

Displacement, Ethnicity and Ghost: Vietnamese Refugees' Traumatic American Landscape Writing in *The Refugees*

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As a Vietnamese-American writer, Viet Thanh Nguyen often expresses his concern for the cultural displacement of Vietnamese. Nguyen's *The Refugees* contains landscape writing of Vietnamese refugees' lives in America about their hidden trauma. The landscapes in this book uncover Nguyen's thoughts on why trauma always haunts the Vietnamese refugees. Initially, the displacing experiences recorded by past natural landscapes relapse in daily life. Additionally, human landscapes like food and car remind them of the routines of their isolated ethnicity. Moreover, their attempt to heal the trauma is marked as a failure, which is formed in the way of imagined ghosts in landscapes. This study is expected to arouse public concern about the cultural secondary trauma of refugees and help the community of shared future for mankind to go deeper in the cultural field.

Keywords: Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Refugees*, landscape writing, refugees' trauma

Viet Thanh Nguyen is one of the representative contemporary Vietnamese American writers. His latest novel, *The Refugees* narrates about traumatic memories of Vietnamese refugees as they live in the United States. Nguyen (2017) said at the beginning that "we had no belongings except our stories" (p. 4). Particularly, Nguyen utilizes traumatic American landscape writing to show refugees' trauma. Derived from the neoclassic "ruins" landscape in England in the eighteenth century, the traumatic landscape was created as a path to combine social history, traumatic experiences, and cultural representations in geographical life space, which met its prosperity after World War II in Europe and was deeply affected by the cultural traumatic memory theory and "narrative landscape" concept during its development. In this work, the traumatic American landscape is the reconstruction of the American landscape by fugitive experiences, traumatic

memories, and uncompromising culture from past times. In other words, the traumatic memories in *The Refugees* are not bluntly stated, most of which are kept in refugees' minds and can be seen as the melancholy of their life in the United States, expressed through the surrounding landscapes such as water, houses, cuisines, and cars. Then, why are refugees' traumatic memories so melancholic in *The Refugees*? Are there any relationships between landscape narrative and this melancholy?

In recent research, the findings of traumatic memory are abundant. From the perspective of memory ethics, Gao (2022) deems the memories which the Vietnamese American refugees hold are "the memories of the victims of an unjust war" (p. 90). In terms of the importance of refugees' memories, Nguyen (2016) has bluntly stated, "All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory" (p. 4). From the view of the cause of their traumatic memories, Nguyen also spoke out the need for American society to view the situation of the maimed side of colonization and war through the lens of "the Other." "Avoiding memory is not a healthy way of forgetting, because that does not touch the root causes of the plight" (Nguyen & Zhang, 2022, p. 155). However, the researchers rarely take into consideration the landscape narratives in Nguyen's novel, and their influence on refugees' remembrance of past trauma. Meanwhile, according to the relevance of refugees' identity and memory,

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the landscapes and their interchanges form refugees' diverse identities which may become the origin of their traumatic memories in this novel.

However, the scope of landscapes in *The Refugees* is broad, so are there any similarities to those landscape depictions? From the definition of landscape, it means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors (Council, 2000, p. 2). The Council of Europe focuses on landscapes in reality and splits them into natural landscapes and human landscapes, with people as perceivers. Cosgrove (1984) extends the concept of landscape, thinking that people are not only perceivers but also a part of the landscape, which makes landscapes subjective: "Landscape denotes the external world mediated through subjective human experience Landscape is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world. Landscape is a way of seeing the world" (p. 13). The subjectivity of landscapes leads to the result that there exist imagined landscapes beyond the real ones: "In referring to imagined landscapes we are drawing attention to the tendency for metaphorical landscapes to transform over time into cultural imaginaries, networks of allusions and references which, in turn, shape the perception and construction of the physical world" (Bintley & Franklin, 2024, p. 2). To conclude, three forms of landscapes are discovered: natural, human, and imagined landscapes. Nguyen portrays these three landscapes through seven mini-stories in the book, analyzing three origins of refugees' traumatic memories which are the wandering pain, the ethnic protection, and the trauma-healing failure. It is expected to provide suggestions for the enhancement of the life-political discourse of minorities and the construction of a community of shared future for mankind.

