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“We Had No Belonging Except Our Stories”: Storytelling and Countermemory in Vietnamese American Refugee Literature

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Displaced by war and an ocean away from home, Vietnamese refugees' new beginnings in their destination country are often marked by a lack of feeling included in the American social circles in which they arrive after their traumatising escapes and precarious stays in refugee camps. Moreover, even though some might, over time, adhere to the infamous Asian American 'model minority' stereotype¹ and work their way up to leading affluent lives, most refugees commence their stays devoid of economic means – further marginalising them in a consumerist society that upholds the value of financial success. For instance, when reminiscing about her early days in the US, the ghostwriter narrator in “Black-Eyed Women” (2017), a short story by influential Vietnamese American writer Viet Thanh Nguyen, remembers how her mother would not believe in their family's belonging in the host country due to their shortage of wealth. Nevertheless, they arrived enriched by less palpable goods: “In a country where possessions counted for everything, we had no belongings except our stories” (7). Regardless of their lack of material possessions, stories are viewed as nonphysical belongings that serve the family as an anchor in their new surroundings, simultaneously enabling belonging in the Vietnamese diaspora and opening the possibility of nurturing future feelings of specifically Vietnamese American belonging. Before practising place-making in a more tangible fashion, storytelling in the form of recounting family histories and other tales set in Vietnam emerges as an effective collective strategy for refugees to understand their past and

¹ The notion of Asian Americans as the model minority homogenises the group “as hard-working, highly educated, successful, and lacking social problems” (Võ 33). Despite concealing inequalities within a diverse group while enhancing divides between Asian Americans and other non-white American communities, this image has been a prevalent myth ever since the 1960s that continues to prevail in popular discourses.

overcome uncertainties in present situations, especially for members of younger generations, whose corporeal recollection of their homeland remains blurry or even inaccessible.

Narratives are thus not only temporal but space-bound, too – “one can think of storytelling as a spatial form and practice” (Bieger 11). Hence, it performs several functions regarding emplacement, which can be perceived as “the strategies of coming to belong somewhere” both physically and in “an imaginative process, the orienting of self within multiple frameworks of meaning” (Narayan 472). Storytelling allows uprooted individuals to position their ancestral homelands and themselves while recognising their own and their family’s past despite their dislocation. Concurrently, this awareness not only enacts a spatial and experiential understanding of a place from which refugees have been displaced, but it may also stabilise their sense of belonging in unfamiliar settings, mainly through the typically community-based character of storytelling. Therefore, collective memory is pivotal when discussing storytelling in the face of shared crises: “By constructing, relating and sharing stories, people contrive to restore viability to their relationship with others, redressing a bias toward autonomy when it has been lost, and affirming collective ideals in the face of disparate experiences” (Jackson 18). Regaining agency is critical in the context of remembering the American war in Vietnam, whose memory in mainstream consciousness has for decades been dominated by US-centred narratives that neglected Vietnamese American perspectives. These factors align with Nguyen’s nonfictional arguments on the war and its memory: “Storytelling allows us to tell a different story about war and its relationship to our identity. In this way, storytelling changes how we remember and forget war” (Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* 292). Collective memory is about remembering *and* forgetting and may resurface as countermemory. Countermemory designates “oppositional memory, the memory of the subordinated and the marginalized, memory from below versus memory from above” (“Memory” 154) – a practice that the examples to be examined here engage in, within the text and as the texts themselves.

In this essay, the emphasis lies on fictional representations of storytelling, which is understood in a broad sense but always as a “coping strategy”

(Jackson 18). However, there are parallels to anthropological and sociological approaches in the larger field of transnational migration scholarship. Kirin Narayan, whose definition of emplacement was provided earlier, claims “that telling one’s own stories, staking out a space for one’s own meaning, is a powerful discursive means of emplacement” (472) when examining life stories by South Asian Americans of the second generation. Similarly, but focusing on telling, writing *and* listening to stories alike, I argue that novels and short stories by and about Vietnamese Americans illustrate that emplacement through storytelling works on multiple levels and acts as an agent for producing collective memory in the form of countermemory. At first, I inspect the practice of storytelling as represented in selected works, contemplating how storytellers construct their stories and how this affects their own and their audience’s sense of belonging. Along with mentioning short fictions by Aimee Phan, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Andrew Lam, Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (OEWBG 2019) shall serve as the principal source and the depiction of storytelling in oral and written form in the novel will be scrutinised. In a secondary step, I briefly touch upon the role of the authors themselves, who arguably create new types of storytelling through their hybrid novels and short stories.

