

AIRPORT MEMORY: RECALLING VIETNAM FROM THE TERMINAL IN ANDREW PHAM'S TRAVEL WRITING

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Our interest in [places of memory] where memory crystallizes and secretes itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists.

—Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History:
Les Lieux de Mémoire” (1989)¹

In his essay collection *A Theory of Flight* (2012), Andrew Pham recounts the many ways flight has marked his life. The “flight” of the title signals his family’s flight from Vietnam in 1977 and his later retreat from his family, his father’s anger and daunting demands. It refers to Andrew’s hobby of coastal hang gliding and to fleeing from difficult circumstances and ex-girlfriends. But it also signifies commercial air travel. Out of college, Pham works as an aerospace engineer for United Airlines, a career he finds secure but suffocating. His “principal dangers” at United, he writes, were “being bored and falling asleep driving to work.”² He resigns from the airline and begins writing and traveling, first to Vietnam and then around the world. In these essays, Pham characterizes flight as burdened with meaning, a reminder of his family history, life-altering decisions, and sense of dislocation. Nevertheless, *A Theory of Flight* concludes on an altogether different note. Pham narrates a brief scene at an airport terminal. He does not name the airport or the destination, only noting that it is a “solo” flight “without complications” or goodbyes. He remarks, “I’m in the international terminal. Why do they call it that? All terminals are new beginnings. . . . All at once, it is as easy as turning

the page. I step into the plane and into the blue vigor.”³ This final scene contradicts the sentiment of the essays that precede it. Whereas the earlier essays represent flight as symptomatic of life’s constraints, as an always-unreal release from the past, Pham here renders flight as a clean break, a new beginning freed from memory. All he needs to do is turn the page of his life story. What then is the airport’s relation to memory? Does it directly or indirectly summon the past or does it liberate us from memory entirely? In what ways might the airport function as, in Pierre Nora’s words, a “[place of memory] where memory crystallizes” and conjures a torn past? In his essays, as in his best-selling travel memoir *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam* (1999), Pham’s rendering of flight is contradictory as it relates to memory, sometimes evoking it and other times leading away from it all together toward an unburdened future. If Pham does advance a theory of flight, as his title suggests, it is an ambiguous one.

Airports and airplanes are for many critics key sites for analyzing cultures of modernity, postmodernity, and “supermodernity.” They are understood to be locations from which we might trace the complex movements of the global economy, transnational cultural exchange, and the far-reaching surveillance systems of the United States. Despite the cultural embeddedness of airports, however, they are often named as “non-places” existing outside of memory, history, and “normal time.” Yet it is precisely the in-betweenness of airports that makes them critical sites for the consolidation of memory. Who and what am I departing from? Who and what am I returning to? They are, paradoxically, places *without* memory and *for* memory. This is the case in Pham’s *Catfish and Mandala*, in which air travel is imagined to lack memory while evoking it all the same. In analyzing Pham’s memoir, I first build on the work of Marita Sturken to theorize the remembering carried out in airports and on airplanes. Whereas Sturken goes beyond Nora’s theory of places of memory to scrutinize other memory “technologies,” I focus on the remembering done where memory is perceived to be entirely absent.⁴ I then trace this airport memory as it functions within *Catfish and Mandala*. In conclusion, I consider how air travel frames the idea of a “return to Vietnam” for American veterans of the war.

Airport Reading, Airport Memory

Travelers tend to understand airports as familiar transitional zones, moving through them without a second thought to their broader significance. It is for this reason that, as David Pascoe points out, the airport is

seldom identified as an object of study outside of specific technology and engineering fields. Whether by “accident or design,” we are inclined to see it as “some inert architectural project” rather than as a cultural space that “reflects and shapes the narratives of those who process through it.”⁵ Taken as objects of critical analysis in their own right, airports become sites from which one might analyze the social and material mechanisms of globalized flexible labor, international legal discourse, digitized warfare, the politics of displacement and immigration, and the shifting definitions of privacy in the twenty-first century. Christopher Schaberg, moreover, emphasizes the “textual life” of airports as sites for reading and sites *to be read*.⁶ What he terms “airport reading” thereby speaks to books and magazines marketed to airline travelers, literary portrayals of airports, and the critical analysis of airports as themselves texts.⁷ This latter “critical airport reading” calls for the scrutiny of airports and airplanes as charged textual objects through which one might trace the asymmetrical power dynamics of present-day biopolitics. And these readings occur directly or indirectly in many literary texts themselves.

Still, notwithstanding this emerging body of criticism, airports tend to be understood as existing in a different reality than everywhere else. In an influential study, Marc Augé theorizes the airport as a non-place, a site to be passed through rather than arrived at.⁸ Whereas the places of modernity are defined as “relational, historical and concerned with identity,” the non-places of what he calls supermodernity either erase history altogether or transform it into spectacle.⁹ The non-place, Augé writes, “creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude. There is no room there for history. . . . What reigns there is actuality, the urgency of the present.”¹⁰ The sites of modernity are then isolated as places of memory, whereas the non-places of supermodernity exist entirely outside of memory. This spectacularity is reinforced when scholars theorize a distinct time register for airports—what Augé calls their “unending history in the present.”¹¹ Pascoe, for example, characterizes the temporality of the airport as “short-circuiting the past, of freeing us from Time; historical and also predictive time.”¹² Located outside the city—the location of many traditional memory sites—the modern-day airport is removed not only from the memory of the past but also from time itself. It is nonetheless incongruous to think of air travel as so entangled in society and culture and yet occurring outside of memory and “normal time.”