Carrier of Displacement: Memories of Natural Landscapes of Vietnamese Refugees

The natural landscapes of Vietnamese refugees in this book should be defined as the natural elements observed and even grouped and formed by refugees. In this scope, natural landscapes are distinguished from the perceivers, in other words, even though the landscapes contain the perceivers' practice and refinement, the landscapes themselves are formed by objects but don't regard the perceivers as a part of it. In *The Refugees*, this kind of landscape plays a role as the carrier of displacement for the refugees. Displacement means

someone is forced to leave his or her homeland or where he or she has settled for quite a long time and then immigrate to a strange place. This meaning can also be used to interpret the refugees' escaping experiences and just because of the displacing process, they are given the identity of refugees. Along the route of wandering and during the settlement in the U. S., foreign and exotic natural landscapes appear constantly to provoke the refugees who may suffer a lot, struggle to the death, and try to find safety and peace in them, so the landscapes could be seen as material carriers to those suffers and trauma caused by displacing. Specifically, *The Refugees* mainly depicts the observation and memory of two aspects of the natural landscape, namely, water and land. Water landscapes mainly appear through the refugees' way of fleeing on the sea and record direct trauma caused by the famine and cruel maritime situations, while land landscapes represent the trauma of their failure to shake their wandering identity off and resume their lifestyle in past time in the way of building cultural enclave when they have settled in the United States for decades.

Firstly, water landscapes are the historical and realistic factors that directly lead to a result of refugees' unstable and wandering lives. Due to the uncertainty of natural forces such as currents and sea storms, these raging natural phenomena made the refugees, who were already poorly equipped and lacked necessities, even worse. As a direct result of this catastrophe, the refugees' memories of the ocean are mostly filled with trauma. As a triggering condition of refugees' wandering trauma, the American water landscapes, large or small, could be comprehended as traumatic American landscapes.

In *I'd Love You to Want Me*, a glass of drinking water becomes the medium through which Mrs. Khanh connects with the past maritime disaster, especially the lack of fresh water. "Mrs. Khanh refused to look at him as she dabbed a napkin in her glass of water. She wondered if he remembered their escape from Vung Tau on a rickety fishing trawler" (Nguyen, 2017, p. 65). A glass of water was a part of the landscape when Mrs. Khanh was dining with her family, but it also aroused her traumatic memories, so any behaviors that had a connection with that landscape could force her to recall the past. As Mrs. Khanh wiped the grease stains from her husband's body, she thought of her past experiences washing the children at sea. "He and the rest of the children, bleached by the sun, were crying for water, even though there was none to offer but the sea's. Nevertheless, she had washed their faces and combed their hair every morning, using salt water and

spit” (Nguyen, 2017, pp. 65–66). It is also worth noticing the contrast between the use of pure water now and the use of “salt water and spit” in the past time. With their villa and garden in the Little Saigon neighborhood of the United States, Professor, and Mrs. Khanh had an ample source of fresh water inside the house and could even now use the straight drinking water in a cup to wipe away stains on their bodies. The abundance and accessibility of water in the house’s landscape were observed by Mrs. Khanh from this seemingly extravagant act, and it evoked a painful memory of Mrs. Khanh’s time at sea: using saliva and seawater to wash her children, even if this act was tantamount to quenching her thirst with poison at the time.

The shower landscape creates pathological feedback of drowning traumatic memories. “Open expanses of water prompted fears of drowning, a phobia so strong that she no longer took baths, and even when showering kept her back to the spray” (Nguyen, 2017, p. 68). The water in showers was not a substance for Mrs. Khanh to quench her thirst and keep her clean daily, but a life-threatening disaster similar to the seawater that wrapped around the refugee boats in the memory. The traumatic memory-triggering mechanism caused by this shower and the fear that spreads to the characters is post-traumatic stress disorder. Freud (1920) called this phenomenon “Traumatic Neurosis” (p. 289) and this kind of stress lingers in the minds of the characters for a long time. Comparing the various triggering situations of the water landscape for the memory of the shipwreck, an ambivalence of a constant struggle emerges: on the one hand, the real water landscape is transformed into a “thirst” in the memory, a thirst to have water resources as abundant as today to reach the safe destination; on the other hand, this water landscape is transformed into a “horror” in memory, as an explanation of fear of water as a direct factor of life passing away. In summary, the memory of the shipwreck constitutes memory feedback based on the observation of the water landscape that *The Refugee* portrays, and it expresses the trauma suffered by the refugees in the former water landscape. Refugees observe the displacement of self and homeland and the danger of self-existing through it, and the “water” in the memory of the natural landscape constitutes the material carrier of the refugees’ “wandering” identity.

