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CAROLE MARTIN

**Tracing Im/Mobilities in
Contemporary Vietnamese
American Refugee Literature**

Tracing Im/Mobilities in Contemporary Vietnamese American Refugee Literature

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zur Erlangung des Doktorgrades der Philosophie
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Carole Martin

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Refugee Literature

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by
Carole Martin

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Introduction: Rewriting the Narrative of Vietnamese American Refugee Experiences

Following the establishment of communist governments in former French colonies in Southeast Asia in the mid-1970s, more than three million people fled Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos over the ensuing two decades in a mass exodus (UNHCR, *World's Refugees* 79). Due to American military involvement in Vietnam particularly, many Vietnamese fled the south and made the dangerous journey across the ocean to the United States in hopes of a better future. These passages showcase dialectical relationships between mobility and immobility: refugees were forced to move, but were also repeatedly detained. For instance, many endured cramped conditions in refugee camps before relocating to centers on the American mainland or finding a sponsor, only then beginning their individual journeys into unfamiliar environments.

Despite or because of these constraints, community-building was essential for survival. Today, the Vietnamese American community persists and, as of the U.S. 2020 census, constitutes the fourth-largest Asian American group. Diasporic writers have given rise to numerous literary works written in English, which take up refugees' uncertain and precarious routes to challenge romantic notions of nomadic mobility prevalent in road narratives and other popular categories of North American fiction. Although the field of contemporary Vietnamese American literature transcends topics of war and has become increasingly diversified, memories of flight prevail and are pivotal for these narratives.

Moreover, refugeehood as a topic across different geographical and political contexts remains timely. Recent years have seen a persistent escalation in the global number of displaced individuals. In the process of writing this book, the figures documenting forcibly displaced people worldwide have risen with every successive report

from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).¹ The 100 million mark was exceeded for the first time in history at the end of 2022 (“Global Trends 2022” 2), and reached 117.3 million at the end of 2023 (“Global Trends 2023” 2). Internally displaced people (IDPs) constitute more than fifty percent of displaced people, followed by the second largest group, which constitutes those whose displacement has entailed crossing national borders: refugees. The global refugee population reached 43.4 million² by the end of 2023—about the same number of people as if the population of my home country, Switzerland, where the UNHCR has its headquarters, were to increase by a factor of five. Commenting on the rising statistics during his opening remarks to the Global Refugee Forum held in Geneva in December 2023, the current head of the UNHCR, Filippo Grandi, spoke of “a crisis—in fact many crises—of humanity.”

This linking of the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘crisis’ is well-established in popular media discourses, too. As an example, Vietnamese refugees have been seen as integral to the broader ‘Indochina refugee crisis.’ The routine invocation of the ‘crisis’ concept has been widespread in various settings, prompting Lauren Berlant to observe how “the present moment increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis, with one happening piling on another” (7). In the European context, the streams of human movement in the year 2015 are remembered via the notion of a ‘migrant crisis’ or ‘refugee crisis’—often used interchangeably—due to the influx of people from Arab countries who have escaped the civil wars in their homelands. While individuals, organizations, and governments have come together to facilitate refugees’ arrivals, right-wing political forces continue to harness this momentum to disseminate nationalist sentiments and propagate prejudiced, racist, and iden-

1 This book is anchored in figures and contexts available up to June 2024. Consequently, it does not engage with later developments, notably the significant repercussions for refugees under Donald Trump’s second administration.

2 This figure is made up of three groups: the 31.6 million people who were refugees under the UNHCR’s mandate at the end of 2023, the 6 million Palestinian refugees under the UNRWA’s (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) mandate, and 5.8 million “other people in need of international protection” (“Global Trends 2023” 5).

titarian ideologies. Seven years later, the racialized acceptance or rejection of refugees was made strikingly evident when predominantly white Ukrainians were welcomed across Europe after fleeing the Russian invasion. Across various refugee portrayals, though, a recurring theme is the emphasis placed on the loss experienced by the displaced, regardless of where they come from. Such damage-centered approaches essentialize refugees as helpless victims and ignore their potential for agency. Other dominant narratives eschew similar complexities—for example, portrayals of refugees as ostensible threats to the nation-state, as asylum seekers and terrorists, or, common in the Vietnamese American context, as obedient ‘model minority’ members.

In other words, prevalent depictions characterize refugees by their association with crises and represent them via shocking numbers, mind-blowing statistics, or sensationalist images. But what about their stories? What about the individuals behind the (photo)graphs? This is where literary interventions may offer fresh perspectives from which to consider refugee experiences. Generalized depictions give rise to a need for empowering self-representations, about refugees *by* refugees, that capture distinctive features of their experience from an emic perspective without neglecting the idiosyncrasies thereof. These works restore agency and productively rewrite the notion of crisis, working against the term’s typically negative connotations, which evoke misfortunes befalling individuals beyond their capacity to resist. This resonates with the etymological roots of the word ‘crisis,’ which trace back to the Greek verb *κρίνω* (*krinō*), embodying active concepts like “separate,” “choose,” “judge,” or “decide” (Koselleck 358). Refugee literature hence interprets crisis in alignment with the word’s Greek origins, emphasizing refugees’ agency in determining how to navigate challenging situations.

These numerous refugee narratives offer diverse stories of war, exile, and new beginnings, inviting promising avenues for exploration in literary studies and beyond. In the American context, the examination of Vietnamese American refugee literature, which has already existed for around half a century, provides a particularly intriguing vantage point. The corpus of Vietnamese American ref-

ugee literature has developed significantly since the 1970s and is still expanding as members of generations who have not fled themselves continue to engage with displacement and its intergenerational consequences. In that manner, refugeehood is understood as more than a legal concept: although many Vietnamese Americans in the United States no longer hold official refugee status and have typically attained naturalized citizenship, Vietnamese American literature is nurtured by an unwillingness to forget the past and an aim to revise history. In this way, Vietnamese American literary and other cultural productions counter dominant American historiographies that still tend to neglect Vietnamese voices when remembering the war in Vietnam. In the study at hand, I am interested in investigating the representation of refugees and tracing their movements through the lens of selected novels and short stories that narrate Vietnamese American refugee experiences from a variety of angles. Despite my ardent convictions about the effective power of these literary works, it is not my goal to recommend that they serve as an all-encompassing remedy to solve current displacement discussions of any kind. However, I propose that Vietnamese American refugee literature can imaginatively and insightfully add to political, societal, humanitarian, and conceptual debates about refugeehood—in a time of a perceived “crisis . . . of humanity” (Grandi), refugee novels and short stories give shape to the individuals behind the numbers and pictures that are often overshadowed by prevailing portrayals.

At the same time, the selected cultural productions are more than didactic means of creating mutual understanding. Rather than merely looking at the contents of the stories, I will engage with them on their aesthetic levels, too, and focus on *how* the experience of flight is narrated. To reaffirm this framework, I consider fictional rather than strictly autobiographical works, although the lines between the two are often blurred. While maintaining a focus on the less tangible aspects of displacement, an appropriate starting point for the examination of refugee narratives is to follow physical refugee trajectories across national boundaries or, in other words, mobilities. Additionally, besides distinguishing between various kinds of mobilities, the study of refugeehood—in novels and short

stories as well as in the world at large—also demands particular attention to the dynamics between mobility and forced immobility, for example due to detainment in refugee camps. These entanglements demonstrate uneven mobility politics, complexities that will be unraveled across different contexts.

Accordingly, in a nutshell, this book is about the representations of im/mobilities and refugee identities in selected works of contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature. To properly discuss the literature in the analysis part of this book, some historical and theoretical background is indispensable. This project is primarily interested in the literary exploration of relevant passages from novels and short stories, but the interdisciplinary fields of mobility studies and critical refugee studies notably also inform my approach. Additionally, the discussion of refugee identities benefits from post-colonial interpretations of the notions of cultural hybridity and liminality. Hence, before outlining the objectives in greater detail and ending this introduction with an overview of the four main chapters, the subsequent subchapters will provide the necessary contextual information in the following areas: Vietnamese American literature; refugee literature and critical refugee studies; mobility studies; and the concepts of hybridity and liminality.

Contemporary Vietnamese American Literature³

The phrase ‘contemporary Vietnamese American literature’ harbors intricacies that necessitate careful elucidation and untangling. This ‘literature’ encompasses a wide range of creative and intellectual works written as well as transcribed in any language—following Monique T. D. Truong’s definition, it “includes transcription of orally

3 Select portions of this subchapter, particularly those addressing Deborah Reed-Danahey’s study, are adapted from my previously published essay, “Of Ghosts, Gifts, and Globetrotters: Tracing Homes and Homelands in Vietnamese American Refugee Short Stories,” which appeared in *Perspectives of Homelessness (2022)*, edited by Anna Flüggé and Giorgia Tommasi.

communicated narratives and written texts in any and all languages deemed applicable and creatively relevant by the storyteller(s)" (221). Conscious of this larger context, the works chosen for analysis in the ensuing chapters cover one specific area of Vietnamese American 'literature,' namely novels and short stories that are marketed as fiction and written in English. By 'contemporary' Vietnamese American literature, I refer to works written in the twenty-first century, even if they are composed of or incorporate storylines set before that time. The earliest published book in the selection of works relevant for this study is lê thi diem thúy's novel, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003), while Eric Nguyen's⁴ *Things We Lost to the Water* was published more recently in 2021.

Despite these works' temporal flexibility, drawing a line for 'contemporary' proves more manageable than precisely differentiating 'Vietnamese American' literature. In this book, specific Vietnamese American refugee contexts are of interest and seen as distinguishing features of the analyzed novels and short stories, yet the larger field of 'Vietnamese American' literature is more complex and covers a broad range of genres, styles, and forms. Just like other racial and ethnic classifications, 'Vietnamese American' is frequently used as a determining category, disregarding the diaspora's heterogeneity. Due to their college degrees, contemporary "Vietnamese American authors are not [diverse], at least in terms of their education" (V. T. Nguyen, "What Is?" 57), yet their stories encompass perspectives from across different social groups to exhibit Vietnamese American

4 Among the seven spotlighted writers, two are named Nguyen, the diacritical-free form of Nguyễn, a surname shared with numerous other authors of secondary literature referenced in this project. This reflects statistical insights into the distribution of Vietnamese family names: "It is not an exaggeration that for approximately every three Vietnamese individuals, one bears the surname *Nguyễn*" (V. K. Nguyen 9). In my text, to ensure clarity, a Nguyen/Nguyễn is referred to by their surname alone only when the context of the paragraph clearly identifies the individual. There are several reasons for the prevalence of the name; for instance, across various centuries, some ruling Vietnamese dynasties forced members of conquered royal families to assume the name Nguyễn. Additionally, the tradition of taking on the ruler's family name to express loyalty further accounts for the surname's popularity—with a history of nine lords and thirteen kings up until 1945, the Nguyễn name has over 300 years of ruling legacy in today's Vietnam, thereby encouraging many to have adopted it (V. K. Nguyen 9–10).

diversity in terms of class, gender, religion, age, and various other factors. In light of the heterogeneity of what it means to be 'Vietnamese American,' 'Vietnamese American literature' is "an approximation" (Janette, "Vietnamese American Literature" 378) and its definition remains elusive. Nevertheless, there is a general consensus that 'Vietnamese American literature' "is an authorial perspective informed by being Vietnamese American in the United States, of sharing a history of the specific racialized violence resulting from the war in Vietnam and its aftermath" (378), thereby providing viewpoints about and by Vietnamese Americans.

The question of authorship is significant in the context of the United States, where the dominant historiography has silenced, neglected, misinterpreted, or instrumentalized Vietnamese and Vietnamese American voices. 'Vietnam' "has been whittled down to nothing more than a signifier of a military conflict" (Trương 242) and 'Vietnam literature' is equated with texts dealing with U.S. military involvement in Vietnam (242), leaving little opportunity for Vietnamese and, more particularly, Vietnamese American perspectives. Meanwhile, there have been instances of "speaking of and for Vietnamese Americans" (V. T. Nguyen, "What Is?" 58) by white authors who capitalized on their stories, like Robert Olen Butler's critically acclaimed collection, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1992). Under these circumstances, there emerges the "need for Vietnamese American authors to speak for Vietnamese Americans," which is both "a responsibility and a burden" (V. T. Nguyen, "What Is?" 58).

This applies to ethnic literature in general. While the call for self-representation serves as a constructive response to simplistic portrayals coming from external perspectives, "the necessity of speaking up, speaking out, and speaking for remains lashed to the name of the ethnic population" (V. T. Nguyen, "What Is?" 52), which simultaneously imposes a challenging and potentially reductive situation for "the racially straitjacketed ethnic writer" (52). In this context, Viet Thanh Nguyen distinguishes between an 'economy of narrative scarcity' and an 'economy of narrative plenitude':

But while dominant Americans exist in an economy of narrative plenitude with a surfeit of stories, their ethnic and racial others live in an economy of narrative scarcity. Fewer stories exist about them, at least ones that leave their enclaves. Not surprisingly, both the larger American public and the ethnic community then place great pressure on those few stories and those few writers who emerge to stand on the American stage. (*Nothing Ever Dies* 203)

Therefore, even if it may be debatable on the level of form to claim that there is necessarily more authenticity to stories of authors who share a background with those they represent, it remains that “[i]n an economy of narrative scarcity . . . literary representation cannot be separated from larger social issues of equity and justice” (210). In other words, it is difficult to ignore authors’ backgrounds “because art exists in a social world where readers and writers bring prejudices and injustices to the act of reading” (“What Is?” 59). Literature is not produced in a social vacuum and, although ethnic writers cannot possibly speak for their whole communities, their authorial role in the production of stories concerning their communities is substantive as long as an economy of narrative scarcity persists. In the long run, the proliferation of such stories, presenting diverse perspectives, may lead to a situation of narrative plenitude in which Asian American or Vietnamese American stories will be read just like other American stories.

In addition to addressing questions about ethnic authorship, historical backgrounds shaping present societal configurations are integral to any discourse on Vietnamese American literature. One of the most frequently mentioned dates is April 30, 1975, marking the fall of Saigon, during which the communist government of the (northern) Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) took over the capital of the (southern) Republic of Vietnam (RVN) and reunified the territory to become the current Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). This event denoted the end of almost twenty years of war and caused a substantial influx of Vietnamese to the United States. For many individuals, this was not their first experience of flight, since they had already become refugees while coming to the south from

the north of Vietnam after the resolution of the First Indochina War, or the Anti-French Resistance War (1946–54). This war, which ended French colonial control, was fought between France and the Việt Minh, a nationalist coalition formed by the communist revolutionary Hồ Chí Minh. While the Soviet Union and China recognized the communist DRV as the legitimate state, the United States and Great Britain supported the anti-communist south (Boyle and Lim ix). These opposing regions were officially partitioned at the 17th parallel following the Geneva agreements in 1954, which also granted free movement between the two territories for civilians until May 1955. This caused the relocation of almost one million individuals, most of them Catholic refugees who feared repression under the communist regime in the north and chose to move to the south. The division was meant to be only temporary, with the goal of unification after elections in 1956 (Goscha 303–4). However, these elections never took place, and what followed instead was a civil war between North Vietnam and South Vietnam as well as their respective allies. The U.S. most commonly remembers this conflict as the ‘Vietnam War,’ but it is sometimes also referred to as the ‘Second Indochina War.’ In Vietnam, other names for the conflict, like ‘American War’ or ‘Resistance War against America,’ are the preferred alternatives (Ha and Babcock xviii). Civil wars also took place in the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia.

With this in mind, publications following the mass exodus shortly before and right after the fall of Saigon are typically seen as the first works in the field of Vietnamese American literature. From this point up until the 1990s, Vietnamese American writings “are based in memoir, . . . offer strident political critiques of Vietnam’s government, and . . . seek to change America’s views, thus hoping to alter America’s behavior” (Janette, “‘Nam No Longer” xvii). Given that Vietnamese nationals were present in the U.S. even before the war’s conclusion, there are also noteworthy instances of earlier Vietnamese American literature. Authors who published in English in the 1960s, like Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai and Tran Van Dinh, “wrote as Vietnamese in America rather than Vietnamese Americans” (xvi). A specifically hybrid ‘Vietnamese American’ literature with not only

political but also aesthetically-geared aspirations followed much later in the form of fictionalized creations like Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* from 1997. Brenda M. Boyle and Jeehyun Lim, in their edited volume on twenty-first-century perspectives on the war in Vietnam, thus designate 1997 as the year when "the first 'Vietnamese American' novel" (xvi) was published. In this interpretation, the publication of Cao's debut novel signals the advent of 'contemporary Vietnamese American' literature.

Even without identifying a specific work that could serve as the potential starting point, a discernible shift in the tone and thematic focus of this literary genre becomes evident towards the end of the century. Whereas corrective reports of Vietnam's political history were common in texts of the earlier generation of writers—often characterized as didactic and aimed at educating American readers—the field of more contemporary Vietnamese American literature transcends topics of war and spans across different genres (Janette, "Vietnamese American Literature" 384–6). In *This Is All I Choose to Tell* (2010), the first book-length treatise on Vietnamese American literature, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud underscores the impact of 1994, the year Bill Clinton lifted the trade embargo against Vietnam. This substantially eased the upholding of transnational ties and promoted the visibility of Vietnamese American cultural productions in the U.S. Rather than providing military discussions, authors of Vietnamese American memoirs, which became increasingly popular around that time, favor subjects of identity in their work and "take on the role of spokespersons for their community" (27). As mentioned above, this role may carry certain risks, yet its adoption is paramount for the creation of productive self-representations.

However, the war and its aftermath continue to be of consequence and remain relevant in twenty-first-century Vietnamese American fiction and memoirs, even if some authors do not remember the war themselves. Contemporary writers are members of the so-called 1.5 generation, who were born in Vietnam and fled to the U.S. at a young age, and the second generation. Their continued engagement with the war highlights the importance of investigating transgenerational trauma. In the present day, the Vietnamese American diaspora

amounts to around two million people, who continue to give rise to numerous literary productions written in English.

In this context, a more recent milestone for Vietnamese American literature was the year 2016, in which Viet Thanh Nguyen's debut novel *The Sympathizer* (2015) received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. After Bengali American writer Jhumpa Lahiri's triumph in 2000, Nguyen was only the second Asian American writer to secure the award. Following this victory, one of his short stories was included in the most recent Norton Anthology of American Literature, the tenth edition published in 2022. Notwithstanding the problems and politics of canonization and of literary accolades, the significance of this success for the visibility and popularity of the field of Vietnamese American literature cannot be overstated.⁵

Today, Viet Thanh Nguyen is viewed as one of the most prominent Vietnamese American authors of literary fiction, although he has also published extensively as an academic on ethnic literature and, more particularly, Asian American as well as Vietnamese American literature. For Nguyen, the war is at the center of Vietnamese American literature, its thematization sometimes overt, other times covert: "Vietnamese American literature that avoids a direct confrontation with the war is growing slowly, . . . but even here the literature's refusal to discuss the war has to be seen in light of the war itself" ("What Is?" 61). While the war cannot be ignored, the topic is surpassed in many examples of contemporary Vietnamese American literature. Moreover, Pelaud cautions against simplistic approaches that focus solely on connections to the war: "The association of Vietnamese American literature only with the Viet Nam War is problematic because it obscures the complexities of hybridity, the subjects' postcolonial, refugee, immigrant of color, and transna-

5 This does not only apply to literary fiction; there was a discernible surge in academic pursuits as well. For me personally, this means that the decision to focus my dissertation on Vietnamese American refugee literature—a choice substantiated through the formulation of a first project proposal draft in 2019—was supported within the German academic context, although the topic was (and often is) still considered niche. However, a colleague with experience in a similar setting mentioned that before 2016, their research in Vietnamese American literature was not considered significant at their institute, and only gained acceptance following Nguyen's success.

tional experiences, and therefore misses a large part of what is being said and presented in the texts" (*This Is All* 132). In this book, the refugee angle is foregrounded, thus the subject matter of war cannot be avoided in the analysis of the selected material. Simultaneously, due attention will be accorded to other pertinent aspects, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the literature.

Memoirs and fictional narratives by Vietnamese American authors have not only received attention from the field of literary studies but also from anthropology. Ever since at least the late 1980s, when the Writing Culture debate (Clifford and Marcus) disputed the inevitable artificiality of texts and the resulting challenge to the supposed non-fictionality of ethnography, anthropologists have turned to literary theory and texts to provide cross-cultural understanding. The call for taking inspiration from alternative genres in the production of ethnographical knowledge has frequently been answered in regard to autobiographical texts, whereas research on purely fictional texts from the perspective of the social sciences remains rare.