This contradiction arises in many ways from the prominence of Nora’s work in memory studies, which forecloses on the possibility of the airport as a memory site. He argues that the modern loss of traditional cultures

has resulted in the creation of formalized places of memory in the absence of “environments of memory”; memory, then, “attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events.”¹³ If the airport is not marked as a site for memory, then it must not partake in the same memory discourses as Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Oklahoma City National Memorial, and the makeshift memorial assembled at the site of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing. Within Nora’s theoretical framework, the in-between zones of air travel are dissociated from official memory discourses. Yet, while cultural memory no doubt accumulates around formal memory sites, it is still an outcome of human action and cognition and not the material location alone. Memory does not halt when one is removed from a recognized place of memory but does become less formal, less sought after, and even less conscious. We do not visit airports to remember, and this perceived absence of memory makes them sites from which memory might coalesce and be analyzed at a remove.

Sturken’s work points in this direction. Building on Nora’s study, she theorizes the broader category of what she calls “technologies of memory”: cultural products that “embody and generate memory and are thus implicated in the power dynamics of memory’s production.”¹⁴ These technologies of memory can be memorials but can also be photos, literary works, art installations, kitsch commodities, and bodies themselves. They are not lifeless containers of memory but rather “objects through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning.”¹⁵ The airport can in this way act as a technology of memory. Whether or not it constitutes one of Nora’s traditional places of memory, the airport is a site at which memories are conjured, sifted through, shared, and analyzed as indicators of power. Augé emphasizes the urgency and forward movement of air travel, but travelers in fact spend more time waiting (at check-in, security, the gate, baggage claim, and on the plane itself) than rushing onward once they enter the terminal. Airports are in this way less passed through than Augé’s theory would suggest. These are forced breaks in which memory is consolidated and narrativized. Airports and airplanes are in this way places for storytelling—for the *making-narrative of memory*, whether to oneself, a companion, or a stranger. They are the interstices of a globalizing world from which one might recall and restructure the memory of a life being departed from or returned to. This is not to say that life comes to a halt during air travel; I am suggesting rather that it is the lack of formalized memory discourses in these transitional zones that makes them technologies through which travelers might organize and assign meaning to the past, as well as interrogate the asymmetrical power relations signaled by our cultural memory of an event.¹⁶ Put another way, the

airport is a technology of memory precisely because it is never understood to be a traditional place of memory. When we retrieve a family photo album or visit a childhood home, we do so with the understanding that these things evoke and even preserve a lived past. We are there for our memories. In contrast, when we enter an airport terminal, we are thought to be leaving the world of memory and entering an environment in which there “is no room for history.” The informality of memory at airports and on airplanes thereby marks them as particular technologies of memory: not containers of memory per se but rather spaces for the narrative structuring and critical scrutiny of memory discourses themselves. They are *for memory* because they are never recognized as *of memory*.

In the wake of the contemporary memory boom, it is all the more critical that we recognize the cultural remembering mediated by these under-analyzed technologies, these non-places. Memory has everything to do with the narrative structuring of personal and cultural knowledge, and archives and memorials are not the only sites from which we formulate and mobilize the past. Andreas Huyssen, one of the founding theorists of memory studies, has suggested that American culture today is suffering less from amnesia than from a “surfeit of memory” that renders us unable to imagine alternative futures.¹⁷ The lack of formalized memory discourses at the airport could, in this regard, make it a critical site for distinguishing and mobilizing usable pasts in the interest of the future. Pham’s travel writing speaks to this airport memory; his family history is entangled with and crystallized through the non-places of air travel.

Sea–Tac, Narita, Tan Son Nhat, and SFO in *Catfish and Mandala*

Catfish and Mandala, Pham’s best-known work, tells the story of his life after resigning from United Airlines and the suicide of his transsexual sister, Chi. With the aim of securing a clear sense of self in the wake of this family tragedy, Andrew sets out on a transnational bicycle tour, first through the West Coast of the United States and then Japan and Vietnam. Cycling is characterized throughout as a personal and revitalizing activity—one that, as Anita Duneer points out, is associated with mandala, as an effort to restore the self.¹⁸ The subtitle of the memoir, *A Two-Wheeled Voyage through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam*, is telling. Traveling on two wheels is understood to bring Andrew closer to memories of his childhood home, memories that are bound to the sites (“the landscape”) of Vietnam.¹⁹ The non-places of air travel are, in contrast, characterized as without memory, the antithesis to Andrew’s

two-wheeled voyage. This distinction is associated with labor and the difficulty of different forms of travel. Cycling is revitalizing for Andrew precisely because it is challenging, sometimes even dangerous. On his bicycle he is retrieving and *making* memories, whereas in an airport he is merely on his way to places of memory, a passive traveler. However, even if only unconsciously, these distinctions break down continually, revealing the centrality of air travel to Andrew's search for memory.

