetris. It’s like that optical illusion that is half-rabbit, half-duck; you

can switch back and forth. The building is still the same building.

While it might not be an ideal encapsulation of Saigon's past, for some young Saigonese it is still a remnant of "old Saigon." For others the building is a glowing mini mall for foreign visitors. It could also just be a convenient spot for the young and "mainstream" to gather and get Instagrammable views of downtown without resorting to a stay in one of the many nearby hotels.

Yet if we shift our attention inside, the structure becomes a porous container for the interplay between the unique and the ubiquitous, the fetid and the fragrant, the airy and the constricting, the dirty and the clean, the livable and unlivable, this generation and the transgenerational, the conspicuously false and the genuine, home and not home, Saigon and Ho Chi Minh City. The building is at once a space of mixture and a space of contrasts. The face that makes the building appear as a subject of scorn, boredom, cynicism, or frustration for some is the same one, seen from another angle, that makes it for others the subject of their appreciation, fascination, curiosity, or fantasy.

Perhaps the odd bundle of feelings attached to the building is best captured in Ngoc's response when I ask her what she thought brought young people to the building. "It looks just lovely. It's something I would love to visit, even though I *hate* it." Kaleidoscopic, indeed.

There is a moment I thought about constantly after a good friend and interlocutor Quân, comes by the Café Apartment one morning, a fine mist in the air. He acutely remembers the smells of the old building — a "mixed scent, a smell of dog-cat-rat's waste, the humidity the building captured inside over time." He wanders from one café to another, trying to pick only one. Occasionally he pauses at one, then moves on. No one is in sight. Eventually he pushes open the door to Dosh, a donut shop. Everything begins to smell like donut, he thinks.

It's possible to walk around the Apartment looking for a donut while sharply aware of the other realities, in his words, "captured inside over time." The first time I read his lines, I thought he

was talking about the smells, not the humidity trapped in a seventy-year-old building. But it makes sense to me the first way, especially when looking at it from the vague instructions I offered when he asked what he should know before his first trip. I had said: *pick up on the small things that make Saigon home for you.*

Shortly after reading these sentences, I was left reflecting on that instant just before he left the corridor and stepped through the donut shop's door — that small pocket of time when he lived in all sorts of smells. Something struck me about having the perfume of sugary fried dough mixing with the stench of waste, stagnant water, rotten food. It wasn't the idea or the source of the smells that were sticking points. Nothing is extraordinary. Rather, what I felt, and heard in subsequent conversations, is the banality of being part of a landscape where the incomparable extremes of space and time melt into each other to open up another way of seeing and remembering the city.

What does it mean to live in the midst of such merging, in that threshold of entering and leaving? What do we notice and remember in a space at once new and quotidian? There seems to be nothing quite like this experience, and yet it is not expressly adversarial to say that this experience is everywhere if we pay close enough attention. Space becomes a place when through action and movement we invest it with meaning, geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1979) has written. It becomes a place when we see space as something to be perceived, apprehended, experienced.

Old forms such as the Café Apartment are ways to explore understandings of the city as it stands, the meanings that lie at the heart of young people's sense of admiration and possibility for it, and conversely, their feelings of loss and impossibility. These gradations of feelings are still at play in places of the old, rendering the face young Saigoneses instinctively recognize as the one that matters deeply, and perhaps, that is the city itself.

...

I sat in the center of a broken circle of fieldnotes and printed transcripts in a darkened room

late October, lost in feelings. The building holds the private, intangible sensibility of home in the city and the real-world ways the young are disassembling the master urban blueprint of a smart city that runs on an assumption of widespread contentment. As long as the authoritative vision of development in Saigon is premised on growth, experts — government or otherwise — don't see the heterogeneity of space and time, even where it is obvious to young people.

But several news sites have also published stories over the past few years on this relentless drive for economic growth, arguing that it has led to the eradication of the “old,” often synonymous with colonial architecture. (Picture pinning the “old” on Google Maps). One article published in 2017 by *The Jakarta Post* even went further to suggest that development is partly driven by a “young population hungry for modernity.”

Beyond the political problems of having a state that writes its own rules on how the present should be remembered, the former glosses over the social dynamics that threaten the appeal of the city's economically thriving image. The latter is shaped by a nostalgic desire for French Saigon. Both rise up from an either-or logic of binary thinking that forgets the interplay between memory and space. The grand plan of the city's development is about power and growth, but the subtext is space.

Urban theorist Edward Soja developed “thirdspace” in his work looking at the “real-and-imagined” city of Los Angeles as a way to see space and the ways social groups act to change it. Thirdspace is both *firstspace* (the things in a space) and *secondspace* (thoughts about or representations of space). But it also holds *lived* space, the most creative and personal notion of space. This third possibility of space that carries the metamorphic charge of the unknown. Thirdspace is not any specific kind of space but a way of looking “with maximum breadth and scope” at any space one chooses (Soja 2014, 177).

This chapter breaks down and opens up these dichotomies in the Apartment to alternatives, beginning with that third possibility of space — “an other” rather than another. My claim is that

Saigon's young are working closely with space to see and re-see the "old" as a medium of expression, maybe even communication—that what is already there can be seen and engaged with new ways. And in doing so, they are creating their own sense of Saigon as a place, and by extension, of home different from that of older generations. The old can become new as much as the new can become old. The predicament of this generation, writes Eva Hoffman (2005, 66), is that it inherits "not experience, but its shadows." The question then is: what can we make of those shadows?

Urban reality in Saigon is always in motion, constantly changing, becoming "newer." And yet most of those I spoke with have stories to tell about the changing city as a space one can look at through multiple angles and still find pieces of the familiar. But it can also be a space where the young can define their own modernity even if it is through "old" spaces and materials.

"This is my city," a young Saigonese replies when I ask what drove him to do street photography. "It is a mixture of the modern lifestyle and the old way of life, and I want to show this for everyone."⁵ Like the lines and pores and expressions we know on our own face, everything that makes the city home is there at the surface of the Café Apartment, and across the city. Those markers are singular and specific, not fully comprehensible, even more so when patched together in an amalgam. Is there a certain point, though, when our face changes just enough where we cannot say with confidence we really knew it?

I could say the building's story is about unreliable memory and unreliable narrators, the fundamental unknowability of experience, the impossibility of securing a single version of the truth. But like the city, a building never appears the same to any two people. The Café Apartment contains a multitude of changing private experiences that refuse a singular characterization; it is made of expressions multiplied by each person who visits. We can't begin to notice the kaleidoscope that is

⁵ His statement echoes Bélanger et al.'s (2011) argument that becoming middle class involves the process of relating oneself with "modern" lifestyles.

Saigon, or ourselves, until we come in.

The Visitor

The bookstore Fahasa takes up the ground floor of the Apartments. *Loneley Planet* guides say that it is the city's largest collection of texts written in English. To get to the upper levels, we have to start at another entrance, which can only be accessed from the side. Near the entry is a woman, sometimes a man, sitting on a plastic chair (a monobloc) beside the elevator. Tenants or different men or women overlooking the elevator at different times and days — no one I know comes here enough to notice.

It costs 3,000 vnd (13 US cents) to use the elevator. There's an old apartment next door, not as flashy and conspicuous, but is said to be by one young Saigonese as fancier, more elegant, and *sang xịn mịn* (of higher quality) than the Café Apartment. It has an elevator free for use.

Most of the visitors, like me, are foreigners, more youthful than elderly. Some come for the adventurousness of the place, mostly young Western hipsters and East Asian high schoolers. They opt for the stairs for the most part. But young locals would often use the elevators, knowing where they wanted to go. Maybe it was because I was technically new to the building that interlocutors decided to give me a guided tour using the stairs.

Twisting along faded yellow paint and worn wooden banisters are tall staircases made of stone cracked beyond repair, crumbles of ceiling gathered throughout. Everything dark at night as the inside of a box, except for the stairwell on the second level where fluorescent lights flicker over walls wallpapered with multicolored ads for Kotex's (the feminine hygiene brand) Mini Meow campaign in Vietnam. Amorphous cat paws, cuteness, boldfaced lines about a community made of confident *cá tính* (personality) girls — that's the marketing. There is only a short note on it from Quân, who calls it odd.

Each stairwell opens onto slighter wider corridors lined with private residences and shops. Exposed electrical wires and water pipes weave in and out of ceilings and walls on each level. Unlike in other old apartments, corridors lead to well-lit shops, their golden lights wearing through the dimness. Signs and hand painted murals direct visitors to specific businesses in the building, moving them towards the side nearest to the walking street. Brightly lit shop windows show differently designed and large spaces that cater to young Saigonese and foreigners. Or more so, those who have the capital to come. All of the shops are owned and worked by Vietnamese, the latter mostly college students who do schoolwork as business slows.

The pandemic has left these passages quieter during the day — not silent, that is a thing yet to find in the city—but as quiet as it gets in this part of Saigon. And yet, it is not the quiet of empty spaces, of spaces that empty made simply because one is alone within them. It is a living quiet, full of the sounds of ordinary life coming from the residential units: running water, cooking, shuffling footsteps, large pots being moved, dripping garments being threshed and hung. And at a certain hour of the evening, everything is overlaid by the distant shouts and music and laughter from Nguyen Hue street reduced to an ambient static.

Marcelino Truong's *Such a Lovely Little War*, a graphic memoir published in 2016, dedicates many panels to the building where he spent two years of his childhood. (The apartment he lived in, at the time of this writing, is a street-facing restaurant on the sixth floor that serves Sapporo and Japanese-inspired chicken.) One two-page length panel rendered in shades of soft, watercolor browns shows the side furthest from the main street inhabited by wives and servants of South Vietnamese and US officers during the war from 1954-1975. Here, nearly fifty years later, is where the few remaining residents live today.

It's darker at the back of the apartment block, cooler. Peering over the balcony, trash is piling on the tin rooftops of other buildings below: crushed water bottles, snack wrappers, food

containers, face masks, cigarette buds, plastic bowls wrapped in clear plastic bags. The air is ripe and heavy with the smell of garbage, layered with the stink of waste and stagnant water embedded in the walls.

The discarded and disused objects may register as litter or debris, which some might think as “dirty.” But local or not, behind everything the visitor sees, something they may not know to remember, or remember to remember. To dwell is to leave a trace. Discarded matter are traces, recognized yet unmentioned, to people, to the working class — often older generations who may remain invisible, unknown, and perhaps even unremembered in spaces of consumption.

“The cafes enable people to go into those old buildings,” Quên tells me. “I was enabled to go into those places without being questioned; I can ask questions of the people who live there.” The shops, he continues, “enable people to look more closely into the Apartment.”

The building is not a modern ruin, but rather a historic site where one could choose an evening’s dinner from the outside. As one walks through the Apartment’s passages, something of the old settles lightly on the skin like powder. The “atmosphere of an old building is still there,” Lân writes in his fieldnotes. The past leaves a trace, not anything specific that can be dug up or named. Scraps of memory from almost thirty thousand days and nights are in one building, each layered and trapped and folded on top of the last. In what is thrown away is also a throwing outward into spaces of possible encounter, into spaces where we might notice the presence of lives and stories and lineage.

Ownership

With no unified ownership in the building, the thirty or so shop owners can do whatever they wanted. They may leave their own signature in a space, a certain trace. “This is what I like the



Figure 2. Partea. Photos by Giang.

most: I can see the creation in young people,” a young Saigonese I met through Instagram says.

“They freely design what they like for their own shop. The idea here is there is no rule and no limit for creation.”

The teashop Partea comes up for most I’ve spoken with; they can still see it in memory, even if it has been years since they’ve been back. Taking the winding stairs to the fourth floor on an early afternoon, my interlocutor Giang walks into the teashop too. It looks like an English tearoom, she remembers. The shop is mostly empty when she arrives. A sign tells everyone to speak softly. The balcony opens to good weather. Instrumental music plays. The smell of “elegant” tea envelops.

A gramophone, boots, British toy soldiers, porcelain figurines, classic novels, globes. Giang lists off the porcelain objects carefully placed on shelves along the walls. Everywhere she saw open cupboards, wooden shelves neatly arranged with sauceboats, teacups, teapots, cakes, all of various sizes and shapes. There is no such thing as an empty shelf. Apparently very little is purely decorative.

The shop slowly fills late in the afternoon. Small groups of young people trickle in as school lets out. Some walk around, slowly perusing, gingerly touching one object, then another. Others are snapping pictures here and there with their phones. Some are doing both. No one is speaking much. Like others, Giang is with a friend. She reaches across the table for a spoon, everything before her paid without queuing. It’s her first time having red velvet cake and a cup of tea she believes tastes

like mint chocolate.

When I did a quick search on Foody (Vietnam’s version of Yelp) for this teashop I noticed the constant high regard it received. It’s thought of as *sang trọng* (luxurious), *ấm cúng* (cozy), *đẹp* (beautiful), *vui* (fun), *bắt mắt* (eye-catching). “It’s like being in a royal dollhouse,” Trieu tells me. Even “bad” reviews over prices and crowds are given high ratings or accompanied with smiling emojis.

Reviews are important. All experiences have their meaning beyond the moment. That is, the meaning we find most matters of a place and perhaps urge others to see also might only be realized once we have left it and can view it, in full, from a distance.

...

The teashop is elaborate, but it also evokes a disquieting recognition. Images of the shop reveal an aesthetics that may call into question notions of British imperialism, tropes linked to the Victorian era revolving around sentimentalism and cuteness. Across my laptop screen, the Instagram app on my phone, the entire atmosphere arising from smells, touch, and light, seems made to mirror this one era — and Disney.

When I talk with others about this shop, and others, it’s seen as something other than a self-portrait of the West. For some, it is simply a place to sit down and try something different in the company of friends. But it is also a place to engage with a world reimagined by the owner. A place of retreat and innovation somehow flourishing inside and beyond the tedium of shopping malls and high-rises. Many remember the ways shop owners play with space, the effort given to small details, everything sequenced in a certain way to achieve an effect. The overdone-ness, the precision in the reproduction of what is seen, in fact, more than what is being sold is centerpiece to the appeal of this teashop. “Going into a shop is not for the drink, it would be for the *whole* experience, Ngoc acknowledges, “and if the space has some sort of theme, it would be better.”

The tenor of Western culture carries throughout, and yet everything remains other. The

work of emulation—meaning not just copying the original, but the surpassing of it—is embedded in the space. When we study at this shop and all its complications more carefully, perhaps at the heart of it is the practice of bricolage; that is, making use of what is available, whether what is there is desirable or not, or something in between.^{6 7} And in this is the emphasis placed on independent small businesses by the young, on keeping things Vietnamese-owned (Nilan 1999, Nguyen 2006). And indeed, in the antithetical valences around Starbucks and McDonalds, the chain of Taiwanese bubble tea shops popping up around the country. There is no precisely drawn line between what is Vietnamese and what is English. The space instead stretches across and beyond these two pillars of unlikelihood to arrive at a place where pleasure, confusion, tedium, disturbing familiarity, or maybe even unexpected joy, are simultaneous possibilities. There is imagination here, a person's articulation of not what they had seen, but how it had felt to see it. There is an attempt to put together something that might bring others into the palimpsestic sensations, into the folds of that experience. This is what many can see and appreciate.⁸

Fun

Even if it looks and feels otherwise, Partea is still a business. The opening into a market economy has made possible and encouraged the change of leisure and public space into commercialized private spaces (Drummond 2000). Young people are growing up in a social milieu where consumption is a tea party.

⁶ While tea has been grown and consumed in Vietnam for up to 3000 years, it was commercialized on a large scale in 1918 under the French administration. Doi Moi only added to the surge of revival in the tea market that began in the 1960s since its collapse during the French War from 1945 to 1954 (Dasgupta and Jain 2007).

⁷ The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss introduced the idea of *bricolage* in his work *La Pensée Sauvage* (The Savage Mind), which was published in the 1960s, just after the French defeat in Vietnam. Here, he separates the scientific approach of the engineer — a metaphor for Western thinking — and the makeshift inventiveness of the bricoleur, a sort of tinkerer whom is supposed to represent the “primitive” and their ways of thinking. In other words, the term has a deep colonial history.

⁸ This complicates the idea that young people are much more influenced by globalization and spurring cultural homogenization as some may have suggested. See: Raffin 2008, 340.

The colors and stops Alice passes on her way across Wonderland fill my phone screen as I scroll through the shop's social media. Posts are tagged with #farmhouse, cottage, fireplace, kitchen, cabinet, etcetera. The space echoes with everything expressed through the hashtag. #Shabbychic explains what the owners were going for too.

Baristas don aprons and pastel dresses and special makeup. High-quality teas, their fragrance, the feeling of drinking from cups of porcelain, have transformed into high prices, validated them. Rattling porcelain and the clink of gold-looking spoons draw visitors into the acoustics of extravagance. People walk around with smartphones picking, perhaps, a backdrop for what Foody reviewers call *sống ảo* (virtual life). Comparatively unremarkable flavors are pulled out of the ordinary. Some gather around pots of *trà xanh* (green tea). Others around what I find hard to imagine but entirely plausible: banana, Irish coffee, caramel popcorn tea.

"They have the whole contact experience that young people want," Anne, a twenty-three-year-old aspiring fashion designer, tells me. "They want to take photos that have special themes...for the likes and the reactions and the comments."

"Our home, our wonderland" — this is how the owner construes her teashop on Facebook. It is at once familiar and so unlikely as to be an other land, an otherness that may make known our continued capacity of wonder in an age that is, in many ways, incompatible with wonder. For the owner, it is not a matter of making real, or giving form to, an imagined world already fleshed out in the mind. Rather it is to create a place that is both truth and fantasy, at once real and imagined. Such a place is more interactive and open-ended, that isn't too superficial to sustain wonder. And in this is the sense that the place will mean different things for different people; it will matter differently. That is its fun quotient, its relevance. It is a relevancy that can generate a livable wage for the owner, that can sustain the small business in one of the most expensive areas in the city where rent is gradually rising and large corporations mushroom. Profit and entertainment and the personal merge into one

enclosed experimental space.

A place is a small world Yi-Fu Tuan (1979, 411) once wrote, it is “the node at which activities converge.” The place is for more than its picture. It is one of excitement and leisure, the theme meant to draw them in. But the teashop and its ornamented walls are much more than passive backdrop. These spatial elements are essential to creating an experience, one that varies with the person and social group, and sustaining it. The space shapes the social experience as much as the social experience shapes the meanings, the memories, of the place.

Soon after her trip to Orientea, another teashop on the eighth floor, I ask Trang what she meant when she called that teashop “posh,” a word sometimes used to describe Partea — a word that, interestingly, many believe come from tickets stamped with “port out, starboard home,” tickets that provide the nicest accommodations for ocean voyages from England to India and back.

Though insightfully she replies:

Expensive. One has to have lots of money going into these places and try to act like one has a lot of money too. So that is manifested in the particular choices of tea this place offers and it looks to me, the lay eye, that someone with lots of knowledge about tea and willing to [spend] such an amount of money on tea would’ve gone to. With that said, I think this place is still middle-high income and not that high yet.