But water has two sides in the memory of the shipwreck. When water is a necessity at sea, it is a scarce resource for the refugees; but when it is transformed into seawater to carry the refugees, it becomes an infinite and deadly force for the refugees at any time.

Different from the water landscapes, land landscapes are

the abstract factors that appear in refugees’ tranquil settlement after their turbulent migration and act as a timeless reminder that if Vietnamese refugees live in America for a life-long time, no matter how well and rich their life is, their wandering identity will last for evermore. It is usually a substance that intervenes in the overall landscape at all times, allowing the observer to look at it for a long time in a specific environment. Wood (2018) has suggested that the local (land) emerges from the studies presented here as the field within which everyday life unfolded (p. 237). So the landscape memory of the land, should contain human practices. The intervention of the observer not only allows this memory feedback to remain in the memory mapped by the observation but also allows it to be reproduced in the present landscape, transforming the existing land landscape to form a new landscape with the refugees’ characteristics.

Theoretically, the essence of land landscape in traumatic American landscapes is cultural enclave, as a means of self-adaptation. Cultural enclave usually refers to urban areas within which culturally distinct minority communities maintain ways of life largely separate from those of the generally larger communities that surround them (Adams, 1982, p. 3). In the seven mini-stories, most of the Vietnamese refugees who settled in the United States chose to work and live in urban areas, and the land transformation that resulted from their long-term residence allowed them to build their communities on foreign land, the “Little Saigon” area mentioned in the book. In terms of the relationship between space and culture, this kind of community formed by land transformation is a manifestation of the Vietnamese refugees’ conscious construction of their cultural enclaves. This construction of cultural enclaves represents the establishment of a sense of self-adaptation for Vietnamese refugees in urban America. This invention extends to culture as well, as the construction of enclaves becomes a rejection of cultural invasion and a desire for cultural freedom.

Practically, the transformation of private spaces is the most common cultural enclave constructed by Vietnamese refugees in America, as the reminiscence of land. Therefore, the recurring memory of the artificial transformation of the land focuses on the observation and memory of the furnished landscape of the house. In the third mini-story, *The Transplant*, the dialogue between Louis a Vietnamese immigrant, and Arthur an American about houses demonstrates the important influence of memory on the concept of house transformation. At the time, Arthur arrived in Louis’ place, a modest single room with “mismatched furniture” and “grimy walls.” Such

a view was observed by Arthur, who knew Louis' house inside out and wondered, "Why don't you just live in one of those houses you bought?" (p. 54) It turned out that Louis had two detached houses with yards and an apartment. But Louis insisted on completing his daily routine in this modest single room. Later, the question evolved into a discussion of "quality of life" between the two men, Louis' position being more related to money, preferring to name the house "real estate"; but Arthur felt that the quality of life lay in non-wealthy things, such as love and happiness. These conversations after the observation of the house landscape do not seem to deal with the cultural memory of the land, but this memory has already been diffused throughout the space as part of the landscape. A detail was observed by Arthur: he noticed that Louis was watching a program that was related to simple renovation and house appreciation. And Arthur focused on Louis' concern about finding alternatives to high-end furniture, which included "thrift-store shopping, dumpster diving, and attic treasure hunts" (Nguyen, 2017, p. 54). Louis gave his assessment when he saw such decorating tips, "I love that," and "You can't even tell it's not really marble" (Nguyen, 2017, p. 54). This "gilded exterior, shabby and ruined inside" decorating concept seemed to have hinted at the end of Louis' three properties, which became a false lure for tenants in the rental market. Louis' reaction to the television program confirms the oddity of living in a humble single room with three properties: even though he has a very materialistic outlook on life, this reaction represents his memory of a land that has been culturally fused with the traumatic memory of living as an illegal laborer.