In the Vietnamese American context, for example, Deborah Reed-Danahay explores memoirs to complement the ethnographic fieldwork she conducted with Vietnamese Americans in Texas between 2005 and 2008. In the analysis of her ethnographic material (605–7), she compares different conceptions of 'home' and 'homeland' among participants across generations and investigates refugees' cosmopolitan and/or diasporic aspirations. Whereas children who fled at a younger age might not remember Vietnam as it once was, refugees of the first generation are faced with the reality that their homeland as they once knew it lives on only in their imagination. After the communist takeover, South Vietnam—which was a young nation to begin with—ceased to exist as an official nation-state, making it impossible to properly return there. Following Stéphane Dufoix's categorization of four diaspora types defined through their relationship to the homeland, Reed-Danahay identifies the Vietnamese American diaspora as "a political space in which the current regime of the home country is not accepted as legitimate" (604). This represents the 'antagonistic mode,' in which the present nation-state is opposed (605). This stance is frequently encountered

among diasporic first-generation refugees, whose anti-communism typically thwarts cosmopolitan sensibilities. Nevertheless, a nostalgic longing for their ancestral land prevails despite the regime change, and many of Reed-Danahay's first-generation research partners express a wish to eventually return to Vietnam, either alive or to be buried there.

In that way, members of the first generation have a sense of belonging to South Vietnam as it once was and locate it as their home, despite their ongoing separation from it. This was different for other generations, as Reed-Danahay discovered during her ethnographic study: "While many of the first generation felt that the former South Vietnam was home, their children had no clear answer as to where home is located" (606). People of the 1.5 generation generally find themselves in spaces in-between, unable to pinpoint any one home, and feel neither fully accepted in America nor able to connect to current Vietnam. Contrarily, second-generation Vietnamese Americans, unlike their parents, can be viewed as "cosmopolitan subject[s]" (607) who seem to face fewer difficulties in negotiating their different identities. Even if they no longer speak Vietnamese, they consider themselves members of a Vietnamese diaspora, although they are at home in the multiculturalism of American social circles.

In a further step, Reed-Danahay employs autobiographical works of members of the 1.5 generation that mirror her own findings (608–14). The two discussed texts, Trinh Do's and Bich Minh Nguyen's memoirs, start with escape from Vietnam, continue with arrival in the U.S. where the narrators adjust to their new surroundings, and end with return visits to Vietnam. These accounts reveal tensions between cosmopolitan and diasporic ambitions of refugee children, who "desire a more global form of belonging linked to possibilities of transcending the homeland/host nation dichotomy but also display ambivalence about longings for, and the possibility of, a return to 'home'" (613). Reed-Danahay considers the works she consults as diasporic 'autoethnographies' that "combine autobiography with ethnographic perspectives through stories not only about individual selves, but also about wider sociopolitical events and forces" (608).

Acting as sources of ethnographic knowledge, such works reflect and foster the development of collective memory. Hence, Reed-Danahay regards it as “useful to supplement ethnographic research on diasporic populations with considerations of their cultural productions through memoir” (614) and calls for more scholarly attention to such cultural productions.

Reed-Danahay’s focus remains on memoirs, yet in her conclusion, she speaks generally of “modes of cultural expression” (615), the plural form suggesting the value of considering other literary genres, too. Given the authenticity discourse surrounding ethnic literature, I argue that the Vietnamese American fictions that I consider in my analysis may similarly provide ethnographic insights without being reduced to this function. Some of the works are semi-autobiographical, yet all of them are interested in the “wider sociopolitical events and forces” (Reed-Danahay 608) of Vietnamese American refugee-hood. Freed from certain constraints, fictional representations may prove even more adept at imagining the intricacies of refugeehood. In this interpretation, they do more than provide sociological data—it is about their content *and* form.

As a cultural anthropologist, Reed-Danahay favors content and underscores the practical way in which the memoirs complement her ethnographic study. The viewing of cultural productions as sources of alternative ethnographic knowledge is significant given the urgent need to center self-representations, which may rectify or enrich media (mis)representations of refugees. However, as a literary scholar, I am interested in the aesthetic reach of the selected Vietnamese American novels and short stories as well as in how they not only illustrate refugeehood but complicate it. In the following chapters, I do not merely discuss the experiences that the works relate, but also examine how and to what effects these experiences are presented in these literary fictions.

After all, contemporary Vietnamese American writers demand attention as literary professionals and not merely as social commentators. Their 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” (Janette, “Vietnamese American Literature” 386). Anthologies display the heterogeneity of Vietnamese American writing—most prominently, *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry & Prose* (1998), which was reprinted in the form of a 25th-anniversary edition in 2023. Many other collaborative efforts have led to increased visibility of Vietnamese American literature in recent years. For example, the Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network (DVAN), which was co-founded by Isabelle Thuy Pelaud and Viet Thanh Nguyen, “uplifts and fosters diasporic Vietnamese and Southeast Asian literary voices” (DVAN, “Mission”), spotlighting Vietnamese American and other Vietnamese diasporic productions through events, the online publication *diACRITICS*, workshops, residencies, and other opportunities.

These bustling cultural activities reveal and generate a vast field of 21st-century Vietnamese American literary productions, diversified in style and theme. These works attest that ‘Vietnamese American literature’ does not have to explore refugee imaginaries only. In this book, however, the spotlight is on Vietnamese American refugeehood, meaning that the selected works of interest deal specifically with the Vietnamese American refugee experience in one way or another. I consider these novels and short stories to be counter-narratives in the form of ‘contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature.’ In the following subchapter, I first expand on the broader concept of ‘refugee literature’ and then return to the notion of ‘contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature’ in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of the genre’s salient features.

Refugee Literature and Critical Refugee Studies

As outlined in the previous chapter, Vietnamese American literature is a diverse body of literature frequently seen as a subcategory of Asian American literature, which encompasses various ethnic literatures. Furthermore, Vietnamese American literature is often

grouped under various labels such as ‘migrant literature,’ ‘immigrant literature,’ ‘diasporic literature,’ or ‘transnational literature,’ to name only a few. Indeed, some Vietnamese American writers might see themselves as former refugees or im/migrants rather than centering their refugee identity; after all, most of them have become naturalized U.S. citizens and no longer hold their legal refugee status, or were born in the U.S. to begin with. While there is no internationally recognized legal definition for the term ‘migrant,’ Article 1 of the UNHCR’s 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a ‘refugee’ as

any person who . . . owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (Convention and Protocol 14)

The rights established by the treaty generally remain in effect today. The legal text, however, puts a temporal constraint on official refugee status, defining it as starting with leaving the country of one’s nationality and ending with obtaining the citizenship of another nation-state.

However, being a refugee is about more than formal definitions. While passport affiliations may switch from one day to the next, refugee identities may outlast legal delimitations—even if the common American melting pot ideology prefers to ignore such differences and forget the past. Viet Thanh Nguyen’s consistent advocacy for choosing to call himself a refugee is oft-cited in this context:

I was once a refugee, although no one would mistake me for being a refugee now. Because of this, I insist on being called a refugee, since the temptation to pretend that I am not a refugee is strong. It would be so much easier to call myself an immigrant, to pass myself off

as belonging to a category of migratory humanity that is less controversial, less demanding, and less threatening than the refugee. (Introduction 11)

In this interpretation, refugeehood is conceptualized as a process, a continuous status with no fixed point of arrival. As a—in legal terms—former refugee, Nguyen emphasizes the significance of maintaining this refugee angle, even if it were less complicated to ignore history and buy into the myth of the U.S. as an immigrant nation where people come to pursue their dreams rather than as a consequence of military interconnections. Furthermore, Nguyen notes that there is a “paradox [of refugees] being either invisible or hypervisible, but rarely just visible” (15). Despite or because of all these difficulties, “the refugee position is a choice and a strategy” (August, *The Refugee Aesthetic* 132) adopted by Nguyen and others. At the same time, Nguyen acknowledges in his memoir that, in a political climate that suggests the incompatibility of being both an American *and* a refugee,⁶ many Vietnamese Americans may prefer to call themselves immigrants: “Refugees claim to be immigrants because Americans understand the immigrant typology” (*A Man of Two Faces* 157). Accordingly, the immigrant label may function as a method for gaining acceptance in the U.S.

Nguyen expands on this typology by declaring a list of steps “for anyone wanting to write their own immigrant saga for the American and Western marketplace” (*A Man of Two Faces* 157). The five points are presented in evidently sardonic and exaggerated tones, yet they are familiar to readers of immigrant literature; as a white European who has enjoyed many novels that follow the same structure, I have frequently encountered the aspects illustrated in Nguyen’s satirical instruction, and their accentuation serves as a reminder not to for-

6 As an example, Nguyen describes how, following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Republican president George W. Bush and civil rights leader Jesse Jackson expressed indignation when reporters labeled the tens of thousands of displaced individuals as ‘refugees’; both the right and the left insisted that these people were American citizens, and not refugees, insinuating that the two categories are mutually exclusive—“[i]t seems that refugees have succeeded in bringing a racially divided AMERICA™ together” (*A Man of Two Faces* 155).

get for whom these stories are tailored. Moreover, Nguyen demonstrates how these narratives, instead of representing plurality, ultimately contribute to reinforcing the United States as, “for all its flaws and challenges, . . . THE GREATEST COUNTRY ON EARTH” (159). Since I will return to Nguyen’s five steps to writing an immigrant saga throughout my book, I will quote them in their entirety:

STEP ONE

Hard life in the old world—poverty, war, patriarchy, homophobia, religious persecution, dictatorial regime, etc. If AMERICA™ had a hand in stoking any of the turmoil, do not mention, or downplay, or point out that other countries are worse.

STEP TWO

Daunting challenges in the new world—language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, racism, and condescension, as well as starting at or near the economic bottom, above many Black people (sometimes visible) and Native people (usually unmentioned). Gentle criticism of American racism and capitalism is permitted, even embraced, so long as it is not explicitly decolonial or Marxist and so long as Step Four (see below) is achieved.

STEP THREE

Generational conflict—parents don’t understand their Americanized children; American-born or American-raised children don’t get their old-world parents. Describe generational conflict as the result of personal differences, familial tensions, and cultural conflict, but not as the direct intimate consequence of colonization with the resulting upheavals of millions, events that AMERICA™ has often instigated.

STEP FOUR

Reconciliation—your grandparents have achieved the AMERICAN DREAM™, and if they didn't, your parents did, and if they didn't, you did. For self-published books, self-help books, and the memoirs of people who are not writers: state reconciliation baldly. Flag-waving is acceptable. For writers hoping to win literary prizes, express reconciliation with great subtlety, mixed with regret and melancholy. Flag-waving: less acceptable.

STEP FIVE

Remember that your people are only the backdrop for your personal struggle to become an individual, someone who has shed your ethnic, cultural, or group heritage as a political identity (although keeping that heritage as a cultural identity is acceptable). Your only political identity is as an American, which is, paradoxically, synonymous with being an individual. Not with being part of a collective. (157–8)

The two terms AMERICA™ and the AMERICAN DREAM™ appear in caps and with a trademark throughout *A Man of Two Faces*, emphasizing their constructedness. Steps Four and Five together “compose the Hollywood ending, where all that has gone wrong is set right, where the individual is affirmed” (158). As bonus points, Nguyen adds: “As an individual, serve as your people’s ambassador. . . . Assume, explicitly or implicitly, that your audience is white” (159). In contrast to this recognizable script, which Nguyen presents sarcastically, he in fact “write[s] against this immigrant saga” (160) in his own refugee writing and breaks, as other contemporary refugee writers do, with the expectations of the literary market.

In the specific Vietnamese American context, Nguyen and others who depart from traditional immigrant writing conventions are perceived as “a new group of Southeast Asian American artists who are embracing the refugee identity as a transformative position,” and whose work “provides great insight into the *process* of writ-

ing as a refugee and the reflexive development of refugee aesthetic styles” (August, “Displaced Subjects” 60). Commenting on this kind of contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature, Timothy K. August argued in 2020 that the scholarly and artistic landscape had changed over the course of the first two decades of the new century, and that “one can observe a profound change in the readership” (60). Today, these works—as well as other refugee literatures—are not only read by white audiences, but also by members of the community.

It is in this context that I see the works selected for analysis as examples of ‘refugee literature’ rather than ‘immigrant literature.’ Not all of the works break quite as radically from convention, and some may feature elements of what Nguyen called out as traditional components of the “immigrant saga.” Nevertheless, all of the selected novels and short stories pointedly revolve around refugee perspectives and offer largely non-linear narratives that question the nation-state while resisting straightforward, reconciliatory endings. In the following, I will provide an overview of salient features and contemporary conceptualizations of ‘refugee literature’ as it pertains to literary studies and elaborate on contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature in particular.

In *The Routledge Handbook of Refugee Narratives*, Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi and Vinh Nguyen’s introduction tackles the definition of the broad category of ‘refugee narratives’ as “stories of and formed in displaced movement, that cross borders and bring material and immaterial things around the world and back,” emphasizing “the different ways refugees are imbricated with narrative or how they are understood and produced *through* narrative, whether it be legal, journalistic, artistic, literary, or personal” (1). In literary studies, refugee memoirs, novels, short stories, poetry, drama, and other writings that create and engage with these narratives are of particular interest. While many interpretations of the extensive body of refugee literature include any form of literature about refugees, written by refugees and non-refugees alike, I will focus on works that can be read as refugee self-representations. Furthermore, while my time-frame includes contemporary works written in the twenty-first cen-

tury, refugee literature has been around for longer, dating back to the early twentieth century; as Hadji Bakara notes, it can be considered “the product of and response to a new kind of European nation state” (289). Discussing refugees means discussing the borders of nation-states, and “this historical co-emergence of the nation and the refugee tells us at least one very important thing: refugee writers have always been special witnesses to the shifting grounds of political life” (289), underlining refugee literature’s political potential.

Despite this considerable history, the scholarly attention in literary studies to literature examining displacement as ‘refugee literature’ is relatively new and follows an earlier preference for the notion of ‘exile literature.’ As B. Venkat Mani explains, intellectuals who fled the Nazi regime endorsed the designation of ‘exile’ rather than that of ‘refugee,’ which led to a biased “distinction between the exile and the refugee, the nobleman or political exile and the working-class person” (29). Against its title’s invitation to be interpreted as ‘refugee literature,’ Hannah Arendt’s seminal essay, “We Refugees” (1943), begins by refuting the term: “In the first place, we don’t like to be called ‘refugees.’ We ourselves call each other ‘new-comers’ or ‘immigrants’” (110). Literary studies adopted this hierarchy of terminology:

In literary studies, this translates into proliferation of research on “Exile Literature,” whereas “Refugee Literature” stands for handouts, pamphlets, and information booklets As politics progresses, literary studies become more regressive in their distinctions between the terms. Even in Postcolonial theory, the difference between an articulate exile and an inarticulate or silent subaltern refugee is forever sealed. (Venkat Mani 29)

In the twenty-first century, these perceptions resonate in common media representations, but contemporary refugee writers “have reclaimed the refugee’s authority to challenge nationalism and national sovereignty as the only legitimate grounds of political community” (Bakara 291). Simultaneously, there has been a noticeable shift in scholarly approaches from literary studies and beyond; most

strikingly, the field of critical refugee studies seeks to “*imbue the term ‘refugee’ with social and political critiques that call into question the relationship between war, race, and violence, then and now*” (Espiritu, “Critical Refugee Study” 427). This interdisciplinary field, also inhabited by contributors from literary studies who engage with refugee literature, re-theorizes the refugee position beyond victimization and emphasizes the critical and creative potential of refugee subjectivities.

In his genealogy of refugee writing, Arthur Rose recognizes negative identification, evident from the outset in the first sentence of “We Refugees,” as a crucial connecting thread linking modern refugee literature from Arendt to Nguyen. Rose writes: “If Nguyen does not avoid the refugee label, neither should his active endorsement of it . . . fully detach from the structure of negative identification. Even as he identifies with his refugee identity, he disidentifies with a total immersion in that identity” (61). Given Nguyen’s and others’ unwavering commitment to the refugee label, Rose’s interpretation appears somewhat paternalistic. Indeed, while refugee writers reject the unfavorable connotations that the term ‘refugee’ has held ever since the early twentieth century, it sounds misleading to frame this active reappropriation of the refugee identity as negative identification. Additionally, contemporary writers might “disidentify with a total immersion” in the refugee identity, but I see this in the context of acknowledging the diversity of the category—which does not exclude the option of embodying some form of refugee identification rather than negative identification. Contrasting Arendt’s “conservative structure of refugee storytelling” (*Refugee Aesthetics* 16) with twenty-first-century refugee perspectives, August detects further contrasts between refugee literature then and now. As has also been mentioned in regard to Vietnamese American literature as well as ethnic and immigrant literature in general, concerns around reception have “compel[led] refugees to heavily tailor their stories to the needs and desires of their audience, with contextual demands requiring that these accounts be marked by stylized patterns of authenticity” (15). More recently, however, refugee writers have increasingly subverted external demands and counteracted “a

long history of their narratives being used by colonial institutions, refugee organizations, and/or collaborative autobiographies co-written by white authors” (16), thereby regaining narrative control.

This shift did not only bring to focus previously overlooked refugee narratives but simultaneously worked with and developed new refugee aesthetics. Similarly, it is productive to think of “refugee literature as writing beyond crisis . . . that . . . cannot be studied out of its material context, while at the same time stressing the fact that it cannot be reduced to it” (Gallien 743). Even as producers of refugee literature command their storylines, they remain attentive to “a tension between the ethics and aesthetics of making refugee experience visible” (M. Nguyen and Fung 2). As Marguerite Nguyen and Catherine Fung indicate, humanitarian ‘refugee ethics’ is aimed at eliciting quick solutions from the international community and establishes a “frame of reference [that] casts refugees as abject victims and downplays the particularities of refugee situations, including nation-states’ accountability and specific refugee histories and politics” (2). In contrast, refugee cultural practices like twenty-first-century refugee literature productively combine ‘refugee ethics’ with ‘refugee aesthetics’ to render these particularities visible. This approach “can reveal how the complex histories, geopolitics, and memories of refugee migrations are variously obscured and brought into view in ways that might not be apparent in what is explicitly said” (2). As such, refugee literature can complement the international discourse on refugees in relevant ways and influence societal attitudes toward refugees.

Along with these political dimensions, what are the distinguishing features that make up contemporary refugee literature? Answers to this may be found in special issues on the topic of refugee literature(s) of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (2018) and the *Journal of Narrative Theory* (2020), or in recently published volumes like *Refugee Imaginaries* (2020), *Refugee Genres* (2022), or *The Routledge Handbook of Refugee Narratives* (2023). For the purpose of this book, I want to address components mentioned by Yogita Goyal in her article (2020) on the refugee novel and by Timothy K. August in his conceptualizations in *The Refugee Aesthetic* (2021). Goyal argues that

the refugee novel—and I would argue similarly in regard to the short stories under analysis—“reshapes or makes legible historical experiences that are still unfolding . . . [and] imagines futurity, inscribes memory, arranges time and place, or refuses the spectacular immediacy of traumatic images of refugees in favor of giving them voice and subjectivity” (248). She expands upon the idea of refraining from sensationalism, which contrasts the refugee novel with common media representations of refugees: “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). August similarly broaches the subject of how contemporary refugee literature can be distinguished from dominant outside representations, identifying “a collection of refugee aesthetics fronted by refugees or their descendants [that] is, at the moment, best characterized by narratives that foreground interiority, present multiple refugee subject positions, and reflexively comment upon the ways refugee lives are customarily represented and their expressions received” (4). To sum up, both Goyal and August contemplate refugee literature’s empathetic attention to a broad range of sometimes conflicting refugee angles, its consideration of both the collective *and* the individual, and its concern with countering outside representations of refugees with literary (self-)representation of forced migration.

Even if expressed differently, some key aspects of refugee literature that Goyal and August highlight overlap in some ways with those that Viet Thanh Nguyen dismisses in his refusal to write a typical successful immigrant saga. Psychological depth often means discovering what Nguyen discusses in Steps One and Two—challenges in the “old” and the “new” world. The exploration of refugee subjectivities also reveals ambivalence towards Step Four, reconciliation; while the myth of the American Dream is rarely confronted without criticism, it still remains a pervasive idea that many strive for. Furthermore, Nguyen’s third step—generational conflict—surfaces in all of the selected works of contemporary Vietnamese American

refugee literature and is connected to the key aspects of examining the relationship between the individual and the group, as well as focusing on different perspectives as characters from different generations take over the narrative.

However, there are several important factors that more clearly distinguish contemporary refugee literature—including works that are not as radical in their rebuttal to follow conventions—from Nguyen’s sarcastic list. Step Five, the focus on individualism and adopting a political identity that is decidedly only American, is disrupted: the literature is about individuals as well as the community, and the political identities that crystallize over the course of the narratives are usually hybrid rather than strictly American. Moreover, the emphasis that both Goyal and August put on representation, against the grain, disqualifies these works from the bonus point of catering to white audiences—instead, refugee literature provides self-representations, subverts expectations, and avoids sensationalism. Generally speaking, even though contemporary refugee literature may introduce Steps One to Four, its critical reflection regarding representation leads to a distinct approach to these familiar elements of immigrant literature. Refugee literature avoids the absolute black-and-white thinking that summarily rejects the “old” world in celebration of the “new” one—there is no simplified “good” vs. “bad” narrative, and the Hollywood ending, which portrays the U.S. as the sole great nation, is put on hold.