These are places of middle-class striving within a city of wealthier upper-middle-class striving. They are places made of frustrations and disappointments with price, accessibility, and weekday crowds that resonate with Saigon’s larger urban problems. But those feelings interweave with, rather than are swallowed by, the excitement or thrill that comes from brief but charged private and communal experiences. Whether those feelings come from living or not living a certain lifestyle, the ability or inability to afford certain items, from encountering something for the first time or the thirteenth, they come together and come apart in a space.

Space is a dimension of “loose ends and ongoing stories,” Doreen Massey (2005, 107) writes,

“full of holes, of disconnections, of tentative half-formed first encounters.” The meaning with which a space is invested may not persist, may be visible to no one else. The meaning only grows in retrospection. A young Saigoneuse, Dieu, I connected with on social media summarizes what most suggest: that a shop in the Café Apartments can be “pricy” but also “so fun.” Fun is personal and unknowable. The sense of monetary value ties to one’s position in society, to deviations in ideals. But maybe it is enough to know that, for any one person, a place can mean both yet dense with something more.

Flashy

Most remember the building as a one-stop shop, a plaza, new capitalism in old heritage. “It’s not the building, it’s the shop that people care about,” Hoàng insists. This doesn’t mean that commercial activity is unwanted.⁹ Rather that the building is more Café than Apartment. And that may be because the building sits on the city’s “golden land”; that is, top locations for urban redevelopment. But these views may also be considered through movement and the maps created through that movement—what we might say composes lived thirdspace.

What galvanizes most conversations about the building is the sense that it exists *because of* commerce, rather than the opposite. Businesses make the building cool, singular, fun. Otherwise the structure would just be “a place to leave” as one person put it. But if there were no shops, it may be the case that rent would rise to the point where remaining families would be pushed out and the building demolished. From this angle, shops and cafes sustain the building, allow it to survive.

⁹ For context, in a 2014 Pew Poll, 95 percent of Vietnamese respondents—more people polled than in any other country—agreed with the idea that most are better off in a free market economy despite wealth disparity. Bangladesh had the next highest proportion of people agreeing, at 80 percent. For comparison, 75 percent of Americans agree with the idea that a free market is better for most people, even with the wealth gap. See: <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/10/09/emerging-and-developing-economies-much-more-optimistic-than-rich-countries-about-the-future/#free-market-seen-as-best-despite-inequality>

The aesthetic space of a building's presumed front is its own advertisement, something where our senses are assaulted against our will — like with a commercial. This perhaps partly explains why some young locals prefer less flashy old apartments like the nameless one on 14 Ton That Dam Street or the one right next to the Café Apartment. A façade can raise questions about the inside of an enclosed space while offering little information about it.

That the street-facing exterior displays a multicolored vertical screen of shops, and that most economic activity in the city revolves around trade and service, speaks towards the importance placed on notions of *nội/ngoại* (inside/outside) in Vietnamese considerations of space (Harms 2011). These ideas are used to value land plots, but it wouldn't be far-fetched to say that they may extend to space generally. Note that “facade” is *mặt tiền* in which the word *mặt* means “face” and *tiền*, “money.”¹⁰

What is first known about the inside of the Apartments is what can be seen from the outside. The exterior provides reason for the entering, and perhaps even existence, of the interior. But what is documented from the outside is not the building itself but a way of seeing — the object infused with the subject. And movement accompanies that seeing. Even if in an exploratory or meandering sort when unfamiliar with a space, movement draws towards the front; attention drifts towards the shops. And the building comes to be about commerce. Reality is made by images and, along the lines of Baudrillard (1994), the map precedes the territory. Unless it is where one actually lives. Then that would be another story.

Forgetting

¹⁰ The expression *nhà mặt tiền* refers to a house located on a frontage street. To have access to the streets is valuable for households. Authorities in urban areas even set land property taxes based on the criterion of street accessibility (Decree on Land Pricing, 188/ND-CP, 2004, article 10).

With the absence of unified ownership in the Apartment, everything outside of each apartment can steadily deteriorate in the tropical climate. And the contrasts made by breakdown help “sell an appeal of... *oh* it’s strange, it’s exotic,” Trieu tells me, her voice tinged with something between amusement and exasperation. Juxtaposing space is in the interest of the market. The effect is something that is, on the whole, visually attractive, that draws attention; it is its own advertisement. Decay leaves the site poised for tourism and for creative expression to profit.

Ruins and half-ruins are “rendered newly visible by these structures of temporality based on disorder and rupture, concealment and half-life,” Peter Fritzsche (2004, 106) writes in *Stranded in the Present*. Lucrative appeal depends on making marginality usual, fracturing space into the perishing and the permanent, allowing some to rot while others are continuously given a facelift.

To look at a place that is decaying with a certain approval, to see it as cool and charming even, relies on unseeing what is still near, what does not translate to monetary worth. It relies on forgetting that this place has a history, a set of personal meanings; it is someone’s. Behind the things that say “ruin,” that describe the broken down and the unpreserved — which is to say, uncared for — is evidence of the continued life of ownership that suggest feelings attached to something, while withholding any narrative. Authorities forget “the people” or the “common people” in their plans for urban renewal, most of my interlocutors tell me. Often those I’ve spoken with mention the families in the building’s quieter corridors as the point of entry into it.

The Apartment may be a conspicuous symbol of the uneven distribution of Doi Moi’s benefits. But it is also one of profound forgetting by visitors — locals or otherwise. Space is made into a passive stage, altered and appraised for economic value. In District Two’s Thu Thiem, anthropologist Erik Harms (2014) writes how the more a space became an object of improvement, the more it had to be remembered as a wasteland, an emptiness. Done by invoking moralizing

claims of civility and civilization, the horizon of the present is easily recast in light of who can and cannot be forgotten.

Everything might end with displacement, but it begins with forgetting. It begins with forgetting that the marks on a wall and the wearing down of stairs are evidence of time, the acclimation of a building's body to human and non-human forms. When places are removed of the people who are somehow part of understandings of home — at least those of young middle-class Saigonese — they contract in meaning. They are made into places meant not just for commercial activity but mostly, as some believe, for foreign visitors. And sometimes they become places that are better to simply avoid.

Beautiful

I meet Thi in late September, a college student studying economics and art. We talk about what brought her to Saigon from a small town in the north nearly a decade earlier. Like most, she wanted a better education. In that decade and after a handful of social projects, she is already looking forward to her retirement at forty. Her future, she says, is to start a venture capital firm to fund nonprofits in Southeast Asia, a way for her to help incorporate art into education with her knowledge in economics.

What she says when I ask her why she calls an old apartment in another part of District One “beautiful” surprised me.

“It’s old but... I feel like there’s someone [who] lived there before.
And it’s quiet. It’s closed. That makes it beautiful.”

“And you don’t get these feelings at the apartments on Nguyen Hue?”

She was quick in her response.

“Yes. It’s just commercial activity. People go there, eat the food, enjoy,

pay it and get out.”

Only then did I realize that I haven’t seen or heard anyone call the Café Apartment beautiful.

...

Beautiful things, writes Elaine Scarry (1999, 47) in *On Beauty and Being Just*, “always carry greetings from other worlds within them.” And the striving for truth is the legacy of beauty, Scarry explains: “It creates, without itself fulfilling, the aspiration for enduring certitude. It comes to us, with no work of our own; then leaves us prepared to undergo a giant labor” (53). Beauty arrives unsolicited, in pieces, which build not a whole — a single and enduring truth — but a concert, a community of distinct presences. In its un-wholeness is something of the imperfect, the quickly passing. But in that moment of being seen, beauty holds up something we had never seen, offers us something we hadn’t noticed before: another world, one just at the edge of its disappearance.

Eight minutes away from the Café Apartment is the old apartment Thi calls beautiful. There is no name for it, only that it sits on 14 Ton That Dam.¹¹ Fewer motorbikes and cars travel up and down this street, which I heard from a friend of a friend is locally referred to as the “Wallstreet of Saigon.” It doesn’t stretch eight blocks like the one in New York, but it is home to some big financial companies and banks, including the National Bank.¹² #Tonthatdam takes us to hundreds of photographs captured by young Saigonese in this single apartment. It is almost as if they are not two separate worlds, the street and this apartment, but that they are each other.

When I look for Ton That Dam on social media, countless images bring us to spaces of in-betweenness: staircases, windows, window lattices, corridors, ledges, ladders, corners, doors, gaps in

¹¹ According to locals, it was built by the French in 1886, but it is built in the style of 1930s French architecture. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46AF6vPJYDg>

¹² The bank also went through quite a few name changes. It was initially called the Indochinese Bank Branch in Saigon from 1930 to 1957. Then the National Bank of Vietnam until 1975. Now it’s the State Bank of Vietnam’s Ho Chi Minh City. Like the name “Saigon” most prefer to call it the National Bank.



Figure 3. *Between*. Photos by Quân.

the walls. Hashtags reveal that most walk through the apartment with a film camera, few doing so in the Café Apartments.¹³ And each photograph taken is an instant of attention, an instant of seeing that other world just around the corner or through a gap in the wall, often from far away. Each photograph is an attempt to bring beauty into being, make it palpable for others. It's as if these photos are trying to recreate that moment of rapture, something pregnant, as Barthes would say, with personal meaning. And take us there too, arrest us in that brief moment. Not everything is shared. But with film photos captured by Quân, there are a few such moments:

A girl in a dress the color of a clear sky rides her bike down an empty corridor.
Her back to the photographer, and us, she rides into a darkness. She might have
been laughing.

¹³ Film photography has been trending among youths but has mostly remained underground. There are cafés and Facebook groups dedicated to film enthusiasts, of all ages, in Saigon (Nguyễn 2017).

She stands in the dark, in the middle of a long alley. At the far end is a boy who squats to pet a dog. A German Shepherd perhaps. An older man walks towards the boy to ask what he is doing. Or maybe he would have walked past. Perhaps he wants to join.

He notices a sign taped on a thick pole, the words “Mất Đồ (:)” in large black letters. Someone has lost their purse.

Laundry hung to dry. She sees four men gather on a narrow balcony for dinner. They don’t appear to notice the two boys staring intently at each other on the exterior stairwell. One is crouching, ready to leap at the other.

Peering through thin rails and beyond the lip of the balcony, she sees a shirtless father sitting behind a boy, likely his son, peering over his shoulder. The father might have been urging his son to eat breakfast. We can’t hear.

Through the window, she sees a woman sitting on three stacked monoblocs. Her eyes half-lidded, swinging her left foot back and forth, I imagine. “Slow life,” the caption reads.

He passes by an altar on a stool. Behind the glass half-full of coffee are yellow flowers. Fresh.

There is no instruction here on how to see, no subject matter on which beauty hangs and in which we are supposed to map meaning. Yet the charge of beauty — what brings us more deeply into a memory affected by feeling — lies in the presence of others, visible or unseen. That kind of beauty lives in the old places where time is compressed, everything layered and packed like cave strata that holds the stacked evidence of dwelling, of histories.

“Beautiful means that I can see the many layers of history in that same building,” Quân, an artist and street photographer who has become a good friend over the course of this project, tells me, after some thought. “It’s beautiful because I can see...people spend their lifetime, spend their time, spend their effort, in that building.”

To see those layers — to see them invisibly, imagine them — is to be led into a conversation with everything that bears the evidence of its own making: the laundry wrung and wrinkled, the altar laid out, the notebook paper streaked with marker. And the labor that Scarry speaks of, perhaps, is

remembering. The work is in the re-member-ing: to notice and put the pieces of those who once lived in, moved through, touched, left a residue of themselves in touch with those who remain alive, leaving their own individuating marks on a place. The mark of beauty is the trace of other worlds in this one, the present the young are experiencing, one that seems to point to a future which has no memory. Maybe that kind of beauty is an ingredient of home.

Nostalgic and the Not

In Duong Thu Huong's (1996) short story "Reflections of Spring," we meet a nameless successful economic planner whose bus breaks down on its way to Hanoi. When he leaves the bus, he finds himself wandering into a shophouse in the nearby town. Stirred by its familiar atmosphere and conversations with the older shopkeeper, he begins to remember a young girl he loved and left twenty-three years prior. In a feverish and painful attempt to explain how he could have forgotten her, and perhaps convince himself otherwise, he replays, in a crude brushstroke, his life:

"I really did love her back then...I really did love..." Then why hadn't he gone back to that town to find her? Finished with his studies, he was assigned a job by the government. Then he had to apply for housing. Then he was involved with a female colleague. Life worries. There was a secret agreement, then the marriage license. That was his wife, unattractive yet dogged in her pursuit of his love, who used every trick imaginable to make him yield to the harsh demands of necessity...And then what? Children. Problems at work. A promotion. Steps forward and backwards. Years spent overseas to get a doctorate degree... Everything has to be tabulated. (22)

A private onslaught of feelings, moments, and semi-articulations unfold between punctuation marks, which presents a life in disrupted form. With each period, his story breaks apart only to come together again, radically altered. The prose fragments into something more like poetry, with imagination left to bridge the gaps. Even rendered in this staccato rhythm, we still get an

onward and angrily insistent flow of time. Nothing here is treated as truly exceptional or bears a second reading. And yet every moment feels filled with life and with peril.

Yet the tragedy lies in the reality he faces when he finally returns to Hanoi and looks in the mirror: the grayed hair, his dulled eyes, the lines that marble his cheeks. With the appalled recognition of a life climaxing in a loveless and overworked present, the past becomes a realm of fantasy that haunts the narrator. And the story ends in an ellipsis, glowing harvests and bygone better days shadowing his future and imaginings of his future.

This story would probably be ticked off as one about nostalgia, as seen in other Vietnamese short stories written in the post-reform era. But the author threads into that nostalgia a tale about the contradicting visions of the party-state and the building opposition between individual and state dreams. Under the barrage of demands of the present world, the narrator is unable to fulfill the sort of love the state demands (“the harsh demands of necessity”). If the new form of governance requires people to shift their love from the state to the family, the main character seems incapable of reciprocating his wife’s love (if it is possible to call it such), and that of his children (whom he describes without hesitation as ugly and stuck-up) for that matter. That shift is necessary to imagine a society made of modern subjects who bear responsibility for their own happiness, who could ensure the state’s future success in the global market economy (Phinney 2008). Though it is perverted by a narrator who cannot find joy, love, beauty except in that which is forgotten.

This story becomes more one of forgetting than of remembering each time I re-read it. Present and past are not incompatible but are held in dialogue through a recurring series of forgotten experiences. The shocks and torment in his present arise from fleshing out the space within and between the reference points: the marriage, children, promotion, degree, and so on. Everything is tabulated. And this chain of events does indeed constitute his life. Yet there are simply things that cannot be ordered or classified. We might know those things as experiences.

The word for “to miss” and “to remember” is the same in Vietnamese, *nhớ*. And with both senses of the word *nhớ*, even with the rigorous mapping of his life, there is something more that has blurred between the road markers, something he misses more than he remembers. Everything has been swept up from his quick transits in time. His life is rendered as a mass of meaningless data points, of only arrivals and departures. He relentlessly circles back to them, only to realize that nothing coheres without memory. There is, without remembering, no relation between past, present, future. What remains is a life that is “vague and anguished,” everything within the countless events and within the intervals becoming speculative — and weighty (17).

During her Nobel Prize speech in 2018, the writer Olga Tokarczuk talked about the distinction between the event and the experience. She articulated experience as events which have been given interpretation and made meaningful. Experience, she said, refers to a “deep structure of significations upon which we can unfurl our own lives and examine them fully and carefully.” I found this important, that lived experience is deeply situated in memory. But little of experience assembles into remembrance so much as it offers a process. That is, meaning is made not from putting pieces of a life together as they come, but constantly rearranging those parts, adding in new ones, to see the relations emerging among things. The emergence of relations between events, more than the events themselves perhaps, gives rise to new meanings. How they rearrange, though, is informed by our ways of seeing in the present, by what we remember — that deep structure of signification we each carry.

Today’s “more” modern urban city with its sharp focus on growth and material gains — on quickness and hurry — is counterbalanced by the main character’s need to comb through, in despair, what was forgotten. He begins collecting the pieces of his life, connects them with “why didn’t I...?” And in those moments of reflection, the tempo in scenes of the past cools. Single moments stretch into a paragraph or two. Dialogue becomes longer and fuller. Forgotten

experiences and forgotten love are imagined into memory. Whether those memories can be called accurate or real doesn't matter. They are still a kind of truth, these new memories still meaningful. More significant is that memories are still there, that they "never left him. They would circle back like the hands on a watch" (23).

Young people have never experienced wars or its immediate aftermath — by which I mean the years leading up to Doi Moi. Yet the appeal of the old is not precipitated by a nostalgic desire to reinstate a fictive colonial past or one structured solely by wars. What would happen if we thought of nostalgia, the old and the vintage, by privileging space over time?

While the young might not have the same dramas as the older narrator in Duong Thu Huong's story, both are affected by similar forces. Many are putting themselves in the places that seem to be on the edge of disappearance, that have some historic "vibe" as they say. And many are engaging with older practices such as film photography. Often these things are seen as part of "old Saigon." But this doesn't mean that they long for what has never happened to them, for those they never knew. Their appreciation of the vintage, as they call it, doesn't mean that they want to return to doing the things people once did like children in their parent's closet, knowing fully that they are trying on what once belonged to someone else. Only that there is something about the present that makes these places and practices important, meaningful.

Something Old

Life in the current urban landscape is increasingly experienced through places that specify their function: shopping malls, business towers, walking streets, the recent food streets in District One. Even the narrator in Huong's story points to a few in a surge of scenes: "streetcars... teahouses... the classroom" (21). The Café Apartment may be described in this way too. There, memory carries a different meaning, one that is often about the endpoints: the things bought, the

food ate, the store visited. Memory there begins with outcomes. Even if everything is history embedded in the Apartment, the past gives way to future, depth to surface. And entire other worlds appear as a single face.



Figure 4. Shadow. Photo by Quán.

Everywhere they go in the new world is somewhere they've been before, places they can always see and experience and have again — places that are cleaned up and made ready for the next day. And the next. Always, perhaps, there is the sentiment that everything seems like what it is, the commonplace, the usual, the unmemorable. And the significance, the *extra*-ordinary, in the old isn't something that we make or dig for as nostalgia implies. But that something shines through the

things the young see in it, in the chipped stairs, faded corridors, dusty corners, damaged and graffitied walls of the old apartment on Ton That Dam.

That *something* in the old is like the uneven crisscrosses made by window lattices in the photograph taken by Quân, by many of the young, in fact. Old and dark lattices cut across Bitexco, the new. They break the clean image, deepen and darken it. And they exit the frame, entering a pool of inscrutable white space — their future. The future is bright, or dark. Not the kind that is pleasant or terrible, but the kind that is unknowable.

But notice that if Quân had put his hand in the frame, by the nature of the film camera and his proximity to it, his hand would have been dark and shadowy also. What is in the old, the building's shadows, has the same quality as the shadow of a person. Old things have a shine that is the result of use, of being subject to time. Space is time, time is space. The words old and new swell and dip and break into each other like waves, a ceaseless movement that produces a glimmer of a building's lived history, full of unknowns and questions. And, by virtue of that history's persistence into the present, its staying on, there is little sense of an ending or outcome. But we know from experience that that which shines cannot be looked at directly. It evades sight. Something in old spaces reminds the young that the past is still close, that they do not need to look at it or for it to know that it is there, that it is an inseparable part of the city.