Culturally, the American stereotype of Asians mirrors Vietnamese refugees' traumatic memories which influences their behavior in the traumatic land landscape. When Louis tells him about the origin of the counterfeit goods hidden in his garage, Arthur associates them with the group of people who are making them in the underground factory, whose appearance is naturally portrayed by Arthur as similar to Louis', "dark haired, tight eyed, and nimble" (Nguyen, 2017, p. 46). Louis, as the smuggler of counterfeit goods, seems to overlap with the identity of that imaginary group of Asian underground workers, so much so that he confronts Arthur's questioning when things fall apart with a deafening roar, "Wake up! Who's your brother underpaying to clip his lawns and trim his hedges?" (Nguyen, 2017, p. 59) The question itself is certainly a disguised acknowledgment of the identity of the underground workers and his own identity. Returning to the housing monstrosity, this implicit traumatic memory

is enough to influence Louis' every action: even though he owns properties and his economic level is already higher than the average American family, his traumatic memory still commands him to live a cheap life and run a business that cannot escape the gray industry, which leads to the oddity of being questioned by Arthur. This strange phenomenon is the cultural enclave built by the recurrence of Louis' memories.

However, the trauma shown therein makes the refugees struggle in the process of gradual adaptation to life in another country. In this process, many immigrants develop a dual identity with both their host and home countries (Kong et al., 2023). Refugees as marginal people are both the product of the exchange of two cultural systems and the cultural crystallization of the contact between the old and new eras, and their role behavior is often confused, contradictory, and marginal (Chen, 2006, p. 54). This marginal state, to some extent, deepens their consciousness of wandering identity. They may have changed the landscape to suit themselves, but the land reveals more cross-cultural conflicts giving them hurt and injury psychologically.

In a nutshell, the natural landscapes Vietnamese refugees observed could tell that the entire process of migration, even including the long-lasting peaceful life in the U. S., could be seen as "going to exile" for them, meaning that they cannot gain any feeling of belonging through it, for as a community with a common origin, they still retain their common historical collective memory through language and script, literature art, living customs, religious beliefs, and livelihood patterns, and have fused it into their blood (Naran, 2020; Wang, 2023).

Space of Ethnicity: Memories of Human Landscape of Vietnamese Refugees

"Landscape is culture first and nature second" (Schama, 2013, p. 67). Human landscapes in this novel are landscapes with a high degree of human attendance and culture, which means that different from natural landscapes, on the one hand, human landscapes contain cultural products; on the other hand, they contain the perceivers as well. The Vietnamese refugees are both the perceivers and the elements of human landscapes at the same time. They are often aware of and intend to protect their original ethnicity, for the distinction between their original culture and the exotic culture they touch in the foreign land is enormous, including living habits, economic structure, values, and almost any side of daily life. This ethnic-protecting thought of the refugees can be interpreted as their

trauma, for they fail to find cultural calmness or mental ease in a foreign culture circle. In *The Refugees*, two main human landscapes reveal this ethnic trauma, which are, food and car. Both of them show the intention to protect the uniqueness of refugees' primitive ethnicity, representing this behavior as a kind of closure or sealing process.

What's the area of food landscape and car landscape? If food is regarded as a human landscape, then the meaning of food will encompass all scenarios involved in food processing and dining, rather than being limited to a single food ingredient. The food landscapes often call up the homeland memories of eating habits and growing experiences, leading to refugees' refusal to share their feelings or communicate with their companies or other people when enjoying their cuisines. While the food landscapes call up their past ethnicity, the car landscapes create a mobile but sealing place for them to freely express their feelings which are always some bad moods such as fragileness, desperation, or sadness, and easily do things by their original lifestyle, which means that the seemingly open landscapes for refugees to do some cross-cultural communications have been transformed into their private space to claim their ethnical eagerness.