This understanding of flight is first made clear in Seattle. Riding from his family's home in San Jose, Andrew reaches the Puget Sound intent on finding "steerage passage" to Vietnam on a freighter. "It is a defunct form of travel," he writes, "rumored to still be in practice on a few ships where a few penniless hopefuls are allowed to work off their passage and board, mostly by tending to filthy chores the crew avoids."²⁰ Andrew looks for steerage passage for weeks at sailors' associations, marinas, and yacht clubs. But his search fails, and he resigns himself to buying a plane ticket to Japan out of Seattle-Tacoma International (Sea-Tac) Airport, thirteen miles south of Seattle. Although he recognizes that steerage passage is not only difficult to find but also challenging work, Andrew is attached to the idea of arriving in Vietnam on a freighter. Calling it a "defunct form of travel," it is clear that he understands sea travel as tied to the past, something that binds generations of "penniless hopefuls" together. If he were to find passage on a freighter, he imagines it to be a story. In the same way that he sees bicycling as meaningful labor, he considers working for his ticket to Vietnam as a way to transform travel into a source of memories, new and old; he would be replicating in reverse his family's flight from Vietnam, while also crafting a memorable story out of the arduous work of commercial sailing. In contrast to a coach-class seat at the back of a plane, he imagines himself taking on the filthiest chores and working alongside other seamen. Whereas Augé calls the traveler's space the "archetype of *non-place*,"²¹ Andrew distinguishes his imagined freighter from other modes of travel as a site with no shortage of memory and history. He maintains this perspective on air travel, as disassociated from memory discourses, throughout *Catfish and Mandala*, even as his accounts of commercial flight suggest something different. And this is exactly what distinguishes airports from other technologies of memory: perceived as lacking a history, they are never the subjects of the kind of memory fantasy that constitutes Andrew's freighter.

The idea of sea travel as constituting memory, moreover, speaks back to the other story being told in Pham's memoir: his family's departure from Vietnam in which they fled on a thirty-foot fishing boat before being rescued by an Indonesian freighter. In imagining the "few penniless

hopefuls” who still travel by boat, struggling to earn their passage and board, Andrew casts this mode of travel as anachronistic, something bound to a past that includes his family’s own history. Of course, in doing so, he also fails to acknowledge the degree to which class informs one’s mobility, as well as one’s perspective on different forms of travel. Andrew wishes to re-create something of his personal past, but *choosing* this “defunct” and “filthy” crossing is very different from doing so out of necessity. In *A Theory of Flight*, Andrew tells of leaving his work at United Airlines because of the sterile, boring work environment. In the same way here, he distinguishes the memoryless labor of the white-collar professional (associated with air travel) from the memory-forming labor of the blue-collar worker (associated with steerage passage). But this too-easy distinction itself relies on Andrew’s classed perspective, romanticizing these “penniless hopefuls” in a way that portrays poverty as an adventure.²²

In the memoir’s present, however, the freighter never materializes. But it does shed light on Andrew’s understanding of flight. He concludes his search for steerage passage by conceding, “At last, with my funds dwindling, I give up and buy a one-way plane ticket to Vietnam with a forty-five-day layover in Japan.”²³ There is a chapter break, and then Andrew is landing at Tokyo’s Narita Airport. The international flight is significant for the lack of narration Pham commits to it. Unlike his fantasized saga on a freighter to Vietnam, the five-thousand-mile flight goes untold. The airport, as it is first rendered, is exactly as Augé’s theory would predict: as a transitional non-place, there is no room for memory or storytelling. Admitting his failure to find a more romantic way to cross the Pacific, Andrew buys a plane ticket and thereby distances himself from the “filthy” passage he imagines for himself on the freighter. With some funds remaining from his time at United—enough at least for an international plane ticket—Andrew is not exactly one of the “penniless hopefuls” he idealizes. Even with his “funds dwindling,” his search for steerage passage is revealed to be more fantasy than necessity. Andrew is uneasy about inhabiting what Sturken calls the subjectivity of the “tourist of history”: a distorted understanding of oneself as traveling in and out of locations without becoming entangled in or effecting them.²⁴ He correlates this ignorant subjectivity with air travel itself, and he goes to efforts to circumvent it. He sees the freighter as a way to ensure that his travels are unmediated and bound to memory, whereas he distinguishes the plane as an unreality. His flight out of Seattle is, moreover, marked in the narrative by a chapter break. Andrew thereby commits more of his memoir to a fantasized sea voyage than to the trans-Pacific flight that he

does take. For him, the latter is not a story at all. But it is, by virtue of the chapter break, constituted as a site of pause from which memory might be consolidated and structured through the act of storytelling—the literary memory that emerges from and is foregrounded by this break. Sea–Tac is not remembered and yet a site for remembering, not narrated and yet a site for narrating. In other words, this silence signals how air travel functions as a particular technology of memory: perceived as lacking its own memory content, it is a retreat from the memory boom where usable pasts might again be distinguished and mobilized.