...

For a Friday evening in the middle of a pandemic, it's unusually crowded in the Café Apartment, Lân thinks. At one end of the fifth floor is a coffeeshop called "Saigon Oi," the golden glow from inside pushing back the darkness of the corridor.

He decides to come in, orders tea. There's enough space to settle down comfortably in a corner, listen to the ambient noise of the espresso machine, frothing milk, young people enjoying



Figure 5. Saigon Oi. Photo by Lân.

themselves, the loud and easy laughter of the crowd. Here, “time goes by slower.” The air in the room is cool, the AC running on medium. His tea arrives, cools too. “It’s like stepping from one world into another,” he writes in his fieldnotes, “an opposite world just across the mirror’s surface like in a fictional novel.”

What is across the surface is often what is most remember about the building on 42 Nguyen Hue: the cafés, the shops, the restaurants, the new and modern. And young people look towards old places for something different, that perhaps, leads deeper inside, toward a shrouded world bigger than a room.

...

There is a middle-aged man wearing a blue Bộ đội (army) helmet Quân notices when arrives at 14 Ton That Dam. Interesting, he thinks as he finally finds a place to park his motorbike in the narrow tunnel. The helmets are usually army green. Something old seen anew.

It’s late in the afternoon, overcast skies. Light slants through and across the wet enclosure of the tunnel, the air warm and still. Everything heavy with the smell of animal feces and moisture —

“typical order for old apartments.” Old women lean out from open windows and terraces, peering down at him as he walks towards the entrance, peering up. They look curious, he thinks, since guests have been less frequent after the pandemic.

He holds his Pentax analog camera and phone as he walks around the apartment, everything here touched by a “sense of nostalgia with its dark old corridors, stray cats, rusty fences, and especially Saigon’s old working-class residents.” Nearly ten years ago, he remembers, there was one café here — the Thing Café, which belongs to a famous MC, a rapper. It still exists. But, until now, he hadn’t noticed the shift in the number of cafés and shops, more than ten today. I wonder who he was to have found himself in an apartment with a single café all those years ago.

...



Figure 6. 14 Ton That Dam. Photo by Quân.

Unlike the Café Apartment, the essence of the old apartment cannot be known from the exterior. No direction is hinted at, no map is given. What is there — the faded colors; the graffiti and murals; the countless stairs, corners, windows, hallways; the strange smells; the residue of

human and non-human presences — welcomes a sense of carefulness towards experience, of being held within an intimacy with the building's interior. What is there propels us to turn our heads and look through, up, down, around, instead of staring only at what is directly in front.

We can see this in photographs too, like the one Quân takes outside the apartment. I can almost imagine him craning his neck ninety degrees for this one shot. The angle of the camera, how the hand tilts it, holds it steady to lessen the blurriness of a place — slow things down — tells us how a photographer experienced that place. And how he wants us to experience it also.

If I close my eyes, I can feel my own camera in my hands, a steady weight against my palms. I can feel myself lifting it towards my face as I've done countless other times, in other places. I turn my face skywards, repositioning the camera and myself just so. A cooling breeze flowing around my exposed throat. As if they can't help but do so, powerlines intrude on the frame. The few windows that have glass in their frames reflect back rectangles of sky. I imagine the apartment would have been invisible among the city's high rises from a distance. But from this angle, the width and height of the apartment stretches; it appears big, but not overwhelming.

The froth of whites and grays of the sky provides a nice contrast, drawing my gaze to the soft browns of building, its architectural details — the intricate shading elements below the windows in particular. My fingers press down lightly on the shutter to focus. A firmer push and I capture what he saw. I have his photo and my imagination, at least for that one moment in time.

...

Quân ducks into one space he passed as he was walking up and down. It opens to an apartment café called “my House” on the third floor. Must be new. It wasn't there the last time he came by, which wasn't so long ago. Vast and modern and fit with its own DJ table — “it captured my attention as a very different vibe from all the existing cafes,” he says. Unsurprisingly, the theme is that it is someone's house, that home is for commerce. He greets the owner as he walks in, a white

man. The young woman near him—probably the man’s Vietnamese girlfriend Quân thinks — has a northern accent.

He orders a tall glass of cà phê sữa đá before walking past the bathtub that occupies a corner of the space, making his way to the couch placed in front of the owner’s bed. There are a few groups of young people sitting and hanging out around the apartment, but his attention lingers for a little while on some young men, likely DJs or underground music players. They’re doing some handshake that looks Western, “lots of punching and slapping movements that I could not make sense of.” The owner’s Corgi pads around him from time to time, eating carrots.

At some point, darkness begins to dim the room. Somehow, a few hours have gone by, the time compressed into the space. He should head home.

...

Change catches and concentrates in this building, yet in a seemingly less accelerated way than in the Café Apartment. The air contains different sounds and smells, new and old. If I stitch together pieces from photographs and video clips I’ve come across, it’s possible to imagine the faint notes of Creed’s “One Last Breathe” spilling from an old Diatone sound system from somewhere far off—notes joined by the low whirl of electric fans, metal pots banging by unseen hands, the muted sounds of a TV playing in the background, children playing on the stairwells, their laughter. The potent smell of coffee beans spills from the new coffeeshops, twining with that of things decomposing. I see myself hopping over a bright orange flip-flop, careful not to land on the many-colored others lying outside a turquoise door. For someone else, this could have all been real.

“We need to let our city develop,” Dieu tells me. “Saigon should become a better city. Keeping memories is good but it cannot let them be the same forever.” Walls now contain more artwork. Raw edges are deepening with time. The apartment is at once barer and more layered, resisting any sense of time’s linearity. Life goes on. The building constantly acquires new memories,

stories that change the ways we see the building, that reproduce its meanings. As in anthropology, we can never really get to the end these stories or know them fully. If we do it is only to be sent back to the beginning, to something new but familiar still. The place keeps changing, a change driven by a desire for a better city. And yet it is the same face, only the expression is different.

Change manifests in families leaving and businesses moving in too, those owned by Vietnamese and by those who are not. A 2017 documentary series by Rice — a collective of young filmmakers in Saigon — about old apartments in Saigon describes this recent development as “trading places.” In their description of the documentaries, they write: “In today’s Saigon, apartments are not just a place to live. Beneath their weather-beaten facades is often a unique ecosystem of homes, shops, whimsical cafes, art galleries, hip hangouts and more...we felt the need to tell their stories before it’s too late.”

The beauty in the old and the vintage arises from the desire to know that this world has an identity and a boundary when big change approaches, when change is felt intensely. Places appear then disappear in a flash in this urban landscape, if not physically then in memory. For many, across the generations, it is a loss that is instant, painful, experienced. *Nhớ* — to remember is also to miss.

But the loss of a place, literal or not, is buffered by engraving it into memory, into ourselves. Photographs are taken so that we might recognize the life we no longer lead. Attention is given to those people who have stories to tell of the place that they might call home. We accumulate pieces of their places. And then we begin again. We multiply our experiences in a place by coming and coming back again and again, until one day, it is not possible anymore. The place is gone, the people moved away, lost, or dead. But, by then, our memory of them has become long and capacious; we may have our own stories of their many iterations. And the many iterations of ourselves, the “I’s” we grew out of, became too big for — big enough to hold all of them and more.

...

Curious about the uptick in film photography in Saigon among its youngest generation, I spoke with Quân about the reason he brought his analog camera to this apartment. We spoke about how film has become a way to distinguish from the proliferation of digital photos; the need to manually adjust shutter speeds and the lens; how film quality changes with years of practice; Kodak versus Fujifilm; different films and their settings.

“It’s the excitement of having something of the past, but that still works,” Quân reflects. And “it makes us feel like we will never know what the outcome will be after it is developed.”

As a photographer, I was captivated by the idea that minor and major adjustments converge to concoct something irreplicable. Some things affect light and color, which in turn affects moods. I loved the idea that we can take a photo of a person or environment again and again, and, each time, they become singular. We might not remember the exact ways we tweaked the camera or the specific combination we started with. We might not know what those changes will do. But when the film is developed, we see the singularity because we see the variation—what is different about it, and us, now. The camera still works, and we are still here.

Chapter Three

Nguyen Hue Street

Mythologies have their way of explaining the basic human condition:
that there will always be some where or thing you wish to get to or back to.

—Dao Strom, *You Will Always Be Someone from Somewhere Else*

To live past the end of your myth is a perilous thing.

—Anne Carson, *Red Doc*

Through the 1860s, the idea of beautiful and single-function urban spaces were valued by French city planners in Saigon, as in other colonial cities. The image came first. Everything else fell into place, even humans.¹⁴ Eventually the city would be precise, clean, organized. The basic interdependencies of life in and of a city forgotten so separation and personal gain are valorized. Everything would be a replica of the ideal European *métropole* — a city determined by French logic and rules cemented into a landscape on another side of the world.

Using colonial labor, the French replaced the existing narrow and curved lanes with paved main streets dominated by huge sidewalks that met each other at right angles. The road walked was perpendicular, the landscape cut into a grid. Colonial architecture, a mix of domestic and exotic trees, imported cars, lined the Haussmann-style boulevards. Public and private spaces were juxtaposed, which is increasingly the case today. Repetitive and uniform, the city that emerged would be uncomplicated and two-dimensional.

...

The promised future is a “contradictory and impossible idea,” wrote anthropologist Marc Augé (2014, 13). “It implied the stopping of time and thus the disappearance of the future — and of the individual with it.” This is what I mean when I use the metaphor of a myth to describe the

¹⁴ There were three major ethnic groups subjected to racial zoning: Chinese in Cho Lon, the French in Saigon, and Vietnamese in the low-lying areas in the two peripheries. Separation was also due to a fear that the Chinese and Vietnamese would join forces and overthrow the French (Wright 1991; Ungar 1987).

streets of Saigon. A myth is not a synonym for “falsehood” and it is not always a handmaiden of nationalism, though it can be. When I speak of myths, I mean the desire to narrate at the limits of reality. It is that tendency to give an account of a life while standing at the perimeter of the real-and-imagined, an other space. This space of otherness is where we make dreams.

But that limit is a protean, metamorphic thing. A myth, which I see as a dream of the future which surfaces from multiple pasts and multiple relations with others, is constructed from variation, departure, the violation of the rules considered sacrosanct or taboo. To promise a future discourages any permutation, much less innovation. Without ongoing dialogue, there’s just, *here we are*. There’s no other place to get to, perhaps a better place; there’s nothing more to do.

...

The colonists named one of their new boulevards Charner to honor French military figure. After their defeat in 1954, the Vietnamese renamed it Nguyen Hue to honor a Vietnamese military figure. Everyone has to pass through Nguyen Hue Street before entering the Café Apartment.

But war and politics interrupted the French city that was unfolding. The grid only could cover Cho Lon and the inner districts — present-day prime real estate land.^{15 16} Ngoc describes everything here as “the richer part of Saigon.”

“District One...it’s a small world,” Thi resigns after struggling for the words to describe it. It was, perhaps, made to be that way.

...

Four years after Nguyen Hue Street was turned into a *phố đi bộ* (walking street), in April of 2015, it went through another revision. The state-sponsored newspaper *Sài Gòn Giải Phóng*

¹⁵ That is, the planned inner districts include One and some of Three.

¹⁶ The city was left mostly unplanned. After decades of lax attitudes towards urban growth, much of it by rural-urban migration, city authorities expressed their desire to plan and regulate the urbanization process, especially in the city peripheries (Huynh 2015).

(Liberated Saigon) highlighted key elements of its renewal: a focus on the “airspace of the crossing as well as design space by dividing the special space to ensure open space for traffic and good vision as well as solemnity in front of Uncle Ho statue.” I find this sentence incredibly difficult to follow the more I read it. One might say I became lost in space.

“There is something almost carnal about the sense of territoriality,” architect Fumihiko Maki (2008, 92) reflects. It is a “thing that is ‘entered’ and that wraps itself around the individual.” A territory is space plus politics — a space contained and distinguished, often imposed. A photograph can easily be seen in the same terms, as truth. It can pull, trap, ensnare, drag us in. It captivates. Depending on what angle it is seen from, the photograph can be used to confine viewers within a present, or make a different present observed visible to others.

...



Figure 7. Presences. Photos by Giang.

Giang stops by Nguyen Hue on a balmy early evening in January. She busies herself by walking up and down the boulevard, looking for nothing in particular. She stops to snap a photo here and there of pink tulips, the uniform sky, an orange canvas stretched between tower blocks.

The sun had just slipped into the darkness when she slows down and joins a small crowd beginning to surround an elderly woman who must have just arrived, not there one minute ago and grilling and selling rice sheets the next. Anticipation descends on the small spot. There's another middle-aged woman nearby who's spending that night, and perhaps many other nights, selling cotton candy. And a young man selling ice cream too. Kids with kites and balloons in hand are running back and forth between their parents and the vendors all excited and stuff.

It doesn't take Giang long before she pulls out her phone and takes multiple photos of the children and sellers, who are brief but sunlit centers of a young stranger's world. At a certain point the dozens of photos she sends me of people stops being a heap of images and instead becomes a presence, everything becoming unremarkably familiar, quotidian, no need to look for something, to curate. Earlier I sent a note to her when she asked what I needed fieldnotes of: *what reminds you of the city*. This is her memory of Saigon, her past and present, the faces and lives that make its future.

...

Nguyen Hue Street can be seen as the territory of a myth. City Hall stands like a beacon, to remind others that the postcolonial metropolis exists, that it mustn't be forgotten. That the immense space stretched before it, its border of silvery cars and financial towers, is the image of a city that only needs to compete economically. A scenery spread out on a canvas, a snapshot of the dream, a claim to the future narrative. It's the vision of a city that has leaped from its past and beyond its present, only significant for its meaning to the state rather than to those who are living and producing the present, seeing its other possibilities.

"I can see the rise of conglomerates or these housing complexes, these *big* infrastructures coming from corporations like Vingroup and stuff like that and there's nothing stopping them," Trieu says, "I think Saigon is going in a way that is trying to trade its culture for economy."

A myth makes a grand claim about the purchase a narrative might have on the shape of a

life. But if the spaces of “culture” appear traded for spaces of economy in Saigon, how tenuous is the city’s grip on the future narrative? This chapter explores the dream made, what it reveals and conceals, the places made possible in it, how far it diverges from its makers. In what follows, I try to bring into focus the various details made visible within the dream, that perhaps confound it, by beginning with the street itself.

Social Distancing

Giang walks along Nguyen Hue in the early afternoon. During the day, even before the heat reaches its peak, the walking street feels sluggish, tempered. Meanwhile groups and couples drift slowly past the trees, too far to really detail. Unlike what she’ll write inside the Apartments, her observations of the street are cursory, as if nothing more needs to be said. Based on them, I can imagine the kind of conversation we would have had were I there that morning with her:

Five people, she says.

What are they doing? I ask.

Laughing, chatting, taking pictures.

Can you tell what they look like?

Male.

...

A single-track voice floods Quân’s ears as he walks across Nguyen Hue. It’s mid-December and the speakers are still looping the government’s message on COVID-19, mandating that everyone wear a mask and follow preventative measures. The noise has been ubiquitous for months, traveling the airwaves, moving across different parts of the country. “After a while, it became like a



Figure 8. Nguyen Hue. Photo by Quân.

chanting sound to me,” he says.

Businesses have closed from time to time in recent weeks, but never for long. With Vietnam’s early public health campaign, the city has been back to pre-pandemic normalcy for the most part. Record economic growth has caught the attention of foreign investors.¹⁷ Unity of the masses has been mentioned on the front pages by state and global media. Three trade deals have been signed. The future seems bright. But brightness could blind.

Pandemic or not, it was empty on Nguyen Hue that afternoon, quiet — the empty, internal quiet of places too big for one person. Monotone and grayish, Quân thinks. I’m not sure whether he means the street or the weather. Both probably. With the government caution broadcasting across the open space and grim weather, the street might seem bleak, perhaps a little stifling. Visits are few and far between. He stops to take a photo of everything before continuing to the Apartments.

¹⁷ Vietnam’s economy expanded by 2.9 percent in 2020, a decrease compared to earlier years but still an impressive given the global economic downturn (Hoang 2021).

...

Monotony broken by scattered people shows up on the camera — people who cast no shadow, who are not present in this visible life. There is a cluster of skateboarders, a splotch of gold from a hoodie. Most are walking. Male. Everyone is too small to see, invisible. Mostly their backs are turned. The photographer is a ghost, a smudge at the edges of their vision.

Something about the tone of the photo, this street, its austere composition, muted colors, and abundant space left me uneasy. The street demands a certain intelligibility or transparency, to reduce everything to a kind of visibility. Blunt and colorless and new-looking.

My eyes drift to the expanse of bare paved ground as if it is center stage. Photography has the power to obliterate our sense of scale. The promenade, for example, looks roughly equal to the size of the sky. It can be bigger in other photos. That is the power of the street: to remind viewers of stasis. Each time we return, it looks more or less the same, people floating across like clouds. Knowing everyone will see it again changes it. It changes the place and how we see it.

From the wide-angle perspective of this viewpoint, the pedestrians are too small to make out anything distinguishable. No detail demands intense interest, a second look. There's little to anchor in; or be "pricked by" as Barthes would say. Someone might look at the photo and see what is functionally a screen saver.

...

Open space allows for distance. And anything seen from a great distance can be summed up in a single sentence. It isn't news that large cities often bring with them a greater sense of anonymity. Whenever I walk around the streets of one, to move beyond surfaces has always felt something like chipping at eggshells — slow, inefficient, awkward. Of course, just as no two faces are the same, no two cities are either. Perhaps this captured moment on Nguyen Hue just reminds that there's a point past which we might no longer notice the thin crack of an opening to recognize the difference.

Opening

Transforming Nguyen Hue into a walking street is said to be a move towards making Saigon “pedestrian friendly,” a city with abundant greenery and walkable public spaces. A walking street is a shopping street, like Madison Avenue in New York. Most streets under consideration to be made into future pedestrian areas are situated in the financial (and colonial) city center.

According to the well-read news site *VN Express*, authorities imagined that the city’s high population density would fill these open spaces. They thought walking streets would become “lively shopping areas...with lots of attractions.” The city’s first, Nguyen Hue has shown that walking streets do encourage consumer spending. Mostly these activities give rise to land speculation, a cause for skyrocketing costs of land and rent surrounding the street, and present-day urban dispossession.¹⁸

“It’s a showroom for modernity,” Jack tells me one morning. A close friend I met in the fall of 2020, Jack is someone who seems to approach life with a genuine sense awe and curiosity. “If you walk on Nguyen Hue and see two rows of big buildings on both sides,” he says buoyantly, “you have this feeling of *ooh abh* the city is developing!”

Thi insists that all she could see from the balconies of the Café Apartment are “offices; it’s *just* offices.” There are more than offices. Many talk how great the views are of Nguyen Hue from the Apartment. Towers are the retained image, what she remembers still, traces of everything else lost and forgotten.