Typically, stories within the narratives under consideration are told by the first generation and transgenerationally transmitted to members of the 1.5 generation – people who were born in Vietnam and fled to the US at a young age – and the second generation. In addition to recollections of perilous journeys by boat and other kinds of escape, most of the stories are set in Vietnam before and during the war and range from epics to fairy tales and family histories. At the same time, storytelling unfolds in the here and now – the past and the present become enmeshed via storytelling: “Storytelling, then, is the meeting point between past and present; it is another crossroad at which places and memories from the past and impressions and experiences from the present begin to leak into each other” (Lems 216). Accordingly, storytelling frequently operates as an essential impetus for 1.5- and second-generation children to understand their hybridity and to emplace them in their American environments by acquiring an enhanced understanding of their own and their family’s past.

However, specific memories of the past are difficult to discuss: sharing stories means sharing trauma, yet those affected might not always find the words to express what they have endured and some parents will never be able to open up to their children. Thus, whereas some refugees deal with processing their own or their family's traumatic memories, the origin of unease for others is their inability to access their own and their family's past. The stories of orphans epitomise this; they will never even receive the chance to ask their parents about their life in Vietnam. This conflict is captured in Aimee Phan's *We Should Never Meet* (2004), a fragmented work spanning continents and decades that features orphaned narrators of the 1.5 generation. The most important characters in the short story cycle entered the world as unwanted babies of Vietnamese mothers and predominantly anonymous American fathers. The orphans left Vietnam through Operation Babylift, a mass evacuation scheme that was orchestrated just before the war's end in 1975 and removed more than 3,000 children by plane to western countries. The Babylift orphans' alienation in the US is, at least, threefold: besides staying in the dark about their past, they face varying degrees of difficulty in their experiences with the foster care system and, as half-Asians and half-Americans, are confronted with racial prejudice from different sources. These circumstances combined lead to unresolved ambivalences that are reflected in literary form through gaps, fragmentation and open-endedness.

Unlike the Babylift orphans, Rose, the narratee in Vuong's seminal work, lives together with her mother until the day the latter dies. Just like them, though, she is "a direct product of the war in Vietnam" (*OEWBG* 53) and her biological father, an American serviceman who meets her mother as a sex worker, remains unknown. Her ambiguous hybridity denies her belonging in Vietnam – "get the white off her" (63), children in the neighbourhood would shout after her when she was still a girl – and language barriers add to her complications of fitting in in America. Rose sustains a challenging relationship with her son Little Dog, the novel's first-person narrator, and over the years only discloses some of her stories to him. Meanwhile, her abusive husband has mostly been missing from the family's life and for their son, fatherly absence is the norm he encounters growing up in Hartford, Connecticut, "where fathers were phantoms, dipping in and out of their children's lives" (213).

In cases where parents' storytelling remains sparse for disparate reasons, stories may still be transfused through generation-skipping from grandparents to grandchildren. For example, Little Dog cherishes a deep connection to his grandmother Lan, whose storytelling continues to console and stabilise him as a child and during his later years. In a cyclical, nonlinear and undetermined style – “the past never a fixed and dormant landscape but one that is re-seen” (28) – she recounts her own journeys in Vietnam during the war and recites scenes of folklore while her grandson is plucking her grey hairs:

As I plucked, the blank walls around us did not so much fill with fantastical landscapes as open into them, the plaster disintegrating to reveal the past behind it. Scenes from the war, mythologies of manlike monkeys, of ancient ghost catchers from the hills of Da Lat [city in Vietnam's Central Highlands region] who were paid in jugs of rice wine, who traveled through villages with packs of wild dogs and spells written on palm leaves to dispel evil spirits. (22)

Little Dog has heard her stories before; nevertheless, they keep their force in transcending time and space as her voice carries him from the American East Coast to the West Coast across the Pacific Ocean to their genealogical homeland and to times before he was even born. In this fashion, Lan's vivid storytelling exceeds its capacity of merely sparking her grandson's imagination. Instead, he goes beyond visualising her stories and feels his present spatial surroundings transformed by her tales, demonstrating that “the past . . . is not a foreign country; it is relevant and present for the here and now and continues to play into and form our lifeworlds” (Lems 215). Little Dog's current environments “open into” the landscapes, framing the act of listening as a sensory experience, vigorously fabricating space and surpassing linear time restrictions.