The food landscape is a cultural symbol and a memorial trigger for Vietnamese refugees. Due to factors such as geography and climate, food has shown considerable differences as human civilization has evolved, and such differences have become cultural symbols of a region and a nation. In *The Refugees*, eating also becomes a major scene in the plot. The memory of the food scene is usually based on the food itself, from the perspective of the food's category, processing state, and smell. The result of this memory lands on the refugees' native memory: refugees are usually in a state of near isolation from their homeland in a foreign country, and similar food becomes the most intuitive way to recall their homeland. In the second mini-story, *The Other Man*, Liem's thoughts on Asian cuisine also trigger his original memories of food. After putting Parrish on a plane, Marcus takes Liem to a Chinatown Asian restaurant. The food appears in front of Liem's eyes: all kinds of delicious Cantonese-style snacks surround Liem, and he looks at the wide array of dumplings, kale, and barbecue pork, and "sucks the dimpled skin off a chicken's foot, leaving only the twiggy bones" (Nguyen, 2017, p. 22). This portrayal of the chicken claw eating is this view that sets the stage for the food memories that follow. After the meal, Liem and Marcus order a pot of chrysanthemum tea, and during the tea break, Liem and Marcus talk about Marcus's past in Hong Kong. At this point, Liem shows a contrast with

the food he is enjoying, as he "rolled the bottom of his teacup in a circle around a grease stain on the tablecloth" (Nguyen, 2017, p. 22). This seems to bring Liem back to his true state: when Liem first arrived on the West Coast, he was so timid, playing with the fog he exhaled on the window of Parrish's car. It is the greasy ring at the bottom of the teacup that Liem stares at in disbelief that pulls him back to his memories of food from his homeland in Vietnam.

The contrast between present and past food landscapes should be noticed. At the train station, after his parents parted from him, he saw many more people boarding the train with agricultural products, "keeping a close watch on their pigs and chickens, shuffling in wire cages" (Nguyen, 2017, p. 22). Liem's memories of food in his hometown are in stark contrast to the current food landscape: Liem sucks on the delicate brined chicken feet at the dinner table, but in his hometown, he usually sees them in chicken cages smelling of "chicken manure and sweat."

Moreover, memories of past food landscapes reflect the identity and insecurity of Vietnamese refugees. Liem's identity changes quietly in the connection between landscape and memory: the present-day Liem in Chinatown is a customer who enjoys the dishes; but in memory, Liem is a laborer who grew up in an agrarian society that needed to provide raw materials for food processing. It was the contrast between the current landscape and the food landscape he remembered that traumatized him. The industrial structure of the United States is already in an extremely modern state, with the modernization of the food processing industry turning raw materials into a variety of food and by-products; and the proliferation of the service industry turning food into a kind of "pleasure." In Liem's memory, his hometown has not yet reached the first step. Glück (1996), in her *Nostos*, exclaims, "We look at the world once, in childhood. The rest is memory" (p. 59). Liem gives birth to an indelible insecurity: Does he have a life here today? Can he take it for granted and enjoy it all? From this perspective, food is positioned as a kind of remembrance of refugees' past community in their homeland. In terms of cultural attributes, the food itself carries cultural symbols that are unique to a region, triggering the exclusive memories of people belonging to the same cultural identity.

The car landscape in traumatic American landscapes has the nature of flexibility and sealing. Compared to the food landscapes, the car landscapes are more flexible, because the characters in these landscapes are always in a state of fluidity. However, though they often supply opportunities for people from different cultural field or statuses to communicate, as

Campbell (2001) has explained the road narrative in the travel narrative as “roadscapes provide vibrant cultural contact zones” (p. 282), the car landscapes for refugees are sealed and locked, expressing an attitude of refusal to share and freedom to enjoy their own culture. Even, the decision of whether the car landscapes are open or not is an ethnic and cultural behavior. In *The Refugees*, the journey is usually a landscape in a car: this mobility is expressed through the music, the words and movements of the passengers, and the changes in the environment outside the car. In *I'd Love You to Want Me*, Sa, the wife of Professor Khanh, triggers her traumatic memories on the day she retires through the landscape she observes in the car.