“The real can be mythologized just as the mythic can engender strong reality effects,” Andreas Huyssen writes (2000, 26). This is a space made of forgetting, of zooming in on the smallest

¹⁸ This is written much about by anthropologist Erik Harms (2016) in *Luxury and Rubble*.

scale so that the larger world becomes insignificant. All that should be seen is what is seen: open space closed by big things. Standing before the screen of modernity, the very real urban problems of dispossession, lack of adequate affordable housing, traffic jams and attendant pollution, rising sea-levels and flooding become out of focus (Harms 2014). And the world before us looks generally stable, not precarious. A durable world made of durable things.

The feeling of wonder, of being in a gigantic space surrounded by the future, is perhaps about feeling lost in something bigger than oneself. To me, that is the definition of spectacle. Nguyen Hue is thoroughly unshaded and spare on most days, as if the row of short and newly planted trees were only there to underline the image. I remember the same news article saying that the walking street “suffers from intense thermal radiation.” It was written a year before Nguyen Hue’s 2019 facelift, which was to widen the side streets, to give the street with more lights, sounds, colors. Shade wasn’t mentioned.

There’s a certain ideal that uplifts Ho Chi Minh City, that animates most cities that call themselves modern: open space as a visual scene to be conquered by the unobstructed eye of a spectator. I think about a space such as Nguyen Hue — dynamic, multifunctional, teeming with possibility — like those photos in a Lonely Planet guidebook. What we have is a surface of a nicely framed space. And it’s one imagined to belong to us; that is, the space presented on the surface looks potentially available for anyone’s experience, pleasure, and control. It moves people to want to be there, peel off layer just above a cleaned-up space.

What some actually see and experience confounds that myth. Here, purchase on “modern” Ho Chi Minh City is always brokered through thick webs of memory, experience, and place.

...

There used to be big, tall trees on either side of the pavement, Quân remembers. As he turns towards the Sunwah Tower, he sees the new lotus fountain that replaced that “iconic statue with a

clock on it.” A few youngsters are playing around it, skipping class probably. He spots a few foreigners, which felt strange since at the same time last year the place would fill with tourists.

There are a few street patrol officers on duty in the distance, lounging under the statue of Ho Chi Minh. He watches in silence as street sellers move back and forth, working. There wasn’t much selling happening. “The walking street was pretty empty...clearer.” Open space can easily become synonymous with empty space.

Memory is presence that evokes absence, says Paul Ricoeur (2004). Sometimes, emptiness crowds with something big, memories collected over a lifetime. Those memories accumulate in spaces, which hold them in their entirety. Emptiness is littered with places, with those that we can’t see, we can’t hear, we can’t touch. But they are there.

Seeing

“There is a security camera to my left. Two of them, actually,” Jack tells me. “Oh wait, I can see more cameras. I will go around this place and count the total number of CCTV cameras.” He writes as if reacting in real time. Waking up the morning after, even though what he says doesn’t sanction it, I smile as I read his fieldnotes from Nguyen Hue. I feel right there with him.

He brings me along as he walks the promenade, pointing out and meticulously counting the surveillance cameras farther along. He pauses to snap a blurry photo of a red flyer plastered over a metal placard, something about shrimp and hot pot. The flyer is under a statue of a man with his mouth poised open in an O. The way his throat has been carved, strained cords running down, I can’t tell if he’s about to sing or howling in pain. He’s pushing a woman on a wheelchair, her white marble eyes protruding outwards, without sockets.

Each camera is fixed near the top of the recently installed pedestrian streetlights. He peers up and sees a few nestled against the trees. Everything in plain sight for the most part. No one

seems as interested in them as Jack is. The cameras weren't there to be looked back at.

"A minimum of two cameras per streetlight," he reports. Each of the crosswalks would have up to three. "At each and every intersection, there were even more." Some seemed on, others off. If there was someone watching at all hours, no one really knows. The feeling remains though, of being watched.

...

Foucault wrote in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) about the panoptical society. He describes a world where visibility is structured by design. It is not a dream design though. Rather "it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form" (205). Spaces are shaped to make things seeable, and seeable in a certain way.

Power of a certain kind is everywhere. The flags of ASEAN on one end, a statue of Uncle Ho on the other. Standing on a tall stone plinth, it's huge. More than four meters tall, Jack approximates. I think about how that's nearly three of me.

This statue is a replacement of another one. Before, there was one of Uncle Ho sitting, playing an instrument or reading or something, Jack doesn't exactly remember. Actually, his arm was wrapped around a girl writing in a book that laid on a desk splayed across his lap. "Much taller than before," Jack tells me, "Ho Chi Minh is more like a God-like figure here."

Lenins and Uncle Hos have been erected in many large and wide-open public spaces across the country. Young people have taken to skating back and forth under their godly energies.

...

A few days later, he decides to return to Nguyen Hue. He's in the mood to mark time today. 3:44 pm, blue skies. The street simmers in the sun. He finds a seat under the shadow of a tree somewhere in front of the Kim Do Hotel, turning around and removing his mask for a second to smell the small white flowers behind him. They're cute enough to decorate both sides of the walking

street but they don't seem to smell like anything in particular, he thinks.

3:59 pm. A cluster of younger people are gathered in the middle of the intersection between Nguyen Hue and Nguyen Thiep, shooting photos. He shoots a photo of them.

Putting his mask back on, he tunes into the “shouts” coming from the surrounding speakers, not necessarily in that order. It's the government's COVID-19 warnings again, likely similar to those heard a month ago by Quân. Something about the situation being complicated.

He takes a moment to jot down some of what he hears. *Việc không chấp hành đeo khẩu trang theo quy định sẽ bị xử phạt theo quy định ...* Those who fail to comply with mask wearing will be sanctioned according to regulations.

“This clearly gave me a chill,” he writes. I know he's remembering those minutes ago when he stopped to smell those flowers. He shares what that experience felt like:

I am still very afraid that some guards or police officers could approach me and charge me for not wearing masks. This goes both ways in Vietnam. On the one hand, this way of communication – repeatedly played a message on loudspeakers in public spaces – reminds people of the regulations, perhaps effectively forcing people to abide by the laws. On the other hand, however, it creates in me a sense of fear and terror that someone could approach and convict me of not wearing masks properly. This fear extends from the fear or anxiety from the authority in Vietnam, like traffic police and government officials as well.

And I personally don't like having this fear, even though it is minor. My feeling could be described in Vietnamese as “*cảm thấy bị làm phiền*” (the feeling of being disturbed).

...

That sense of something unpleasant or unnerving is small but it's there. Like those moments when my neck begins to tingle when I think someone is looking at me, eyes flinging hot questions at my back that I don't know how to answer. Where are you from? *Why* are you *here*? Fear, dread, disturbance, or something in between can make people want less. It can tether identity and the

imagination, orient the world in such a way that makes it feel much smaller, finite.

“I don’t want to truly be myself in those places,” Trieu tells me, thinking about fancy spaces like the Café Apartments and Nguyen Hue. “It can be too ‘barbarian’ for a seemingly cultured place where people keep themselves upright and not swinging their hands and bodies and talking freely or laughing loudly as I would’ve done.” A glance is not a casual gesture. Sight can be loaded, aimed at those considered not good or right enough. There’s a sense of out-of-placeness, a perceived incongruity in the landscape.

Yet the CCTV security cameras Jack notices points to those micro-technologies of social control that have come to demarcate urban space in Saigon. They’ve become pervasive, dominant, and perhaps even invisible by virtue of their ubiquity in the developed landscape. Resonating outward and blanketing those spaces with a suspicious mode of seeing, they mark space with an implicit understanding of what needs to happen there — what kind of place needs to be remembered.

Edward Soja (2010) describes how the restructuring of space in the modern metropolis is driven by a security-obsessed fear of the other, at least in part. Said to be for crime and traffic, the tendency towards security in certain areas of Saigon has led to this “tightly meshed and prisonlike geography punctuated by protective enclosures and overseen by ubiquitous watchful eyes (43). Just in 2021, ninety-three million US dollars have been invested for more cameras and smart security centers across the city. Which lends the question: when does surveillance become an all-encompassing ambience?

Seeing happens all the time. But watching is a separation from the world desired, from a public climate that isn’t about heightened surveillance and wariness. Security has provided sites of intense preoccupation with privacy, with modes of thinking and being that must pass public inspection. And if the dreamed space leaves traces of disturbance, perhaps that is recognition that a

better one can exist, that this one has limitations by design.

...

4:13 pm. Jack starts toward City Hall, passing by a man sitting on a chair. *Sleeping?* he wonders. *Dân phòng* (guards) clad in their familiar green uniforms are scattered throughout the street. 4:24 pm. Nearing the building, he spots two police officers sitting and chatting. One is dragging long and heavy on his cigarette. There are different kinds of flowers in this area. It doesn't seem like he stopped to smell them this time.

Seeing, Too

On December 31st 2018, the day before the country's new cybersecurity law went into effect, a Facebook page called Save NET went live.¹⁹ The page was created by an organization under the same name by a group of young Vietnamese in June 2018, the month the law passed. The aim, they explained, is to protect and promote freedom of expression and internet freedom. Three petitions formed on their website have even gathered more than a hundred thousand signatures, according to one post.

Their website was taken down at some point, along with the petitions, but their Facebook page is still up with a little over five hundred followers. No names are published. Other than a handful of words buried in some of their images and posts, the only thing visibly written in English is in the About box: *Save NET was established by young Vietnamese*. It's as if they are saying, "World, if there is anything to take away here, it is this."

This group uses an uncanny image as their profile photo. Eyes appear peeled off from faces

¹⁹ The law was passed by Vietnam's National Assembly in June 2018 to demand that popular (among youth) platforms such as Facebook and Google to take down any content deemed "anti-state" within 24 hours and set up local offices in Vietnam if they wanted to keep operating in the country. Since it went into effect, there has been an increase in arrests of Vietnamese who've gone online to express their views—often on corruption and the environment (Humphrey 2020).

and stuck on the lens of a binocular or a magnifying glass. In fact, in a series of cover photos, lidless eyes appear as all sorts of things: the dot on the i, the space of an o, the save Net logo as a pupil. In the image's background is the date the law went into effect and a search bar with the words *tự do*, freedom.



Figure 9. Message. Photo by SaveNet.

The image is creepy, but it resonates with a combined sense of realness and absurdity. Toying with the idea of an unblinking, all-seeing eye, the floating head, the faceless pursuant, the artist seemed to be asking: How could anyone *not* look at the law in this way? Following anthropologist Stuart McLean's (2017) thinking, these are not symbols — they're real. And the humor in such works offers a different way of conveying the gravity of such a law.

The digital is real and inhabited space, like a street. It's made of indispensable and porous micro-zones of collective life: Google, Facebook, Instagram, Foody, etc.²⁰ While many things remain open and visible, ideas and bits and pieces of information are constantly drifting in and out behind

²⁰ Facebook is the largest media platform in Vietnam, sixty-eight million users—the seventh largest worldwide (Statista 2021)

backs and beneath notice — like in alleyways.

In a city where being tech-savvy is almost a requirement to make do and make a comfortable living, what happens online has the tremendous capacity to shape what happens in the material world — and vice versa. They exist in relation to each other. The digital world has the ability to shape the possibilities of place.

What the law does, the Save Net group appears to be saying, is turn people into watchers who also expect to be watched. The gaze of the state is embedded in the private. And a more attentive audience, more eyes, can reduce avenues for being something other, unknowable, a further possibility. It reminds me of that creepy song teachers would sing in the US to keep children in line: *Eyes are watching, ears are listening, lips are closed, hands are still...*

The law passed. Life goes on. The page is still up too, like an act of remembrance — a narrative to express who this group is in the present and what the country could still possibly become (Arias and del Campo 2009). Artwork doesn't resolve the dilemma, but at least it generates a response. At least it keeps something circulating.

...

Freedom is a salient topic in how young people describe Saigon; it often comes up in conversation, unprompted. To be sure, the city *does* emerge as a place of relative expressive freedom in many conversations. “I see much freedom here in what I can do, Quân insists. “In terms of being a citizen here, I can do pretty much most of the things I like, but when it comes to art, it will somehow follow the narrative of the government sometimes.”

When taking art classes, he studied art techniques alongside the works of Marx and Lenin, the Communist Manifesto. “They want to make sure students have the right mindset before creating art,” he says, tapping the side of his head twice.

Hoàng, who has grown familiar with what he calls “American freedom,” spoke in quite

dramatic terms: “When you go back there, it’s like ‘what rights?’ you don’t have any rights.” While it may seem that a bit exaggerated, he brings to the fore a kind of myth about Vietnam: a country where private, interior lives are ongoing spectacles for the condemning, exterior witness of the state.

“That’s a little scary,” he says, “if it gets too dystopian, then I’m not going to go back.” It’s a powerful narrative that can shape diasporic desires of home and homecoming, that reveals what is at stake in this tension between surveillance and privacy.

That schism — thinking versus expressing — is lived. That gap most noticeable in education and the media. But the inability to publicly acknowledge, explore, and talk about certain inner lives can also appear in one of the most intimate of settings. Trieu’s parents, for example, hold different values from the government. “They keep it inside and they deter me from talking about it openly,” she says, “so it’s kind of a weird dynamic where the things that you really think about, you can’t say.”

“The thinker’s task: to make sense of a world,” writes poet H.L. Hix (1995, 169). “The artist’s task: to make of sense a world.” Silence can be coercive rhetoric. When certain kinds of art and words are muted, myths of various sorts rise in their place to make *this* world apprehensible, often along clean lines: an oppressive surveillance state, a beneficent state, an evil state, a state built on an entirely morally-sound politics, or one made from a completely corrupt politics.

Silence is usual in a time when personal interiority and imagination become sites of everyday surveillance. It’s the kind of silence that stifles, that tense silence of new and unfamiliar spaces, of stepping on someone else’s territory. That silence is made when autonomous, creative language can render visible, palpable, the hard borders of the state and the uneven power relations. And it is made when different images and ideas could question those lines, to make a space of hesitation, to make sense an alternative present. And this is precisely art’s relevance.

...

“I have the freedom to look at Saigon from multiple perspectives and that, I think is the

peculiarity of Saigon,” Jack says. “I don’t have that luxury when I was living in Hanoi. There is always one way, or at least one very broad pathway to understand the culture of Hanoi.”

It might seem strange to dwell on art, the digital, and freedom in a chapter on streets. But I understand them as interrelated. Social media has become a creative resource among the young to tune into the silences and dismantle myths of the city presented by local and global media, most of which surface from images of its streets. And in doing so they disrupt those myths about themselves, as people driving a so-called loss of culture.

Various forms of art — drawings, photography, poetry — are made about and through streets and *bẻm* (alleyways) and posted online.²¹ More and more, photos that look nothing like Nguyen Hue are crowding out those that do. Some of these images draw in foreign visitors. Others draw attention to the essential unknowability or even strangeness of Saigon, photographing people and places without a hint of specific location. And perhaps this is an invitation to inhabit that moment in which imagination encounters its limits, to disrupt a see-er’s sense of authority over the city.

But there are silences, areas where others’ myths can grow wild. I have in mind Trieu’s last words on the topic: the things that you really think about, you can’t say. Perhaps the use of “you” was just a convenience. Yet it felt like a call to imagine, to make this experience obvious, to bring it close, to bring it home, to remember that what is shown is incomplete and respect what cannot be expressed. In doing so, the conditions, impossibilities, and affordances of the everyday spaces they inhabit, digital or otherwise are made clear. How can we see what silence shows that we have not yet seen? — without demanding it be defined.

Ngoc believes there’s another reason for why the young are turning to spaces related to the past:

²¹ For example, the Instagram accounts *odaungchup*, *vi.saiгон*, *saigonaround.jpg*

We associate it with people being kind and genuine with each other, some sort of closeness, but also a lot of freedom to express themselves because their clothes would be very vibrant and with patterns and stuff. It feels nice, to be genuine but also free. And I think some of us, we don't like the politics these days now and thinking back of that time sounds like a more attractive idea, even though it may not actually be that."

Is it enough to say that something about this present for her feels ungenuine and unfree?

Must there be a story?

Cleaning

The sun's light has already faded when Jack pauses in front of seven maintenance workers on Nguyen Hue. He observes as they pour some sort of cleaning solution onto the street. With a hose or mop, the seven begin to blast and scrub the street sparking, the water puddling on the slate-grey ground an imperfect mirror of themselves.

Another group of trash collectors with the same orange uniforms "crashed the street" the day Quân comes by. "They swept the whole place within two minutes and quickly moved to the other end of the street." Their presence is a flash, there one minute and then gone the next — like memory. But they "added some color" to Nguyen Hue that day, the one with no sun out or anything. He even takes a long moment to draw a sketch of them, among others.

I wake one morning to a message I received from Trang overnight. She's asking whether I can help an older cleaning lady she knows, offer her the chance to carry out field observations too. "I'm asking for her, a favor. She can use the money." Writing this, now as then, I find myself at a loss for words, conflicted. Perhaps it is sufficiently revealing how, after reading her message, I felt *powerless*, a word telling both in its rightness and wrongness.

...



Figure 10. Sketches of Nguyen Hue by Quân.

Power, the image of modernity, order and control, the neat division between public and private space—there has been a lot of conversation about what “clean” means in Vietnam. The desire to cleanse the streets in Saigon by disenfranchising or eliminating small-scale commercial activities has been long and ongoing, a constant through various political regimes.²² And it is critical to understanding how the life that takes place on the streets, its appearance, can threaten the ability of the state to hold tightly to political power and legitimacy. This is not new.

What I think *is* surprising is the degree to which it becomes easy to forget how “clean” happens, who is making it clean. What I think is touching is the degree to which some of the young notice and remember the how, even if most have forgotten.

...

When distractions heave at us, when there’s continuous traffic flow, the many-voiced and layered cacophony of urban life, and people moving with an uncanny focus, attending only to the moment before them, “the city renders us insensible,” writes Maki (2008, 58). “Then, in our inability to order experience, we merely suffer the city and long for some adequate means to comprehend it as a project of human creation—a product of intelligent, ordering forces.”

The vision of the clean, modern city needs to seem organic to feel real, compelling. It should feel unorchestrated and unforced, more atmosphere or a thing in the air than content. To suffer the city is to live in another’s myth of it, one we had no hand in creating. And that city depends on many things, but speed is certain, haste and fervor are crucial, particularly on visible and public spaces like streets.

“The development’s going too fast but everything else is not,” Vincent stops for a short bit, grasping for the right words to describe the city he’s lived for more than two decades, his entire life.

²² For historical and present-day context on aesthetics and power on Saigon’s streets, see Harms 2009, Kim 2015.



Figure 11. Cleaning. Photo by Jack.

It has changed in that short span, once familiar lives and buildings abandoned and forgotten.

“Everything else doesn’t come with that same pace,” he adds. It’s not natural.

The rule of speed, says Baudrillard (1988), is to leave no trace behind. Silence on how *this* end was reached, of *who* made it possible. But the imagined city is always contingent on someone: the cleaning ladies, the maintenance crews, the trash collectors — the people who deserve being seen, colored, even drawn, but who so often aren’t. And what clean stands for, what it means to young people (not all, but some) doesn’t stray too far from what emptiness holds.