The Tokyo terminal is a contradictory site for memory, at once the apotheosis of a non-place and a technology of memory laden with meaning for Andrew. Upon arriving at Narita Airport, he reassembles his bicycle in the bus loading zone and then asks an airport employee for directions out of the terminal. He is told that, though many foreigners arrive with bicycles, no one has ever ridden one directly out of the airport. Committed nonetheless, Andrew tells himself, “If I am to tour Japan, I might as well start now. Except the only road out is choked with cars and buses. Is it legal to ride on the street? Where in the hell is the sidewalk?”²⁵ When he sees an old man on a bicycle, he follows him, assuming, “It is late: he must be going home. And home can’t be the airport.”²⁶ The airport is an interstitial location, neither Japan nor anywhere else. If bicycling is associated with mandala and Andrew’s effort to restore a sense of self through this grueling trek, then Narita is that which blocks this effort. There is no way out of this nowhere other than in the taxis and chartered buses built into the scripted motion of the airport. Andrew characterizes it as a place for cars but not people (roads but no sidewalks). When he sees the old man on a bicycle, he does not consider that he might work a nightshift at Narita or be staying at the on-site hotel. Instead he assumes that the man must be heading home because “home can’t be the airport.” The airport cannot, in Andrew’s account, be a lived environment; it is rather a zone to be traversed on the way to somewhere else, where one’s life occurs and where memories are made. Unlike with Sea–Tac, however, Narita is not a narrative absence but an antithetical presence, the nonhome against which social memory is defined.

As Andrew’s plane is setting down in Tokyo, however, he recalls his mother telling him as a child that there was Japanese blood in his veins. But she did so in secret, Andrew’s father having lived through the Japanese occupation of Vietnam during World War II. He then remembers her instructing him to stretch out his nose as a boy: “Pinch it, like this . . . and pull. It’ll make your nose longer, thinner, and better looking. . . . Don’t play in the sun in the middle of the day! You’ll be

dark like a peasant's kid. And don't forget to pull your nose three times a day."²⁷ It is a memory that evokes, however implicitly, the long, complex history of Vietnam's freedom struggles, against Japan but also France, the United States, and "Vietnam's most persistent threat, China."²⁸ Though Japan's occupation of the country during World War II is, as Pham puts it, something "no one wanted to be reminded of," it nevertheless had a lasting effect on his mother, who cherishes the thought of her and her son's Japanese heredity. Andrew's mother sees a thin nose and light skin as features that could change her son's fortunes in a war-torn Vietnam. Of course, her perspective on skin color has as much to do with intranational class as it does with nationality, even as it also evokes the Vietnam War, which was motivated by and ensured the postwar economic recover of Japan.²⁹ Yet Andrew admits that many Vietnamese maintain a "grudging hate-admiration"³⁰ for Japan as an Asian nation at the forefront of the global economy. It is not surprising, then, that this painful memory and violent legacy cross Andrew's mind as he lands at Tokyo's state-of-the-art Narita Airport. One of the busiest airports in the world, it speaks to the bustling market and dominant tech industry that characterize Japan on the global stage. The racialized status of Vietnam in relation to Japan is entangled with the latter's military occupation of Southeast Asia but also with the asymmetrical distribution of wealth more broadly. Darker skin, Andrew's mother tells him, would make him look "like a peasant's kid" in contrast to a light-skinned and hence affluent child. Air travel is here a technology of memory and, as Schaberg suggests, a text through which one might read "operations of power."³¹ Whereas Andrew imagines a freighter to be a place of memory, the airplane landing at Narita becomes a place *for memory* from which he consolidates and scrutinizes his family's past in the context of twentieth-century race and war. The plane itself receives almost no narrative treatment at all but nevertheless frames Andrew's memory as he considers the significance of his mother's proud secret and the social worlds his family has traversed. The airplane is not a traditional place of memory but a particular technology of memory: set outside our perceived discourses of memory, as a non-place, it becomes a break from the contemporary "surfeit of memory" during which memories are restructured and narrativized. In some ways, this very absence of memory during air travel, whether real or imagined, can incite a longing for the social groundedness that cultural memory provides. And, as international spaces that are neither exactly within nor without the nation, terminals bring to the surface the disparity in power and wealth between the global North and global South, the business traveler and the refugee. In Sturken's words, memory is not truth

but an “inventive social practice,”³² and the spaces of air travel are critical sites from which we might interrogate who is doing this inventing and to what ends.

This airport memory conjures not only Andrew’s past but also an imagined future. After finding his way out of the terminal, he assembles his tent in an empty lot somewhere outside Narita. Once he is situated, he reflects, “The last time I was here, my family was passing through on our way to America. We changed planes and never left the airport. My mother had always dreamed of visiting Japan. I remember telling her that someday when I was bigger, rich, and famous in America, I would come back to tour Japan.”³³ Even though his family never left the transitional zone of the airport on their way to the United States in 1977, Andrew retains this memory as significant. It is a memory that speaks again to Japan’s violent legacy in Vietnam but also to what younger Andrew conceived to be the promise of the United States. He imagines himself as a “bigger, rich, and famous” American, no longer the Vietnamese “peasant’s kid” of his mother’s imagining. Channeling her desires and insecurities, younger Andrew recognizes the ways in which power is tied to force (“bigger”), capital (“rich”), and the enactment of both (“famous”). Recalling this layover twenty years later, Pham characterizes Narita Airport as a site through which memory crystallizes and power dynamics are made clear. To be a tourist, to “come back to tour Japan,” is understood as an indicator of one’s power; and this tourism is related to international politics, the inner workings of the global economy, and discourses of race. In this way, Andrew’s travels are an effort to reenact but also revise his personal and family history, and, contra Augé, this occurs in the transitional zones of commercial air travel. Though unsuccessful, he wishes to arrive in Vietnam by boat, as his family left it. And, reversing their original course, he travels through Tokyo on his way to Southeast Asia. Though he makes light of his childhood fantasy of touring Japan as a rich, famous American, he recognizes that his recreational traveling, made strenuous by choice, means something very different from his family’s flight from Vietnam two decades earlier.