Sa has a strong emotional impact through two car landscapes. The first time was when Sa's colleagues were giving her a farewell party. Colleagues gave her a travel guide because she always had a habit of planning trips. However, since Sa did not tell her colleagues about Professor Khanh's health condition, the landscape in the car creates a contrasting scene: in the back seat of the car, bags of adult diapers are placed alongside the travel guide. The landscape creates a strong narrative tension that brings Sa to tears: she compares her life to “the book” that “so slowly was being closed” (Nguyen, 2017, p. 74). This intense sadness exposed the traumatic memories of the global travel in anticipation of her retirement with Professor Khanh. And then, when she found that her husband, whose condition had worsened, was not at home after Sa returned home, she instantly drove out in search of him: “Anh Khanh! Anh Khanh!” (Nguyen, 2017, p. 75) Her shouting also presents the reader with a view from outside the car: a road where cars slow down, where houses on both sides of the street light up, and where people inside the houses gaze at her with curious eyes all because of her shouting. At this point, the husband's performance in the initial episode came to Sa's mind: he had gone to Mr. Esteban to buy flowers brought them to her, and taken her as Yen. But when she passed by Mr. Esteban's flower stall, he only spoke Spanish. For Professor Khanh, who only speaks English and Vietnamese, communicating with the flower vendor who only speaks Spanish, is an impossible task. Thus, it is clear that from then on, the professor had already been full of confusion in his mind. And this also added to Sa's anxiety about not being able to find him.

The car landscapes have the reinforcement of private and public spaces. The shift in the narrative perspective of the landscape should be considered: while the first scene is shot at the furnishings in the back seat of the car, the second scene

shifts to the window of the car with Sa's shout. For Sa, the observer, this kind of observation with a mobile vision is in line with the perspective of the car travel narrative described by Walden in *Through France*, “the driving experience also constitutes an important element of his travel narrative, and even makes his narrative form bear the imprint of the mobility of the car” (Liu & Sun, 2016, p. 83). Both landscapes give pathos to Sa, but Sa's reactions inside the car are very different: when she receives the travel guide to go home, she only cries silently inside the car and does not show her pain to her colleagues outside the car; but when she is looking for her husband, she opens the car window and shouts despite the danger, even if it draws the attention of everyone on the street. Therefore, for Sa, the space inside the car is private and allows her to express her emotions as if she were at home, while the act of shouting out of the car window is undoubtedly a “breakthrough” for the private space. This breakthrough symbolizes Sa's breakthrough of her cultural identity, which has a deep East Asian cultural connotation that all people should be family-centered: she sobs because she will never be able to travel around the world with Professor Khanh again; she cries out because she fears that she may never find Professor Khanh again. In traditional East Asian culture, the family becomes the basic survival situation of a person, not just a social organization (Wu, 2007, p. 66). The importance of the family's reputation is reflected in the phrase “Family shame must not be publicized” (Wang, 2013, p. 100). Therefore, it is understandable that Professor Khanh does not tell outsiders about his illness: Sa treats it as a kind of “family scandal,” which will lead to unnecessary gossip and affect the happiness of Sa's family in the eyes of outsiders. Therefore, it is only in a safe and private space that Sa can release this painful emotion. The disappearance of Professor Khanh represents the destruction of her family, and to fight against the loss of her family, family shame must take second place, so Sa opens the window and shouts. This courage to break through the private space unfolds the landscape outside the car window and reveals the weight of family in Sa's Vietnamese cultural outlook. Therefore, the nature of car landscape memories is its construction of ethnic space for refugees. As the car landscape produces culturally biased interpretations specific to different ethnicities, the public sphere, which seems to provide a place of exchange for different cultures, is transformed into a private domain for the interpreters at this moment. The car landscape becomes the vehicle they use to connect with their traumatic memories, creating a culturally private space for them. This contradiction and shifting between the public and private

function of the landscapes properly uncovers the intention of refugees to protect their ethnicity and the uniqueness of their culture, thus the traumatic memory in the plot of *The Refugees* is mostly a self-explanation of psychological fluctuations.

“Talismans” and “Headless Statues”: Construction of Imagined Landscapes of Vietnamese Refugees