Stopping by

Anne lives in a tall apartment complex in the middle of Saigon today, but she remembers mornings in the house she grew up in — a place closer to the streets, human-level. Someone would yell outside at five or six every morning. It was always loud, pitched just enough to wake the entire house and notify the family that they were coming through with food. “It’s like delivery, straight to your door,” she says.

She would often walk with her mother to the doorstep, watching as her mother bought breakfast for the family and talked with the vendors. She would listen as they checked in with each other, asking about each other's kids and their school, their individual lives, about everything that was happening. "I think it's very special," she says, "that they keep the communication that brings people closer."

Before, all sorts of food would come from a cart that people constantly pushed around the city. She lists them off as she remembers them: fresh fruits, groceries, vegetables, tomatoes, bánh mì, phở. Tightly fisting both of her hands, she pushes an invisible, heavy pushcart towards me. "They would yell out the food they are selling, '*bánh mì đây! Bánh mì đây!*'" she raises her soft voice, trying to capture those notes she once heard more often.

"The government tries to forbid all of that, they say it's not sanitized, it's not clean, and it will make the city dirty," Anne explains. "I think it's a shame, it's part of the Vietnamese culture and how we do things."

What she remembers — the stopping by, the exchanges and conversations — still takes place, but generally out of sight, in the alleyways or backstreets of the city and among older generations. At least in its central districts. A thread of soft hope and sadness enters her voice as she thinks about those born today, in the next few years. As she considers what city they are born into.

"The young generation wouldn't know the history anymore if we don't see it," she says, "know what was before, rather than just everything is all brand new."

Yet I wonder whether *she* saw this future for herself when she was younger, a present that looks bereft of her past.

...

There is a desire for a cleanness of memory in the developed landscape. A cleanness of people selling and working. A cleanness that can make everyone and everything feel new, without a

past or the memories that rise up from it.

But perhaps what clean fills with is less memories of certain people than those of a *sound*. There is a sound missing in the brand-new city, in its uber-modern streets. It's a sound that may provoke what Homi Bhabha (1994, 7) would call "an insurgent act of cultural translation," an act that "renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present."

In spaces like Nguyen Hue where public expression and movement are surveillable, and speedy exchanges are encouraged or done beneath notice, there's little of those encounters Anne remembers: the shouting and the selling, the stopping by and talking, the bickering and laughing, the storytelling, the memories passed on. Those moments that *keep* one in the company of others, in the presence and pasts of other generations. What does it mean that alleyways and backstreets are becoming popular among the young?

...

There's an odd vendor design on Nguyen Hue, Jack notices. He describes it to me — or tries to: a surface at the top to place ingredients, or whatever things are being sold; a metal structure for a rack to hang things; four wheels below to move stuff around, as all vendors have.

He sends me a text a few days later about a recent post by *Saigoneer* on Facebook. The photograph's caption: *Nguyen Hue's version of a vending machine*. It looked like a metallic, smaller version of one of those heavy-duty wagon carts Home Depot sells.

"This design is so convenient and agile," he tells me, "if there is any *quản lý đô thị* (officer) around, the vendor owner can quickly move the vendors to the other side of the street, or somewhere that is private enough so that they can hide." Others who don't have this "special" design would commonly place food and other things on top of one or two plastic stools and sell that way, he goes on to explain.

A young Saigonese commented below the photo, “you guys ever see the scene when the food cart popo arrive?”²³ Attached to the post is a gif looping a clip of ten or so SpongeBobs running circles in a burning building, papers flying all around.

...

Constant movement is baked into the space of Nguyen Hue. It’s in the name too, walking street. People, often of the older generation, have to run, hide, keep moving. A space of distance, speed, constant movement, all overseen by the suspicious gaze of CCTV security cameras, creates a mode of seeing that can erode intimacy — a nearness or trust made of shared pasts.

People are positioned first as strangers here. Put differently, it is space shaped by the strangeness of others, of people not recognized in memory. It is a place that seems to lack memories. Or perhaps, for some, a place that is silent with them.

...

Sitting on the third-floor balcony of the Café Apartment overlooking Nguyen Hue, Quân catches a whiff of some combination of dried squid and rice sheets grilling the same cloudy morning he took the photo of the wide street. The vendors are occupying the wide sidewalk below, just out of visibility of the walking street. “Even though the government is trying to forbid it,” Anne says, “it still finds a way to come back.”

“I think modern Saigon will have big buildings,” Vincent says. He makes a wide circling motion with a finger around an imagined building. “But street food vendors will surround them.”

There is a moment in Aimee Phan’s (2012) *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* when Cherry asks her older brother Lum whether it’s better not to know her past. She asks whether it’s better to have the “worse memories” of her life erased: her mother’s rape, her grandfather’s dementia, her cousin’s abortion — which all connect to Saigon’s falling. Lum replies, “I think you have to make sense of

²³ Popo is slang for police, often used in US and Hong Kong.

whatever you have” (348).

When the experience of present is one of relentless forward motion, of irrevocable change in the places that went into identity, memory is anchorage. It is a way of explaining how the past and present might really coexist, of making sense of whatever is here.

People come and come back. This is the future most see, made from who is still here and palpably present: the people whose presence and lives most grew up around. Perhaps it is one grounded in a precarious feeling of repetition, of *seeing* the same people over and again. There’s a layer of protection in that, the idea that there is a visible constant.

But much has already changed, as Anne suggests. Modes of being with each other, of being aware of dwelling alongside other pasts, forgotten or silenced for the sake of separation, privacy, modernity — a myth. At least in certain parts of the city. What would it mean to live in a city whose past only holds the breadth of one’s own life? What myths will emerge from the chasm of silence made in the aftermath of forgetfulness?

Noticing

That sunny afternoon, there’s wasn’t much to do except sit, walk, watch shadows. Shophouses and restaurants have been forced to closed with COVID shutting out foreign tourists. For lease signs are cropping up everywhere. “Seems surreal,” Jack says.

He makes note of a placard near City Hall marking September 2, 1945 — the day Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam’s independence from France.

Walking back towards the roundabout, he sees a woman and a boy (mother and son?) who catches his eye. Her clothes make him think she must be part of the working class. They’re *tối màu*, dark. Also, he feels the need to add, she’s wearing a backpack, a transparent folder with what looks like official documents in hand.

She looks up and their eyes meet. He's wearing a mask. She lingers for a short moment on his eyes. Do we still smile when that happens?

Playing near the lotus fountain at the roundabout, the boy is left to his own devices. "He would play alone," Jack thinks, studying him in silence for a long moment, "and when she walks, he would follow." Something about her face and steps he reads as sadness. I agree. What he wrote sounds depressing.

Bánh mì nóng đây, nóng giòn đây. Bánh mì chả lụa đây! On his way to the fountain, he hears the person's call from a *bánh mì* bicycle "moving through me." He means the bicycle was moving past him. It's a lexical error, or not. A feeling is evidence of presence, even if the source is long gone.

A motorbike accident at the intersection between Nguyen Hue and Hai Trieu. A Grab Bike driver and two people from a nearby vendor run to help the young man who didn't seem able to stand up.²⁴ The motorbike is on the man's legs. A few minutes later the young man is back up and has ridden away.

It's almost five. "I end my note," Jack writes, "there are only few old people who come to Nguyen Hue today."

...

The silver horizon of Ho Chi Minh City has, for some, lost its sense of wonder — that feeling that presents a world Jane Bennett (2001, 162) describes as "vibrant, quirky, and overflowing." It's that side with the big and high and new things called "unoriginal" by some young photographers —or the one, as Anne describes, where "everything is just more white, more simple, less characteristic."

Against the white background, it can be easier to notice certain colors, vibrant memories

²⁴ Grab bikes are Vietnam's Uber, but with motorbikes rather than cars.

amplifying and popping out. Lives come into focus, other ways of living and being, other ways people are negotiating territories. Vibrancy emerges not through built spaces, but by what inhabitants make of them.

...

I met Kim on Instagram. She's a product designer and self-ascribed coffee enthusiast who grew up in the States, originally from the village of Trà Vinh. I asked what drew her to Saigon, to live there for nearly three years. She told me a story.

I've always wondered how my people remain so strong despite everything the Vietnam War put them through, and I find my answer every day in the streets and in the people.

The streets are always bustling with activities, new businesses, and people figuring out ways to make a living despite their living condition. I've seen the old and the poor walked the streets of Saigon and not once have they asked for free money. Instead, they would be selling. They would be selling lottery tickets, cheap food, or any talent they might have. I remember there was a blind guy that always lugged his karaoke machine to the corner of a busy street... and sang for money. Despite being blind, he found a way to work the karaoke machine and make a living. That's the fighter and entrepreneurial spirit of the Vietnamese people.

When you multiply this by the 95 million people living in Vietnam, it's really no wonder why Vietnam has become one of the fastest growing economy in Asia and was one of the few countries that was able to fight back the pandemic with very little casualty.

Current actions disclose a future that fails to affirm the validity of the lives it depends on, that the young notice. It reveals a future that allows, occasions, and sanctions invisibility. Certain people become obstacles in the movement towards the developed landscape.

Some parts of Saigon are really, really Westernized and modern and rich and some are really poor and underdeveloped, Trieu says.

Can you say more? I ask.

The areas underdeveloped are, I feel, like a rug, a metaphoric rug or like a backyard

or polluting area for the richer parts.
My mind produces a broomstick. Sweep sweep.

The need to remain wary, on the move, make haste, or prepare to be disrupted and (worst case scenario) lose vital income illuminates something. It's a tale about how scarily adaptable people can be, their ability to survive and grow habituated to all kinds of violence — memories written into the nerves and practiced in the everyday. I find this at once inspiring and unsettling.

But more, perhaps, what the daily wage earners, street sellers, the informal workers — those they don't know but see every day — show the young is what Kim points out: how to live. What they communicate is a story about how to color in the negative space of the present, confront the reductive myths that surface (e.g. the unhygienic, the victim, the criminal) when silencing is used to preserve them. Or: to reclaim those spaces made and shaped by the suspicious stance, by an attitude of doubt about motives, as places to say otherwise.

Possibility

Monique Truong's (2003) *Book of Salt* tells the story of Binh, the novel's first-person narrator and an imagined composite of the two "Indochinese" cooks who worked for Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in early twentieth century Paris. According to Truong, the two cooks were footnotes in a chapter titled "Servants in France" in the *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook*.

"There could be a personal epic embedded inside that footnote," Truong said in an interview in 2003, articulating the inspiration behind Binh. Rather than a voice for the supposed voiceless, Binh is a conduit for the real and forgotten. This is significant. Truong writing *Book of Salt*, like my writing these words, is a way to insist on narrating and feeling absence, instead of seizing the

stories of those who cannot share their own.²⁵ Here, the idea of the reliable voice is problematized. The idea that history is transcendent and knowable frays.

Exiled to Paris from Saigon, Binh wanders its streets in search of work for over three years, which speak to the experiences faced when colonial metropolises become sites of dislocation and diasporic subjectivity. Following help-wanted ads, he grows familiar with the Parisian streets. “I know where they reside, where they dissolve discreetly into one another, where they inexplicably choose to rear their unmarked heads” (15). With each ad, rejection, year, he assimilates places, urban fragments, memories. He creates a new Paris — a city that cannot be understood by the French.

Important are those moments on the streets of Paris when he is *seen*. The difference between being seen by a fellow “*asiatique*” and being seen by a French person is the difference between the look of mutual recognition and one that locks him inside race and class. He is the photo-graphed; that is, his surface image pins him to a (social) place, a race, a definition, a timeline, a meaning, a myth.

Every day when I walk the streets of this city, I am just that.
I am an Indochinese laborer, generalized and indiscriminate,
easily spotted and readily identifiable all the same. It is this curious
mixture of careless disregard and notoriety that makes me long
to take my body into a busy Saigon marketplace and lose it
in the crush. There, I tell myself, I was just a man, anonymous,
and, at a passing glance, a student, a gardener, a poet, a chef, a
prince, a porter, a doctor, a scholar. But in Vietnam, I tell myself,
I was above all just a man. (152)

I return to this passage in Binh’s story, thinking about the ability to pass through the streets without negative consequence. Being lost to the swell of the marketplace is to be taken in by it, welcomed by it. A glance there is a crack in the metaphorical egg. And one might wonder if he could be a prince or a poet. To be acknowledged relies on seeing what *could* be there, on feeling the

²⁵ Truong gives Binh the quality of Avery Gordon’s (1997) notion of the “missing presence,” consistently making obvious the conditions that make him erased throughout the work.

personal epic rippling through the surface. Possibility is an ever-present reality.

Yet on the streets of Paris, a glance throws a switch on that potential. He is seen but his life is not. A glance, here, is like a map thrown over a life. Where the eye begins and ends (e.g the color of his skin) is like assigning the lines of a territory, which do not describe who Binh is but remake him completely. He becomes just a laborer, “the only real option left” (152).

...

Truong writes about an inaccessible time and space. But she reaches across time and space. The stream of consciousness form allows us to plunge into the silences, move through vibrant and interior landscapes. But more so, the intimate, private voice is an instructive and redemptive attempt at expressing the power those fleeting moments of seeing on the streets can have in diminishing or expanding a life, in penciling or gouging in the lines and boundaries of belonging.

I remember what Thi said: the beautiful comes in what feels lived-in. Perhaps it’s also there in what feels lived, in the people the young may hardly know but know they bear more than can be seen, like Binh. Or maybe, to be deemed beautiful is a shared myth, a dream for a world where others can see the fullness and potential of another life. A world where others can feel in the silences those other pasts and other modes of living and being with each other vibrating within — pasts, as Ngoc imagines, that are more genuine and kinder.

“It’s about people here,” Thi says, echoing so many others, “they talk a lot about their stories and that’s what I want to hear...other stories. Every time, I feel like I have to think more and more when I listen to other stories. It makes me happy because I have to think.”

She remembers a woman who told her about Dong Khoi Street, the Americans and French who used to live along it when it was then called Catinat Street. The woman showed her who built what, the destruction of buildings by the Vietnamese government. “I was surprised by how a woman in the street can know that,” Thi says reverently, “we couldn’t find that information on the

Internet.”

I never can hear or pronounce the difference, but in Vietnamese there are two kinds of stories: *truyện* (the written story) and *chuyện* (the spoken story). Not everyone has a story in writing, and it is not need for meaning. But everyone has spoken and unspoken ones. Changing the diacritics, *chuyện* becomes *chuyển*, to shift. When stories are spoken, a move happens. A memory leaps and merges and settles in us. It comes alive, becomes real. We can't hear it or see it or touch it. It is not *here*. But it may be taken in because in it is that ring of truth, that echo of lived time. We may even say, *this is our story too*.

“The contemporary world retains the power to enchant humans,” Jane Bennett writes (2001, 4). “To be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday.” Enchantment or wonder is a way to see others, the stories said or unsaid. Wonder surfaces in the silences, and those spaces of the real and imagined. Our skin, not as image but as our interface with the world, could be that space. As Bình represents. Those tender, intense, vivid, horrific, unsettling moments and actions that make a person coalesce there, the depth of which might one day be shared — if one is attuned to that possibility to begin with.

Wonder presents the chance to stretch the limits of myths, those that fill the silences of past, present, future. Wonder ushers in a space where we can grow the possibilities of two lives at once: our own and another's. We can think here, as Thi put it, about another's being — the collection of memories in that person. Such an act doesn't ask for explanation, just recognition of complexity. Wonder, perhaps, reorients the present toward that world more beautiful, kinder than the one seen.

Chapter Four

Saigon

Nevertheless, the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses.
—Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

Time stopped. Then — inexplicably, incredibly — it continued.
—lê thi diem thúy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*

It is around four in the afternoon when Jack comes by Chợ Cũ, a hundred or so year old market on Ton That Dam. The name literally translates to “old market.” The day is gray, humid, and overcast. The sky is like a film of dust on a windshield.

By way of introduction, Jack tells me he wants to write a story about this street rather than how he would usually organize notes. The reason, he says, is because it's not Nguyen Hue, which is categorized on Google Maps as a “scenic spot.” “This is a place of bustling activities, of undistinguishable smells, of human's adaptation to societal and economic changes, of what is and remains history, of the stagnant presence, and essentially, of what the future might hold for the people here.”

He walks by a handful of *chú xe ôm* (taxi drivers) lingering at a street corner. Immediately he wonders about the rise of ride hailing apps like Grab and Gojek, and what money these drivers could actually make instead of waiting around for customers.

There's a swept, meter-wide alley between two kiosks. Every shop owner, he tells me, knows how to extend their limited space by adding to the street, hanging things on walls, keeping space tidy. The view affords not a whole lot, but he stops here anyways, situating himself between stacked chairs, plastic buckets, an electric fan, and a makeshift area to chat over coffee, also made of chairs. The phone a shaking weight in his hands, he records a video. He says nothing about why. It is as if I was being told to engage with the video, get lost in the movement.



Figure 12. One second. Video by Jack.

The video is over a minute long. I pause at each second, not sure what I'm looking for. A line from Beverley Farmer's *The Bone House* (2005) echoes in my mind: "The photograph has its full being in the instant of exposure. The rest is aftermath." The aftermath is me, having missed the main event, that present lived by Jack. I have no memory of the moment. And memory, a permutation of the past, is the present's potency. Memory is the city's history. With no memory of that present, I am left only with silence and questions. The simplest question: how do I begin?

Taking silence as an opening, I make something different of his recording. I choose to start somewhere in the middle, with a second of quiet, and screenshot three images, placing one next to another. There is no order to them, only beginnings and gaps made between when I wasn't quick enough in the pause. The still surface of reality has gaps. In everything that can be perceived, another life is operating concealed. It is the backside to the surface, occupied by a history lived, that shapes how reality appears. And in the gap between surface and history is the space through which

memory might pass. Among those of Vietnamese descent, these memories are often accompanied by a sentiment of catastrophe.

A blink and tides of people begin to drift in a hundred directions: commuters, shoppers, students, shop owners, bicyclists. Motorbikes rattle on all sides, puncturing the quiet at uneven intervals. A sign turning slightly as a breeze moves around it. What is still about a tendril of wind in space? Everything exists for an instant before coming apart, seen or not. In an image, at the instant of exposure, time stops, but then it sediments.

To say that a place or a moment is on the edge of extinction, of an end and the beginning of a new era, is to say that the future is only memorial. That the past is exhaustible, without likelihood or possibility even, of becoming a new creation—by which I mean a persistence of that present in its reproduction, not its replication. There is relearning in the remaking, a loose braiding of past and present, with fissures of silence and not knowing in between, is itself testimony to the afterlife of what had actually happened.

I play with images and video footage in this chapter because they speak to the its subject: how Saigon is seen and remembered by its youth, people who are part of Generation Z, who are, like me, young adults. It is an age at which, I think, little has yet become too late or obsolete — an age not too heavy with the weight of our own lives, when everything of the older-than-us past is still part of the possible, the future.

This chapter considers how the city changes when we look beyond time as passing to look at lives as embedded history, lives as time. Here, I am not writing about things as they are in Saigon, at the surface of things, but rather how things endure underneath. Surfaces or screens are part of our normal way of looking at the present, or rather the normal way of seeing the world without looking at it. Surfaces are about what can be glimpsed and named, and something without a name is commonly thought not to exist. If we can only talk about the things we can point to and label, those

things and people don't have very long afterlives, if any; their presence in our lives races away, insensate and indistinguishable, quickly, as a landscape seen through the window of a moving car. History would be then, as Benjamin thinks (1982), remembered not as stories but as images. But that is the thing between stories and images: remembering.