Andrew’s memory of Narita is, then, a memory of an idea: an idealized life story to culminate in the United States—in the end, a mistaken fantasy for Andrew and more so for Chi. The airport can be a location at which memories are produced, but it is more clearly a site at which memory is consolidated and life narrativized. What Andrew remembers of his family’s layover in Japan is of “telling” his mother his life as a fully realized story. This is the story of where he is coming from, Phan Thiet, and where he is going to, the United States to become “bigger,

rich, and famous." Camped out near Narita, Andrew remembers the act of storytelling; his memory is of a memory, a narrative constructed from his life. The sites of air travel are incongruous in this regard. They are locations for memory but not necessarily of memory; they mobilize storytelling but not necessarily stories. This embodies what Pascoe calls the "resonant duplicity" of the airport: "the double feeling of hating control and yet cherishing it; of reaching for the sky and yet being fixed in place; of wanting to take off and yet not wanting to."³⁴ This duplicity also marks the memory of the airport. The "urgency of the present" reigns, and yet we are compelled to look backward and forward to create the stories of the places from which we are leaving and to which we are heading. If Andrew imagines his time on the bicycle to be restoring his sense of self, then his time in-flight is where he narrativizes it. The airport, that is, emerges as an unlikely technology of memory on his otherwise two-wheeled voyage.

However, as Andrew's plane banks over Ho Chi Minh City en route to Tan Son Nhat International Airport, the memories he imagined would emerge are not forthcoming. From the plane, he looks down upon the city. "I search for signs of old Saigon," he writes, "neon messages, bright boulevards. Nothing familiar in the bombed-out darkness. . . . So I toss back yet another lowball, this one a toast to my twenty-year anniversary since I had forsaken this city. Here's to you, Saigon. I've come for my memories."³⁵ Later, when he sees the airport's "sleek new facility," reminiscent of a "small Stateside city" airport, he feels let down; he had "expected something more native, maybe a little burnt-out or run-down, at best a quaint shanty like the Maui airport."³⁶ The look of Ho Chi Minh City from the plane is obscured—he cannot distinguish it from any other city—and Tan Son Nhat is as "sleek" and "modern" as many small-city airports in the United States. These sites of air travel do not act as Nora's formalized places of memory, causing Andrew to become discouraged by the lack of familiarity. Here to collect memories, he waits for them to emerge from recognizable sites: the streets, homes, and state buildings of his childhood. But his search for memory is at first bound to only built locations. This is something Huyssen theorizes as "monumental seduction": the misguided desire for unchanging material structures from which memory might materialize.³⁷ Yet, as Huyssen suggests, this seduction is less and less tied to "real built space" in a world of "mammoth shopping malls," "international airports," and the "new public space on the Internet."³⁸ The airport is among those present-day sites that detach memory from the materiality of the monument, but this is not to say that they do not also structure memory in specific and meaningful ways.

Never perceived as a structural “embodiment of memory,” as Nora suggests of monuments, the zones of air travel invite remembering that is less about memory production than about the reconfiguring and analysis of this production itself. However unconsciously, it is from the skies over Vietnam that Andrew’s changed relationship to memory, an indicator of power, comes into focus.

Andrew’s scrutiny of Ho Chi Minh City is, moreover, telling in the way he demands visibility. Although he seeks on-the-ground knowledge throughout *Catfish and Mandala*, from the plane Andrew sees Vietnam as Sturken’s tourist of history might: although it is his family’s history, he sees himself as “once or twice removed, a mediated and reenacted experience.”³⁹ His desire for the Vietnam that he left twenty years earlier obstructs his ability to see the present-day Vietnam before him. To suggest that he has come for his memories reinforces the idea that memory is bound to a specific location where it can be accessed and “reenacted” on command. This mentality surfaces again when he is disheartened to find that the Tan Son Nhat Airport is as modern as one belonging to a “small Stateside city.” That he “expected something more native” not only speaks to his desire for the Vietnam of his childhood but also mimics the exoticism with which an American tourist with no personal knowledge of the country might survey the airport. This is a perspective that, Sturken underscores, relies on the exceptionalist “belief that the world and its ills are somehow elsewhere,” unrelated to the actions of the United States.⁴⁰ Gazing out at Vietnam as an American, Andrew takes account of his childhood memories as though they constituted the life of a stranger. He had anticipated landing at “a quaint shanty like the Maui airport,” an analogy that underscores the constructedness of memory—without a mental image of Tan Son Nhat, Andrew had used the Maui airport as a cognitive placeholder—and conjures the American imperial legacy in Hawaii (the “gateway to the Pacific” and thus Southeast Asia). Although Pham characterizes the plane and airport as far from the memory sites he imagines await him, they are nonetheless sites from which he begins to negotiate his childhood memories and structure the story of his return. This sense of remoteness and narrative desire arises from the absence of memory with which Andrew associates commercial flights; his family left Vietnam not by plane but by boat, and the bourgeois culture of air travel (“yet another lowball”) is characterized as false and without memory. Perceiving the airplane in this way, as a site for but not of memory, Andrew begins to trace the contours of his own tangled understanding of Vietnam. He begins to recognize that his alienation from and desire for Southeast Asia is marked by an American perspective, an imperial imaginary that

comes into view only outside the Tan Son Nhat terminal. The airport, as neither exactly within nor without the nation, serves here as a technology through which Andrew's transnational memory of Vietnam crystallizes, revealing a desire for belonging as well as withdrawal.