In the remainder of the chapter, I will return to contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature as an example of refugee literature, and elaborate on its distinctive features (although some of them may be present in other refugee literatures as well). Contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature uses the generation gap trope not to make simplistic arguments concerning the clash between traditional first-generation parents and the Americanized second-generation children they no longer understand, but to complicate the notion of home in the refugee context. Even in examples of Vietnamese American novels and short stories that are not overly political, notions of home and homeland are prominent. Looking at both autobiographical and fictional works by Vietnamese American

writers, Pelaud argues that different generations are distinguished primarily by their articulation of home:

More emotionally and politically detached from Viet Nam than those of the first generation, these narratives [by writers of the 1.5 generation] articulate a new concept of home. Identity is depicted to a different degree in terms of movement, one that goes back and forth between North America and Viet Nam, either by actual travel there or by acts of memory, imagined or recollected. (*This Is All* 37)

This coincides with Reed-Danahay's anthropological research, discussed in the previous chapter—while the first generation's homeland rests in nostalgic memory, the second generation is often prone to cosmopolitan loyalties, and the perspective of the 1.5 generation provides an ambivalent position in-between. The discrepancies across generations show not only that refugees' relationships to home differ but also that these relationships, which are crucial for shaping a Vietnamese American identity, are in perpetual flux. Furthermore, tracing physical and metaphorical mobilities opens further avenues for investigation, which I will elaborate on in the next subchapter.

Nevertheless, in many cases, these distinctions cannot solely be attributed to generational variance. Instead, the conditions under which the characters escaped Vietnam prove to be far more decisive for the formation of refugee identities than generational differences, which the analysis of selected works that I term 'contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature' will reveal. Except for two authors of the second generation—Aimee Phan and Eric Nguyen—all writers whose works will be discussed in detail were born in Vietnam but escaped to the U.S. at a young age, just like most of their narrators and characters, thereby providing various 1.5-generation standpoints. In addition, these novels and short stories broaden the view on Vietnamese American refugeehood by including the perspectives of people who fled as adults as well as Vietnamese Americans, Vietnamese, and Americans who have never left the country they grew up in. The narratives analyzed, all writ-

ten in recent years, are scattered across time and space, ranging from memories from before the end of the war in Vietnam, to the early days of arriving on new shores, to later returning to a transformed homeland. However, unlike memoirs, the fictional storylines are not always presented in chronological order, which reflects the fragmented nature of refugee lives.

This leads to a further aspect that I consider a salient feature of Vietnamese American refugee literature—ambivalence not only of content but likewise of form. Many refugees do not have easy answers to questions about their own and their family's past, making it difficult to seamlessly reconstruct their trajectories. This is echoed in the form of Vietnamese American refugee literature, which refuses to provide straightforward explanations in chronological order. Even in examples where some kind of temporal progression is followed, readers do not get the full story, only fragments, resulting in many unresolved gaps. The links between such fragments are, in Long Le-Khac's⁷ words, "invited but never quite realized"; this refusal "withholds from readers the comfort of believing that life stories disjointed by warfare can be smoothly reconstructed" (122–3) and "confronts readers with the difficult task of imagining political communities that address rather than smooth over such ruptures" (123). These narrative gaps as well as the open-endedness that characterizes the Vietnamese American novels and short stories that I discuss provoke unsettling uncertainty. Unlike Hollywood

7 In his article, Le-Khac elaborates on these points specifically in regard to Aimee Phan's story cycle, *We Should Never Meet* (2004), out of which I will analyze the final short story in the fourth chapter. Le-Khac approaches Phan's collection of short stories as a transnarrative story cycle, which "emphasizes narrative gaps" (112) and creates "meaning from one story to another, across and beyond the boundaries of individual stories" (109). Le-Khac, to whose article I will return when discussing one of Phan's short stories in particular, argues that due to its transnarrative features, the form of the story cycle is particularly well-suited to frame transnational lives. Phan's *We Should Never Meet* is the only short story cycle under inspection in this book, which is why I will not elaborate on this form. However, I suggest that due to fragmentation and the consequent gaps, the novels—and, even though they are less obviously interconnected than Phan's story cycle, also the short story collections—that I consider examples of 'contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature' similarly work as transnarrative texts.

movies that serve satisfying and conclusive finales, contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature lacks closure.

Commenting on this absence of resolution, August differentiates works like *The Sympathizer*, which deny readers their appealing happy ending, from what he calls 'refugee-genre fiction,' whose "comfortable ending lets the reader off the hook, turning refugee literature from a socially urgent force into a palatable form of genre fiction. This refugee-genre fiction enables those outside of the refugee community to briefly contemplate refugee lives but cast the book aside once the narrative ends" (August, *The Refugee Aesthetic* 127). In contrast, contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature avoids this type of sugarcoating, instead often ending ambivalently without tying up loose ends or explaining gaps. This promotes more sustainable reflection on refugee positions, which require political and social circumstances to be confronted rather than concealed.

Such reflections on form, representation, and the relationship between the individual and the community are interconnected with the notion of collective memory. As Reed-Danahay mentions with regard to memoirs, Vietnamese American fictional refugee narratives contemplate and have the potential to generate new forms of collective memory. Collective memory—negotiating individual memories with the broader social contexts of a shared past—is pivotal to the study of Asian American literature in general and often emerges in the form of Foucauldian 'countermemory' to challenge dominant discourses from below (V. T. Nguyen, "Memory" 154). In the Vietnamese American context of engaging with the memory of the war in Vietnam, the analyzed short stories and novels produce countermemory that shifts the focus to alternate historiographies. Unlike mainstream remembrance in which American soldiers and student protestors are the main actors, the countermemory that these fictions produce centers on the Vietnamese American refugee experience.

Countermemory and collective memory are connected to violence—in some conceptualizations, collective memory is presented as "a traumatic relationship with the past in which the group identifies itself as a victim through its recognition of a shared experi-

ence of violence" (Fassin and Rechtman 16). Even in approaches that focus on the group's agency in these processes rather than its endorsement of victimization, the shaping of collective memory in the form of countermemory evokes the notion of confronting traumatic memories and transgenerational trauma.⁸ Processing the past means returning to uncomfortable memories that the mind often tries to bury. Children of refugees, even if they did not escape themselves or cannot remember their flight, inherit their parents' trauma, either consciously or subconsciously. In either case, "[g]iven the scale of so many historical traumas," as Viet Thanh Nguyen argues, "the past can only be worked through together, in collectivity and community, in struggle and solidarity" (*Nothing Ever Dies* 16). Nguyen extends the aspect of solidarity in refugee memory and refugee writing not only to the Vietnamese diaspora but to displaced people worldwide: "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 17–8). This reveals that collective refugee memory is as much about imagining a more just future as it is about recovering the past from a marginalized position. Furthermore, past as well as present trauma is addressed, "for it is today's material inequalities that help to shape mnemonic inequities" (*Nothing Ever Dies* 16). In this way, trauma can be read productively "as the condition that makes visible the relationship between war, race, and violence" (Espiritu, "Critical Refugee Study" 422) instead of an immobilizing force.

As a preliminary step, I want to summarize the key features of contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature that can

⁸ Tackling transgenerational trauma in the context of forced displacement recalls the context of the Shoah, whose memory is by some read as "a paradigm for trauma" (Fassin and Rechtman 18). I will not elaborate here on the similarities and differences of memory-making and processing trauma across historically and geographically diverse refugee diasporas, but I will take up memory theorist Marianne Hirsch's influential concept of 'postmemory' in Chapter Three. Hirsch develops the term in the discussion of Holocaust survivors and their children in particular to refer to "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" (5).

be found in the works I will present in the main part. Building on approaches to refugee literature developed by Viet Thanh Nguyen, Yogita Goyal, Timothy K. August, Hadji Bakara, and Long Le-Khac, I consider contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature a diverse genre that foregrounds Vietnamese American refugee subjectivity and identity without neglecting the material conditions and political contexts of displacement. These works question rather than affirm the nation-state and perform countermemorial work by revising mainstream historiography of the war in Vietnam. Furthermore, the literature is characterized by the following key features: diversity of viewpoints; focus on the dynamics between the individual and the community; ambivalence in content and form; and reflection on representation. I will go into more detail about these aspects in my analysis, where I will demonstrate that these complexities necessitate an intersectional approach that considers critical interconnections of class, gender, and race.⁹ Arguably, refugee literature may be produced by anyone, but given this framework's focus on self-representation, I will consider works not only about but also *by* Vietnamese American refugees and their children. Although the literature has become diversified, ethnic authorship remains significant in light of the ongoing persistence of what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls 'narrative scarcity.'

Contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature as outlined above counteracts prevailing conceptions of refugees as powerless, docile, or even dangerous individuals, and hence contributes to the interdisciplinary field of critical refugee studies by offering valuable literary interventions for the discussion of refugee subjectivities. Countering the "crisis in the representation of refugees," critical refugee studies "gravitates instead toward art by refugees and, most resoundingly, to more private moments of grief, interiority, and

9 'Intersectionality' as a concept "stands for an analytical programmatic in policy contexts focusing on multiple discrimination and vulnerabilities" (Knapp 255) and was famously coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in a 1989 article in which she addresses the marginalization of Black women. In gender studies and feminist theory in particular, it has since been used to examine the interconnections between structures of oppression, in particular, "the categorical triad of 'race-class-gender'" (Knapp 249).

reflection" (CRSC 112). This field of study has become more visible and influential in recent years through the efforts of the Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC), "a group of interdisciplinary scholars who advocate for and envision a world where refugee rights are human rights" ("Who We Are"). The collective was co-founded by Yến Lê Espiritu, whose work addresses the Vietnamese American context and who has called for a redirection of the traditional field of refugee studies for the past two decades. In their jointly authored introduction to the field, the Critical Refugee Studies Collective offers an effective reframing of the term 'refugee':

Refugees are human beings forcibly displaced within or outside of their land of origin as a result of persecution, conflict, war, conquest, settler/colonialism, militarism, occupation, empire, and environmental and climate-related disasters, regardless of their legal status. Refugees can be self-identified and are often unrecognized within the limited definitions proffered by international and state laws. (72)

While "fear" drives the UNHCR's definition of a refugee, the CRSC's redefinition counters the victimizing language of legal and humanitarian definitions by foregrounding the refugee as a human being first and foremost, echoing the emphasis found in refugee literature.

Moreover, the methodologies endorsed by critical refugee studies are helpful for the analysis of contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature. Specifically, the notions of 'storytelling' or 're-storying,' which are "particularly important for forging a different and needed analytic on refugees" (CRSC 22), parallel twenty-first-century refugee literature's aim to provide stories against dominant outside representations. Furthermore, an intersectional approach may benefit from "examining the intersections between private grief and public commemoration, the listening for unsaid things by relying on other senses such as feelings and emotions, and the looking for the hidden political forces within the site of intimate domestic and familial interaction" (23). The collective introduces this feminist approach as 'Feminist Refugee Epistemology,' which "resists the objectification of refugees and their bodies and eschews rep-

representations of refugees in terms of the spectacular, the iconic, and the figural” (23). This resonates with previously mentioned interpretations of refugee literature as powerful representations that go beyond sensationalism.

The name of the CRSC’s introduction to critical refugee studies—*Departures* (2022)—refers to the genre’s focus on “both the act of leaving and a divergence from a usual course of action” (CRSC 11). As has become visible in this and the previous subchapter, contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature similarly departs from more traditional refugee representations while centering refugees’ various physical and metaphorical mobilities. Escapes from the homeland, perilous oceanic mobilities, social mobility in the U.S., and returns to Vietnam are only some of the examples addressed in the novels and short stories. At the same time, the literature problematizes crucial moments of refugee immobility—such as containment in refugee camps and centers. Following the analyzed works’ engagement with entangled politics of im/mobility, the next subchapter will offer a short overview of the interdisciplinary field of mobility studies. In particular, I will turn to mobility perspectives in the humanities and elaborate on why a mobilities approach may be beneficial for the study of contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature.

Before closing, I want to quickly address a pertinent issue concerning Vietnamese American refugee literature’s political potential. The analyzed novels and short stories do not only comment on and question political interconnections but also offer alternatives for a more just refugee future. However, Viet Thanh Nguyen’s following call is a reminder that merely consuming refugee stories is not enough if the goal is to stimulate productive change regarding the conditions and perceptions of refugees:

Just because we have listened to that story or read that book does not mean that anything has changed for the voiceless. Readers and writers should not deceive themselves that literature changes the world. Literature changes the world of readers and writers, but literature does not change the world until people get out of their chairs,

go out in the world, and do something to transform the conditions of which the literature speaks. Otherwise literature will just be a fetish for readers and writers, allowing them to think that they are hearing the voiceless when they are really only hearing the writer's individual voice. (Introduction 20)

With this in mind, I insist on the literature's political capacity without romanticizing it as an all-encompassing remedy for current injustices. From the perspective of literary studies, it is not my goal to investigate the correlation between listening to the literature and instigating actual changes. Nevertheless, I trust in the literature's efficacy and want to argue that these stories offer refugee self-representation and show *how* the texts work towards inviting critical reflection that may prompt readers to act beyond their armchairs.

Mobility Perspectives in the Humanities and Beyond

Mobility is more than mere movement from one location to the next. Rather, as influential mobility scholar and geographer Tim Cresswell argues, mobility is “socially produced motion” (*On the Move* 3) and, “[i]f movement is the dynamic equivalent of location, then mobility is the dynamic equivalent of *place*” (3). Unlike abstract locations, place “has come to signify meaningful segments of space—locations imbued with meaning and power” (3).¹⁰ Similarly, then, mobility is movement infused with meaning and power, which can be analyzed via three interlinked aspects: first, physical movement, or “mobility

10 Throughout his work, Cresswell elaborates on the concepts of ‘place’ and ‘space.’ In his view, places are not fixed and an “alternative to mobility” (*On the Move* 2), but dynamic and “constantly made and remade by their fluid interactions with the world beyond” (“Place” 137). In some secondary literature that I rely on in this project, however, the two notions seem to be used interchangeably. In my own words, I see both immobility and mobility as integral to place, and employ the term ‘place’ for discussing parts of space that are made meaningful; *displacement* from one place does not rule out place-making elsewhere. In more abstract discussions—for example, in the subchapter discussing liminality and hybridity in relation to identity-making—I use the term ‘space.’

as a brute fact”; second, representational strategies, which assign meaning to mobility; and third, the practice, experience, and embodiment of movement—mobility “as a way of being in the world” (3–4). In short, mobility is entangled with movement, representation, and practice.

In the context of human displacement, refugees’ escapes rarely involve a straightforward movement from A to B; rather, their movements are repeatedly interrupted and restricted, and their arrival at intended destinations remains uncertain. The imagining of refugee mobility is molded by their representation—as discussed previously, refugees’ movements are frequently represented as forced and dangerous, which may have staggering consequences as it constructs refugees as dependent victims rather than active agents of their own whereabouts. Furthermore, refugees’ border-crossing activities and claims to legal status in the destination country are represented as a threat to the nation-state, portraying refugees’ arrivals as an invasion. In terms of the experience of movement, refugees’ embodied journeys are marked by precarity and a lack of comfort, which significantly influences representations of refugee movements. These complex entanglements of refugees’ movement, representation, and practice, constitute an uneven ‘politics of mobility’ (e.g. Cresswell, “Politics of Mobility”). In this book, my analysis of contemporary Vietnamese American refugee novels and short stories will pay close attention to refugees’ various mobilities. While the focus is on their representation in the literature, movement and experience are also considered in order to provide a more holistic understanding of refugee mobilities. In this subchapter, I will offer a very brief introduction to the interdisciplinary field of mobility studies, including mobilities perspectives from the humanities. Furthermore, I will elaborate on the six key constituent parts of mobility delineated by Tim Cresswell, a breakdown that I find helpful for the analysis of literary texts.

In departing from the view of sedentariness and fixity as the preferred ideal, proponents of the ‘mobilities turn’ and the influential ‘new mobilities paradigm’ (Sheller and Urry) have focused on the prevalence of mobility in everyday life and developed new

theoretical approaches to examine everything mobile. Alluding to this redirection, influential geographer and mobility scholar Tim Cresswell terms what he observes in his discipline and others as an emergent ‘nomadic metaphysics,’ which suggests positive associations with mobility. He contrasts this nomadic metaphysics to a ‘sedentarist metaphysics,’ which has significantly influenced twentieth-century perceptions of mobility as negative. Each of the two metaphysical ways of seeing the world—and, in particular, mobility and place—offers a different form of geographical imagination that “influences and informs thought and action” (*On the Move* 25): rather than reducing these imaginations to mere ideas, Cresswell views them as “active participants in the world of action” (21). Hence, moving the spotlight from sedentarism to nomadism does not only involve a shift in thinking about mobilities and mobile subjects, but may have various social, political, and ideological implications. For example, following a sedentarist logic, “[t]he mobility of others is captured, ordered, and emplaced in order to make it legible in a modern society” (55), which may lead to material consequences like the encampment of mobile subjects.

Cresswell borrows the notion of a sedentarist metaphysics from anthropologist Liisa Malkki, whose conceptualization of refugee identities as mobile and processual counters pervasive essentialist approaches to cultural identity. Malkki charts how “the widely held commonsense assumptions linking people to place, nation to territory, are not simply territorializing, but deeply metaphysical” (27) and hence, “sedentarist assumptions about attachment to place lead us to define displacement not as a fact about sociopolitical context, but rather as an inner, pathological condition of the displaced” (33). Furthermore, refugees’ border-crossing mobilities define them as people from outside: “The term is . . . heavily racialized because of a long history of negative representations of refugees as other, as being from somewhere else, as threateningly mobile” (Cresswell, *On the Move* 264–5). Refugees are created by mobilities and create new ones, which are often deemed menacing as they “run counter to established forms of power” (Cresswell, “Desire Lines” 7). In this way, a sedentarist metaphysics naturalizes roots rather than routes,

and constructs a pathological image of mobility as a threat to the nation-state. As a consequence, refugees' and other uprooted individuals' displacement is viewed as unnatural, they are read as potentially troubling Others, and their mental and moral characteristics are questioned.

Influenced by mobility-savvy theorists like Michel de Certeau, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, a nomadic metaphysics offers an alternative to a sedentarist metaphysics that demonizes displaced movers. In nomadic thought, "mobility is linked to a world of practice, of anti-essentialism, anti-foundationalism, and resistance to established forms of ordering and discipline" (Cresswell, *On the Move* 47). While "[t]he metaphor of the nomad is clearly pejorative" (33) in sedentarist thought, a nomadic metaphysics reconceptualizes the figure of the freedom-seeking nomad as a suitable metaphor to make sense of a mobile, fast-paced world. "In this new world," Cresswell contemplates, "a place such as the airport lounge, once seen as a reprehensible site of placelessness, becomes a contemporary symbol of flow, dynamism, and mobility" (44–5). In this context, Cresswell takes up Iain Chambers's use of the nomad metaphor: "As a simulated metropolis [the international airport] is inhabited by a community of modern nomads: a collective metaphor of cosmopolitan existence where the pleasure of travel is not only to arrive, but also not to be in any particular place" (Chambers 57–8). This reveals a crucial drawback of a nomadic metaphysics—the romanticization of mobility, which overlooks the fact that while moving from place to place may be a privilege for some, it serves as a survival strategy for others.

Addressing cultural mobilities in particular, new historicist Stephen Greenblatt reconciles sedentarist and nomadic conceptualizations of mobility by underscoring the analysis of 'rootedness' in his 'mobility studies manifesto.' Mobility and immobility are not binary opposites but need to be scrutinized together: "The paradox here is only apparent: it is impossible to understand mobility without also understanding the glacial weight of what appears bounded and static" (252). According to Greenblatt, "[a] study of cultural mobility that ignores the allure (and, on occasion, the entrapment) of the

firmly rooted simply misses the point" (252–3). In line with Greenblatt's recommendations, contemporary approaches in mobility studies avoid the glorification of mobility, advocating for a more nuanced understanding that recognizes the distinctions among different forms of mobility and immobility. Furthermore, some people's movements might be reliant on the relative immobility of others. This also requires "attention to the necessary spatial, infrastructural and institutional moorings that configure and enable mobilities" (Hannam et al. 3); for example, certain places and technologies might facilitate the mobility of some while governing the mobility or even reinforcing the immobility of others (Sheller and Urry 213). Accordingly, even though mobilities are frequently praised and even celebrated, it remains important to see them in context, scrutinize their relationships to immobilities, and consider them in differential as well as relational ways (Adey 83). To shed light on various dynamics surrounding entangled im/mobilities, Nina Glick Schiller and Noel B. Salazar promote a 'regimes-of-mobility approach' (7) that "neither normalises fixed relationships between people and territory nor naturalises movement" (6). Instead of prioritizing one or the other, they intend to "redirect the attention of mobility researchers back to the dynamic between sedentariness and movement, and explicitly critique the dichotomy between mobility and immobility" (7–8). Their approach recognizes inequalities regarding access to im/mobilities and includes an examination of the ways in which certain structures exert power over individuals' movements.