The screenshots I've taken of the video are disordered to denormalize the surface, transforming it into what it actually is: a historical, contingent condition that can be changed and seen differently. The past, for many, is not a thing to be re-entered or dredged up; it cannot be extracted as knowledge. The past remains at the surface of the present, a space where surface gives way to depth and yet depth, or knowledge, is obscured, illusive.

I also chose to decolor the videos and photographs I think with in this chapter, and in earlier chapters as well. This is an effort to readjust, to negotiate seriously with, the daily lens of ordinary vision in which color is a part. We wake to a world in color. Only when the sun dips does vision begin to fail, allowing doubt or mystery to make its appearance. And so, a colored photograph carries within it the sense of ownership; it is precise and tactile enough to let in the idea that we can acquire and order that *real* the image shows. Almost every image of Saigon that I encounter is in color; to see the city is commonly to see it in color, which also carries in it also the notion of time passing: day in the city is viewed through scenes of multicolored trades that overwhelm its streets; at night, the gaze turns to the city center where everywhere are glowing lights and electric towers — like the glow of an iPhone screen. Shades of gray stand for rolling tanks, military planes overhead, guns casually wielded, acts of mourning for television viewing. Gray is the tint of war time, of a Saigon falling, a time long passed.

Color is usual. And maybe to see only the colorful makes it easy to say that this city has moved on, and to leave history unquestioned or to colonize the present with the presumptive desires of the imagination. But I reprocess the photographs in this chapter into black and white as a

practice, a way to question the colored territories of time, the idea of an end, of being in settled order. I ask how the visible can itself be analogous to the unseen, to suggestion and deliberate silence instead of clarity and presumed knowledge. Because photographs are partly about loss. When we look at photographs, we're looking for what has just passed or looking in the condition of loss. And how do we put a thing such as loss — an experience that resists order — into an assumed order?

...

“I think that development gives people a better living condition,” Thi says, “but we shouldn’t move forward from the past.” The past doesn’t begin or end; rather, it is the reverse of the present. To translate the past to the present — to remember — is like viewing the backside of embroidery. In ordinary usage, to translate is an operation of language, not time. And it is not hard in language to run up against the problem of the untranslatable, a word that loses meaning in change or transit. I use the verb *translate* in this chapter metaphorically, because it is precisely on the backside of the translation embroidery that the mycelial network of the present is made visible.

For the young who are trying to bring some part of the past into being, maintain some relation to what they were not alive to experience, they likely know that the silence of the past is not one of emptiness. They likely know that Saigon does not follow a sense of linearity, as in the old apartments. All of this can be seen in the name “Saigon.” Officially, Saigon no longer exists. You would *never* see that word on paper, a friend in Saigon once told me when I said that I wanted to write about the city. Well.

But even if the young have never lived in a place called Saigon, the name has been worn into everyday speech, into collective memory. It’s an inheritance of silence and shadows vibrating with the echoes of all that has been, a deep mystery, that many have come to love. Or much more, *thuong*, which floats somewhere between love and like. That is, the kind of relationship with a place

built through compassion (*compassioun*, literally meaning “suffering with another”), but also an acceptance without condition, akin to what a child might feel for her parents, and them for her.

Perhaps love for the city, or some vague memory of love and care, forms through an everyday practice of looking, where to look at the surface is to realize that the two, past and present, are not so easy to tell apart. Or, to put it another way, to look at the world isn’t always to see it, and yet to look away from it, to attend to the gaps and silences, sometimes is. Maybe, in this looking, is the sense that the young are participating in the city’s ongoing history. They carry small hopes that the things they are doing can actually rebuild the city’s collective memory before it appears as stasis, before it disappears.

...

Noisy, colorful, the country’s economic engine, the second Singapore or the second Hong Kong—Saigon is described as many things. And yet it retains its strangeness (*lạ*) and sense of peace (*bình yên*), writes a young Saigonee on Instagram. A time when there was little peace remains beyond personal memory for this generation, but pieces of it are felt in certain people, in family. Fragments of it appear in specific places, those that emerge spontaneously or that remain inconspicuous, that lay unmarked by gridlines and that persist invisibly under surveillance that has become routine.

Without that past, the city is remembered by its opacity, its resistance to full comprehension. And its meaning is only gradually revealed, that grows with connections to the old, with noticing the folds at the surface of the ordinary — folds that conceal both beauty and horror, the “story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (Caruth 1996, 7). Almost like looking as one might at the thick surface of an oil painting, a surface better seen by being touched, which both figures a world and arrests attention with its material texture, grooves and cracks in full light.

“Saigon is the place that everybody comes and then they bring their own culture,” Vincent

tells me, “and then we take this and then we take that and then we make our own Saigonese culture.” Interconnected as the city is, affected by the myriad layering of human (and non-human) life, the city is history embedded — a history made with the stuff of memory and the silences that surround it. The echoes of the past find their way to the young, the ways they engage with memories in their opacity, the ways the presence of the unseen and unknowable gives the surface its weight, its power of displacement. I use this space to engage with what can be seen while leaving room for that which is unknown but still moves beneath the surface.

Haunts

Quân’s interest in photography started when, as a young teen in Cho Lon, a district where he was brought up, he saw a colonial-era building near his house turned into a construction site on his way to school. “It was a sad moment of losing a bit of myself,” he recalls, “I grew up with that. It’s so near my house and I pass by it every day to go to school. It’s part of me.”

Cho Lon is a landscape that was once dense with villas, courtyards, shophouses, and many other buildings designed and made in the earlier half of the twentieth century and before.²⁶

“Whenever I was on a bus, I was looking around,” Quân says of those years after, “I was looking for old houses.” Because the first floor is used for commercial activities, he remembers looking upwards at the second floors of shophouses as they blur past on his route to and from school.

Morning light filters through the window behind him as he speaks, softening the features of his face across my laptop screen. I find myself imagining him younger. An eleven or twelve-year-old with square rim glasses on a roundish face that can sometimes appear serious, pensive. But he is

²⁶ Cho Lon (whose name translates to “big market”) is often thought of as the Chinese neighborhood of Saigon and as a space of commercial activities with deep colonial connections, particularly with regards to its rice trade. Quân talks passionately about being Chinese-Vietnamese-Khmer, positioning his past in the Cambodian Khmer empire that once stood in today’s Ho Chi Minh City before the Nguyen lords annexed more than a 1,000 square kilometers of it in 1698. Most Vietnamese historians say this year is the beginning of Saigon as a Vietnamese city (Kim 2016).

always on the cusp of a smile, which breaks whenever he talks about being part Chinese in Saigon, and their long presence in the city.

I imagine this young man on a bus, attention focused on the city beyond the windows, tracing into memory the shapes: above him, terraces overgrown with plants; people standing amid drying laundry; running air conditioners; cracked concrete and corrugated tin roofs; the vertical walls whose textures feel weathered, yet layered with time; homes that were once remembered as the only ones tall enough to touch the sky. A bus becomes a recurring space, an everyday shaped within an atmosphere of expectation and sense of foreboding, that gestures towards something beyond his control.

“Day by day, I saw them change,” Quân says. “I saw beautiful buildings demolished and turned into malls and all that.” His mother, who worked for a high-ranking officer for the southern government, and his father, who served in the southern military, would tell stories about some of them. They would pass on to him their recollections of the people who once lived in one building or another, what happened to them. I could imagine that Quân’s parents passed on to him who they were in their earlier days too, what they knew and saw when they were his age today.

Throughout his university years, he would venture out into the city on his motorbike with friends, taking as many photos as he could of what he and most others call the “old side” of Saigon. “I know one day it will be demolished... we have to develop this city and not just stick to the past,” he explains. The grind of development sounds on the horizon. But photographs were a way “to create something that connects to a Saigon which is long gone — to protect or save the picture of Saigon that I’m living in.”

In these images, he says, “I was seeking all of the memory that I lost.”

...

Loss, writes David Eng and David Kazanjian (2003, 2), “is inseparable from what remains,

for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained.” In the absence of actual places, images and memories are footholds to a past that one did live through, but has become distant, more muddled. Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt* begins: “Of that day I have two photographs and, of course, my memories.”

Beyond areas like Nguyen Hue, everything the young and old see in the city is a reminder that the present of the socialist project wasn’t so far removed from the presence of colonial conflict, of wars. The incomplete present and the dream of the socialist utopia, the demolished past and the construction sites where that new world was being built, still exist side by side. “This is the modern side,” Trieu says, using her hands to casually gesture towards an imagined modern city, “and this is the old side.”

Remembering places built long ago has little to do with rescuing a past, or whether the past that is now being destroyed or “lost forever,” as one young photographer put it, was peaceful or violent, pleasant or unpleasant. It was time — time that is conserved in the settings of everyday childhood experiences, in rooms and on busses and on motorbikes. It was time that might have otherwise been forgotten in those places where there is much that remains unexplored about their family, and themselves. This is all another way of saying that there are places in the past, but the past is not a place. And photographs certify that those pasts were once a present.

But if there is no one left to tell them what else was once present, what cannot be seen and captured, would they even know that anything was missing — or anyone? Because once places give to memory, they begin to loosen. They split into smaller parts like the dread on a mother’s face in a room on some upper level, the slam of a door, the heat on a certain day. The whole, and even the depth of the parts, remains opaque.

“I think I can remember it,” Cam says in Aimee Phan’s (2012) *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong*, recalling Saigon’s fall when she was one:

It was hot that day, really hot. The adults wouldn't open a window. Our mothers kept us upstairs because the front door kept opening and slamming shut. It would shake the entire house. Even though the windows were locked, we could still hear people on the streets...and sirens. We weren't sure if they were from the Communists or the South Vietnamese police...And someone shot out the kitchen window. No one got hurt, but it made Grandmère cry. (151)

Something was opened by the gunshot — a shot that left “an empty gray space” that collects unclear images and the particular silence of older relatives that lives in and between them (159). Old or young, each character can still feel an injury. Like Cam's brother Xuan, who can on certain days smell the sweat of guards at the refugee camp where they stayed in Pulau, it is a pungency that still disorients him. “A person could not invent that sort of memory,” he tells himself (159).

We don't know what those cries Cam remembers from her grandmother were for exactly, but we know that still haunt her. The word “haunt” comes from the word “home.” We can speculate that it was for the uncertain journey ahead on sea, the splitting of the family between continents, her husband's dementia. Or maybe those cries were for that moment when home suddenly became memory.

...

The fear or anxiety that compels activities like photography is perhaps not about the loss of what remains, but the memories born of that fading: the things that remain partial and unknown, that silence braids into; the things that can leave spaces empty and gray. As Quân says of the building and construction site that began his practice, “it was a haunt and a pain for many years to come.” Pain becomes meaning. And in the act of narrating that meaning to me, he suggests that it still haunts.

More



Figure 13. Both. Photo by Jack.

One picture taken by Jack reminds me of photoblogs by the young on Instagram: Bitexco rising like a polished blade from the city. If the tower is supposed to represent a lotus, then I suppose the city is the *bùn* (mud) from which it blooms. The image might strike a viewer as one taken by a stranger to the city, a tourist. The image, though, is more conceptual than pictorial.

Photographs have this uncanny ability to set everything on equal terms. That is, everything we can see seems to belong in the frame. And so, we can grasp all of it as a whole, juxtapositions aside. Contrasts can lead to transitions: old to new, unclean to clean, motion to stillness. But when we consider just the whole, anything can be a beginning, or an ending. And the beginning doesn't have to be in the photo.

If I resize the photograph, tug at corners and edges, for the briefest second it's possible to

think that enlarging the frame will reveal more shops, more people and sky. There's a future outside the photograph, that exits the frame. I experiment with this a couple more times but, somehow, the tower always stands in its aloneness. The extended sky is free of high buildings; the modern that presents itself falls hard behind me as I expand my imagined field of vision outwards, the new gets smaller and fainter until there are fewer buildings with names, fewer places that have pictures.

Photoblogs of the city, at least those which are publicly accessible, may be seen in a way that is similar to how I played with Jack's photo. We can begin anywhere and still be aware that there are many other versions of the same present caught within a photograph. Each image is its own autonomous entity that doesn't hint at some kind of destination but begins instead with a framework of unknowability. The photoblogger leads viewers to the site of dispersal, of potential, and leaves us there, alone, to contemplate all that has been lost and what remains to be seen, what requires an extension of the imagination.

Everything comes in layered strata of imagery, one after another. A man massages the head of a lady on a sidewalk, spotted on a walk during good weather. Bitexco is seen in the middle of a barren highway; the sky is the color of a dressing over a wound which bleeds. In the shade of a small shop, a woman folds herself over uneven shelves of cooking oil, toothpaste, fish sauce, dish soap, ramen, looking for something. Things hang on the back of motorbikes, like fridges or balloons. Melons left out to dry. Children with toys. A gang of white pigeons. Clouds —

The only geographic clue often connecting them all is some variation of #saigonese, #somerwhereinsaigon and #odaucungchup (roughly, "take anywhere"). And in the midst of quick change, to take anywhere is to say, perhaps, that what has been lost is the name no one will call these moments again: the present.

Clarity and mystery arrive together in each photograph, delinking the city glimpsed in the window space from a futurity that ascribes to it the function of a limit. Social media is not a space to

criticize a city that is forward-looking. It is not a space to speak against a normative politics of optimism that animates all too many socialist projects, or what anthropologist Christina Schwenkel (2013) calls “socialist affect.” Instead the thin white gap between each image is a period or a question mark, bringing the moment caught between the lens to a temporary end. In these public documents of the ordinary, set somewhere in Saigon, some people are using social media to remark on the limits of that part of the city called modern, the currency of its finitude, rather than its infinite reach or sublimity.

Explorations of memory, of feelings conditioned by Doi Moi, sometimes pair with photographs; hence, a photoblog. Meditations on childhood, adages and stories passed on, desires, happiness, melancholy, loneliness and loss, love for the city in all its complications, squeeze into a space the size of a caption. Some are long. Others are shorter — a handful of words.

If all of this is vague, let me pause to clarify that I stay in the *not knowing*. It matters what I choose to call an example. These private revelations are only loose threads I’ve observed among some images and text, a surface that reflects back a depth I do not know and cannot fill (like mirrors); they remain as such, unfilled and private — even if all is public.

The anthropologist Allen Tran (2015) writes about how emotional lives in Saigon are submerged in the quotidian, a departure from the heroic socialism that is centerpiece to the nationalist self. Decoupled from the actions of revolutionary urgency once experienced by older generations, selfhood, he writes, “is firmly rooted and find intrinsic meaning in the banalities of family and work life” (487). And Vietnamese selfhood is not to be set apart from the world, he explains, but to sit entangled in the social, material, and supernatural — the beyond vision.

Pictures uploaded on Instagram may be about a morning ago, a summer or an evening ago; meanwhile, captions and revelatory thoughts that become accompanying text take shape in the present. The captions do not name the scene, but instead build on it in an attempt to gather

possibility and depth from no great event caught on camera, but from the surface of an ordinary that no longer is. Or perhaps, the active captioning of words and feelings is to attend to that place sitting *song song* (parallel) to present Saigon, as one photoblogger put it in his caption underneath a photograph of two men having a coffee together, bodies partially hidden by a motorbike. It's a quiet moment when neither is speaking to the other, a moment — perhaps — of waiting, of words fermenting. The man wearing a black snapback with an Adidas logos is looking at something out of frame, the other man who has the back of a hand perched nonchalantly against his hips is too, though right at the photographer.

What some suggest through the ways they photograph — what they choose to show and their practice of active captioning — is how, in a city where everything comes and quickly goes, the meaning of this present is vitally bound to that parallel place the photoblogger speaks of, to not losing sight of it. Because the city promised to everyone is one where authorities transform the future's unknowability into something certain, the fulfillment of all their hope and dread, that attests to the completion of the story, of time, the point at which there is no way forward. So, rather than a “post” on social media, each photograph might be construed instead as a signpost, which does not tell us to go anywhere in particular, only to keep going, follow the signposts and stop at another one, any of them, look at how different it is from the ones we've seen. As viewers travel along these varied tracks, we have the sense that the city cannot be a finished thing. Every photo we pause at — only for a short while, not to linger and start thinking up stories — is a making of the city into more of the city the young remember, the city they participate in. And if Saigon is seen as finished or finishing, it is only because someone wants to stop moving, to stop letting memory in.

That parallel place isn't visible or occupied, it can't be read from a caption or image. It hides, rather, in the midst of its revelation. It withdraws from vision, which would make a category of strangeness and the inexplicable. Maybe it is in this second space where the inscrutable and nameless

things that drive acts of preservation, like wonder or pain, fashion into meaning or a sense of selfhood, into something that refreshes the known — and intensifies the unknown.

“Each photo, each moment in every place where I go has its own story and memories,” writes one young Saigonese on his blog *Pick Up Your Camera*, which I found through his Instagram profile. Photography, he writes, is a way to “save everything — what I see and what I love.”



Figure 14. *Paused for.* Photos by Jack (left) and Giang (right).

Each and together, words and photographs speak to the personal affects of the city. And affect, as a point of concern, is synonymous with *cảm xúc* (emotion) in Vietnamese (Tran 2015, 482). Their meanings slip into one another. But there is something to be said in the attempt to sustain and recount that charge of an unfolding, through images or otherwise, especially in a city where everything can feel like a last time.

“The atmosphere here,” Dieu tells me, “it is hard to describe.” Words like *binh yên* (peaceful) or *vui* (happy) that very often surface in captions alongside photographs of banality are not a

romanticization of the city, or a neat summary of it. Perhaps many can no longer remember the being happy or whatever else was of that moment, only that it came to an end — that what is left is a feeling remembered and named as happiness. It's important that these states of feeling come from a place of completion, a future that seems settled and easy to describe (e.g. clean, white, bright, new), and from a place that looks finished. They reorient vision towards that haze of potential that arrests the gaze, that merits attention. What that opacity conceals is hard to name or contain, but sometimes what is hidden makes itself known, coming to the surface, perhaps in some distant future, as a feeling, a memory, a photo — something to have beyond the end.

Deeper

“When we go past a building with our parents and grandparents, they would say ‘Oh! That building was built when I was twenty,’ and they have a whole story behind it,” Anne tells me. She remembers *Thương Xá* — the shopping mall at the corner of Nguyen Hue. It was destroyed in 2014 to be replaced by another mall, but she can still remember the lights strung across and around the former building on Tết and Nô en (Christmas). She recalls people gathering around the building to take photographs. Others would take videos. There may have been a hum in the air, voices rising as young and old near the street corner, drawn, too, to the animating source.

Anne soaks it all in somewhere in the middle of it all with her parents who are telling her about the building, about “how big it was, how fancy it was, back in the day.”

“Old buildings can speak to generations and generations of people living in Ho Chi Minh City,” she reminds.

...