And while *Catfish and Mandala* characterizes Andrew's two-wheeled voyage as the struggle through which he achieves a heightened sense of self, the non-places of air travel are no less revealing of his entangled, transnational identity. At a remove from the formalized memory discourses of the United States as well as Vietnam, even troubling these national boundaries, the flight into Vietnam lays bare the difficulties Andrew faces in reconciling these conflicting cultural knowledges. During the plane's descent into Tan Son Nhat, a middle-aged Vietnamese American husband and wife sit in the empty seats next to Andrew. They are surprised to discover that he is Vietnamese, "gauging the ethnic shape of [his] face" and assuming that he is Japanese or Korean. And when he admits that he has no direct family left in Vietnam and is "*just visiting the fatherland*," they look concerned. "He pauses," Andrew notes, "eyeing me again, probably thinking I am one of those lost souls he's heard about. America is full of young-old Vietnamese, uncentered, uncertain of their identity. The older generation calls them *mat goch* —lost roots."⁴¹ Whether or not the man is actually thinking this, Andrew's guesswork brings to the surface the disconnect between his and his parents' generation of Vietnamese Americans. Having left Vietnam at the age of ten, Andrew is perceived not as *having* memories of Southeast Asia but, as he himself admits, *coming to get them*. This is what Isabelle Thuy Pelaud calls "triple vision": Andrew's social location is not that of a bridge from the United States to Vietnam; rather, he finds himself caught between the United States, Southeast Asia, and "a Vietnamese American community dominated by first-generation Vietnamese."⁴² This complex selfhood can challenge the constructed boundaries of national and racial identity but can also alienate Andrew and other "lost roots."⁴³ When we assume, à la Nora, that memory attaches itself to places, then Andrew finds himself characterized as always lacking memory—of the United States (where he was not born) and Vietnam (where he did not live to adulthood). When Andrew is clearing customs at Tan Son Nhat, he is scorned as *Viet-kieu*, a foreign Vietnamese. But even the *Viet-kieu* isolate him as *mat goch*, neither altogether the same nor altogether different. It is not until Andrew enters the Tan Son Nhat terminal that his exclusion from cultural memory practices becomes fully evident. Never granted authority as a Vietnamese, an American, or even a Vietnamese American, Andrew reveals the power relations that lie just beneath the surface of his airport memory. If, as Sturken suggests, "memory

provides the very core of identity,”⁴⁴ then technologies of memory become critical objects of analysis for understanding the ways modern-day selfhood is structured through interpretative memory narratives. Distanced from national memory discourses, the transitional zones of air travel are technologies through which these very discourses might be interrogated and contested, always as much about desire as reality.

Catfish and Mandala concludes in a Boeing 747 with a scene marked less by the “urgency of the present” than by the legacy of the Vietnam War and the idea of an American future. After touring the length of the Indochinese Peninsula, Andrew is on a plane about to set down at the San Francisco International Airport (SFO). From the plane, Andrew can see the Bay Area clearly, and he revels in “all [his] sweetest memories of America.”⁴⁵ Whereas Ho Chi Minh City (and the memories Andrew had come for) could not be seen during the earlier flight, San Francisco comes into view as clear as day, as do his memories of it. He not only can see the city but also remembers all that he left behind and “taste” the “stifling fears” and “irrepressible joys”⁴⁶ of the American leg of his bicycle tour. For Andrew, whose family left Vietnam when he was a child, his memory of his time in California is less clouded than his memory of Southeast Asia. Whereas he cannot recognize anything in the “bombed-out darkness” of Ho Chi Minh City, the sight of San Francisco calls to mind his fondest memories of the California coast. The plane here reveals itself to be a particular technology of memory through which the very mechanisms of memory are laid bare: whereas memories are perceived to be present at formalized places of memory, their perceived absence during air travel enables and clarifies the processes by which Andrew analyzes and structures the past. Memory is always, Pham recognizes, inflected by time and nation; his memories of the United States are so recent and familiar he can “taste” them, whereas Vietnam, from above Tan Son Nhat, is only the vague history of a stranger. The interior of the 747 is not described outside of the Plexiglas through which Andrew gazes down upon the Bay Area. This transitional zone is characterized as no more than a frame within which he recalls and narrativizes his transnational memory, discovering a sense of clarity and belonging he could not while setting down at Tan Son Nhat. Andrew never explicitly recognizes these airports and airplanes as sites for remembering, and it is precisely this informality that makes them so critical to his otherwise conscious pursuit of memory. Air travel is then a contradictory technology of memory: always understood as in-between memory sites, it facilitates the narrative structuring of the past—and an awareness of the past *as structured* through conflicting personal, cultural, and national memory discourses.