Imagined landscapes in *The Refugees* are depicted as a kind of surreal scene that characters construct and join in at the same time. Nguyen in this novel also reflects on his hope on the issue of how to deal with refugees’ traumatic memories, carried by the imagined landscapes: on the one hand, he deems that the guilt that caused refugees’ trauma should be admitted by the U. S. old soldiers and the whole American society should take the responsibility to assist the Vietnamese refugees; on the other hand, he tries to explore the way that refugees could lead themselves to a state of no trauma. To be noticed, though the landscapes are fundamentally fictional, it does not mean that they are pure imagination of people’s minds, which, to some extent, have a relationship with the real landscapes, for “imagined landscapes bear complex relations with ‘real’ physical topographies and ecologies and can roam around and overlay disparate and distant places across cultural contexts” (Bintley & Franklin, 2024, p. 103). Moreover, just as in Cosgrove’s landscape theory, those landscapes are specialized by refugees’ way of perception and transformed into abstraction. Therefore, the landscapes in this novel depend on some real indications such as garment talismans and headless stone statues in places of interest in Vietnam, and then transfer into ghost landscapes and dream landscapes. According to the plot, the functions of ghost and dream landscapes differ from each other: the ghost landscapes show the possibility of refugees’ self-salvation, while the dream landscapes serve as a spiritual judgment and punishment to the U.S. veteran who directly gave catastrophe to Vietnamese refugees. However, admittedly, whether Nguyen’s hope could become a reality is still questioned by himself, so much so that he is too unconfident to put it in some real landscape depictions.

The ghost landscape plays a role in the self-comfort of the refugees. In the first mini-story, *Black-Eyed Women*, the characters combine their observations of the watery landscape with the ghosts, creating a ghost landscape that belongs to the characters. The protagonist’s mother speaks to the protagonist on a rainy night about his late brother’s return, and the

evidence is the stained house carpet. “‘It’s wet.’ She crawled to the front door in her cotton pajamas, following the trail. When I touched the carpet, it was damp” (Nguyen, 2017, p. 2). The house on a rainy night is supposed to give a dry and warm environment, but at this point, the intervention of the water landscape, which symbolizes cold and dampness, renders the supposedly cozy environment with a treacherous atmosphere. Thus, the characters then deify the weirdness and blame it on the ghost: “He (‘my’ brother) must have disappeared because he was tired. After all, he had just completed a journey of thousands of miles across the Pacific” (Nguyen, 2017, p. 3).

In-depth, the ghost landscape is a manifestation of trauma. In the subsequent episodes, the author, even as a “ghostwriter,” a person who makes his living writing realistic stories about “ghosts,” begins to believe in the frightening emotion of his brother’s “ghost” coming into the water. And what is the reason for the character to create the swimming “ghost”? Or what motivates the characters to put the careful observation of the water landscape in the house to a “definite” attitude locked in the “ghost”? Apart from cultural reasons, the characters’ past trauma caused by water also becomes an internal motivation. At this point, the “ghost” becomes the materialized feature of the refugees’ trauma, the only medium to carry their sad past. With the plot development, the main character and his mother suffer from hunger and pirate robbery at sea through the communication with his brother “ghost” reappears. The description of the brother’s appearance is also a reflection of past trauma: the brother’s body is still the same, the brother’s head because of the behavior of protecting the hero was hit by pirates still have black scars ... brother’s “ghost” relative to the hero’s middle-aged body is stagnant. And this “stagnation,” as opposed to appearance change because of the “passage of time,” reflects a physical and spiritual dislocation of time and space: the ghost of “stagnation” is the refugee self-psychological “stagnation.” Even as early as the fight with the pirates, the spirit of the characters was always stagnant there. “‘You died too,’ he said. ‘You just don’t know it’” (Nguyen, 2017, p. 11).

Furthermore, the ghost landscape also serves as a symbolic resolution of trauma. At the end of the story, a “talismans” brings this uncompromising trauma to an end and acts as an object that symbolizes the brother’s ghost: “The talismans on my desk, a tattered pair of shorts and a ragged T-shirt, clean and dry, has been neatly pressed” (Nguyen, 2017, p. 13). Those garments were worn by the brother and sunk with him in the maritime disaster, but indeed they were on the desk again. The myth of whether they had just been collected by

the characters or they were truly the symbol of the brother's ghostly coming cannot be found out, but their state of, "clean, dry and neatly pressed" can reflect the calmness of the characters: the brother finally arrived on the land and would never struggle in the horrible ocean in the future.