In addition to encouraging belonging, stories are also viewed as immaterial possessions worthy in a transaction, which is illustrated in the following passage where Little Dog deems obtaining stories as his payment for plucking hairs:

For this work I was paid in stories. After positioning her head under the window's light, I would kneel on a pillow behind her, the tweezers ready in my grip. She

would start to talk, her tone dropping an octave, drifting deep into a narrative. Mostly, as was her way, she rambled, the tales cycling one after another. . . . A familiar story would follow, punctuated with the same dramatic pauses and inflections during moments of suspense or crucial turns. I'd mouth along with the sentences, as if watching a film for the umpteenth time – a movie made by Lan's words and animated by my imagination. In this way, we collaborated. (*OEWBG* 22)

This collaboration can be read in light of what Marianne Hirsch calls 'postmemory', a term that

describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (5)

Wordlessly, the narrator acquires postmemory by internalising his mother's and his grandmother's PTSD through their conduct: "Little Dog did not live the war as Rose and Lan did, but he does witness their violent outbursts, flashbacks, and nightmares. He observes how trauma distorts the boundaries of space and time. . . . Through his intimate proximity to Rose and Lan's psychological damage from the war, Little Dog inherits their memories as postmemory" (Ha and Tompkins 208). Furthermore, his grandmother's stories, too, repeated over and over, appeal to Little Dog on an affective level, rendering him much more than a passive listener as he is also regularly reinscribed into the occasionally changing stories, exemplifying how they actively remember together: "I was standing next to her as her purple dress swayed in the smoky bar, the glasses clinking under the scent of motor oil and cigars, of vodka and gunsmoke from the soldiers' uniforms" (*OEWBG* 23), Little Dog envisions when Lan narrates how she met his grandfather decades ago as a sex worker. The past is malleable and his grandmother's memory has seemingly become his own: "Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch 5). In this vein, Little Dog and Lan's storytelling practices are constituted not

simply as a rendition of facts but as collective, creative and dynamic efforts between the storyteller and her audience.

Despite the appeal of the dynamic nature of oral storytelling, many Vietnamese Americans express a wish or need to solidify stories in writing. Storytelling through writing is significant because conserving stories and memories in this form means they cannot get lost while forgetting stories and memories in old age is often associated with losing the homeland all over again. Highlighting the entanglements of remembering and writing is a prominent ingredient in Nguyen's introduction to *The Displaced* (2018), a collection of nineteen essays and two illustrations by displaced writers from around the world. Referring to local Vietnamese businesses like his parents' grocery store that populated downtown San Jose before the rise in wealth of the Silicon Valley region, he muses, "I remember all these things because if I did not remember them and write them down then perhaps they would all disappear, as all those Vietnamese businesses have vanished" (14). Remembering Vietnamese enterprises points to a different angle of the importance of storytelling; not only is it vital for remembering the homeland but also for remembering Vietnamese American refugees' early arrivals in the US and their active place-making, figuratively and physically, through shops like his parents' former "mom-and-pop Vietnamese grocery store catering to refugees" (15).

Later on in the same text, Nguyen continues to talk about displaced writers and their engagement in discussing displacement through their writings:

Many writers, perhaps most writers or even all writers, are people who do not feel completely at home. . . . I cannot help but suspect that it is from this displacement that writers come into being, and why so many writers have sympathy and empathy for those who are displaced in one way or another, whether it is the lonely social misfit or whether it is the millions rendered homeless by forces beyond their control. In my case, I remember my displacement so that I can feel for those now displaced. I remember the injustice of displacement so that I can imagine my writing as attempting to perform some justice for those compelled to move. ("Introduction" 17-18)

Rather than lamenting displacement, Nguyen proposes that it acts as the creator of writers and, consequently, functions as the main generator of any piece of writing. This insistent refusal to pathologise refugees' trauma and displacement echoes YẾN Lê Espiritu's call to reconceptualise the term of the 'refugee'. Emphasising refugees' productive potential beyond victimisation, she urges that "instead of producing narratives of traumatized refugees, in which trauma is conceptualized only as pain, suffering, and distress, we can read trauma productively . . . as the condition that makes visible the relationship between war, race, and violence" (422-23). Furthermore, this passage from Nguyen's introduction reveals a supplementary element of storytelling by suggesting that written stories will facilitate remembering the past and finding one's place in the present and may even help future refugees in different contexts.