This concluding sentiment is, however, reductive in light of the plane's other passengers. On board with him are dozens of Vietnamese refugees who were granted American visas for serving alongside the United States during the war and who "had been imprisoned for three years or more by Communist Vietnam."⁴⁷ When an older Vietnamese man sitting beside him asks, "*This is America?*" Andrew answers him, "*Yes, Brother. . . . Welcome home.*"⁴⁸ Yet it is clear that he is speaking less to the man than to himself. Pham's account of his family's struggles in the United States and his sister's suicide—the chief stimulus for his months-long transnational bicycle tour—would suggest that this man is facing a difficult, often unwelcoming life in the United States. This ending runs the risk of reinforcing what Yen Le Espiritu has termed the "'we-win-even-when-we-lose' syndrome." Decades after the "fall of Saigon," the figure of the "good refugee," she argues, has come to rationalize the American military's long stay in Vietnam. These refugees are recast as "rescued and liberated" and thus used to memorialize the war as "historically 'necessary' for the progress of freedom and democracy."⁴⁹ And this claim is substantiated through "'would-have-been' stories" in which the lives of successful Vietnamese Americans are contrasted with those who stayed behind.⁵⁰ The old Vietnamese man, who was scorned and imprisoned after the war, is characterized as the latter. Welcoming him home would suggest that he has been away in a foreign land all his life. The airplane here, as a technology of memory, enables Andrew to narrativize his life, to ground it in the larger contexts of the nation and the dislocation of Vietnamese refugees. But memory is always constructed through a dialectic of remembering and forgetting, and what is forgotten can be strategic and organized. Whereas Pham's story gets told (and finds a large audience) in *Catfish and Mandala*, this is not the case for the older Vietnamese man's life history. This is not to say that every memory must be recorded, but that analyzing which memories are and are not circulated might tell us something about their significance to us personally, culturally, and nationally. It is critical that we work to mobilize usable pasts in the interest of the future. But we must first be able to recognize which pasts these are and to what ends we are using them. The transitional zones of air travel, I have suggested here, are sites at which this scrutiny can and should be carried out. Traversing continents, global class structures, and nationalisms, *Catfish and Mandala* shows how cultural memory is always an indicator of power. Whether romanticizing the "penniless hopefuls" of industrial labor, remembering his mother's racialized wishes for her son, or confronting his own alienation from nationalist memory discourses, Andrew

reveals over the course of his travels that a search *for memory* is always also a search *about power*.

American Veterans and the “Return to Vietnam”

Throughout *Catfish and Mandala*, Pham’s struggle to reconcile his personal memory with the history of the Vietnam War is contrasted with that of traumatized American veterans of the war. When Andrew meets Cao, a Vietnamese tour guide at the Demilitarized Zone, he asks him why American soldiers cannot forget the war as easily as Vietnamese soldiers. Cao answers with an allegory in which he marries a woman who Andrew has also courted: “*I live with her for twenty years. I see her at her best and at her worse [sic]. . . . Twenty years and you have only memories. It is not the forgetting but the new history with the girl that is the difference between you and me.*”⁵¹ Cao’s reasoning is to a degree the prevailing logic among American veterans, who see the burden of unredeemed memory itself as a source of trauma. This has led some veterans to return to the sites of the war many of them fought as teenagers. There are in fact programs and travel agencies that specialize in organizing return-to-Vietnam tours for veterans. The nonprofit Tours of Peace (TOP), for example, suggests, “seeing Vietnam as it is now . . . gives veterans the opportunity to bring closure to their Vietnam War experience.”⁵² One of their customers, a former marine, writes of TOP, “Since my trip to Vietnam, the old images of the war are still with me, but have somewhat faded and are put into the past. Now when I think of Vietnam, I have new images.”⁵³ These programs and agencies characterize a flight to Southeast Asia as an entryway to a veteran’s past life through which they might renarrate (“bring closure”) to this past and introduce “new images” of Vietnam. There is, however, some anxiety evident in the contradictory idea of achieving closure by making new memories. Whereas Cao emphasizes the need for establishing a new history that builds from and augments a violent past, the return-to-Vietnam tours characterize these new images as cognitive *substitutes* for veterans’ distressing memories of the Vietnam War. In the same way that George H. W. Bush envisioned the Gulf War as an alternative end to Vietnam (in which the US military “kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all”⁵⁴), TOP endeavors to create not a new future but a different past, however constructed.

The idea that a return tour of Vietnam might enable American veterans to come to terms with the war is premised on Nora’s theory that memory in the modern world is bound to sites. If they are to understand

and reconcile these memories, they must return to places that are thought to embody them. Yet, as a result of this interest in “places of memory,” the act of traveling is itself forgotten. If we are to think not of places but of technologies of memory, then the transitional zones that mediate these tours emerge as meaningful objects “implicated in the power dynamics of memory’s production.”⁵⁵ When the program *Back to the Nam Tours* describes present-day Vietnam’s “fairytale countryside,”⁵⁶ it is evoking not the reality of life in Southeast Asia but a fantasy of a pastoralized, anachronistic otherworld. In the story told on the *TOP and Back to the Nam* websites, the plane flight is the unnamed threshold relocating veterans from the reality of life in the United States to the unreality of this crafted fantasy of a “fairytale” Vietnam. These tours thereby prioritize the healing of the American veteran while setting aside the analytic memory that might offer insight into the legacy of the war today. I do not at all mean to suggest that veterans should not work through the trauma of the Vietnam War; I am rather contending that if we analyze the idea of a return to Vietnam not through the places it describes but the “non-places” it does not, we can begin to see the way in which memory crystallizes in these intermediary locations. The way we remember at airports and in airplanes, as Pham’s travel writing illustrates, can tell us something about the politics of memory and enable us to advance a new history.