These uneven relationships are readily apparent when examining border-crossing practices, which may favor particular movements while criminalizing others. Ginette Verstraete comments on border politics in the European context, yet her observations are applicable elsewhere: "The freedom of mobility for some (citizens, tourists, businesspeople) could only be made possible through the organized exclusion of others forced to move around as illegal 'aliens', migrants, or refugees" ("Technological Frontiers" 229). Similarly, refugees' precarious journeys are not only marked by prescribed movement away from their homelands and across foreign state borders, but also by forced immobilization periods in camps or other

infrastructures. In the following, I will refer to refugees' flights as instances of 'forced' or 'involuntary' mobility in order to place them in the context of displacement caused by war—unlike other figures of mobility who embark on exciting adventures because they are free to do so, refugees' impetus to move is more directly linked to global interconnections from outside. However, an understanding that counters conservative portrayals of refugees as helpless victims should incorporate the acknowledgment that leave-taking is also an active decision. In this vein, Stephen C. Lubkemann proposes to “extend the critique of reductionist framings of refugee agency to *all* aspects of refugee experience, *including movement*,” and points out that “movement is *not* the only choice that so-called forced migrants can make when confronted with war-time violence or by other forms of socioeconomic, environmental, or political calamity” (19). Although motivated by factors different to those of business-people, flâneurs, tourists, and other types of movers, refugees still actively decide to depart.

The academic field of mobility studies has mostly been dominated by geographers, sociologists, and various (other) scholars working in the social sciences. However, the social sciences did not prevent mobilities perspectives from entering the humanities per se. With regard to understanding the affective facets of experiencing movement in particular, a recourse to cultural and artistic productions has been readily promoted—for example, in Mimi Sheller and John Urry's seminal 2006 article which declared a 'new mobilities paradigm' in the social sciences. Listing novel methods in the field, Sheller and Urry note that “[s]ocial research needs to be more attentive to researching the affective dimension” and encourage an engagement with literary texts since “the atmosphere or ‘feeling’ of particular kinds of movement is often a concern in the poetry and literature of exile and displacement, and is central to practices of commemoration of traumatic events” (218). Meanwhile, a growing body of scholarship in literary studies and the humanities has turned to exploring mobilities and immobilities, prompting some to call out a 'humanities turn' in mobility studies (Aguiar et al. 2).

Furthermore, a closer look at the historical trajectory of mobility studies reveals that the social sciences cannot assert to be the sole inventors of mobilities research. In their alternative history of the field, Peter Merriman and Lynne Pearce explain that “early conceptual engagements with mobility were often closely aligned with humanities traditions of thinking” (494). Even though “[a]rts and humanities approaches bring to the fore a broad range of distinctive methodologies, approaches, epistemologies and practical methods which are exciting for . . . mobility scholars” (498), there is a lack of a “more formal recognition of the field’s complex genealogy” (504). According to Merriman and Pearce, arts and humanities scholars “have yet to discover that a ‘mobility paradigm’ exists or to realise their potential contribution to it” (504)—it would seem that the abundant arts and humanities perspectives on mobilities only rarely claim a relationship to the interdisciplinary field and are not accredited as meaningful contributions to the field.

More recently, though, the field has bridged this disciplinary gap, with journals such as *Mobility Humanities* demonstrating a more official emergence. Volumes like *Researching and Representing Mobilities: Transdisciplinary Encounters* (2014), edited by Lesley Murray and Sara Upstone, have productively collected mobilities research from the social sciences and the humanities to open up “the conceptual and theoretical terrain within which mobilities are situated” (Conclusion 193). Nevertheless, it can be observed that even though mobility studies has increasingly turned to theoretical approaches advanced in the humanities, investigations of literary productions remain sparse—for example, Amanda Ladji notes that “while postcolonial approaches and theories have been often cited and referenced by mobilities scholars, few critics reference postcolonial *literature*” (223). Although “literary texts and other artistic practices have the power to produce tangible, intensified, and even defamiliarized understandings of mobility that rise above the triviality of the everyday” (Toivanen and García 6), literary perspectives in mobility studies remain rare: “the research potential of fiction has not been fully realized in this field of study” (Murray and Vincent 58). At the same time, literary studies trailed behind other

humanities fields in adopting a mobilities framework. Addressing literary criticism in particular, Marian Aguiar, Charlotte Mathieson, and Lynne Pearce note that their field “is arguably one of the last disciplines to annex the mobilities theories devised and developed by geographers and sociologists in the 1990s and early 2000s” (4). Their co-edited book series, “Studies in Mobilities, Literature, and Culture,” aims to mitigate this shortcoming by showcasing scholarship at the intersection of literary, cultural, and mobilities research. In their introduction to the first book of the series, a collection of essays titled *Mobilities, Literature, Culture* (2019), the editors recognize that while they themselves and many others have already been involved with mobility studies for years, theirs is still “the first published volume to bring mobilities research and literary scholarship together in a dedicated way” (4). Drawing a parallel to the ‘spatial turn’ in literary studies, for which the works of French sociologists Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau have been elemental, Aguiar et al. argue that their discipline might similarly profit from endorsing the mobility studies work of sociologists and geographers like Tim Cresswell, John Urry, Mimi Sheller, or Peter Adey.

Furthermore, Aguiar et al. contend that this interdisciplinary interaction is not a one-way street; just as literary studies can learn from mobility studies, mobility studies may engage with text-based methodologies advanced by the humanities for developing a refined understanding of mobility. For this argument, they return to Lefebvre’s work *The Production of Space* (1991), in which he advocates for the importance of how discourses and representations shape lived experiences: “Lefebvre highlighted the crucial role the imagination plays in the production of social space, and the same logic may, of course, be applied to mobilities” (Aguiar et al. 7). In this vein, they proclaim that close reading, the practice central to literary interpretation, may contribute to future mobilities research—“the close-reading skills of the textual critic can enhance the significance of such sources in the context of mobilities research across the disciplinary spectrum” (25). For my work, Aguiar et al.’s observations are of particular importance as I strive to combine these two endeavors: on the one hand, with an approach informed by social sciences

research on mobility studies, and on the other, through textual analysis based mainly on close reading, thereby offering a literary intervention to the field of mobility studies.

While the work of other mobility scholars will also feature in my analysis of contemporary Vietnamese American refugee novels and short stories, I am mostly interested in Cresswell's contributions and will use his approach to the politics of mobility as a lens through which to explore the literature. Building upon the insights from the new mobilities paradigm, Cresswell defines a politics of mobility as follows:

By politics I mean social relations that involve the production and distribution of power. By a politics of mobility I mean the ways in which mobilities are both productive of such social relations and produced by them. Social relations are of course complicated and diverse. They include relations between classes, genders, ethnicities, nationalities, and religious groups as well as a host of other forms of group identity. Mobility, as with other geographical phenomena, lies at the heart of all of these. ("Politics of Mobility" 21)

Returning to the notion that "mobility involves a fragile entanglement of physical movement, representations, and practices" (18), Cresswell suggests that examining a politics of material movement, a politics of representation, and a politics of mobile practice may be beneficial for a refined understanding of this politics of mobility (21). To further "fine-tune our accounts of the politics of mobility" (17), Cresswell breaks down six elements of a politics of mobility, each of which holds its own politics. These six features and the corresponding key questions through which they may be analyzed are as follows: 1) motive force, why does a person or thing move?; 2) speed, how fast does a person or thing move?; 3) rhythm, in what rhythm does a person or thing move?; 4) route, what route does it take?; 5) experience, how does it feel?; and 6) friction, when and how does it stop? (22–6).

In the refugee context, these questions trigger a variety of diverging answers, emphasizing the importance of refraining from essen-

tializing the ‘refugee’ category. Motive force—do people move because they choose to do so or because they are forced to?—is what most strikingly distinguishes the refugees portrayed in the literature from other types of movers. The main factor here is the discrepancy between wanting to move and having to do so, yet “the difference between choosing and not choosing is never straightforward and there are clearly degrees of necessity” (“Politics of Mobility” 22). Nevertheless, refugees’ movements as a means of escape are certainly different from forms of mobility such as tourists’ leisurely travel.¹¹ With regard to the selected Vietnamese American writings under analysis, the means of transport that refugees used to escape their homeland is a decisive factor influencing the remaining six elements of mobility. In regard to the last question—when and how does it stop?—the additional question of ‘when does it start?’ is crucial. Those who departed just before the war’s end often did so by plane, facilitated by specific connections. However, this avenue

11 Because of this, I refrain from over-emphasizing connections to a rich body of literary productions and scholarship concerning travel. However, the links cannot be ignored—after all, the tourist is of course only one type of traveler and “the history of travel writing is full of people who were forced to travel to places—and in circumstances—that were not of their choosing” (Sherman 27), like captives and castaways. Furthermore, contemporary writings and approaches acknowledge that “so much travel in the postcolonial context is involuntary; it takes place under conditions of necessity, reluctance, coercion, and deprivation” (Clarke 54). Consequently, April Shemak suggests that “[r]efugee and asylum seeker narratives push the limits of travel writing” (189). For example, they frequently single out collective stories of mass exodus, thereby challenging accounts of individual travel prevalent in more conventional travel writing (189). At any rate, both voluntary and more involuntary forms of travel require mobility and as a result, travel in its multiple configurations has been a subject of interest for research positioned at the interface of literary and mobility studies. In their overview of mobilities contributions from literary studies across recent decades, Aguiar et al. chart how in the 1990s, monographs like Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturalism* (1992) and Caren Kaplan’s *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (1996) demonstrate the emergence of text-based studies that delved into travel and mobilities, with a particular emphasis on migration. This interest, Aguiar et al. argue, arises in the aftermath of an escalating concern for world literature and postcolonial theory (6), which has also left a lasting mark on research into refugee literature. All of this suggests a kinship between the fields of travel literature and refugee literature, which I will take up in the last chapter in particular. In the case of contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature, the overlaps range from escape as a coerced form of travel to the return of (former) refugees to their homeland.

became inaccessible after the communist takeover, making perilous boat journeys the only remaining means of escape.

This only briefly hints at how an approach informed by Cresswell's six aspects of a politics of mobility can reveal intersections of class, gender, and race. The questions accompanying the six interconnected elements are not only beneficial for assessing empirical data but also applicable to the study of literary texts. In this book, they contribute to a more differentiated account of conflicting refugee subjectivities as represented in Vietnamese American refugee fiction. I will come back to these elements and elaborate on how I will deploy Cresswell's framework in the last subsection of the introduction. Preceding that, I will introduce two additional concepts I deem imperative for understanding refugee literature: hybridity and liminality, ideas that result from mobility and have been essential in the field of postcolonial theory.

Postcolonial Approaches to Hybrid and Liminal Diaspora Identities

Mobile individuals' identities (what they identify with and how they are perceived and categorized by others) and subjectivities (referring to inner perspectives) are dynamic and determined by several different frames of reference. Hence, an investigation of refugee perspectives inevitably requires engagement with complex notions of cultural identity and the ongoing debate challenging unified notions of culture. To put it simply, there has been a shift, motivated by post-structuralism, from considering identities as fixed entities to seeing them as dynamic and continuously changing. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall's insightful definitions posit that the term 'cultural identity' can be approached from at least two positions: "The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (393). This perspective, although important in certain stages of postcolonial struggles, sees identity

as a rather unchanging and essentializing concept. In contrast, the second outlook recognizes that identities are not rigid and fixed, but susceptible to change:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. . . . But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. (394)

In this understanding, identities are not determined by their roots, but are continuously evolving, and need to be considered in their specific contexts (392). Referring to diaspora experiences, Hall advocates for "a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*" and sees diaspora identities as "those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (402). Thus, this second definition stressing 'becoming' emerges as crucial for the discussion of hybrid, diasporic identities that will be encountered in the analysis of Vietnamese American literature.

In the overarching field of cultural studies, the concept of 'hybridity' is most commonly associated with the influential postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha. In his seminal work *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha emphasizes how individuals in colonial confrontations are situated within a space in-between cultures, which he calls "Third Space" (36–39). Contrary to assertions postulating the existence of distinct and authentic cultures, he argues that, "It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space [the Third Space] of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity" (37). Thus, "it is the 'inter'— . . . the *in-between* space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture"

(38). Hence, the location of culture is positioned in this Third Space, a dynamic realm where novel actions, practices, and identifications can emerge and challenge simplistic, reductionist perspectives on culture.

In postcolonial studies, the notion of hybridity emerges from the interaction and blending of different cultures—in other words, from mobility. Individuals caught within spaces in-between will gain access to two or more cultural identities, exposing the fluidity and non-fixedness of identity. Cultural hybridity encompasses symbolic aspects of identity and extends to various domains. Its physical expression is often most apparent when considering culinary examples. Numerous cultural influences have played a significant role in Vietnam's recent history, for example, with French colonization notably imprinting its impact not only on Vietnamese society but also on its cuisine. Creations like *bánh mì*, a type of sandwich, are material manifestations of cultural hybridity. In Viet Thanh Nguyen's second novel, *The Committed* (2021), the narrator reflects on the incongruity of the "dialectical baguette" (10):

Oh, baguette! Symbol of France, and hence symbol of French colonization! So spoke one side of me. But the other side said, at the same time, Ah, baguette! Symbol of how we Vietnamese have made French culture our own! For we were good bakers of the baguette, and the *banh mi* we created with baguettes were far tastier and more imaginative than the sandwiches the French fashioned from them. (9–10)

This excerpt illustrates the significance of food in shaping individuals' sense of identity, with the equivocal sentiments towards adopting the colonizer's dishes emblematic of the broader ambivalence surrounding hybridity. The baguette by itself acts as a reminder of colonization and the narrator, considering himself "nearly completely colonized," cynically recognizes that willingly embracing this type of bread exemplifies "the seduction of subjugation" to the French "charm offensive" (9). However, *bánh mì* is neither just a baguette nor a simple fusion of French and Vietnamese cuisine; it is something new, a hybrid—rather than merely combining elements from

two or more available cultural systems, colonial concurrences catalyze the emergence of novel forms.

In this way, the dish demonstrates Vietnamese subversion of French influence in the culinary dominion, offering a tangible and sensory example of cultural hybridity that can be observed in many other contexts. In his work, Bhabha stresses this creative component of hybridity, recognizing its productive potential for resistance to colonial control: "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power; its shifting forces and fixities; . . . It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power" (112). While the hybrid Third Space may exhibit ambivalence, it can also be viewed as a potent and dynamic force. By transcending the confines of colonial binary thinking, it establishes a politics of inclusion rather than exclusion.

To visualize this transitional Third Space, Bhabha employs the metaphor of the stairwell, which he borrowed from artist Renée Green:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy[.] (4)

Bhabha's approach defies the mutually exclusive binary opposition of colonizer/colonized and emphasizes how subjects can be located within spaces in-between cultures. Bhabha asserts that the Third Space also provides an opportunity for resistance, thus discarding the colonizer's overarching hegemonic authority. By leveraging their hybrid understanding of both systems, the colonized reclaim agency and can challenge and undermine the dominant position through self-empowering acts of subversion.

Bhabha's conceptions of hybridity and the Third Space were coined to discuss colonial situations and still hold in the age of postcolonialism, increasing international immigration, displacement, and globalization. Nevertheless, there has also been ample critique challenging this empowering view on hybridity. For example, since some uses of hybridity equate it with transcultural exchange, thereby ignoring inequalities, "it has been regarded as replicating assimilationist policies by masking or 'whitewashing' cultural difference" (Ashcroft et al. 109). Moreover, an uncritical celebration of hybridity "can mask the immense difficulty, stress, pain, and contradictions that arise to various degrees when the people involved are located on the margin at the intersection of cultures" (Pelaud, *This Is All* 50) and, in the American context, "hides the existence of foreign policies that dictate who can become American and who cannot, who belongs and who does not" (51). In this book, the terms 'hybridity' and 'hybrid' will be employed while acknowledging and engaging with the complexities inherent in their ambivalence, just as in the bánh mì example above. For a definition of hybridity that takes these ambiguities into account, I turn to Pelaud, who uses the term "to refer more specifically to those experiences and identities shaped by colonialism, war, immigration, and racism" (49). Pelaud's framework opens "the possibility of examining tactics of survival through modes of simultaneous resistance and accommodation, without ready-made judgments that would exclude one or the other" (49). The presence of diverse cultural influences, often laden with violent histories, creates a plurality of Vietnamese identities that could be analyzed through this approach. However, in regard to Vietnamese American refugee literature, Vietnamese American hybrid identities are of specific interest. In particular, members of the 1.5 and second generations of Vietnamese Americans grapple with a sense of division, torn between the heritage of their ancestral homeland and the cultural dynamics of their current U.S. setting. In Bhabha's work, the focus lies on hybrid identities formed in Third Spaces in-between the colonizer/colonized divide, yet in the novels and short stories under inspection, many individuals are drawn beyond just two polarities. Instead, some may find comfort in another place (like

Ben in Eric Nguyen's *Things We Lost to the Water*, who emigrates to France), or, through symbolic interaction or as part of a kinetic elite, feel at home in the world as cosmopolitan subjects (like Mai in Aimee Phan's *We Should Never Meet*), revealing the multifacetedness of hybridity.

Furthermore, the term 'liminality' may offer an additional lens through which to consider refugee identities. Bhabha speaks of the "liminality of cultural identity" (170) and of the "liminality of migrant experiences" (224) and in the excerpt cited above, he describes the Third Space as a liminal space (4). Hence, although he does not provide a definition, Bhabha's discussion of hybridity relies on the notion of liminality. Before finding its way to postcolonial studies, liminality was especially prevalent in the field of anthropology of religion. The French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep used the term in his seminal work *Les Rites de Passage* (1909), in which he identified three distinct phases within rites of passage: preliminal rites or rites of separation; liminal rites or transition rites; and postliminal rites or rites of incorporation. Liminality marks the middle stage, a transition or threshold between the phases of separation and incorporation. The liminal period is a time of ambiguity, where the usual structures and norms are in a state of flux, allowing for potential transformation, learning, and redefinition of identity. Decades later, after van Gennep's book had been translated into English in 1960, British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner "re-discovered the importance of liminality" (Thomassen 75). Turner's work, including his influential essay "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*" (1967), contributed significantly to the development and popularization of the concept within other disciplines, like postcolonial studies.

In Bhabha's work, "the liminal is important because liminality and hybridity go hand in hand" (Ashcroft et al. 118). Hybrid identities, formed in liminal spaces, always have a liminal, transitional quality. Liminal identities—which are fluid and ambiguous, never stable—are always in-between positions, hence they cannot help being characterized by hybridity. In other words, the two concepts are entangled and cannot be regarded separately. Liminal identities

are always hybrid, and vice-versa, and I argue therefore that refugee identities are both hybrid and liminal. The use of one or the other term is a question of emphasis: in chapters one and two—escapes and stopovers—liminality is underscored. The focus lies on the transitional states experienced by Vietnamese refugees, illustrated by the fluidity and uncertainty inherent in the process of leaving one's homeland and waiting in intermediate spaces. In this context, referring to the liminal nature of displacement in its initial stages more aptly captures the in-between nature of newly-formed refugee identities during periods of escape and temporary halts. Conversely, in chapters three and four—dedicated to the exploration of arrivals and returns—the concept of cultural hybridity emerges as more relevant. The process of mediating personal, social, and cultural elements unfolds within the ambivalent spaces between cultures as refugees negotiate their Vietnamese Americanness, both in the U.S. and during subsequent visits to Vietnam. In any case, refugee identities, “liv[ing] with and through, not despite, difference” (Hall 402), are perpetually fluctuating and resist essentialization. Hall's second definition, challenging the notion that cultural identities must be “eternally fixed” and redirecting the focus to their “constant transformation” (394), retains its significance and value. Cultural identities “are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (394), thus assuming various forms along individuals' life journeys. Because of this, works whose narratives span several decades offer longitudinal perspectives that showcase the diversity and dynamics of liminal and hybrid refugee identities.

Objectives and Outline

In American (literary) studies, exploring the ever-pervasive notion of freedom unavoidably involves a discussion of mobility, which “has been at the core of American foundational mythology” and given rise to “myriads of mobility narratives from the 15th century to the present” (Paul et al. 11). In most prevalent narratives, mobilities carry positive associations, and main actors like explorers or astronauts are primarily white and male. However, there has also been

a rich tradition of research that scrutinizes counter-narratives of non-dominant mobilities, which “critique the dominant scripts of American mobility from subnational and transnational perspectives” (12)—for instance, Native American narratives of displacement or fugitive slave narratives. By focusing on refugees, who join the ranks of “agents of contested forms of mobility” (13), my project aligns with the exploration of marginalized mobilities found in less canonical North American fiction. Keeping this historical context in mind, this project is about the representation of refugees and refugee im/mobilities in contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature. More specifically, it seeks to discover how the politics of mobility dictates refugee movements and affects how they negotiate questions of belonging; it does so by examining novels and short stories by and about Vietnamese Americans of the 1.5 and the second generation. Despite their temporal distance from the war, these fictions continue to foreground themes of exodus and dislocation, problematizing the long-living transgenerational consequences of trauma and refugeehood. Encoding a variety of different liminal and hybrid refugee subjectivities, these short stories and novels establish determined Vietnamese American self-representations that affirm the possibility of producing countermemory through storytelling.