The dream landscape in trauma American landscapes is a metaphor for death. Due to the arbitrary and abstract nature of dreams, the landscapes constructed by dreams often contain a large number of metaphors. In the mini-story *The Americans*, the undercurrents in Carver's dream world reveal a typical dream landscape. "He floated on his back in a black stream" (Nguyen, 2017, p. 89) is how Carver first describes his dream when he is in a coma with a high fever due to a bacterial infection. This mysterious "blackness" is transformed into a kind of treachery in later dreams: "All the dozens of passengers were Asian, their eyes closed, among them the street kids"(Nguyen, 2017, p. 90) The treacherous "closed eyes" is made explicit in the following as a state of death, which is expressed in a meta-metaphorical way in the dream which gives the metaphorical task to the guide who leads the Carver family to the famous monuments in Vietnam: "their tour guide had pointed to a bridge flanked by the headless statues of deities and said, in a vaguely accusatory tone, 'Foreigners took the heads'" (Nguyen, 2017, p. 90). At this point, the observation of the dream landscape ends with the unfolding of the metaphor of death, which returns to the river at the end of the dream, where "all he saw were the cockpit windows peering out onto the starless river of night, the empty pilot's seat waiting for him" (Nguyen, 2017, p. 90).

And how does this dreamscape of undercurrents bring Carver back to his traumatic memories? The dead Asians in the dream landscape arouse Carver's guilt and avoidance. The observation of the landscape facilitates the overlapping of memories as the dream unfolds the metaphorical connotation step by step, and the dream becomes the "riddle" that unravels Carver's impatient mind throughout the story: the Asian people with closed eyes in the dream could not have been on a flight at the same time. They were Vietnamese people in the past, and also the ones who the Carvers saw through their trip. However, people alive in reality were transformed into dead bodies.

The dream landscape reflects the critique of American indifference to the fate of Vietnamese refugees. The only driving force behind the from-life-to-death transformation is Carver's long-held memory of the trauma of Vietnam. As a decorated fighter pilot who survived the war, Carver's attitude in the plot is one of diffusing between the pride of heroism

and the trepidation of the justness of war, making him evasive about setting foot on the land of Vietnam again. However, the observation of the dream landscape gives a conclusion to his uncertainty: the root of his avoidance has been the killing of the people living in this land, which has even spread to the Vietnamese people from generation to generation. When he came back to this land, he was still able to observe this killing and to express his guilt about it in the undercurrents.

Therefore, the hope of healing the trauma and confessing the past guilt that caused today's traumatic memories are expressed by the ghost landscape and the dream landscape. However, the hope is so unstable that it could be seen as disillusionment when the construction of imagined landscapes is over: the ghost landscape comes into an open ending with a clean talisman which represents a myth whether the brother's ghost visited in reality or just came in their yearning mind; and the dream landscape is denied by the dreamer himself who thinks that it was a terrible accident that almost took his life in this unexpected place. Although the imagined landscapes symbolize the hope to heal, their ending reveals the failure or helplessness to truly heal the trauma haunting the refugees.

Conclusion

The Refugees is about the traumatic memory writing of refugees of Vietnamese origin. In the novel, landscape narratives become the main way for refugees to recall their traumatic memories. It can be said that the landscape provides refugees with rich material resources for traumatic memory in the post-traumatic period, and also empowers refugees with space to think about their own culture and identity.

Firstly, natural landscapes are the carriers of wandering, which is the external cause of their traumatic memories. Water and land that refugees saw and touched through the way of escaping are upsetting the refugees from time to time, even in the peaceful settlement they still haunted them. Secondly, human landscapes are the space of ethnicity, which is the internal cause of their traumatic memories. In these landscapes, the keyword is "closure." To refugees, the more sealed landscapes can stretch their freedom more, and at the same time, these landscapes also serve as a field where they can hug their primitive living habits and culture. Thirdly, imagined landscapes are the author's hope to heal the refugees' trauma, but the tragic truth is with the ending of the construction of the landscapes, the hope also trended into an end. The failure of healing the trauma becomes a new trauma

as well. In short, by discovering the daily lives of refugees, Viet Thanh Nguyen depicts that the traumatic memories of refugees are victim memories that are always difficult to erase. Therefore, the cultural trauma in the memory will also be carried by the refugees' daily life landscape, which becomes their melancholy in the present and future. However, though Nguyen's hope becomes a failure, it should be admitted positive significance that he demonstrated an active attempt to speak out about the need for Vietnamese refugees' mental healing.

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