Likewise, Nguyen's aforementioned short story "Black-Eyed Women" rejects the essentialisation of refugees as helpless victims immobilised by suffering and unveils storytelling's forward-looking stance. For years, the ghostwriter has repressed the painful memories of her escape, a strategy that obstructed her sense of belonging in the country of arrival. Her profession allegorises this condition: rather than taking charge of her own story, she makes a living by recording other people's narratives. She feels detached from her present until she finally confronts her past trauma – materialised in ghost form through the apparition of her long-dead brother – and even starts designing new plans for her future as she switches from ghostwriting to compiling a book of her own. To accomplish this project, she revitalises the relationship with her mother through storytelling, accentuating the significance of collective memory for processing individual trauma. Moreover, the (former) ghostwriter commemorates other women's trauma when she is faced with her brother's ghost: "Most of all, I cried for those other girls who had vanished and never come back" (18), conjuring collective female solidarity and in a way, by writing a book and capturing stories – a practice unavailable to the lost girls – she assumes Nguyen's challenge of "perform[ing] some justice for those compelled to move" ("Introduction" 18) and "to speak for the voiceless" (19). Literally leaving an imprint on her surroundings, she engages in active

placemaking and, through her stories, encourages other hybrid individuals' emplacement.²

The ghostwriter is by no means the only character found in contemporary Vietnamese American literature who has discovered some kind of belonging through language and becoming a writer-storyteller. Vuong's work is composed in epistolary form as a letter by Little Dog addressed to his mother, who is illiterate. The act of writing thus provides the protagonist with cathartic insights into his own subjectivity, yet Rose's illiteracy represents a boundary between her son's storytelling and her reception of the story that remains an obvious restriction, hindering his storytelling from becoming mutually efficient. On the assumption that she can never read Little Dog's words, Rose is ultimately excluded from the story, hinting at rifts between different generations of Vietnamese Americans and the fact that certain traumata are unspeakable.

In spite of the doubtfulness of Rose receiving Little Dog's letter, penning it to her is imperative for the narrator and the story itself. Even if his text may never reach its intended audience, Little Dog is no uncooperative storyteller; especially in the third and last part of the novel, he asks his mother – whom he can “change, embellish, and preserve . . . all at once” (*OEWBG* 85) – to actively join his narrative. The narrator attempts to make his narratee sense and grasp the milieu of substance abuse that he found himself in for many years. Rather than just giving an account of his experience, he takes her on a lifelike journey through Hartford, the city of his childhood and adolescence. Similar to Little Dog's inclusion in Lan's orally transmitted stories, he places his mother into the remembered spaces through engaging storytelling and invites her to “[t]ake the long way home with [him]” (174) as he navigates her from one building to the next. The oral and written storytelling examples demonstrate how Vuong's narrative elicits storytelling's spatial dimensions and, accordingly, its capacity to invoke emplacement. Nevertheless, neither Lan nor Rose manages “to be seamlessly assimilated into the United States

² In the essay “Of Ghosts, Gifts, and Globetrotters: Tracing Homes and Homelands in Vietnamese American Refugee Short Stories” (2022), I elaborate on the ghostwriter's negotiation of trauma and reconciliation of conflicting sentiments towards home and homeland.

through their participation in the model minority paradigm” (Cho 136) and even Little Dog’s participation is limited through his intersectionality as a queer Vietnamese American refugee: “To be refugee and queer, as Vuong conveys, requires conceding to the conditional terms of one’s belonging and to the pervasive shame produced by recognitions of one’s outsider status and failure to live up to white heteronormative ideals of the US nation” (132-33). Hence while attesting to refugees’ agency in engaging with their surroundings, their place-making practices must not be romanticised and it should be added that these strategies’ potential for generating belonging continues to be constrained.

Traditional, essentialist approaches that view cultural identity as fixed and complete might consider the fragmented patterns of the narrator’s storytelling, unpredictably leaping in time and space, as another demonstration of the limitation to his belonging. In contrast, Little Dog reflects that these circumstances ultimately produce perspicuity: “I’m not telling you a story so much as a shipwreck – the pieces floating, finally legible” (OEWBG 190). His storytelling defies the conventional assumption that a story should be told in a linear, unambiguous fashion with a well-defined beginning and end. Instead, the epistolary narrative introduces ‘displaced stories’, which Annika Lems characterises as follows: “While storytelling and displacement can sometimes be experienced as opposing forces, it is important to double-listen and recognise the different expressions of ‘displaced stories’. Such stories can, for example, be uttered as whispers, fragments or half-told stories” (216). Little Dog’s story is not intelligible despite its fragmentation, but *because* of it – it matches his displacement in content and form. At the same time, this complexity elucidates the ambivalent dynamics between storytelling, displacement and emplacement; narrating and distributing displaced stories gives voice to marginalised people, thus cultivating countermemory, which may provide belonging-inducing emplacement.