These portrayals effectively counteract homogenizing mainstream representations of refugees, such as damage-centered approaches that ignore their potential for agency and reduce them to helpless, docile victims. However, other dominant narratives similarly lack complexity. Considering the growing number of forcibly displaced people worldwide—according to the latest Global Trends report by the UN Refugee Agency, 117.3 million people around the world were forcibly displaced by the end of 2023—cultural representation created by and about the communities in question become increasingly relevant and supply meaningful additions to the study of refugeehood during and after flight. Rather than victimizing refugees, the refugee novel restores voice and agency, thus effectively countering media representations that tend to foreground spectacle (Goyal 248–9), and the same can be argued for refugee short stories. Moreover, these texts offer significant counter-narratives concern-

ing not only refugee representation but also the representation of Asian Americans. In light of the prevailing demonization of China as an enemy of the U.S. and the surge in anti-Asian verbal and physical attacks during the COVID-19 pandemic, this remains a pertinent issue.

Besides distinguishing between various kinds of mobilities, the study of refugeehood also demands particular attention to the dynamics between mobility and immobility that demonstrate uneven distributions of the freedom to move or to stay. Where and how may or must people move, where are they delayed or detained, and how do they experience movement? What about their trajectories after their escapes? Through the lens of Vietnamese American literary productions, the aim of this interdisciplinary project is thus to consider the political, social, material, and experiential conditions of displacement, while also establishing a critical framework for the discussion of refugee literature that enables me to focus on forced mobility as well as immobility. With this text-based approach, I want to contribute to a growing body of literary studies research that converges with the field of mobility studies. Following Lesley Murray and Hannah Vincent's proposition, I will "go beyond 'quoting' from fictional texts as a means to 'illustrate' particular points and aim to more systematically interrogate the text" (61). The objective of my mobilities perspective is twofold: on the one hand, I demonstrate how a mobilities approach spotlighting transnational entanglements can reveal intersections of class, gender, and race to provide a more differentiated account of conflicting refugee subjectivities and identities as represented in Vietnamese American fiction. On the other, I intend to explore how literary texts can act as interventions into the field of mobility studies and enliven the representation debate.

Following Tim Cresswell's call to consider diverse 'politics of representation' by pursuing questions such as, "How is mobility discursively constituted? What narratives have been constructed about mobility? How are mobilities represented?" ("Politics of Mobility" 21), the guiding research question of this project is as follows: How do refugees' mobilities and immobilities, represented in selected novels and short stories by and about Vietnamese Americans, prob-

lematize the politics of mobility involved in forced migration? To answer this key question, I will closely examine the texts in regard to the six elements of Cresswell's politics of mobility: motive force; speed; rhythm; route; experience; and friction. In short, these facets correspond to the questions of why, how, in what rhythm, on what routes, with which feelings, and when people or things move. While all of these questions will inform the direction of my analysis, I will refrain from unoriginally checking them off one by one in my interpretations of the literature. The purpose of dissecting mobility into six of its constituent parts is to "get some analytical purchase on how mobility becomes political" (22), unveiling its uneven politics. Furthermore, Cresswell's list of aspects is not exhaustive, and one feature that will be useful to my analysis is memory—how do people remember their mobilities? In this specific context: how do refugees remember their escapes? In what ways does this influence the production of counter-memory?

By attending to these questions, my mobilities approach to Vietnamese American refugee literature scrutinizes the representation of various facets of refugee mobilities, which are also linked to the formation of dynamic refugee identities—as I mentioned earlier, this book is about the representations of im/mobilities *and* refugee identities. These foci make the aims of this project compatible with critical refugee studies: redefining and de-essentializing the refugee category: "critical refugee study scholarship conceptualizes the 'refugee' as a critical idea but also as a social actor whose life, when traced, illuminates the interconnections of colonization, war, and global social change" (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 11). For my project title, I adapted the notion of 'tracing' to spotlight transnational and postcolonial connections beyond the surface—just as mobility studies trace the mobilities of mobile subjects, critical refugee studies trace refugee lives, inevitably encompassing their movements as well. In this way, the principles of mobility studies are complementary to those of critical refugee studies. For this project, a combination of approaches from both fields will prove to be productive for the analysis of the representation of dynamic refugee subjectivities and ambivalent refugee im/mobilities in contemporary novels and

short stories by and about Vietnamese Americans. Furthermore, the synthesis of mobility and critical refugee studies may be considered a contribution to a “not yet a legible field” that Amanda Lagji terms ‘postcolonial mobility studies’ (229).

Mobility is significant not only for the content of this book but also as its structuring principle. The four main chapters of this study mark four key im/mobility moments featured in most narratives: escapes, stopovers, arrivals, and returns. This straightforward sequence fails to capture refugees’ trajectories, which are usually more complex. Moreover, refugee novels and short stories typically resist adhering to such a chronological structure, being characterized instead by their commitment to non-linearity. Nevertheless, this framework enables me to concentrate on the interplay between mobility and immobility during various stages in refugees’ lives. To allow for a more detailed analysis, the spotlight is on two to three works per chapter, yet several more novels and short stories are consulted to paint a fuller picture of the refugee experience as represented in Vietnamese American literary productions. These selected writings are not chosen to represent all Vietnamese American refugee literature; rather, they serve as an illustration of the field’s diversity.

The first chapter delves into two distinct modes of escape: escape by plane and escape by boat. Vietnamese with the necessary connections and financial means managed to depart their homeland just prior to the war’s conclusion, ensuring their escape via aircraft. As an example, I consider the relevant passages in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s novel *The Sympathizer* (2015)—arguably the most prominent work in contemporary Vietnamese American literature—with particular attention to the manifold factors facilitating or impeding people’s departures. The unreliable narrator’s flight will be contrasted with an example of the memory of a boat escape presented in Andrew Lam’s “Hunger” (2013). This short story, part of the author’s collection *Birds of Paradise Lost*, discusses spectacularizing media representations of boat refugees and how refugees themselves remember their ocean passages.

After moments of perilous mobility, refugees are often detained, immobilized, and forced to wait for uncertain periods of time. In this context, the refugee camp emerges as the most noticeable stop-over site. Scrutinizing the politics of waiting and the everyday routines taken up in these liminal spaces in-between, the second chapter takes a closer look at gendered refugee experiences in prolonged camp stays. For some, the refugee camp remains a space of trauma, especially if they faced difficult living conditions and (sexualized) violence, like the characters in Aimee Phan's novel *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* (2012). Others, however, transformed the refugee camp into a place of meaning and fresh starts by fostering new relationships, as I argue in my reading of Vu Tran's *Dragonfish* (2015). In any event, the refugee camp is not a non-place devoid of interpersonal connections but rather a vibrant hub bustling with social interactions, crucial to shaping refugees' future lives.

Chapter Three discusses arrivals—or, in other words, refugees' continued presence in and further journeys within the U.S. This section brings to light the significant interchange between displacement and emplacement via two novels by and about narrators of the 1.5 generation: lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003) and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), both of which are exceedingly captivating due to their liquid narratives. Additionally, I survey Eric Nguyen's chronicle *Things We Lost to the Water* (2021), further investigating the significance of water imagery in contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature. Along with exploring the formation of dynamic and hybrid refugee identities across generations, I discuss storytelling on several levels as a means of emplacement.

The last chapter deals with the ambivalences of returning to the homeland, which may be mother- and/or fatherland. Fittingly, the two short stories that are juxtaposed are Viet Thanh Nguyen's "Fatherland" (2017) from his short story collection *The Refugees* and Aimee Phan's "Motherland" (2004), part of her short story cycle *We Should Never Meet*. Both protagonists left Vietnam when they were young, hence lacking memories of their homeland and, with different degrees of success, try to make up for the loss by experiencing

it as tourists. “Fatherland” and “Motherland” are the final stories of the respective collections, and their analysis also closes the main part of this book.

However, the study of Vietnamese American refugee literature remains open-ended. In the conclusion, I argue that these representations continue to be significant and offer a glimpse of possible future avenues of inquiry. In addition, I will summarize the collected observations about the representations of refugee im/mobilities and refugee identities found in the selected works. Furthermore, I return to Nguyen’s steps to writing an immigrant saga, which I cited in this introduction, to adapt his list and condense the observations about current refugee writing by showing how the novels and short stories presented subvert common expectations of the literature of displacement.

Before moving on to the first chapter, I want to briefly address my own positionality. In exploring Vietnamese American refugee literature from my position as a white, non-refugee scholar, I approach these narratives with an awareness of my outsider perspective. As a Swiss person who has mostly lived in Germany while working on this manuscript, I lack insights regarding Vietnamese, American, and Vietnamese American social circles. My engagement with this literary corpus involves recognizing the cultural and experiential gaps that exist between my own background and the stories being told. Despite not sharing a direct connection to the refugee experience, my analysis aims to delve into the complexities of these narratives, shedding light on their significance and contributing to broader discussions about cultural representation. My focus is on engaging with these texts thoughtfully and respectfully, acknowledging the diverse voices present in Vietnamese American refugee literature without attempting to speak on their behalf.

Alongside cultural and experiential gaps, my perspective also encompasses linguistic shortcomings. Although the literature I am dealing with is written in English, my lack of proficiency in the Vietnamese language, which features literally or metaphorically in these texts, provides an additional layer of complexity to my engagement with them. While certain novels and short stories eschew straight-

forward cultural and linguistic translations, others openly discuss the subtleties of Vietnamese language and culture to render it accessible to those who do not speak it, including second- or third-generation diasporic Vietnamese. Concerning pronunciation, diacritical marks are crucial for indicating tones and meaning. Otherwise, the Vietnamese language is written in a modified version of the Latin alphabet, exposing its colonial legacy. Furthermore, as some other Asian languages do, Vietnamese uses a last-name first-name order. In the U.S., however, many Vietnamese Americans chose to Americanize their names by adopting a Westernized name order and by either omitting diacritical marks or even switching to an English first name. For example, the famous writer who goes by Viet Thanh Nguyen was born as Nguyễn Thanh Việt, and his father Nguyễn Ngọc Thanh changed his name to Joseph Thanh Nguyen when he became an American citizen (V. T. Nguyen, *A Man of Two Faces* 199). Names of authors and characters will feature in my text as they appear in the published works. Unless I am quoting from primary texts that use different approaches, I will *not* italicize Vietnamese words but add the corresponding diacritical marks. Because the literature written in English predominantly refers to Việt Nam and Sài Gòn as 'Vietnam' and 'Saigon,' I will stick to these Americanized forms but introduce other place names as I find them in the source at hand.

Chapter One: Escapes

“Immigrants wanted to come here, but we left because the grass was burning under our feet” (P. Le)¹²—fearing persecution under the new communist regime, many South Vietnamese found themselves facing immense insecurity in the months preceding and following the end of the war. Without any official charges or judicial trials, South Vietnamese soldiers and civil servants were sent to reeducation camps, where around one million people were interned in 1975 (N. H. C. Nguyen 156). These camps caused an unknown number of casualties and have been compared to Soviet gulags or Nazi concentration camps (Vo 58; 143). In order to avoid the looming threat of internment, hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese saw abandoning their homeland as their last resort. Refugees’ uncertain and danger-driven movements thus challenge romanticized notions of mobility popular in North American literature. Genres like road and travel literature celebrate the nomadism of rootless and self-determined subjects who leave places without looking back, stepping forward into new futures full of promising possibilities. In contrast, Vietnamese refugees’ escapes are considered instances of involuntary mobility. In particular, those who had worked alongside the U.S. military or the former South Vietnamese government did not con-

12 Phuong Le, who agreed to my reproduction of her account, left Saigon the day before the end of the war for Berkeley, California, where she has lived ever since. This place held a sense of familiarity for her, having arrived there previously in 1967 to spend time in the college town as a student. One of the first things she asked me when we met at a Vietnamese restaurant close to campus in February 2023 was whether I knew the difference between immigrants and refugees. My approach to this project focuses on literary perspectives rather than strictly sociological data, nevertheless, Phuong’s statement that I quote to start this chapter felt very special. Perusing contemporary Vietnamese American texts while working in Germany during COVID-19 travel restrictions, I thought it was truly remarkable that, once I finally stepped outside, I encountered the same words in the real world that I had already found in the literature. Just like Viet Thanh Nguyen and others, Phuong insists on distinguishing between the categories of the refugee and the immigrant even decades after arriving and acquiring formal American citizenship. Phuong’s evocation of burning grass conjures the image of a destroyed homeland that has to be left, marking the U.S. as an inevitable destination rather than a place chosen for its own merits.

sider staying a viable option, knowing that the communist authorities would be after them.

Nevertheless, some *chose* to stay, and others wanted to leave but did not have the means to do so; the lines between forced and deliberate mobility remain blurry. Those who managed to escape did so by intently working towards finding a way out. Still, Western media would not portray them as active subjects, but rather as destitute victims of a tragic fate bestowed upon them. Photographs, which ostensibly supply more objectivity than texts and thus “provide most of the knowledge people have about the look of the past and the reach of the present” (Sontag, *On Photography* 2), achieved sovereignty of interpretation and became the principal medium for the mainstream collective memory of the mass exodus. In the years following the end of the war, representations of Vietnamese refugees were dominated by depictions of starving people being rescued from crowded boats. This popularized image has survived time and new media, as a simple Google search even in the 2020s demonstrates: the prompt ‘Vietnamese refugees’ immediately leads me to ‘Vietnamese boat people’ and a range of photographs of people in overpopulated vessels. Most of the pictures are black and white, suggesting that these refugees belong to the past rather than the present. Furthermore, the designation ‘boat people’ is a derogatory term that reduces refugees to the means of transport by which they fled; hence, it is either avoided, criticized, or surfaces as an exonym in Vietnamese American literature.

There are also playful reinterpretations of this imagery, however. For example, in his short story “Yacht People” (2013), Andrew Lam spins an ironic twist on the phrase by exchanging the umbrella term ‘boat’ with its luxurious hyponym ‘yacht.’ The unnamed narrator of the short story considers the disparities between his family’s affluent lifestyle today and their perilous flight by boat when he was seven years old. Adhering to the model minority stereotype, one of his siblings had recently bought a yacht and invited the family to cruise around the prosperous Bay Area. The narrator ponders their status: “We ain’t Fresh Off the Boat, ain’t FOBs no more. . . . We’re yacht people now!” (137). Hence, he questions the longevity of the

terms 'boat people' as well as 'FOB,' or 'Fresh Off the Boat,' which, far from merely differentiating between recently arrived and more established immigrants, work as racial slurs. Though not exclusive to the Asian American community, 'FOB' was particularly widespread in the context of increased post-1965 Asian migration (Shankar 270). But, even before Eddie Huang's popular memoir *Fresh Off the Boat* (2013) and the sitcom of the same name (2015–20), the expression has been reappropriated and reclaimed. In the same vein, Lam's "Yacht People" narrator mischievously rebrands the acronym by speaking of "Fab-ulous Oriental Booties," "Flamboyant Oriental Balladeers," and "Fantastic Oto-Biographies" (137), while simultaneously undermining the term oriental, another complicating designation.

Autobiographies and self-representations in works of fiction attempt to look beyond the spectacle offered by photographs and scandalous captions. They humanize refugees and examine why and how they chose to set off on hazardous journeys; meanwhile, dramatic 'boat people' reports merely produce pity in uninvolved spectators rather than empathy for the pictured passengers on board. The dominant portrayal of Vietnamese refugees as people who left by boat further obscures the crucial fact that people who departed early circumvented the severe hardships faced during oceanic escapes, as Andrew Lam notes in his nonfictional work:

Among Vietnamese in America, there existed a strange unwritten caste system. Those who came early [before April 1975] like me are seen as privileged and lucky—we belonged to the first wave, we didn't suffer under communist hands, and we were mostly educated, upper-class people who hadn't escaped in dingy, crowded boats; we avoided, that is to say, the bulk of the horror. Those who escaped later are seen as wretched, having been robbed of education back home and having suffered at the cruel hands of the communist government. Once in America they had to struggle twice as hard to keep up with the already established first-wavers. ("Viet Kieu" 118)

South Vietnamese with sufficient funds and appropriate connections would already have been able to leave the country in the weeks

and days prior to the fall of Saigon—not by boat, but by plane, which has to be taken into account when considering the question of class and classed politics of mobility.

Some of the “first-wavers,” who left Saigon by plane just before it was seized, remember chaotic departures from a city under attack. Nonetheless, evacuations by plane rather than crossings by boat promised more chances for survival since a substantial amount of people died on sea passages. Storms, attacks by pirates, and hunger and thirst were frequent sources of despair. Moreover, aircraft get-aways often coincided with comparatively short-lived stays in refugee camps on islands and in facilities on the U.S. mainland. In the mid-70s, with American public opinion, catalyzed by guilt, still oscillating towards taking in refugees from Vietnam, it was comparatively easy to find sponsors. In later decades, this sentiment shifted, and pictures of escapees would be considered an unsettling reminder of U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia, evoking uncomfortable memories of a failed war and stimulating feelings of rejection rather than action. In accordance with Susan Sontag’s explorations of images of war and violence in her book-length photography essay *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), the accelerated reiteration of such pictures is prone to lead to apathy within the viewer: “If one feels that there is nothing ‘we’ can do . . . then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic” (101)—photographs illustrating overcrowded boats, ubiquitous today in other contexts, may evoke sentiments of pity or compassion for other people’s trauma. But rather than inspiring onlookers to act, common reactions are more likely to foster paralysis and the idea that nothing can be changed.

In this sense, fleeing by plane instead of boat is not a simple distinction, but a decisive factor shaping refugees’ experiences of arrival, depending on how they are perceived in the host country. Moreover, escape by plane guaranteed better chances for survival, and during the process of mobility, refugees’ experiences of movement were markedly more tolerable when seated on an airplane than when enduring an overcrowded boat deck. These differences in experience reveal an “experiential politics of mobility” (Cresswell, “Politics of Mobility” 25). In this context, Cresswell’s *On the Move*

introduces the notion of a 'kinetic hierarchy.' In Cresswell's airport observations, upper-class flyers form the 'kinetic elite,' which benefits from seamless mobility, while refugees, the mobile workforce, and other movers whose mobility is less comfortable, belong to the 'kinetic underclass': "The kinetic elite are voluntarily mobile. They take pleasure in their mobility and experience mobility as freedom, while the kinetic underclass . . . are confined or forced to move out of necessity and experience mobility as survival" (256). Although this idea of kinetic hierarchy illuminates key disparities between different refugees' mobilities, its conceptualizations of elite and underclass need reworking in the context of flight from Vietnam. The people higher up on a kinetic hierarchy—South Vietnamese individuals with appropriate means and connections—may have left earlier as passengers in proper airplane seats, yet they did not travel for pleasure; they departed to survive or evade potential sanctions from the communist government, and thus were refugees nonetheless. Others with lesser means were also able to leave right before the end of the war, albeit in densely packed mass evacuations with military cargo transport aircraft. People who escaped by boat after the war ended made up the lower part of the kinetic hierarchy. Although all of these refugees were mobile, the experiential facets of their mobilities were thus critically affected by their socioeconomic class, which dictated when and how they left.

These distinctions in experiencing mobility have lasting consequences. Their means of transport not only plays a central role in how refugees experience their departures corporeally at the moment of escape but also in how they remember their mobility. The discrepancy between people who departed by air and those who crossed dangerous waters manifests most clearly in the subsequent—and often unspeakable—trauma that has haunted first- and 1.5-generation refugees with memories of perilous sea passages for decades. Accordingly, some see differences in the experience of mobility caused by when and how people fled as an enduring distinguishing feature within the community. Lam not only discusses this phenomenon in the above-cited excerpt from one of his autobiographical essays but also in his fictional work. In the short story

“Everything Must Go” (2013), the two protagonists are both 1.5-generation Vietnamese Americans, but while the young man comes from an upper-class family, his girlfriend grew up under less favorable circumstances. This is something she is well aware of: “She had been poor. She had even been homeless. Unlike him, who, thanks to family connections, came to America by plane even before the war ended, she was, like most of the others who fled afterward, a boat person” (57–8). The childhood that she remembers was spent “in various refugee camps, subsisting on handouts and charity” (58). While her early years were marked by precarity and longing for consumerist possessions promising stability, her boyfriend enjoyed a carefree upbringing, recalling playing in the garden of his family’s “white-washed villa overlooking the Perfume River” (56). While he reminisces about his family’s villa as the tangible manifestation of home in the homeland, she detested the “oppressive corrugated hangars” (58) of the first temporary dwelling spaces that she can remember. Consequently, the male protagonist cannot understand his girlfriend’s obsession with material goods later in life, which is supposedly one of the reasons for their breakup. Although both of them were forced to leave Vietnam and start anew in unfamiliar surroundings, the perilous boat journey, fraught with uncertain stopovers, that preceded the young woman’s finding her place in American society stands in stark contrast to her ex-partner’s privileged transition by plane and comparatively smooth new beginnings in the U.S.

In the second part of this chapter, I will focus on another short story by Andrew Lam, “Hunger” (2013), which examines the issue of self-representation by Vietnamese American refugees who fled by boat. I compare this to the characters’ escape by plane in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer* (2015), a work quite unlike Lam’s in form and content. Both narratives illustrate divergent memories of flight within the Vietnamese American community, focusing on the long-term effects of experiential aspects of mobility as well as the significance of self-determined storytelling.