“Modern has become the past,” Vincent tells me. “Modern has changed from the building and it has become the lifestyle.” That change ties to a new market-economy ethos where

consumption has come to be seen as modern, civilized, and patriotic; it ties to the creation of oppositional images between the middle-class and the urban working poor (Bélanger et al. 2012).

“My parents and I... we don’t know how to have fun,” Ngoc says plainly, “there’s nowhere we can go to have some sort of organic fun; we just went to shopping malls my entire life. We would go knowing that we don’t like it.” As most see it, the places that pull the gaze towards the modern-looking future are “boring.” But they are made to seem necessary, to look lasting, for a future concerned with reaching certain economic aims beyond the horizon. They’re the sort of places where some may ask of memory: What did we think? What did we talk about?

“The government wants to make Ho Chi Minh City —” Anne starts, rewording, “build it into a smart city where it just speaks to us, but I think it destroys what makes Saigon, *Saigon*.” The places not amenable to the sort of modern that carries, silently, the heft of personal history are taken away. They lose their visible life and the rest is memory.

There are two names for a single city. But the essence of the city is Saigonese, an identity planted in social media bios next to an emoji of the flag of Vietnam. And part of this is because of older generations. If we arrive at the whole as with a photograph, and not act to claim and divide — Saigon versus Ho Chi Minh City — it’s possible to notice that the city is not a space to balance contradictions; rather, the binding agent is memory. And from this synthesis of cities and places is a sort of anti-map that dissolves the borders of the restricted imagination, the “natural” borders of time and space serving as the basic architecture for each act of separation — age, class, family, and otherwise.

“Dad often tells me stories about Saigon,” she says, recollecting about how she would ride through and around the city center with her father on his motorbike, seated close, their clothes snapping in wind like fire. She remembers how he would tell her stories of growing up with younger versions of her uncles and aunts, his friends and what they once enjoyed doing, the story of how he

met her mother in the city. And in these narratives is the twining of the visible and invisible, of shifts in perspective and reflections, of one layer of time touching on another, her own.

All that is said would have to be imagined into that impenetrable space before one was born, before memory. But the experiences that those older people carry, that sit in quiet ferment and invisible happening, that sometimes break the silence of pre-memory through story, had once been part of a kind of hovering terror or a field of danger. Those stories remind me that this peacetime with which the young are familiar is very different from the present lived during and after wars by older generations, when those people were the same age we are now. And the presence of that other history is hidden with the people whom we may have known only briefly, or all our lives.

That history is part of the stories Quân's parents tell him about who they remember living in one building or another. It's in the memories Anne's parents share that was jogged by something they see on a walk past a shopping mall that was there when they young too. It is in the response in the form of a story shared when Kim asks a sixty-five-year-old Bà (grandma) how she learned to make coffee, good enough to have stayed in the same alleyway in Saigon since 1976, a year after war ended, selling coffee at 17,000 VND (75 US cents) today.

That history is in my small dining room in Florida. It is in the rice that grows cold, the tofu and marinated beef losing their steam, as my mother tells me about the rice lines after Saigon falls. I don't remember the exact words the first time, but I remember the way she said them. Something tender and distant carries in her voice as she recollects rising with the second crow of the rooster to leave for the line to buy rice. Some could wait for more than half a day in the rice lines if they left closer to three. People might still leave with nothing. When my young mother not yet my mother returns to the shack, to my six aunts and uncles, my grandparents, the mildewed rice is often prepared with boiled gourd, chayote, or sweet potato leaves harvested from the family's small garden. In those years, for some meals, she liked to pretend the vegetables were fish or meat.

Marita Sturken (1997, 7) reminds us that the past doesn't simply exist in one's memory, but rather has to be narrated to become memory. Those pasts are felt. They are shrunken and harbored in the people still here, who suffuse spaces with the silences of people and places — all the inhabitants of the past — that are gone: lost, destroyed, dead, moved away, or pushed away. But to remember is have small things, splinters of a past, pulled to the surface. Our own or of a family or of a place, history is made of narratives broken off. And then there is that impossibility of telling these histories, the inability to gather a wholeness from the splinters of someone else's past, or even take it on as our own convincingly.

"What memories, Mama?" Huong presses her mother Ngọc in Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai's *The Mountains Sing*. "Oh, Huong, I can't tell you. Let's just say I went through terrible, terrible things," she replies. A reader may think she knows, that she is the "you" Huong's mother can tell. It is possible to sift through the written narrative, to gather each character's broken memories of the long famine of 1945, the land reforms in the north, the displacements, the necessary abandonments of family, and put them together like jigsaw pieces. But form says a lot. Each chapter moves between now and then. Within each chapter, we arrive and end in the ongoingness of a memory, in the somewhere of another place. And when we come back to a place in another chapter, a house is changed, a son is left behind, a father's voice is gone, a daughter is older. It's impossible to fill the space between the memories — a space already dense with everything unspoken for or forgotten.

"I cannot see Saigon like in my memory anymore," Dieu says of her first eighteen years growing up in the city. "Anything will be in my mind only." Saigon is always searchable, as any city today. The tech-hub of the country, its interface has increasingly been the screen, a surface where narratives have been fed into, bent, flattened, resolved through a machine that easily wipes away unnecessary data. What is sent back is a city that is clean as new polish, that is background for coverage, or the starting point for absolute history. That city just speaks, as Anne might say. And

speech with no dialogue is exhaustible. It gets boring.

What gives the city weight and meaning is the nameless and inscrutable substance between and even deeper than memory. But it's a weight packed with a past never had as a referent, in image or narrative, for the young — a past utterly lost and yet strangely alive, everywhere. Yet that silence holds the potential to elevate and shape that past into a dialogue, a space for questions and to continuously imagine what holds. And in the curiosity, the asking, is perhaps the realization that the young themselves have survived something, that to be a child of this generation is to also carry all the decisions made, the weight of the choices that have profoundly affected who they are now, where they live, why they are, even who they might have been — if.

I think of Mai's words in Tuyen Do's "Summer Roll" — a play set in Britain that follows the young narrator as she explores her identity as a second-generation immigrant, and her ties to a past kept silent by everyone in her family. "There are so many stories of people starving in Vietnam," Mai says to herself, in a haunting line, "but I don't remember ever being hungry."

This occurs to her after speaking with older Vietnamese at a local community center, when she acknowledges that this past is her present: the admonishments her mother gives when she speaks English; her inability to share her romantic relationship with her parents; her father's frequent sleepwalking when he pleads forgiveness for something she never gets the chance to hear, his lips poised open and she cannot tell if he has more to say.

Her existence bears the trace of everything that is concealed by what need not, or cannot, be said about her family before and during their escape from Vietnam in 1976; that is, the beginnings of *thời bao cấp* (the subsidy period). This past is hidden in the very nature of a play, a form that is unthinkable without everything that takes place behind or beyond the words, behind what can be acted out and seen. "You don't want to talk about it," her older brother Anh says to her, remembering the dead around him as a child on the boat he escaped in. "You want to forget."

No one is innocent of forgetting, writes literary scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen (2016, 17) in *Nothing Ever Dies*, “and we must forget if we are to remember and to live.” The depth of the past remains with older generations, with family — the kind born into or the kind born through language.²⁷ And for the young to ask about it is not to understand events, only the weather in which they happened. In the asking, fraught with the unanswerable, is to grasp the choices and changes that somehow made them possible, became this present, which is ceasing to remember or to mean anything other than what the visible conveys.

“I’m not responsible for the past,” Mai reminds herself. By which she means, she’s not responsible for what was done, not that it doesn’t belong to her. A past to forget or unpack, to dissociate from or open herself up to the pain of knowing that silence and obscurity may be the measure of her history. “It’s hard carrying the weight of the past, but you get used to it,” the old family friend Mr. Dieu tells Mai. “Then you forget that you’re heavier than you should be.”

The past is weighty. We struggle to hold it with either great distance or fine detail, or at all. It cannot be touched, but it can be accessed through memories given expression. There is nothing solid to it, and yet it must all be carried, or fashioned into a thing that carries itself. For Mai, that assembling is through photography. That past carries in the pictures she takes growing up of her parents, of the older generations she meets after leaving home. “What is art for, if not to remember,” she tells visitors to her photo exhibition that opens and ends the play. And memory, she adds, “conceals and shrouds, as much as keeps things alive...”

...

“Any one of us is an educator,” Quang says, a young Saigonesse (“a kid from Saigon, like straight out of Saigon”) I met doing fieldwork in Auckland’s Vietnamese cafes. We met up again one

²⁷ By language, I mean what the younger generations use when speaking with older generations: *con* (child), *em* (younger brother or sister)

afternoon, filling each other in on the latest: COVID, lockdowns, etcetera. For long moments at a time, we spoke about his love for Vietnamese rap, how it romanticizes things to convey taboo topics in Vietnam more easily, like sex and drugs.

Somehow though, our conversation kept returning to the importance of education in the country, to parents who constantly work to send kids to school. But more so, it kept going to another kind of education, “those little moments, those little conversations” that “links” him to Saigon, to people he’s met on its streets over the years. “He’s sort of an educator for my life,” Quang says, telling me about a security officer he once met, a brief talk they had about philosophy, society, how to lead a good life, how to be good. “His opinion, his perspective, shifts my way of thinking.”

Outside the single-perspective history of the state, beyond memorials like the War Museum, is another kind of education, an active curriculum shaped by personal memory and whatever else is absorbed into that heavy silence. Occasionally something of that silence enters the everyday as a detail or opinion, a small thing, vague or not entirely accurate — like an afterthought, crude or approximate. Or the past is drawn on as a reply to a question; other variations of that memory we’ll never know. But it is, for the young, the older generations who can offer a way to imagine the past, a history that is more textured and deeper than a single life. Or, a way to find footing in this one.

I often return to what John Berger (1972, 8) once said: “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.” In my own views, to listen to the stories of older generations, people whose efforts in life were probably dedicated to remaining invisible during and after wars, to keeping themselves apart from the wide current of the history told and retold by more prominent storytellers — that is, the extra-grand narratives of heroism or millions of deaths as a margin of error — is to stand witness to a first. When memory is narrated with another person, it may not be a shock so deep or terrible. The details may soon be forgotten. But some quality derived from the

stories of older generations provides for an intuition of temporal layers, of that dimension both quotidian and hallowed — a layer that may be seen as part of the miraculous, the wounding, or the undeserved. Only now, with old age nearly beginning or almost ending, might such things like loss and struggle, or the smallest joys, be spoken of with humor or gusto. Loss approaches. Ours are the lives these truths enter as gifts.

Translating

“That house is just where a lot of my memories of Vietnam are,” Malery tells me. A friend I met years ago in Florida, Malery and I reconnect after three years — a joyous reunion, albeit in unideal circumstances. But she seems somewhere else entirely as she speaks of her grandparents’ house in Saigon. It is as if she is no longer talking with me, but with herself. I look on quietly as she draws the scene as she remembers it:

There’s this specific room that had AC and they would put my brother and I in there because they’re like, “the kids need AC. They don’t know how to survive the Vietnam summer.” And it was right next to the laundry room, so we would hear the laundry. There was a window at the top where... it was not actually a window, it was just like bricks with holes in them, so the air would still flow through. The AC was still on, but we were still getting airflow from outside, so it was still not that great. And I remember the little newts, little lizards, that were everywhere, eating bugs.

And I remember that the bed was really hard. I remember coming back home after being in Vietnam for about a month and laying on my bed and I was like, “wow, I’ve never felt something so soft before.” But now I like hard surfaces for sleeping, and I understand why. I remember the bedsheets were blue and had a Peking dog or something on it. And there was a TV in the room and we would watch Cartoon Network.

Her father would tell her stories about growing up there, about the houses that have replaced the small pond at its back. A wedding was set there for her parents. I thought of a shadowy house, alive, microscopic, one place teeming with sound and celebration and thousands of

conversations between invisible people, waiting within her.

Malery's grandparents left behind the house and moved to the US to be with her father years ago, but her parents still show her photographs of the house if she asks about them. "Those pictures remind me that my grandparents are here now, and that house is gone." Her voice fades to a whisper. The house exists, there is just little reason to go. But a part of it has broken away, traveling with her.

After a semester in college learning about print history and print-making practices in Southeast Asia, she asks her mother to send photographs of the wedding and each one had of the house in Saigon. Doing some research on different fibers for a book arts project, she learns that paper can be made from the banana leaves sitting in her mini fridge that were for wrapping rice. The rice wasn't going to be steamed any time soon, "so I made paper from banana leaf in my dorm," she says, smiling.

Her fingers skim the photographs her mother sent before looking at each one for a long moment. Each an opening, a window, a migration. A photo, a flimsy and tenuous thing, is a candle to memory, and each of those memories, perhaps rising only as the briefest sensation, is linked to dozens more — both hers and the generations that have gone before.

Over a few weeks, she splices and places some onto one side of the banana leaf paper, inserting in between some poetry. On its other side are photos of her house in Florida. "It's like a duality of homes," she says, "one that I had only heard stories about and had only been to a few times, and one that I have my own stories to tell about." On every page, her parents' and grandparents' stories intersecting with her own. Everything is bound into a book, each page carrying the soft crackle of paper and her silent labor.

How is the past translated as a daughter? How does one translate a parent's own translations of the past? Derrida (1979, 104) once wrote how the scene of translation is inscribed "within a scene

of inheritance,” that translation is a kind of survival. Places are like seeds. They have latency and the potential to endure, not as themselves, but as a transmutation. They are never on the verge of disappearance, but of becoming something else. That to translate a memory, an experience, is to give way to an otherness that is not us but then becomes us, an otherness that is at once intimately and exclusively our own, and yet deeply connected to who and what had once been alive, and everything not yet realized.

I ask Malery what drew her to art as a way to explore her identity as a Vietnamese American. “I don’t know how to define my work in a way that is art,” she tells me, “it’s just memory practice, just a practice.” From the paper to the text to the book, “every step of the way I felt like I was able to put some part of my identity into it.” The form could be anything: a drawing, a story, a few words, a reflection, or a book. Form, the language, reveals itself as she asks her mother questions or looks at pictures and reflects on them, contends with what it all means. “It becomes a form of me processing and reprocessing for myself.”

Identity is a practice, a process. It is history-plus-imagination, a negotiation that we see more clearly when form is changed, when language is displaced. Translation is departure. It is tension. When it comes to the past, translation is not fidelity, only versioning. And when we add in the scrim of memory and all its complications, the most that can be done to create a version of the past is to stitch together sensations of it. To work with the past is almost analogous to working with an infinite number of things that have already become something else. To work with the aftermath of change is to use silence — a silence in which fullness and nothingness are impossible to hear.

Malery doesn’t talk about her process with her parents. She thinks that her parents think this book is just an object — something loved for the simple fact that she made it. She hardly talks with them about Vietnam or about their past. “I don’t know how to talk about them with them,” she adds. But it’s there between them, something they share.

War (which war?) is part of the silence, and all that comes of and with it. All is part of an ongoing perception rather than a series of discrete events that can be seen or talked about. The way we would never ask grandparents or parents point-blank about a famine, a sister they lost, or in Mai's case, a person they may have killed. Rather, we learn to listen to the sounds between the lines, which hides a place imagined as foreign, and let the atlas of images come to on their own. And perhaps we find instead that this place is old and familiar, that somehow it is part of our identity — that we are home.

...

"That chair is funny." I send these words in a text to Jack, studying an image he took of a chair that was not exactly hanging on the folding gate, but deliberately fixed in place. "Daily life art," he replies. He reminds me of Viet Thanh Nguyen's (2016, 267) call to action: "We need an art that celebrates the humanity of all sides and acknowledges the inhumanity of all sides, including our own. We need an art that enacts powerful memory."

That art is ordinary in the city, daily. But to see art as part of identity, as what connects the visible world to the one rippling through it, is also a practice of translation. There's no explanation given for any of the dozens of photographs provided for me of the "old," or for most on social media for that matter. They give no access to any one truth, only a meeting place. There is one silent caption in every image: *see, look*.

The images might be random, or they might be chosen. What is presented may be of no particular value, but something about weeds sprouting from ruptures in the wall, a summer roll half-eaten, a door streaked with black graffiti, a bleached hole in the wall revealing stairs faded with countless steps, a high-up old air conditioner that still functions, is precious. Each thing contains



Figure 15. Art. Photos by *Quân* (left) and *Jack* (middle, right).

something of the owner. They wear the marks of those who have passed through. They filter what is known and render it strange, literally, perhaps, compelling us to ask: what am I looking at?

Silence underlines art. Everyday art is made where imagination is continuously at work filling up all the gaps through which memory might pass, where the urge to know scrapes against the inability to know. The Saigon that parents and grandparents were alive to remember is dark and shadowy. And every hour, a good number of things from that city are forgotten by them, or sometimes better not remembered. But during that same hour the young are moving about, surveying and photographing places like old apartments or alleyways or old markets that may seem to them at once new and familiar, places where memory and imagination arrive together. They note the faded corners and pencil in new lines. They transform the original matter into something other than the original itself, and that alters the past; it makes it other. But it also becomes a space where possibility exists again. The surface is a closed door; it is a barrier. And at the same time it is the way through.

Home

The house is quiet, save the murmur of motorbikes that spills into our room through the open window. I'm on the third floor of a relative's home, in a room filled with clothes, wrinkled bedsheets, humidity, and the sense that life had been lived here.

The bits of bright blue breaking the pale orange light outside signal an approaching spell of heat in June. But the sun still hangs low, lighting the upper floors of homes along the narrow laneway in a deep chiaroscuro. The laneway opens onto Hai Bà Trưng street in District One, just a few minutes from Nguyen Hue.

I watch as my mother folds our clothes, carefully placing them in our luggage. Aunt Trang gathers her toothbrush and leaves the room. My brother lays flat on the bamboo mat spread out at the foot of the bed, his sleeping area for a short week. He is engrossed by something on his phone.

"*Hai ổ bánh mì một ngàn!*" a woman's call breaks the silence. She is selling two baguettes for about four US cents. I walk barefoot to the window, the smell of new bread rising up on a light breeze. If I stand on my tip toes and look down, past the powerlines, I can see the metal top of a moving cart.

When we first arrived in Saigon, her shouts would wake my brother and me up. Everything the woman said was shouted. She would shout the same thing every day, *Hai ổ bánh mì một ngàn!* I remember how my brother had asked my mother one morning whether he could go down and help the lady sell. She said no. But over the past few days, he has grown quite fond of her call, repeating it whenever he feels like it — on the streets, in my grandmother's house in Da Lat, on the plane back to Florida.

I can't remember what her voice sounded like. I can't remember what we did next. And it's difficult for me to pin down where the memory ends. The story changed at some point, but I've forgotten what changed. This is what I remember now. It is not made entirely from my own

memories, and I'm certain there's a detail not exactly right. This was nearly ten years ago, of a place thousands of miles away I've carried with me, but this is my memory now, an afterimage of an afterimage. And that's just about all I know about memory, and of home.

...

"When I ride a bike, or even motorcycle, I got to see things that not all people can see," he says. Through the screen and the patter of rain against the windows of my house, I can hear Quang's soft voice thicken as he recounts a story of an incident in the middle of Saigon. "I was down on the ground bleeding because of something stupid that I do with my bike," he recalls. The situation was precarious for a moment but then people began to stop what they were doing; a small crowd soon gathered.