The examples presented here are loosely categorised as works of literary fiction, yet they might incorporate certain autobiographical elements, too. Noticeably, the real-life authors share with their Vietnamese American characters a love for playing with language to craft displaced stories. Therefore, along with representing writing within their narrative worlds,

the novels and short stories themselves may be considered new types of storytelling capable of engendering enduring collective memory of displacement. In an overview of Vietnamese American literature, Michele Janette distinguishes the texts of an earlier generation of Vietnamese (American) authors writing in English from the productions of their 21st-century counterparts of 1.5- and second-generation Vietnamese American writers: “While all literature contains politics and ideology, these works are often more politicized than political – imbued with political and ideological critique, attuned to social context, but approaching their topics with the indirections of poetry and art rather than the linearity of explanation” (386). Besides Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, lê thi diem thúy’s novel *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003) also bends the rules of linearity of explanation and time, constructing a comparably fractured, lyrical and liquid narrative.

Regarding the fragmentation of Phan’s Babylift short story cycle, Long Le-Khac notes that the work “confronts us with the fragmenting effects of displacement in the gaps between stories and challenges us to develop new principles of connection across narrative and national borders” (110). For further analysis, Le-Khac proposes the concept of ‘transnarrative’, which “theorizes the relations across the gaps separating individual narratives, the aesthetic means by which story cycles with transnational ambitions apprehend social relations across national borders” (107). The notion of transnarrative is powerful because it shifts the focus from immobilising trauma and loss to displacement’s productive capability to foster transnational connections. Moreover, it might also be utilised when discussing episodic and border-crossing novels like Vuong’s and lê’s.

These types of storytelling matter because, unlike sensationalist media accounts that persist across different refugee contexts, they provide Vietnamese American self-representations saturating the figure of the refugee with meaning and agency to counter damage-centred approaches. Andrew Lam’s short story “Hunger” (2013) offers an example of the kind of alienation that external, undifferentiated distributions of stories may cause. The protagonist is tempted by the hope of achieving financial revenue that may increase the “probability of a good life for his daughter” (90), which evokes the image of the American Dream as well as the idea

of stories as immaterial possessions with the potential of generating material possessions in the shape of financial revenue. Eventually, his cousin persuades him to sell his story to a TV channel, but the protagonist is disheartened when he subsequently sees the segment on air. In its filtered and adapted form, he “feels that it is no longer his story” (91), underscoring the need for self-determined storytelling from below by and about refugees that do justice to their actual experiences. Yogita Goyal contrasts the refugee novel to common media representations as follows: “Because so much of the representation of refugees in the media relies on spectacle, crisis, and catastrophe, the novel’s concern with interiority and psychological depth, the cultivation of empathy, and the navigation of the relationship between an individual and the community can help counter such spectacularization” (249), which might similarly be said about the discussed refugee short stories.

Before concluding, the circumstance that this essay has explored several features of storytelling – orating, listening, writing, representing – necessitates a consideration of various facets of collective memory, too. To continue to employ this umbrella term critically, Aleida Assmann suggests distinguishing between different formats of memory: “Interactive and social memory are both formats that are embodied, grounded in lived experience that vanish with their carriers. The manifestations of political and cultural memory, on the other hand, are radically different in that they are grounded on the more durable carriers of external symbols and representation” (55). Without the aim of diminishing its immediate and intimate strength in stimulating belonging, it must be recognized that oral storytelling within families – like Lan’s transmission of stories to her grandson – is of an ephemeral nature that may be remembered by a few generations at most. In contrast, published writings may exert influence for centuries to come, especially if they are popular and institutionalised in libraries, just like Vuong’s. In the year 2020, he was chosen as the seventh contributor to the Future Library project, a public artwork collecting manuscripts that will remain sealed until the year 2114 (Cain). Although at this point, no one except the author is familiar with the work’s contents and form, it is intriguing to observe the novelist’s antedated institutionalisation in the light of Assmann’s distinctions and speculate on his renewed impact on future generations in around nine decades’ time.

In this essay, Vuong's recent, acclaimed novel and other contemporary Vietnamese American pieces of literary fiction have served to illustrate the various ways in which involved refugees of the 1.5 and second generation within and outside the narratives employ storytelling as a coping strategy in the face of displacement and to thwart dominant, spectacularising discourses. Coping, in this context, refers to hybrid individuals' preservation through ingrain meaning to their present surroundings by remembering and forgetting past occurrences and imagining future connections – in other words, engaging in a mixture of practices of transnational place-making that encourage a feeling of belonging. Ultimately, this analysis illuminates the critical dialectics between displacement and emplacement; whereas displacement serves as the catalyst for the fabrication of fragmented stories, their production simultaneously creates a durable cornerstone for enacting collective memory in the form of countermemory and, hence, the opportunity for future generations' emplacement.

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