Plane Evacuation Experiences in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015)

So far, I have mentioned Viet Thanh Nguyen several times and mostly quoted from his academic work. A member of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans, he was born in 1971 in the city of Ban Mê Thuột in what was at the time the Republic of Vietnam, more commonly known as South Vietnam. In many interviews and in his memoir *A Man of Two Faces: A Memoir, A History, A Memorial*—a volume that playfully reworks genre conventions of autofiction—Nguyen examines the ways in which his family's history is entangled with multiple histories of colonization. Like hundreds of thousands of others, Nguyen's parents had already fled from the north to the south of Vietnam in 1954, just before the war started. With American support, the Vietnamese Catholic president Ngô Đình Diệm resettled Catholics like Nguyen's parents in the Central Highlands, where they received land that had traditionally belonged to the region's Indigenous population, referred to by the French as the 'Montagnards.' As Nguyen notes about himself, "[i]n Việt Nam, you were colonized but also colonizer" (*A Man of Two Faces* 82)—a doubleness that defies binary thinking and later becomes one of the key characteristics of Nguyen's writing. In March 1975, when the communists captured their southern hometown, the family left for Saigon, the South's capital. Just before the event that marks the end of the war—the fall of Saigon on April 30th, 1975—they escaped once again, passing through transpacific U.S. military bases to reach a refugee camp in Pennsylvania. They left the camp via different sponsors, and while Viet Thanh Nguyen, then four years old, was only separated from his parents briefly, it would take years for his older brother to be reunited with the rest of the family. They lived in Harrisburg for some time and in 1978, moved to San Jose, California, where Nguyen's parents opened a Vietnamese grocery store (V. T. Nguyen, "Born in Vietnam").

In California, Nguyen started pursuing an academic career as a student at UC Berkeley, where he received a BA and graduated with a PhD in English in 1997. Today, he is not only Professor of English,

American Studies and Ethnicity and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California but also a prominent author of fiction who has written short stories ever since the late 1990s. His short story collection, *The Refugees* (2017), was published after Nguyen properly entered the literary scene with his debut novel, *The Sympathizer* (2015). This outstanding work was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2016 and led to further accolades like a MacArthur ‘genius grant’ in 2017. Six years after the success of his first novel, Nguyen published *The Committed* (2021), in which the narrator of *The Sympathizer* takes up the story again in what will supposedly become a trilogy, although information on the third novel currently remains scarce. At any rate, Nguyen has established himself as one of the most vocal contemporary Vietnamese American voices in scholarly and public debates alike: “Nguyen’s unique position as a visible Vietnamese American author and academic provides him with the cultural capital necessary to speak brazenly and effectively about the ongoing legacy of the American interventionist war in Vietnam during his promotional tours” (August, “Spies Like Us” 60). In this way, Nguyen also supports other diasporic Vietnamese and Southeast Asian artists via DVAN and regularly writes pieces for *The New York Times* and others. Furthermore, he contributed to two volumes of children’s literature (*Chicken of the Sea* (2019), co-written with his son Ellison, and *Simone* (2024), whose eponymous heroine is named after Nguyen’s daughter). With transgenerational impact and across different contexts, Nguyen has taken the literary market by storm. Most recently, in April and May 2024, his work arrived on the streaming market, too, via the HBO adaptation of *The Sympathizer*.

As has been mentioned in the introduction, whereas some writers might prefer to see themselves as former refugees or immigrants, Nguyen insists on being called a refugee: “I was once a refugee, although no one would mistake me for being a refugee now. Because of this, I insist on being called a refugee, since the temptation to pretend that I am not a refugee is strong” (Introduction 11). In this manner, he emphasizes that refugeehood is more than a temporary status and invites a reading of his fictions as refugee rather than immigrant literature. While Nguyen writes against spectacu-

larizing the memory of the war in Vietnam, he also uses his role as a public intellectual to advocate for various other displaced people, which has also led to controversy. More recently, he joined roughly 750 others in co-signing an open letter in the *London Review of Books* that vehemently criticizes Israel's military response in Gaza following the Hamas-led attack on October 7th, 2023. Subsequently, 92NY, a cultural institution in New York City, canceled a scheduled event with the author (Schuessler).

In *The Refugees*, Nguyen's short story collection, the final one of which will be analyzed in more detail in my last chapter, the author presents diverse views from and on Vietnamese American refugees, emphasizing their community's embeddedness in contemporary Vietnamese American society. In *The Sympathizer*, Nguyen further complicates the refugee position—while many of the portrayed characters are South Vietnamese who fled to the States as refugees, the novel's narrator inhabits an ambivalent position as a spy and a refugee. Although most often classified as a spy novel, I also read *The Sympathizer* as a refugee novel: like the refugee literature defined in my introduction, it is a political work that insists on displaced people's agency, interrogates the workings of collective memory, and engages with military and historical interconnections that produce refugeehood. A range of difficult topics is tackled and challenged from multiple viewpoints. Moreover, the novel makes easy chronologic reconstruction impossible through the ambiguity of its structure and narrative style. No coherence or Hollywood ending emerges at the end of the book—quite the contrary. In other words, what Nguyen questions in his academic writings, he subverts in his fictional work, his very own “anti-immigrant saga” (*A Man of Two Faces* 160).

In critical scholarship on the novel, the early chapters receive less attention than the later ones, such as the ones set in the Philippines that satirically engage with stereotypical Hollywood representations of the war in Vietnam and Vietnamese people (like Francis Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979)). My chapter addresses representations of escape from a mobility angle, and thus focuses on the first three chapters. For most of its twenty-three chapters, *The Sympa-*

thizer presents the written confession of the Captain, the otherwise unnamed Eurasian narrator. His narrative is unreliable and nonlinear, full of gaps and uncertainties, yet his in-between and hybrid position allows for multilayered observations of the war. In this way, *The Sympathizer*—even more so than other works by Nguyen—does not criticize only one side or individual actors but rather “is designed to offend everyone” (V. T. Nguyen, *A Man of Two Faces* 345). Owing to the Captain’s singular perspective, I assert that the novel’s early chapters effectively expose the varied politics of mobility that were at play in the last days before Saigon’s fall, thereby complicating simplified interpretations of im/mobility in the context of forced migration.

Nguyen’s work is “[a] spy narrative that abruptly derails into a modernist delirium” (Traina 143), but it is also “historical fiction, a confessional novel, a farce, and a tragedy, with added dashes of the epistolary novel, drama, allegory, *Künstlerroman*, metafictional Nabokovian wordsmithery” (Chihaya 365). Highlighting the text’s metafictional¹³ scope, the novel presents the narrator’s confession as a manuscript, “all 295 pages written by the light of a wick floating in a cup of oil” (*The Sympathizer* 412). During a recon mission, the Captain is captured by communist authorities and sent to a reeducation camp in Vietnam as a political prisoner. Having previously also worked as a mole to spy on the South Vietnamese army, the narrator’s allegiances remain conflicted. He introduces himself as someone who is “able to see any issue from both sides” (1) and, hinting at Ralph Ellison’s classic opening lines for *Invisible Man* (1952), starts the narrative as follows: “I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds”

13 Along with historical notes, *The Sympathizer* (as well as its sequel, *The Committed*) is replete with literary references: “Nguyen’s allusions to the literary canon are nearly as comprehensive as an exam for the English PhD: Shakespeare, Milton, Emerson, Whitman, Stowe, Twain, Kipling, Kafka, and Faulkner all make appearances, as do Raymond Chandler, Graham Greene, Carlos Bulosan, Noël Coward, Philip Roth, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joan Didion, and Frank Chin” (Manshel 21)—in this way, as Alexander Manshel observes, Nguyen’s debut novel is not only metafictional but also ‘metacanonical.’

(1). This doubleness,¹⁴ which also alludes to W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness (Chihaya 364), is reflected in the Captain's Eurasian-ness and personal life; of his two best friends and literal blood brothers, one, Man, was once his communist handler and is now complicit in his interrogation and torture, while the other, Bon, remains loyal to the South and has worked as an assassin for the CIA.

In *The Sympathizer*, the Captain's interrogation in the reeducation camp functions as the frame narrative interwoven throughout the novel, only fully taking over towards the end, just before he and Bon manage to slip away and leave Vietnam once again, this time by boat. The narration is nonlinear, skipping back and forth between imprisonment, childhood memories long gone, and an account of the narrator's journey in the immediate years before his encampment. The main embedded narrative starts with the Captain's last days in Saigon before its fall and ends with his eventual detention in the reeducation camp. In the meantime, he escapes Vietnam via plane just before the end of the war, stays in refugee camps in Guam and California, and works a clerical position at a college in LA while simultaneously executing tasks for his South Vietnamese boss and secretly informing the other side of these acts. Furthermore, he undertakes a trip to the Philippines as a movie set advisor, and later returns to Vietnam as part of the exiled South Vietnamese troops, joining a mission that fails and leads to his and Bon's capture. At first, the narrator's ambivalent position as someone who "can access Vietnamese, American, and Vietnamese American communities lures readers into thinking that they will receive the balanced account of the Vietnam War missing from previous iterations of the war story" (August, *The Refugee Aesthetic* 117). However, the Captain is an unreliable narrator, concocting his confession during solitary

14 Nguyen extends the meaning of the notion of "a man of two faces" in his later work: in *The Committed*, the sequel to *The Sympathizer* and continuation of the three blood brothers' stories set in France, the narrator starts by emphasizing that he is "still a man of two faces and two minds" (3), whose two minds had been held together by a screw that started to be loosened during his reeducation. Effectively jumbling the lines between fact and fiction, Nguyen reuses the term for one of his most recent publications, the repeatedly-mentioned memoir *A Man of Two Faces* (2023), extending his fictional narrator's doubleness to his own ambivalent position as a diasporic writer.

confinement. He thus has motive to fabricate a story that will best guarantee his survival. His Janus-faced position presents a unique view on the refugee experience, demonstrating sympathy for multiple perspectives without holding back his criticism of either—or any—side.

The confession as the story within the story starts in April 1975, the Eliotic “cruellest month” (*The Sympathizer* 1). As “aide-de-camp and junior officer of intelligence” (3), the narrator works for the General, an important figure in the South Vietnamese army with “faith in the *mission civilisatrice* and the American way” (3). By this point, the Captain has lived in his employer’s Saigon villa for the past five years. His narrative weaves in historical details of the past and present, elucidating how “[t]he hybrid culture of Saigon is riddled with ghosts of the colonial past and the macabre present” (Seo 717). For example, he remarks on the villa’s colonial history as it was “conjured into being for the Corsican owners of a rubber plantation” (*The Sympathizer* 30) and mentions French people that he “still encountered . . . periodically in Saigon, nostalgic colonizers who stubbornly insisted on staying in this country even after their empire’s foreclosure” (26). In regard to the “macabre present,” he recounts how the North progressively takes control of region after region in the South. In the opening chapter, Madame, the General’s wife, is adamant about departing prior to the capital falling as well: “If you wait much longer, we won’t be able to get out. You should ask Claude for a plane now” (5). Waiting, staying immobile, is not seen as a pragmatic course of (in)action given the impending threat of political reconstruction. If the North prevails, the South Vietnamese family’s continued waiting will purportedly result in their inability to leave the country (potentially through imprisonment in reeducation camps). They need long-distance transport, and Madame is aware that the easiest way to leave is by plane. Claude, their “most trusted American friend” (5), is a CIA agent whose cover involves working in the American embassy. With the right payment, he might coordinate their plane escape—the family has both the connections and the financial means to plan a departure. However, as the male decision-maker in his patriarchal household, the General gets the

final say in the matter, not his wife. It is only once *he* “think[s] it’s time to ask Claude for a plane” (5) that the narrator gets the order to arrange a meeting with Claude, inciting the first step for their escape.

Claude visits them a few days later, on the same day that “the [South Vietnamese] president resigned” (*The Sympathizer* 11), referring to Nguyễn Văn Thiệu’s resignation on April 21st, 1975 (Robinson 18). This is only one example of how the narrative is embedded within a historical timeline. In this way, the novel, just like other contemporary Asian American works, can be read as an example of “new forms of historical fiction,” doing more than “simply re-narrating the 1960s from the perspective of Asian American subjects” (Sheffer 14). Despite its historical references, *The Sympathizer* does not insist on historical accuracy; it is “not an attempt at an authentic delineation of the war in Viet Nam, but a critical reflection on the knowledge production regarding the Vietnam War in particular, and all the other wars in general” (Liu 541). As seen in the excerpts above, the novel is about the past but simultaneously comments on present practices. Moreover, Giacomo Traina argues, it “reframes history by outlining unseen continuities, reimagining the war in Vietnam as a Petri dish for America’s forever war by putting the emphasis on a common genealogy of interrogation methods that recur from Saigon to Guantánamo” (149). In a next step, “the past might serve as an inspiration for new forms of collective action” (Sheffer 15)—in this way, *The Sympathizer*’s focus on the past to critically shed light on the present might invite future change.

In the past of the novel’s first chapter, April 1975, many Americans were still in the South Vietnamese capital. The last U.S. military unit had already left Vietnam two years before the narrator and the General meet Claude to discuss an escape by plane, but American presence continued (as it does to this day). However, as enemy divisions drew nearer, many Americans fled other South Vietnamese cities and started evacuating Saigon upon its impending fall. Still, as Claude notes, “Officially, there’s no evacuation” (*The Sympathizer* 9), to which the General retorts, “Unofficially, you are abandoning us . . . All day and night planes depart from the airport. Everyone who works with Americans wants an exit visa. They go to your embassy

for these visas” (9). U.S.-orchestrated mass evacuations like Operation Babylift¹⁵ were no secret to the general public, but evacuation only began “in earnest” on April 22nd (Robinson 18), one day after their conversation takes place. Although the CIA agent can offer him “a black flight, off the books, on a C-130” (*The Sympathizer* 8), the General is disturbed that nothing more is done for the South Vietnamese despite their yearlong cooperation with Americans: “The truth, in this case, was that at least a million people were working or had worked for the Americans in one capacity or another, from shining their shoes to running the army designed by the Americans in their own image to performing fellatio on them for the price, in Peoria or Poughkeepsie, of a hamburger” (10). Despite his frustration, the General is reminded that he is “lucky” (10): of the ninety-two seats available on the aircraft, the fifty-eight assigned to his extended family—“Madame would never forgive him if he did not rescue all of her relations” (8)—are a generous offer, since “[o]ther generals were only getting seats for their immediate families” (10). To this, Claude adds, “Even God and Noah couldn’t save everyone” (10–1), likening Americans to biblical saviors against others’ insistence that more might be done.

In his role within the South Vietnamese secret police, the narrator begins escape preparations. He organizes the clandestine mobilities of a chosen few and schemes plans that may only be shared with the evacuees and the (bribed) officials whose assistance is needed to ensure smooth transit. In his role as a North Vietnamese spy, he informs Man, one of his two best friends and communist handler, of the General’s plans to leave for the U.S. Every Wednesday, the two of them secretly meet at a basilica, where Man conveys assignments from his superiors, whose identities remain unquestioned by the narrator as “[b]oth secrecy and hierarchy were key to revolution” (*The Sympathizer* 36). During their last meeting—likely taking place

¹⁵ I will delve into Operation Babylift in a later chapter when discussing Aimee Phan’s *We Should Never Meet*, a short story cycle that features several Babylift orphans. Frequent Wind was another important operation, which evacuated around 7,000 individuals out of Saigon between April 29th and 30th (Robinson 18). In total, around 140,000 Vietnamese left Vietnam in the final days of April 1975 (UNHCR, *World’s Refugees* 81).

on April 23rd, the last Wednesday before the end of the war—the narrator is told to join the evacuees and to watch the exiled South Vietnamese abroad, “to keep an eye on them and make sure they’re not going to get into too much trouble” (37). They will communicate via letters that the narrator will send to Man’s aunt in Paris, whom he will address as his own aunt in writing. While in *The Sympathizer* she serves merely as the “go-between” (37) who receives letters, this aunt assumes a central role in its sequel, *The Committed*.

The narrator feels conflicted about leaving. On the one hand, with the war’s end in sight, he desires to stay and witness the communist rise to power. On the other, he admits to looking forward to returning to the U.S., “land of supermarkets and superhighways, of supersonic jets and Superman” (*The Sympathizer* 38). He prides himself on being mistaken for an American on the phone due to his accent-free speech, as well as on being “the officer most fluent in American culture” (8). Unlike the South *and* the North Vietnamese who, “no matter how divided, all saw themselves as patriots fighting for a country to which they belonged” (39), the narrator, as a liminal and hybrid half-Vietnamese, half-French individual with a fascination for America, struggles to find simple answers to the question of *his* belonging. When he reminds Man that he does not belong to Vietnam, Man tells him that he does not belong to America, either, to which the narrator responds, “But I wasn’t born there. I was born here” (39). While he is intrigued by the U.S., his aspirations for belonging there are different since, by this point, he has merely enjoyed his years there as a student visitor. At the same time, being marginalized as a Eurasian in the country where he was born fosters a sense of unbelonging in Vietnam, which is heightened in the wake of his mother’s death.

Furthermore, at that point, the Captain has never been to France, his paternal homeland. His father, a French Catholic priest, met his mother when she was thirteen years old and working as a maid. The narrator only learns of his father’s identity at age eleven when, after his classmates bully him for being a Eurasian child born out of wedlock, his mother tells him the truth. He is called many names: “half-blooded” (*The Sympathizer* 184), “bastard” (mentioned throughout the novel in reference to the narrator’s illegitimacy at least twenty

times), “mongrel” (26), “half-breed” (26), “métis” (26), or “dust of life” (27), the literal English translation for the designation used in Vietnamese, *bụi đời*. His father, who has since passed, never truly accepted him either, and the narrator with no siblings, is “the only son of an ostracized mother” (11). Rejected by his own relatives except for his mother, the Captain deeply values the alternative kinship found with Man and Bon: “These men were better than any real brothers I could have had, for we had chosen each other” (20). During their school years at the lycée, the three of them become literal blood brothers, “having sworn undying loyalty to one another by slicing [their] adolescent palms and mingling [their] blood in ritual handshakes” (13). Because of these family constellations—which further complicate his rootedness in Vietnam—and because he is a bachelor, there is no one he would want to leave with except his friends (although he knows that “Man would stay to witness the liberation of the south” (19)). Other staff members, the narrator ponders, “if given the chance, would rescue a hundred blood relatives as well as any paper ones” (11), yet he is the one tasked with drafting “the list of evacuees” (11) who will take the remaining thirty-four escape seats of the General’s flight. The Captain only saves four seats for his own use—one for himself and the other three for Bon, Bon’s wife Linh, and their son Duc, who is his godson.

From a mobility angle, the narrator’s connections equip him with control over other people’s movements, a power that, as he is aware, might have significant consequences for others: “Every stroke of my pen through a name felt like a death sentence” (*The Sympathizer* 12). Two days before leaving, the Captain presents the chosen evacuees to the General and asks for the favor of taking Bon and his family along, despite many members of the Special Branch not making the final list. Like the General, Bon served in the airborne forces, and so the seats are granted. Diverse classed politics of mobility are at play: it is not only about financial means or direct American connections; familial and military relationships also play a crucial role in determining people’s access to escape mobility.

In addition to drafting the list of chosen evacuees, the narrator organizes further secret operations to ensure their smooth exit:

“The men had been picked, the buses arranged, and, most important, the bribes for safe passage bestowed” (*The Sympathizer* 27). In the paragraph following the Captain’s observations about the different linguistic markers used by others to refer to his “muddled heritage” (27), he mentions that his “ability to finesse the line between the legal and the illegal” (27) commends him to the General. This indicates that his liminality encompasses not only his cultural identity but also extends to other areas, which he can utilize to his advantage as a (double) spy. The bribes amount to \$10,000, “an extraordinary sum” but “a wholesale bargain for ninety-two evacuees” in a time when “the price of visas, passports, and seats on evacuation airplanes ran to many thousands of dollars” (28). The connections that the narrator needs for their scheme are found at a nightclub, where he befriends a “louche major” (28) who works at the airport. “For a relatively modest fee of a thousand dollars” (28), the major discloses the identities of the guards and the lieutenant on duty the night of the General’s planned escape. In the week before leaving, the narrator visits the lieutenant to bribe him into letting them pass through the airport gates. The lieutenant is not amused; “You want me to stab my country in the back . . . You want to pay me to let cowards and traitors escape” (41), he exclaims. The meeting takes place at the lieutenant’s home, “the canal-side slum he lived in with his wife, three children, parents, and in-laws, all of whom were dependent on a salary that was not enough to feed half of them” (40)—despite the lieutenant’s patriotism, both he and the narrator are aware that his living conditions will make it impossible for him to deny the bribe of \$5,000, a sum amounting to almost twice the monthly salary of his entire platoon (41). For people not in possession of wealth like that of the General and Madame, accepting bribes was a means of survival in desperate times. Furthermore, the lieutenant’s cooperation demonstrates “the link between the mobility of some and immobility of others” (Cresswell, *On the Move* 255): without the (paid) assistance of people who stayed, escapees—considered to be “cowards and traitors” by some—would have failed to successfully cross borders.

On the last morning before leaving, supposedly April 28th, the Captain finally informs “the five chosen officers” (*The Sympathizer* 16) that seats have been secured for them on the General’s escape aircraft. Having attained his professional ambitions through effort instead of familial ties, the narrator seems unimpressed by the young lieutenants: they “earned their precious positions via parental connections” (17), again disclosing classed access to escape mobility. The Captain likens his co-workers, who accept the message with gratitude, to “marionettes” (17). After briefing the last officer, the Captain hears bombs, indicating the approach of North Vietnamese forces. As a mole sympathizing with both sides, he feels “a need both to mourn and to celebrate” (17), a conflict that makes him reach for some whiskey.