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NOTES

1. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–24, quotation on 7.
2. Andrew X. Pham, *A Theory of Flight: Recollections* (Cloudfogger, 2012), Kindle e-book, 358.
3. *Ibid.*, 1701.
4. In theorizing “technologies of memory,” Marita Sturken broadens the work of cultural memory studies from a focus on memorials specifically to analyses of bodies, images, literature, film, advertisements, awareness ribbons, and media more broadly. Her work does not, however, take into account the in-between zones of travel, which are almost always characterized as future-oriented and without memory (*Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997], 10).

5. David Pascoe, *Airspaces*, Topographics (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 7.
6. Christopher Schaberg, *The Textual Life of Airports: Reading the Culture of Flight* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 2.
7. *Ibid.*, 4, 20–21.
8. Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), 94.
9. *Ibid.*, 77, 110.
10. *Ibid.*, 103–4.
11. *Ibid.*, 105.
12. Pascoe, *Airspaces*, 34–35.
13. Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 7, 22.
14. Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 10.
15. *Ibid.*, 9.
16. In Sturken’s study, for example, she notes that the AIDS Memorial Quilt, while a powerful reminder of community and loss, also speaks to the “ownership” of AIDS activism and memory by middle-class gay white men and straight white women. The African American and Latino/a communities affected by the virus are seldom represented in these national campaigns (*Tangled Memories*, 156–59).
17. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 2, 29. In contrast to the claim of memory studies scholars that American culture is amnesic, Huyssen argues that it in fact suffers from a “hypertrophy of memory” arising from a desire to anchor oneself in a world in which family, community, and national myths are no longer able to (4, 18).
18. Anita J. Duneer, “Postpositivist Realism and Mandala: Toward Reconciliation and Reunification of Vietnamese and American Identities in Andrew X. Pham’s *Catfish and Mandala*,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 17, no. 2 (2002): 204–20, quotation on 204. Duneer contends that the sense of identity represented in *Catfish and Mandala* is best understood as “postpositivist realism”: identity is at once real and constructed, the ever-shifting reality produced by social, economic, and political pressures and self-narration (205–7). Andrew’s identity is thus changeable and distinct, an outcome of a complex personal history and how he assigns meaning to it (215–16).
19. And while Andrew sees cycling as a strenuous and thus intimate way to revisit Vietnam, his bicycle also serves to mark his foreignness. When a dozen Vietnamese students on motorbikes surround him on the road, they introduce themselves by asking, “Where rrrre you phrrrom?” Based only on his mode of transportation, they assume he speaks English and not Vietnamese (Pham, *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam* [New York: Picador, 1999], 124).
20. *Ibid.*, 40.
21. Augé, *Non-Places*, 86.
22. Andrew’s “steerage passage” fantasy also idealizes disciplinary power (man-as-body) as it relates to biopower (man-as-species). The latter is associated with air travel and, as Michel Foucault emphasized in first defining the term, is entirely predictive and future-oriented. It is fitting, then, that Andrew associates the freighter (disciplinary

- power) with memory and the airplane (biopower) with forgetting ("*Society Must Be Defended*": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, trans. David Macey, *Lectures at the Collège de France*, vol. 3 [New York: Picador, 2003], 246).
23. Pham, *Catfish and Mandala*, 41.
 24. Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 9. This subjectivity of the tourist of history, Sturken adds, blocks broader ways of seeing the world, and it thereby reinforces Americans' belief in their own innocence (30–31).
 25. Pham, *Catfish and Mandala*, 43.
 26. *Ibid.*, 44.
 27. *Ibid.*, 42.
 28. Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 2.
 29. See *ibid.*, 25; and Bruce Cumings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 400.
 30. Pham, *Catfish and Mandala*, 42.
 31. Schaberg, *Textual Life of Airports*, 21.
 32. Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 259.
 33. Pham, *Catfish and Mandala*, 44.
 34. Pascoe, *Airspaces*, 18–19.
 35. Pham, *Catfish and Mandala*, 62.
 36. *Ibid.*, 65.
 37. Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 39.
 38. *Ibid.*, 47.
 39. Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 9.
 40. *Ibid.*, 293.
 41. Pham, *Catfish and Mandala*, 63.
 42. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, "Catfish and Mandala: Triple Vision," *Amerasia Journal* 29, no. 1 (2003): 219–35, quotation on 222. Pelaud is here building on W. E. B. Du Bois's theory of African American double consciousness.
 43. *Ibid.*, 231.
 44. Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 1.
 45. Pham, *Catfish and Mandala*, 342.
 46. *Ibid.*
 47. *Ibid.*
 48. *Ibid.*
 49. Yen Le Espiritu, "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon,'" *American Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2006): 329–52, quotations on 329–30.
 50. *Ibid.*, 343.
 51. Pham, *Catfish and Mandala*, 285.

52. "Veterans Program," *Tours of Peace*, last modified 2013, <http://topvietnamveterans.org/p-vet.html>.
53. Ibid.
54. George H. W. Bush, "Address to the Nation on the Civil Disturbances in Los Angeles, California," 1 May 1992, *American Presidency Project*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=20910#axzz2iN4n2o00.
55. Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 10.
56. "From Tours of Duty to Tours of Healing," *Back to the Nam*, last modified 2013, www.backtothenam.org/index.html.