"I remember I was bleeding on my arms or something like that and a lottery ticket lady just came to me and asked, 'Oh! you doing all right?'" As if prepared for accidents while selling lottery tickets, or headaches and stiff legs while working, the older lady had *dầu gió* on her to his surprise. "You know, that oil that cures *everything*," Quang describes. I smile back knowingly. "I was overwhelmed with the hospitality," he says, thinking about how she urged him to use it. "There's so many incidents that I have had experienced the kindness, the hospitality, the caring of the people in Saigon — that kindness of people around me from strangers to strangers."

They could make a whole city, I think as he begins speaking about the city's infrastructure, those people who seem to fill him up with tenderness, that change the texture of Saigon for him.

Such moments can allow us to attend to the present with no sense of the future, to notice the extraordinary hidden below the surface of the ordinary. Those moments are spaces that interrupt time as it is imagined, that permit us to live temporarily outside the insinuations of the present. And what happens in them shape the qualities of a place. They create the Saigon that rises easily in memory. And perhaps that city remembered is called home.

Chapter Five

Redux

Then why let anything remain / when whatever we loved / turned instantly to stone?
—Agha Shahid Ali, “Medusa”

It is weight that gives meaning to weightlessness...
—Isamu Noguchi

A breeze from the city had made its way through the open doors of the small café, not one of the establishments in the Café Apartment, but one in the vicinity, in another old apartment. The place is called Bán, copy. Many things here are fashioned in a way to look like the owner knew something about Japan. Still, Trang thinks, “it’s not all the way Japanese.” There are things that remind her of Saigon, at least its new side: an upright piano, a grand sofa, a pub atmosphere, and a large wall of bookshelves many visitors are using as a backdrop for photos. “Definitely doesn’t fit the Japanese aesthetics,” she judges.

The breeze winds its way past the ink paintings of Japanese women, low tables and cushions, glowing lanterns. It makes its way to her. Sometime later, she gets up from her seat on the sofa, leaves for the balcony. The air, she remembers, is always nicer when she is up high. Up there, at least, she can breathe.

“The air freshens up your whole body, and the whole skyline of District One’s buzzing commercial buildings rises before your eyes.” Resting her hands on the bar table outside, she stands there, quietly, not too far above the city she loves so dearly. It’s cooler here, the air less polluted. The exhaust from the tailpipes of idling motorbikes passes as a distant memory. It’s more solitary. *It’s like a whole new world*, she thinks.

She feels the city unfold before her, the visible and invisible. There’s Bitexco right ahead, in full view. Next to it are commercial buildings of different sizes, and plenty of dark spaces in the

cracks between. When she turns her gaze to the left, there's an old but still fancy hotel lit top to bottom by a wavering curtain of small, rectangular windows. She can make out the shapes of people beyond them, doing things she cannot see, each one separated by walls of glass and cement. If she thinks about it, in some ways, the walls between the windows were also a kind of scaffolding holding all those lives together.

Standing on her tiptoes, she glimpses Nguyen Hue stretched out below her, the whole glossy kilometer of it. She's close enough to the walking street to see children, hear them. Beams of white light from the stage being set up below bounces off their red and white costumes, following their movements. They're little flames dancing, singing about Đảng, the Party. *Must be a rehearsal for the approaching Party Congress*, she believes. It will be the thirteenth Congress since 1935.²⁸ The sixth one shifted the country away from centralized planning towards capitalism, towards Doi Moi. That one changed the future, the shape of Vietnam's memory itself.

Trang pulls out her phone and takes a panorama, as if everything the city is to her can be squeezed into a single frame. She gives no explanation for taking the photo, no reason or feeling behind it. Perhaps no photograph or word can hold the depth of that moment, the brief intimacy and abundance within this small act, the present moment. But how best to tell another person — a near stranger, me — what a place means? How else can she voice her experience?

She pockets her phone and makes a mental note to send me this image later, along with a few facts: where she is, where buildings are in relation to where she stands, the fact that it *is* a panoramic view — a way to remind me, us, that this landscape we see is huge and wrong and deformed. She reminds us how, sometimes, the things we think we see are not really what we see.

²⁸ Party Congresses are like the Democratic/Republican Party Conventions. They look over the implementation of the Congress' previous term's resolutions; set the next terms direction and policies; decides whether to amend the Party Platform and Charter; decides on the number of members in the Party Central Committee and elects the next term's members. They set the course of the country's future. The 13th Congress begins on January 25th, 2021 and goes to February 2nd, 2021.



Figure 16. Surface. Photo by Trang.

But here's the surprising thing: this doesn't seem to bother her. She seems okay with it and maybe I'm okay with it too.

Maybe this photograph is Trang's own kind of art, a more daily and personal creation, one that might easily be disregarded or labeled as a cliché under different circumstances. Maybe a photograph should simply be seen as a gesture. A practice. A sharing of what we love and care about, what we find beautiful — which, in the realm of art, is itself an ethics. So many photos these days are filtered through a lens of criticism or categorized as meaningless. But experience hides behind the reflection. An irreducible present — a space of silence — dwells quietly within each image. That silence is more accurate than anything else in the photo.

In an essay called "The Value of Silence," David Eng (2002, 86) writes that silence is speech's "very condition of possibility, the precondition of knowing and of meaning." Silence sifts through the mass of the present: its profound personal sorrows, its particular and greatest joys, its mysteries. It erases, breaks down, translates in order to shape a memory of that present into existence. What we remember of the present is always evolving, always subdividing. Revisit a

memory often enough and we can create a new memory, the memory of remembering. Silence hangs off its branches, off each memory that has split and grown from the present.

In a way, remembering leaves everything on a scale of its own. In writing, the space between the words can be said to make the story, these places upon which the whole meaning of a story rests. What if we simply began there, with the unspoken, in the not knowing? I think silence lets each memory shine and work itself into a history or truth we can tell ourselves and others — a history we can be, however briefly, okay with. Which is all to say that there is silence between the seen, and within the scene. There is a place of silence, a place *for* silence. Something in us listens.

The sun is setting, a deepening blue at the sky's center. Dark descends over the city, its galaxy of electric lights. Hundreds of other square lights begin to flicker on in the surrounding hotels, the glowing trail of luminescence like the windows of a distant airplane, golden and warm and far away. There is a silence here too.

“Expensive view,” Trang’s friend utters under her breath as she steps onto the balcony, joining Trang. “Expensive” depends on where you are coming from. But the price of land is high these days. Property values are at record levels.²⁹ Luxury apartment developers are arriving in District One in a sprint, each trying to lay their claim to space. It is easier to do so when the city is merely a stage, props and people moved around between one act and the next, and the grounds on which the world develops seems new and clean, unstained, and, in some sense, immortal.

Developers are running to another city too, a newer one. I skim the headlines. The state calls it Thu Duc City, a city made of three districts in the original Ho Chi Minh City: District Two, District Nine, and Thu Duc. It’s often introduced as a “city within a city,” as “smart” and “innovative.” Some say that it will build into the Silicon Valley of Vietnam, a place that can quicken

²⁹ And this is, in part, because of the Party Congress that happened in January, the Congress deciding to limit the building of new high-rises in the city center until 2025. Which likely has something to do with the pandemic.

the pace of development, that will help the country grow economically. One chairman describes it as a locomotive for development, one whose journey begins on the first day of 2021.

When I read about Thu Duc, I do not think of a city or have any particular story or timeline that accompanies it. Instead, I remember that my father is buried in Thu Duc, the place where he grew up, a place where I might have grown up too had things gone differently. I remember visiting his burial site when I was eleven. I don't remember much of the trip there — it was by car, through a landscape that left no impression. But the burial site is the place I travel to most in my memories of Saigon, not because I know it well, but because of the abundance of questions, and the failure to answer any of them.

Trash is piled high along the metal fence surrounding rows of tombs on both sides. The fence is caving in. The grass is yellowed, scorched from the sun. The air trembles with the heat. My mother is lighting incense and praying over my father's tomb while his portrait looks at something beyond her. These days, it's a tract of abandonment. A few men are leaning against the trees and lighting cigarettes, outside the fence. The smoke from the incense and cigarettes seem to be keeping the flies away. But the air around me vibrates with them. One is buzzing near my eyes, angling off, veering back. It smells like garbage. I hold my breath.

I remember beginning to leave at some later point, passing the men I saw earlier. The gray smoke of their cigarettes rises high into the glaringly bright sky — thin and faint, but lasting. The incense smoke had already blown away.

Over the years, whenever I remember Saigon, my thoughts linger on that day in Thu Duc. The air was something I could not easily forget, a scar in the shape of nothing. I learned in the years that followed that if the corpse does not matter, then neither does the living body. So, when I imagine myself on the balcony with Trang that night, look out at Saigon with her, sometimes, the line of tall buildings looks like a fortress. Maybe the city keeps building higher to escape something,

like the air that is polluted, getting heavier with matter that can't be seen and shouldn't be breathed. The air that is haunted, that holds the hot breath of the forgotten.

When the future is programmed, when images are mapped on it in order to see and know the end before we get there, the city can become expensive, costly. Perhaps the developed city is simply a permanent collection of glass and mirrors, a place where the young can watch their faces age slowly in the reflection of car windows and buildings. It is a place that makes them constantly aware that they might also be among the faces no name can be put to, that there might be a future in which they were never real.

Throughout this work, I have been talking about the places the young carry, or rather, the small and broken pieces of those places: the silences they hold, the recollection of them, the stories and unknowns that melt into those pieces like watermark, that reveal memory's missed connection with reality, its close relative, its substance. But behind all of it are the ghosts — *ma* — they hold close to them, whom only they can sense and remember. As Viet Thanh Nguyen (2016, 186) reminds, ghosts, or spirits, exist to be seen by some and not by others. The dead, the missing, the wronged, the forgotten, the untold — everyone who passed quietly through life. They are part of the silence too.

“There’s a disconnect between her history and what I know about it,” Phuc tells me, remembering a story his mother told him when he returned to his hometown of Da Nang after seven years in the United States. She tells him during that visit about a hill she knows, a hill where half of her family, his family, is buried. “She never told me,” he says of the years before then, of this secret his mother had been keeping, the thousand things that remain shrouded in mystery. He looks me in the eyes, or as close as he can get across our screens. “There’s not much to say about it, but it would have been nice to know.”

“Sometimes,” the young narrator Huong says in *The Mountains Sing*, “something is so terrible

that you need to pretend it doesn't exist" (207). Silence pools around memory's edges, gathering like the folds of a gown. There isn't much to say about the silence, the kind that speaks to everything that had already happened, that knows all the crimes and betrayals and quiet kindnesses that have made this present we live in possible.

"I think that silence means—" Phuc pauses to think for a little while and then says, "it's a hit in reality." It may be that we know nothing of what silence contains, the materials and people that went into making it. It may be that we will never know how rich it is or how deep it goes. But its presence makes it hard to convince ourselves that all there is to the present is only what is right in front of us, and all there is to history is what we want — or bear — to remember of it. And that silence, Phuc tells me, "only really carries on." It gets passed on to the next generation and the next, and grows with them.

Once, in a chemistry class I took my sophomore year, I watched air undergo a phase change called deposition. Under the right conditions, air turns solid. I think silence can do similar things. It can become as solid and real as the ground beneath our feet, something that can be held. Silence is heavy because we try to carry it. Perhaps it hits us that we might be the only ones holding on to an idea, a memory, a person — the personal facts. It hits us that we may be the only ones who remember, or at least, the only ones trying to remember. When we are the only ones holding onto silence, I think it's hard to keep silence and its ghosts from turning back and floating away.

But every photograph, drawing, sentence, is a way to simultaneously keep the weight real and pass a piece of it on. Maybe we offer these materials in the hopes that somebody else will be changed, if only for a moment, by the history they are now part of too. And maybe one day, enough people will be carrying parts of our story that suddenly we realize that it has become lighter than what it was before, almost weightless.

"My identity and connections with my family," Thi begins, "it's different, it's changing, and I

feel disconnect with them.” There is a fault line between the generations. I think the entire history of ourselves is there, in that rift. And I think the stories that parents and grandparents tell the young are not meant for bridging the chasm. Maybe the stories they tell are to legitimize the silence and distance between the generations. To tell those stories is to confirm that there *is* a gap that will not close. And it accommodates all the faces and names that have fallen out of the world, into the void.

Trang and her friend stand on the balcony for a short while, this odd floating space between inside and outside. For seconds, minutes, they gaze out together, quietly taking in their individual cities. Sometime later, her friend begins to tell her how much she enjoys being up high, peering through the windows of city buildings when she’s closer to the sky. So, they each choose their own sequence of windows. They watch as yellow light negotiates its way through the individual figures beyond each, the way they flutter through the space around them, everyone faint and glowing and not quite real. They stare long enough that their own stories start to emerge.

“Just as we imagined what people are doing over there,” Trang explains, “my friend likes to imagine that somebody over there is also looking at us, imagining us, taking pictures of the square we’re inhabiting too.” As I look through the open windows with her, I imagine each blurry figure as that of a mother, brother, aunt, cousin — past and present. I think about how all those lives and histories could fit within a single eye or a photograph, a window without walls. I wonder how something so small could make us stop the world just to pay closer attention, spend time imagining, if only for a moment.

Precious — the other word for expensive.

Every new generation has to grapple with memory: the fact that it can sew together events and people that hadn’t previously met; the fact that loss and war can occupy the same mental space as an apartment or a shopping mall. But imagination rushes in when we reach the shores of personal memory, arrive at that expanse between the generations. Everyone waits there, in that space — all

the gone ones who have ever touched our lives, who go back far enough for us to have lost their tracks, who we can't recognize, we can't name. Perhaps they wait not for memory to reach them, but for the imagination — and, in that sense, the discipline or practice of anthropology — to notice their presence, render them fully real. Maybe they are waiting for us to consider that they, too, are setting their gaze upon us, witnessing lives and places being seen as entirely surface, all empty on the inside, purged of history.

I find it hard to recall much more of that day in Thu Duc. I've forgotten whether my brother was there or whether I walked with my mother to the altar, laid my hands on my father's tomb like she did. Which makes me wonder if I did actually stand beside it, looked up at his face, still as lake water. It's the same portrait framed above my desk in Florida, except this one is in black and white, and, strangely, feels more alive. It is possible that parts of one memory are being swapped for another.

But what if all this forgetting is a kind of distilling? I had the feeling that all the forgotten moments have brought me to the borderlines of my own memory, a place to stare at the formless ocean ahead, its frothing waves, the lightless tomb of its depths. And here, I ask if he remembers something of me that day. I ask if he had felt — still feels — after so many years, being touched by his daughter.

At many points throughout this work, I had the sense that what I was really writing about was the diaspora — as much as if not more than any particular place in Vietnam, or Saigon. The work positions itself in Saigon; it is filled with, as best it can, the words of the young people who grew up there. But I was thinking and navigating through questions about migration, displacement and loss, reconnection and new beginnings, family. I was thinking about borders: how they separate, how they join, what happens when we try to cross them, what we find out about ourselves along the way.

More and more young overseas Vietnamese, *Viet Kieu*, have been coming to Saigon to live and work over the past few years. Maybe they come for all the opportunities the city affords, building the country the state wants them to build, as some mention (Carruthers 2008). Others might say that they come for home and origins, pursuing answers to questions about culture and identity through their parent's homeland.³⁰

"Saigon takes you in and makes you feel at home," Kim tells me. The return stories, this homeward going — we read them how we want to read them. Those stories though, for many reasons, bring me back to borders. *Doi Moi* is a phrase that generally means "renew" or "innovate," but I also see the phrase through the notion of new borders, new forms and phases.

There are young people who have never strayed far from Saigon. There are the young people who know it mostly through stories that their parents and grandparents have told. And there are some who have not seen or heard or experienced this city for themselves at all. Then there is the border lining these existences, and all the different histories and silences and realities each are bedrock to. The border is a meeting space though, one filled with shared questions about the present: who we are and who we could be, and what the risk-filled and beautiful place in between holds. This plunging into the void, the reaching toward *despite*, is forming new ways of being with each other and calling for new modes of relating to each other, to each other's distinct histories and stories of migration. New kinds of silences will appear, and new phases for the collective and individual units of the family will be made possible. The city is being made in ways yet to be seen. And there is a lot to learn here, in the unknowing.

It seems, personally, that the city invokes a certain hope, which some might call nostalgia. But it's a nostalgia of the truer kind, that places emphasis on the *algia*, longing itself and the many

³⁰ Koh (2015) talks a little about this, the exploration of identity and culture among young, returning Viet Kieu. Though, she mostly centers her work on the second generation of Viet Kieu — those who left Vietnam as children during and after war.

forms of creativity it ushers in.³¹ It is a longing illuminated by old sources, by a looking at the past informed by the ubiquity of silence in the present, across the diaspora. It is a longing affected by the possibility of learning from the place where much of the silence grows.

In Saigon, diasporic identity may be found in the “off” moments, the chance encounter, the unexpected communions, the freedom that comes from detours, mistakes, the alternative and broader forms of family that are surfacing now. Perhaps it is through the diaspora that we might find other ways of being with the gaps, the heavy doors the absent ones hold open. Perhaps we may find other ways of listening to their silences, or even voicing them, through other forms, modes, acts. Events of listening becoming practices and structures of listening. And we might find ourselves holding open the doors for them too.

...

Back on the balcony, a chill sets in. Trang and her friend decide to head back inside. Before they do, they each take in the city one more time, the moving lives beyond the windows. For this moment, the city isn't about shining narratives of past and future, that provide false ends to a fluid and ongoing story. For now, it isn't a city that lives under the hammer of development or the cameras of the state. This is simply the present. Every side of it speaks to some other city that means Saigon, a place full of grief and disappointment, full of surprises and beauty.

The two friends stand beside each other that night, looking at the whole, their unique and irreproducible stories hidden beneath. Everyone and everything they have ever encountered live here, in this city that bears their individual marks, their own ongoing history. Yet it is also a city that has made its marks on them; they wear the effects of every generation before.

Those are cities that I can't see and can't know, part of a country I have only vague

³¹ Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* writes about this kind of nostalgia, calling it “reflective nostalgia.” She distinguishes it from “restorative nostalgia” and its accent on the *nostos*; that is, the home that might be redeemed, a past which might be restored.

memories of, but that lets me make my own country. It's a small place, populated with people who travel with me everywhere, who I write letters to here and there in silence. And this makes it easier to imagine that there are many other small places, each one sharing a membrane with my own, and all the meanings between our many existences. What are those invisible worlds communicating? What is hiding behind the glaring present? What is our responsibility to the unseen? What happens to the real when we destroy that hidden place of others, of otherness? What if we forget that it exists? How will we live here, then?

I still don't have answers to these questions, and I don't assume that there are any. But there is one conversation I am remembering now, with a young Vietnamese American woman, Vi, who I met a few years back. "Vietnam is so large," she tells me, "and, in my mind, it's quite small because that's all I know. But there's no one who knows everything about it in and out. I wished I knew more, and I still wish I knew more. But I'm also okay with how much I know as long as I'm continuing to learn."

For now, what she says seems like a perfect pause to this story. What she says rings true — a good way forward.

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