He leaves the office and, back at the villa, decides what to bring on his escape:

I skipped dinner and packed my rucksack with my toiletries, a pair of chinos and a madras shirt bought at a J. C. Penney in Los Angeles, loafers, three changes of underwear, an electric toothbrush from the thieves’ market, a framed photograph of my mother, envelopes of photographs from here and America, my Kodak camera, and *Asian Communism and the Oriental Mode of Destruction*. (*The Sympathizer* 17)

Furthermore, in the false bottom where he would later conceal his confession manuscript, the narrator hides a Minox mini-camera used to photograph and then leak classified documents from the South Vietnamese Special Branch to his communist handler. He wears his uniform but, knowing that he will be airlifted to Guam and then arrive on U.S. mainland, he packs American apparel to change into, clothes purchased back when he “passed six idyllic years in the dreamy, sun-besotted world of Southern California during the sixties” and “learn[ed] American ways of thinking” as “part scholarship student, part spy-in-training” (15). Alongside essentials for daily hygiene, he carries mementos of his past in America and Vietnam, and a camera for capturing new memories. There is “no room for Elvis or Dylan, Faulkner or Twain” (18) or his guitar. The only

book he brings is Richard “Dick” Hedd’s *Asian Communism and the Oriental Mode of Destruction*, a satirical Nguyenian invention, which the narrator and Man use to communicate via code. While it takes the Captain several nights to come up with the list of evacuees, he chooses his few belongings quickly. Unlike the General, he packs light and brings a rucksack rather than a suitcase. The list of items that he carries is practical for both personal and professional needs, yet they also hold traces of nostalgia and, through the camera, a desire to create new moments elsewhere. As Lynda Mannik highlights in her monograph on photography, memory, and refugee identity, “photography is linked to memory in the creation of a space where refugee identity is negotiated” (xvi). Hence the Captain’s photographs—“a powerful tool in the production of identity” (10)—and the camera reveal the importance of pictures for refugees in memory-keeping and memory-making across borders.

After packing, the narrator goes out for some last Saigon drinks with Bon and Man. He does not own a car himself but is permitted to borrow the General’s Citroën, a means of transport whose brand name recalls their former colonizer. In war Saigon, the General’s car allows for a seamless mobility not available to others: “The military police at the checkpoints waved me by when they saw the General’s stars on the automobile” (*The Sympathizer* 20).¹⁶ At the beer garden, the two communist sympathizers (the narrator and Man) continue to lie to their best friend: “We had told Bon that Man would also flee with his family tomorrow, whereas the truth was that Man would stay to witness the liberation of the south by the northern communists Bon so despised” (19). Nevertheless, all three blood brothers toast to their anticipated reunion in the refugee camp and their

16 While signs visually branding the General’s military status are an advantage in war Saigon, they will become an inconvenience in the refugee camp. The General’s class-based superior living conditions—he and the rest of his escape party are accommodated in barracks rather than tents—may simplify his physical dwelling in the camp. However, socially, his military rank is a source of conflict when openly visible, as trust in the army diminishes and his living presence stands in contrast to the loved ones others have lost to the war. In an article titled “Narrating the Refugee Camp in Vietnamese American Literature: Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer* and Vu Tran’s *Dragonfish*,” I elaborate on these frictions.

eventual return to Vietnam. This also draws attention to linguistic differences regarding the memory of war. While some will see the takeover of Saigon as its fall, others remember it as the city's liberation: "They were my enemies, and yet they were also brothers-in-arms. Their beloved city was about to fall, but mine was soon to be liberated. It was the end of their world, but only a shifting of worlds for me" (21–2), the narrator muses while watching the singing crowd of other young soldiers.

When they leave the establishment, the three blood brothers get into a fight with three marines, which is interrupted when they hear explosions in the distance. At around 6.00 p.m., three AK-37 aircraft of the North Vietnamese air force bomb Tan Son Nhut Air Base (Tobin et al. 70), which instigates a 24-hour curfew in a city that was already used to nightly curfews (38). After the bombing, the narrator and Bon say their goodbyes to Man and leave to fetch Bon's family. They move on to the General's villa, where their departure is scheduled for 7.00 p.m. Two buses have been organized to move the chosen evacuees to the airport, and the General will take the Citroën with Madame and their children. The Captain, checking that "each adult and teenager carried no more than a small suitcase or valise" (*The Sympathizer* 29), directs everyone to their vehicle. The household staff stays behind with their cash-filled farewell envelopes—"tickets to nowhere" (31). They have to stay put, not knowing what awaits them once the city is captured; unlike the kinetic elite consisting of privileged extended family members and select military personnel, they are not offered the chance of a ticket to somewhere else, revealing classed access to mobility. Without further opportunities, their foreseeable departure is improbable despite the monetary gifts they have just obtained. The Citroën, operated by the General, leads the escape party into the night, followed by the first bus overseen by the Captain, and the second bus, which Claude accompanies.

Due to the curfew, which restricts city dwellers' micro-mobilities in exchange for their safety, the streets and sidewalks are empty that evening. Nevertheless, crossing the city is complex: "The route from villa to airport was as uncomplicated as anything could be in Saigon, which is to say not uncomplicated at all" (*The Sympathizer*

31). The drive through Saigon becomes a drive through memory lane as the places they pass, presumably for the last time, transport the narrator to moments from the past. He notes “the street where the imperious French once stabled their gilded mistresses, followed by the more déclassé Americans whooping it up in lurid bars” (34) and, looking at cafés and nightclubs, he is reminded of either “dates with proper Saigonese girls and their mummified chaperone aunts” (33) or “evenings doing the cha-cha with young ladies in miniskirts and the latest in arch-breaking heels” (34). Arriving at the airport, they are permitted to pass, the bribed lieutenant “holding up his end of the bargain as the last fig leaf of his dignity” (41). In this way, around 9.00 p.m., the synergy of personal connections, military rank, and bribes allows them safe passage to “the metropolis that was the airport complex” (42). In this “miniature city” (42), they make their way to the buildings of the Defense Attaché Office, where they park and queue to have their immigration papers checked.

In the chaos of the last few days of the war, Tan Son Nhut Airbase becomes an “evacuation center” (*The Sympathizer* 42). Previously, from 1955 until the communist takeover in 1975, it was used by the South Vietnamese Air Force, and from 1959 to 1975 it was also a main base for U.S. Army, Navy, and Marine units. Located a few kilometers from the city center, the airport was built in the 1930s by the French colonial authorities (Olson 72). A frequent target during the conflict between North and South, it was eventually taken over in the fall of Saigon. Today, Ho Chi Minh City airport, also known as Tan Son Nhat International Airport, is one of the busiest in the country. In December 2004, United Airlines was the first U.S. airline to commercially fly to Vietnam since the end of the war (Mason), touching down near the site of the mass evacuations that took place three decades prior.

As the example of Tan Son Nhut/Nhat reveals, airports solidify global interconnection and often carry colonial history. As a place of departure and arrival for flows of people and goods, the airport has received considerable attention in the field of mobility studies; it is “the strange if iconic space of the new world order” (Sheller and Urry 219). As a symbol, the airport is “a central metaphor for post-modern, transnational life” (Cresswell, *On the Move* 24). As physical

infrastructure, airports' material immobility provides the mooring for aircraft mobility (Adey 87). However, "[s]pace is never still"; airports are "made up of thousands, millions, billions of movements that interact with one another in many different ways" (90). In this way, "[a]irports must consist of this continual ambivalence between mobilities and relative immobilities, movement and moorings" (90). Although portrayed at an exceptional historical moment rather than in its everyday rhythm, the airport in *The Sympathizer* plays with these ambivalences: its facilities are repurposed to make room for hundreds of evacuees, whose only chance of leaving is to wait, immobile, until their papers are processed and their plane is called.

Before entering the airport space, the novel does not use the term 'refugee' in reference to those leaving Saigon by plane; the term 'evacuee' is preferred. Evoking the picture of someone who is in need of rescuing, 'evacuee' is still more neutral than 'refugee.' In legal terms, it makes sense not to call the people waiting at the airport 'refugees' as they have not yet crossed international borders. Interestingly, the first shift to 'refugees' occurs in the second chapter, at the airport, when the members of the General's escape party leave their vehicles to stand in line and wait for the embassy clerk to stamp their papers. At the beginning of the paragraph, they are "evacuees," but after queuing—"unnatural" for the Vietnamese, in the narrator's words—for some time, the marines' "intimidating presence eventually coerced the refugees into lines" (43). In other words, once their plans for long-distance movement as well as their present micro-mobilities are being managed externally, the people on the move become refugees in the Captain's account. Their agency is inhibited and their bodies are "coerced"—made docile and immobile. Even the particular mode in which the evacuees-turned-refugees have to wait to be processed is coordinated by others. The queue is "a form of control" and "configure[s] time as space" (Fuller 209), making their waiting as well as the outside administration of their bodies visible. Camp detainees are also forced into lines while waiting for food in the novel's fourth chapter—the point at which they become aware of their refugee status. Their waiting becomes an epiphanic moment that "addresses the affective dimensions of

waiting and (im)mobility” (Lagji 219). I will elaborate on experiences of immobility in refugee camps in the next chapter, which discusses stopovers.

At the head of the queue, they present their papers: “Each of the family heads had the laissez-passer documents from the Ministry of the Interior I had bought at a hefty discount, as well as the presidential parole delivered by Claude, stamped by the relevant embassy clerk” (*The Sympathizer* 44). The narrator had used the remaining \$4,000 to bribe an embassy employee into obtaining their ninety-two visas, “a hefty discount” indeed considering that this amount would usually only suffice for two visas (62). Moreover, their connection to Claude once again proves to facilitate further passage. Claude is forthright in regularly reminding the Captain of their good fortune— “[j]ust consider yourself lucky” (43). This evokes Mimi Thi Nguyen’s critique of the ‘gift of freedom,’ “an affective-moral economy between a freedom-giving empire and indebted refugees” (Kim 57) that “hides from view the protracted duration of dislocation and loss for the uprooted refugees and enforces liberalist epistemology and ontology based on the logic of development and progress” (59). This gift, which may be seen as “a cluster of promises” (M. T. Nguyen 12), is bestowed on individuals with an expectation of lifelong gratitude as “the debt it imposes . . . troubles the recipient far into the foreseeable future” (19). The stories of transnational adoptees highlight these issues, which I will address in Chapter Four. In the context of *The Sympathizer*, the General laments that the Americans “started this war, and now that they’re tired of it, they’ve sold us out, We were foolish enough to think they would keep their word. Now there’s nowhere to go but America” (15); while Claude reinforces the notion that they may count themselves fortunate to move to the U.S., Vietnamese characters point out that this is simply the final avenue available to them. In this way, refugees are “good” if they remain grateful, and “bad” if they do not.¹⁷

17 In media discourse focused on crisis, this distinction between “good” refugees who are “genuine refugee[s] . . . [who] ‘deserve’ protection” (Szczepanik 24) and “bad” refugees who “intend to abuse the system of social welfare” (26) is ubiquitous. Such perceptions are not based on legal definitions but perpetuated by racist prejudice. Certain distinc-

After passing immigration, the group moves forward to the tennis court, where the waiting continues. The facilities are not designed to accommodate so many people, and the swimming pool close by, which used to be a transnational, though otherwise segregated or controlled space—"an American-only area, with passes for the whites of other countries and for the Indonesians, Iranians, Hungarians, and Poles of the International Committee of Control and Supervision" (*The Sympathizer* 54)—has been turned into a urinal. Hours later, at 4.00 a.m. the next day, the General's number is finally called and they move on to the parking lot, where buses are waiting for them. Rather than remaining in their original escape party of ninety-two people, they are joined by other evacuees, the group eventually numbering around two hundred. Adding a snide comment on their physique ("Y'all ain't too big, so we puttin' two of you on for every one of us" (55)), one of the American marines explains that they will double the number of passengers, aiming for around 180 per aircraft. Their bodies continue to be micro-managed as they enter the C-130 Hercules, "a garbage truck with wings attached, and like a garbage truck deposits were made from the rear, where its big flat cargo ramp dropped down to receive us" (55). Usually, the C-130 Hercules is a transport aircraft configured to carry pallets of cargo, or airlift ninety-two passengers and a crew of five (Wilkinson). There are no seats, and a loadmaster assists the evacuees to squeeze in, equating them with human cargo.

Although their presence at the airport differentiates them as privileged compared to those who were not able to escape, kinetic elites who managed to depart earlier (like the former South Vietnamese president) still experienced aircraft mobility more comfortably than the Captain and his fellow evacuees: "The contours of skin and flesh separating one individual from another merged, everyone forced into the mandatory intimacy required of those less human than the

tions, however, are also made within refugee communities; in his memoir, for example, Viet Thanh Nguyen quotes an older Vietnamese American woman who approved of Donald Trump's border policies: "We are the good refugees. They're not political refugees like we were. There are two types of people who want to come to America—those who seek freedom and those who go out to destroy it" (*A Man of Two Faces* 162).

ones leaving the country in reserved seating” (*The Sympathizer* 57). The C-130 Hercules passengers expect to finally take off and bid their beloved city goodbye. However, before they even leave the ground, there is an explosion: “The plane’s starboard engines were aflame, two blazing torches spewing gusts of spark and smoke” (59). The ramp is lowered again and the almost-evacuated storm out, leaving their suitcases and running for their lives. The attack continues and gunfire breaks out.

Amidst the chaos, a final C-130 remains the only way out. Competition ensues between previously unsuccessful evacuees and American military personnel, each recognizing that enemy forces will soon have control of the airport and Saigon. The General, Madame, the Captain, and Bon make it onto the plane without life-threatening injuries, but it is too late for Linh, Bon’s wife, and their son Duc. The narrator “saw the wet bloody mess of Duc’s chest where something had torn through it and through his mother” (*The Sympathizer* 65–6) but does not witness the bullets catching them. Thus the circumstances of their last moments remain unclear—was it just bad luck? Or was Linh, slower than the others since she must have been carrying her son, overtaken by faster runners, becoming an easier target? Whatever has led to their deaths, all that is left for the narrator and Bon is to retrieve their lifeless bodies. They ascend into the night and leave in the early hours of April 29th, 1975. Later that morning, the final evacuations continue under attacks that lead to the city’s fall on the next day.¹⁸

18 After the attack on the airport, evacuations could no longer be carried out by plane. During Operation Frequent Wind, the final evacuation phase that took place between April 29th and 30th, 1975, evacuees were airlifted out of the city by helicopter (Robinson 18). Forty-six years after the fall of Saigon, memories of these evacuations were reignited by images of military aircraft and helicopters evacuating civilians and military personnel after the Taliban seized Kabul in August 2021. Although some consider this analogy “dangerously misleading” (Humphrey), pictures and reports of Afghans cramming into U.S. cargo planes to escape have led to comparisons between the two events. In an op-ed for *The New York Times*, Viet Thanh Nguyen acknowledges the risks of spectacularization this parallel poses. At the same time, he argues that “the Saigon analogy is important because the urgency and the human disaster are similar as is the role that the United States and other nations must play to shape those fates of Afghans” (“I Can’t Forget”).

The first few chapters of *The Sympathizer* reveal that, although the flight from the threat of prosecution is considered a form of forced mobility, it also involves an active resolution to leave. Simultaneously it is revealed that, even after deciding to flee, escaping is not always an option. Lack of financial means, familial ties, and/or other connections all expose various aspects of classed politics of mobility. Furthermore, obtaining visas and making it to the aircraft's departure point does not guarantee exit or survival. Regarding evacuees' micro-mobilities, controlled waiting in queues—or forced immobility in anticipation of mobility—transforms them into refugees. Additionally, Linh's and Duc's deaths touch on how velocity, "[b]eing able to get somewhere quickly" (Cresswell, "Politics of Mobility" 23), does not only distinguish the seamless and fast mobility of kinetic elites, but also plays a role in situations where running speed is essential for survival, which favor able-bodied, adult individuals (who do not have to carry children).

Nevertheless, the distinction between airway evacuees, who departed in the weeks and days right before the communist takeover, and boat refugees, who did not manage to abandon the reunified nation-state until the following years, remains relevant. In the chapters after their departure, the narrator and others in the General's escape party who managed to board the last plane reach makeshift military camps. The continuation of their journey to the U.S. is facilitated swiftly, since political urgency assures them the refugee status that they need for frictionless passage, although what awaits them on Western shores is yet another refugee camp. They are more fortunate than later arrivals insofar as their stays in overcrowded facilities in the Pacific are brief—I will address longer stopovers in Pulau Bidong, one of Malaysia's most important refugee camps, in the following chapter. For now, I turn to Andrew Lam's short story "Hunger," which offers an example of the representation and memory of escape by boat.

Countering Boat Refugee Spectacularization in Andrew Lam's "Hunger" (2013)

As the son of a South Vietnamese general and baptized as a Catholic, Andrew Lam grew up speaking Vietnamese and French. His family fled when he was a young boy. Today, he is a renowned author who writes in English, his third language, and is celebrated for his reflections on the Vietnamese American diaspora. Besides publishing two noteworthy autobiographical volumes, *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora* (2005) and *East Eats West: Writing in Two Hemispheres* (2010), Lam has composed several short stories that are collected in *Birds of Paradise Lost* (2013). Readers who are familiar with his essays and short stories will likely spot obvious parallels in the narratives across the two genres. At the same time, Lam's experience as a journalist and traveler has led many to regard him as a truly cosmopolitan figure. This is reflected in his own conceptions of home, which he discloses in an interview with Quynh Vo: "Home is therefore rooted in a sense of plurality, in a sense of I am *both* this and that. And more." His statement highlights the importance of home when discussing the multifaceted nature of hybrid refugee experiences and identities.

For the remainder of this subchapter, I will focus on Lam's "Hunger," the seventh short story in *Birds of Paradise Lost*. This collection begins with an epigraph by another great American storyteller, the Native American writer N. Scott Momaday, which emphasizes the importance of storytelling in moving forward: "*Anything is bearable as long as you can make a story out of it . . .*" (ellipsis in source). This is taken up in "Hunger," in which the protagonist, Binh Nguyen, sells his story to *60 Minutes*, a popular news magazine broadcast. Binh is a single father on disability, Section 8, and his intention in commercializing his own story of flight is to improve his daughter's prospects and their overall living standards. While *The Sympathizer's* embedded narrative returns to the narrator's departure by plane across several chapters, the main narrative of Lam's story

only briefly revisits the moment of Binh's boat mobility. "Hunger" traces the protagonist's early days of arrival, and yet it is an important addition to a chapter discussing escapes: at its heart, the short story addresses the (mis)representation of boat escape mobility, not only as a piece of fiction that represents, but as a text problematizing representation within the narrative itself. When he sees the segment on air, in its filtered and adapted form, Binh feels that the story is no longer his own; the TV show makes a spectacle of his boat experience. In this way, Lam's short story offers an example of the kind of alienation that external, undifferentiated distributions of stories may cause, underscoring the need for self-determined storytelling from below—by and about refugees—that does justice to their actual experiences. "Hunger" achieves this by providing Binh's perspective, which counters the media's distorted image of refugees' perilous ocean crossings.

At the beginning of the short story, when first presented with the idea to publicly tell his escape story, Binh's reaction is defensive and markedly physical, as "a sharp, burning pain suddenly shoots outward from somewhere deep inside his stomach, like fireworks" ("Hunger" 87). By contrast, his cousin Thanh, who has long since Americanized his name to Eddie, immediately recognizes the prospect of economic gain and considers the proposed TV segment a "golden opportunity" (86). Enamored by consumerism and tangible assets, Eddie sees Binh's story as an immaterial asset that carries the potential of generating material wealth. Telling one's story may be empowering in some situations, but to Binh, revisiting the horrors of the past seems overwhelming—he even regrets having told Eddie and his wife about his family's escape. As Binh listens to Eddie's proposition on the phone, his inner monologue discloses to readers what happened during their boat passage: "What's there to tell? The boat captain and his crew killed his wife and two others, the weakest, the dying, when their boat was stranded on a coral reef for fourteen days, and ate their flesh and drank their blood in order to survive" (87). The combination of the mother's uncanny absence, the title of the short story, and Binh's daughter's refusal to eat meat alludes to what happened at sea, but it is only at this point, almost

ten pages into the narrative, that Binh unemotionally reveals these details. The boat's sudden immobility threatened its passengers' survival, resulting in measures too harrowing to recount. Choosing not to pursue the matter further, Binh hangs up on his cousin and "goes to sit on the sofa and cry" (88). Reliving this memory serves as a retraumatizing exercise for Binh, yet his impassioned crying contrasts sharply with the emotionless vocalization of this trauma in his inner monologue. His trauma is thinkable and shareable in private, but unspeakable on TV, producing an internal split for Binh that seems irreconcilable.

Throughout the 1980s, instances of boat refugees' forced cannibalism occasionally made headlines in the U.S. Usually, the figure of the cannibal, who "does not only invoke repulsion because he is also a source of great fascination" (Brown 4), is a perfect Other. However, Jennifer Brown argues that while there is "a long tradition of labelling the enemy or Other as cannibal" (215), Othering holds no significance in the context of survival cannibalism. Unlike other forms of cannibalism, survival cannibalism "is usually not political, and those who consume human flesh are not denounced as savage" (221). Nevertheless, the shocking appeal of the subject easily leads to sensationalist headlines (such as "A Vietnamese Orphan Tells of Killings and Cannibalism in 52-Day Sea Escape," the title of a 1981 *New York Times* story written by Henry Kamm). By contrast, Duc Nguyen humanizes survivors in his documentary *Bolinao 52* (2008), which tells the story of a group of boat refugees who, in 1988, resorted to cannibalism when their vessel's motor died and left them stranded in the middle of the sea. The film follows Tung Trinh, one of the fifty-two survivors who kept her story secret for two decades out of shame. Successful community screenings of the documentary demonstrate "the important role of documentary filmmaking in fostering community building and reflection, and how diasporic filmmakers working from within their own communities navigate and facilitate such processes" (Small 199)—along with sharing survivors' stories, Duc Nguyen creates spaces for constructive community dialogues.

In Lam's short story, the *60 Minutes* segment does not promise the same kind of engagement with Binh's story. While Binh is still in contact with Eddie, his cousin's wife stops talking to him after learning about what happened on the boat. Hence, Eddie is well aware that the broadcast might lead to similar reactions and aversion. He counts on society's fascination with rather than repulsion for cannibalism, however, and encourages Binh to tell his story "so that Hollywood would want to make a movie" ("Hunger" 87). Eddie, convinced that the TV show's potential profits will "get [his cousin] out of [his] hellhole" (89), remains adamant about commercializing Binh's story of escape: "I guarantee you, if this story is told, we can sell it as a book, and maybe, who knows, even a movie. At the very least, people will send you money" (90). Working as a manager in the high-tech industry, Eddie might be interested in media attention but has no need for monetary support himself. Nevertheless, he feels obligated to improve his family member's financial situation, even though the attempt may open Binh's wounds without leading to resolution or understanding.

Unsurprisingly, Eddie is a bold advocate of the American Dream: "The main objective here [in the U.S.] is to climb up the social ladder. You should know this term, it's a funny term—but people believe in it. It's called the American Dream. Everybody can be middle class here, at the very least, if they're willing to work hard" ("Hunger" 81). Binh has only recently arrived in the U.S., but Eddie has lived there ever since his escape, right after the war's end. Back in Vietnam, photographs of Eddie's affluent American lifestyle had accompanied Binh's family across borders for several years: "See the two-story house in the suburb with an apple tree in front? See the children laughing in the sparkling pool in back? See the pretty, red-lipped, jewel-bedecked wife waving from their Volvo parked with the Golden Gate Bridge in the background . . . ?" (82-3). These pictures affect what Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan call the 'geographical imagination,' "the mechanism by which people come to know the world and situate themselves in space and time" (6), for which photography is crucial. Back in Vietnam, Binh and his wife Ly had worked as rice farmers in the Mekong Delta, a reality starkly

different from that depicted in Binh's cousin's photographs. After the communist government takes over their fields, seeking to elude impending starvation, they decide to follow Eddie's example. Pictures of home ownership, prosperity, and luxury feed transnational imaginations of a better life elsewhere, which I will take up in Chapter Four when discussing return tourism.

In contrast to his expectations, the reality of Binh's American Dream involves "looking out to the concrete courtyard where the broken swings lie inert, and the walls of the buildings across from his are sprayed with all sorts of graffiti" ("Hunger" 81). The clash between the two cousins' living conditions recalls Lam's distinction between those who left early and those who followed later ("Viet Kieu" 118), which generates a rift in the community. Eddie personifies what is often described as the 'model minority' stereotype. The notion of Asian Americans as the model minority homogenizes the group "as hardworking, 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, the model minority myth has been prevalent ever since the 1960s and continues to dominate popular discourse. Pitching *60 Minutes* to Binh, Eddie makes use of this image by referencing Chinese American writer Amy Tan, author of the successful novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989): "Have you heard of Amy Tan?" his cousin asks. "She's a Chinese woman who writes about Chinese tragedies, and Americans eat them up. It made her very rich, a multimillionaire in Oakland" ("Hunger" 87). Notwithstanding his cousin's present situation, Eddie senses that "[e]thnic literature's hot" (N. Le 9) and hopes for Binh's Vietnamese "tragedy" to result in an American Dream of prosperity.

Accordingly, Binh's negative reply to the suggestion that he sell his story does not hinder Eddie, who invites the TV crew anyway. The next day, he arrives at Binh's apartment with a reporter, "a pretty Chinese woman" ("Hunger" 89), and "a fat cameraman with a goatee wearing his baseball cap backward" (89). In Vietnamese, Eddie continues to encourage Binh to tell his story, while also warning him that he will stop helping his family if Binh does not agree to the deal.

Ostensibly wanting to support his cousin out of goodwill, Eddie's excitement at the presence of the Channel Five representatives and the "threatening tone" (90) he adopts suggest that his interest is not entirely selfless and that he may be pursuing TV fame for himself. In any case, Binh's focus remains on his family as he assesses the situation. Tempted by the hope of gaining financial income that might increase the "probability of a good life for his daughter" (90), he finally agrees to be interviewed.

At the time of the narrative, Binh has not lived in the U.S. for long and still needs to gain the English language skills needed to provide a detailed account of what occurred at sea. A TV segment offers a highly stylized version of what happened, and Binh's reproduction of events in Vietnamese additionally leads to linguistic detours that may contribute to the distortion of the story in its final form. Eddie acts as his mouthpiece, interpreting what his cousin says and translating reporter Caroline Wang-Reed's questions, which Binh responds to in Vietnamese. For administrative reasons and in less public settings, Binh has had to repeat his story before—as Vinh Nguyen observes, "refugees must learn to become storytellers: to prove persecution to officials, to describe trauma to reporters, to express gratitude to the humanitarian state, and to articulate their success to the national community" (xvi). Nevertheless, confronting the past and remembering his dead wife remains a difficult and retraumatizing task for Binh, who "walks away several times from the camera to wash his face in the bathroom" ("Hunger" 90). He pushes through and even manages to respond to the most challenging and scandal-seeking questions: "Did you eat human flesh yourself? And did your daughter? Did you and your daughter eat your wife?" (90). At first, Binh only answers hesitantly, but after "much coaxing from the cousin," he explains that "[h]e and his daughter only ate part of his wife and it was because it was his wife that they gave him and his daughter some of the blood and flesh. That's how he and his daughter survived" (90). While Eddie and the reporters seem interested in the act of eating human flesh as mere spectacle, Binh frames this cannibalism as his wife's heroic sacrifice, which gave him and his daughter the gift of life. He endures the ordeal of

disclosing painful and shameful memories, responding patiently as he thinks of his daughter and how she will grow up without hunger.

The day after the TV crew's visit, Binh watches *60 Minutes* and no longer recognizes his own story. The segment starts with Wang-Reed's introduction, as "footage of ragged-looking boat people standing on rickety boats appears behind her" ("Hunger" 91). The exhausted and worn-out Vietnamese refugees in the backdrop appear as mere victims, framing the scene for Binh's story. Next, Binh "hears himself confessing on TV, with his cousin's voice-over in English" (91). The verb "confessing" reveals that Binh finds sharing his story shameful and does not experience any of the empowerment that speaking out was supposed to bring. Although the two stories differ in form and content, the notion of confessing provides a link to *The Sympathizer*. As a result of his cousin's emotional blackmail and his own impoverished circumstances, Binh feels compelled to confess. Still, his position is quite unlike that of the unnamed narrator in Nguyen's story, who confesses as a tortured prisoner. Pondering that "not to own the means of representation is also a kind of death" (*The Sympathizer* 253), the Captain, whose confession is full of ambivalence in any case, questions its validity: "I cannot help but wonder, writing this confession, whether I own my own representation or whether you, my confessor, do" (253). Binh does not have to contemplate this question further; viewing stories as commodities, he relinquishes ownership of his narrative by selling the rights to Channel Five. Both confessions demonstrate Michel Foucault's assertion that "[t]he confession is a ritual of discourse . . . that unfolds within a power relationship" (61), although the contexts, content, and form of Binh's and the Captain's confessions vary significantly.

As a result of sharing his story but having no control over how the producers would edit it, Binh "feels that it is no longer his story" ("Hunger" 91) when he watches the *60 Minutes* segment—not only because it is now out in the world, on national TV, for everyone to judge, but also because of its changed form. Although there is a short clip showing Binh on his sofa, speaking Vietnamese, "[m]uch of what he told had been cut" (91), and what he does tell in the footage is

consumed by the English-speaking audience via Eddie's translation. After that, the rest of the segment is a conversation between the anchorman and the reporter, who "answers as if she knew the story by heart" (91). As a result of these several stages of decoding and (re)interpretation, Binh's story emerges in an adapted and almost unrecognizable form. Speaking in his native language, Binh recounts his story, a narrative he had previously shared in private and had to tell several times to officials and institutions to facilitate his continued mobility and arrival in the United States. Although the TV show marks his first time speaking out publicly, retelling his escape in other contexts has become a ritual. As such, his story as a confession "is not a means of expressing the irrepressible truth of prior lived experience, but a ritualized technique for producing truth" (Gill 4). In a next step, the rehearsed version of Binh's tale is presented in English by Eddie, who can do the job but has no specific training in translation. Moreover, Eddie's sincerity can be questioned; seemingly enjoying the spotlight, his motives for making Binh appear in the TV show may be self-centered. Furthermore, given Eddie's fascination with the success of Amy Tan, writer of "Chinese tragedies" ("Hunger" 87) that are eagerly consumed by Americans, it is conceivable that he might modify Binh's more neutral retelling to fit presumable viewer expectations. Following these adjustments, most of the story is eventually told by Wang-Reed. These multiple levels of mediation distort Binh's story until it is unrecognizable even to himself, the one person who had actually lived it.

At the end of the segment, Wang-Reed's counterpart gets the final word: "The bald anchorman falls silent for a second after the story is told, then says it's a very sad story" ("Hunger" 91). Binh has heard this sentence many times before: "In the Palawan Refugee Camp, his beautiful Filipina English teacher used to encourage her students to tell their stories in English and then corrected their sentences. After each story was told, she would sigh and comment, 'It's a very sad story.' This English sentence, his first, Mr. Nguyen had memorized" (91). The refugee camp, where "*to die* was among the first few verbs that he and other boat people learned to conjugate thoroughly" (94), is the first place where Binh is obliged to recount what happened

at sea. The repeated response of “It’s a very sad story” teaches Binh and his fellow boat refugees that others see them as victims of a tragedy lacking any means of agency. In this way, Binh’s English competence is closely tied to a language of catastrophe and victimization, which he adopts even before arriving in the U.S. By catering to white audiences and serving them the Vietnamese tragedy that they want, even Eddie is complicit in Binh’s victimization. However, obsessed with the idea of the American Dream, the least he can hope for is to make his cousin rich in the process of selling him out. Eddie, however, might not have anticipated the reporter becoming the main storyteller, and that neither he nor Binh would be permitted to take center stage.

Although Binh seems to have lost control over his own narrative, his appearance on TV still leads to unexpected human connections. The night after watching *60 Minutes*, Binh cannot sleep: “it slowly dawns on him that now everyone knows—and how will they live this down?—that he and his daughter are cannibals” (“Hunger” 92). Without any prior chance to properly reflect on his decision to speak out publicly, he is now filled with regret and a familiar feeling of shame. When disturbed by a knock on the door, he fears that the Channel Five representatives are once again at his doorstep: “Maybe the television people are back. What else do they want? They already got his story” (92). Binh feels the loss of ownership; his story was taken away from him, and since he does not possess any material belongings, he cannot think of anything else that could be taken from him. Against his conjectures, Binh recognizes his neighbor, Kathy Lee Washington, through the spyhole and opens the door. In two months of living at Sunny Dale Housing Project with his daughter, he has not yet properly interacted with Kathy, but was once beaten up by her teenage son. Binh, unable to follow her quick speech, only catches her saying, “I saw you on TV,” and, “It’s all so crazy” (92). He presumes that Kathy means “crazy” in reference to him being a cannibal and, as a potential explanation for his state of mind, he responds by saying, “Yes, I have Section 8” (93). Kathy, who was addressing the situation as crazy rather than his mental condition, laughs and enters without being invited.

Noticing that Kathy brought a bag of chocolate chip cookies, Binh asks her to sit and wait while he makes tea. She talks incessantly and Binh, struggling to comprehend, politely agrees. However, Kathy is patient, and when she lightly touches the bruise on his left cheek, he understands that she is apologizing for her son's violent behavior. Later on, she points to the TV and communicates that she was interviewed for a news broadcast as well after her husband had died—a verb that Binh understands perfectly—from a gunshot. Using her hand to form the shape of a gun, she reconstructs the shooting, accompanying her speech with her body so Binh can follow. She continues with another story and Binh “wishes that he could understand every word, but he can't, and he resorts instead to listening to the deep timbre of her voice, which is warm and rhythmic, its sadness” (95). What he comprehends is that she is talking about substance abuse and family, and then Kathy bursts into tears. She stands up and reenacts memories from her past through physical movement, utilizing her body to show Binh how she and her family used to work in the field back in Georgia, where she lived before moving to California.

This resonates with Binh, who stands up as well and, while Kathy starts humming a song, performs an embodied narrative, showing her how he used to harvest and catch catfish back in Vietnam. Where the TV segment had left no room for Binh to tell his story, Kathy “keeps nodding her head, saying, ‘I hear you’ and ‘Uh-huh, uh-huh,’ as if she could see life in his village very well” (“Hunger” 95–6). The scene may seem cliché, but it effectively demonstrates how Binh and Kathy bridge cultural divides through gestures and sounds, rather than verbal communication. When they hear Binh's daughter, who is sobbing from a nightmare of their harrowing journey at sea, Kathy joins Binh in the other room to comfort her. Binh's daughter, who has given herself the English name Amy, immediately trusts their neighbor, whom she initially misidentifies as her mother. The story ends with the three of them lying on the mattress, the Nguyens slowly falling asleep to Kathy's voice humming another song.

While he is lulled to sleep, Binh “grows lightheaded thinking about this new country” (“Hunger” 97). His prior perception of the

U.S. was filled with iconic symbols of the American Dream such as “freeways, . . . two-tiered suburban houses, . . . smiling successes, . . . clinking champagne glasses” (97), representing incessant personal and social mobility. The encounter with Kathy opens a vision of America “populated with people previously invisible to him. . . . people singing sad, knowing ballads, people celebrating their hard lives, people telling stories” (97). Binh wrestles with his past and present, yet his imagination of the future in “this new country” remains hopeful; he recognizes the possibility of living alongside people whose American Dream is not a classic tale of progress and success. Lam’s story asserts the country’s diversity across race and class dimensions. To get this point across, it is repeatedly emphasized that Kathy is Black; the text refers to her as a “black woman” or a “black lady” nine times in total. While Kathy and the Nguyens are bonding, other characters confirm hostility between Asian Americans and Black Americans: Eddie, knowing that the majority of the other residents at Sunny Dale Housing Project are Black, calls it “that crazy and violent black village full of losers” (82), while Kathy’s son Rash’ad insults Binh with racially charged epithets and discriminatory gestures as he “pulls his eyelids back toward his ears, making them slanted” (85). Both Eddie, who has lived in the U.S. for at least two decades, and Rash’ad, who grew up there, clearly display internalized racism against other ethnic groups.

In a volume of essays on Asian American identity, Cathy Park Hong describes the divides between different American communities as follows: “In the popular imagination, Asian Americans inhabit a vague purgatorial status: not white enough nor black enough; distrusted by African Americans, ignored by whites, unless we’re being used by whites to keep the black man down” (9). These antagonistic relationships solidified during the Cold War; to demonstrate American openness and overhaul the racist image of the Jim Crow era, non-white groups had to be allowed to enter. This was facilitated via the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which changed previous laws banning or limiting Asian migration to the United States. The myth of the model minority served as propaganda: “During this period the model minority myth was popularized to keep Commu-

nists—and black people—in check. Asian American success was circulated to promote capitalism and to undermine the credibility of black civil rights” (22). Asian Americans were portrayed as the “good” Others: “they became the model for the rest of America’s ‘unsuccessful’ minorities and immigrants, at least in the narratives of the media, the politicians, and the pundits who argue that those who fail to achieve the American Dream have only themselves and the welfare state to blame” (V. T. Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* 131)—in this way, the model minority myth was used as an “antiwelfare narrative” (131). However, despite this homogenizing discourse, the Asian American community is diverse, and the fictional example of Binh is a reminder that not all of them live affluent lives. Furthermore, Binh and Kathy undermine the construction of resentment between their racial groups, connecting through their mutual experiences of growing up working in the fields and violently losing their spouses later in life. Moreover, as residents in a housing project, they share the same precarious living situation, and they have both been displaced—Binh left his hometown in Vietnam fleeing starvation, and Kathy presumably moved to California from Georgia during the late phase of the Great Migration.

Hence despite its comfortable and sentimental ending, Lam’s short story resists some of the typical features that Viet Thanh Nguyen lists in his “steps for anyone wanting to write their own immigrant saga for the American and Western marketplace” (*A Man of Two Faces* 157). Most strikingly, Binh is no model Asian American, but he applies his refusal to buy into the myth of the American Dream only to his own life, not his daughter’s—for her, he wishes for all the success and shine that the national ethos of the American Dream promises. In an earlier scene, while watching the Asian American reporter tell his story on TV, Binh is confused, yet briefly smiles when “[h]e imagines the Chinese reporter as his own Easy-to-Love [his daughter], all grown up and articulate and well-adjusted and successful” (“Hunger” 91). While he feels that his own voice was lost in translation, he imagines a future for his daughter that recalls Nguyen’s conceptualization of the immigrant saga, in which the American Dream and the U.S. as the nation of oppor-

tunity are affirmed. Unlike her father, Amy is already proficient in English and has chosen her own English name, seemingly ready for upward social mobility and to seamlessly enter American society as an assimilated Asian American, an immigrant rather than a refugee, despite her gruesome boat escape memories.

In this subchapter, I have focused on a short story that, less subtly than any of the other works, highlights the dangers of refugee (mis)representations. For Binh, the memory of forced long-distance mobility is shameful and retraumatizing because the memory of the ocean crossing is tainted by the immobility of their boat, during which the crew decided to sacrifice some of the passengers—such as his wife—so that the others could survive. Focalized through Binh, the short story neither condemns nor glorifies his actions at sea, and sympathizes with his decision to sell his story. In “Hunger,” Binh’s private point of view creates empathy, challenging the TV channel’s public rendition of his story as well as his cousin’s money-hungry approach to refugee storytelling. The storytelling offered through Binh’s perspective, unlike sensationalist media accounts that persist across different refugee contexts, provides an example of Vietnamese American self-representation that saturates the figure of the refugee with meaning and agency, countering damage- and spectacle-centered approaches. This evokes Yogita Goyal’s contrasts between the refugee novel and common media representations: “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 refugee short stories discussed here.

Chapter Two: Stopovers¹⁹

Popular discourses tend to consider refugees' journeys from their place of birth to another country as a straightforward transition from A to B. This neglects the fact that refugees' crossings are rarely unilinear, as they may decide to return or venture to a new destination. Moreover, a simplified perspective disregards that escaping to a country where refugee status can be obtained is usually only possible after waiting and pausing in spaces in-between. In many cases, prolonged stays at camp stopovers may even lead to finding a home in transitory places. In the Vietnamese American context, transpacific spaces played a crucial role in accommodating Vietnamese as well as Cambodian and Laotian refugees who fled their countries' communist regimes.

In 1975, the U.S. government established makeshift camps in Guam, the largest island in Micronesia and unincorporated territory of the United States. Refugee camps were transnational spaces attesting to the United States' lasting military influence in the region. Many of the 110,000 evacuees airlifted out of Saigon during the city's last hours before its fall were screened before being granted entrance to the American mainland, a tremendous number compared to the local Guamanian population that numbered around 100,000 at the time (Lipman 23). Along with the U.S. Task Force responsible for managing the incoming refugees, UNHCR upheld a presence on the island (Robinson 19) and supported several other camps in the South China Sea region in the years after the war ended. Most of the later camps were more permanent, and the main destinations were Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand (UNHCR, *World's Refugees* 85). This infrastructure served to control the movements

19 Parts of this chapter—especially the introductory section on the historical background and the analysis of Vu Tran's *Dragonfish*—appear under the title “Narrating the Refugee Camp in Vietnamese American Literature: Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and Vu Tran's *Dragonfish*” in the 2024 special issue “Pausing, Waiting, Dwelling: Experiences and Interactions during Stopovers in Transport Infrastructure” of the journal *Mobility Humanities* (3.2).

of refugee bodies, yet for the refugees themselves, the camps were not only places of detainment but also places where they developed strategies for transitory dwelling²⁰ in unfamiliar environments.

Along with refugee camps, fictional representations feature other places as stopover sites. Stories of pausing and waiting at airports and on boats are also frequently chronicled in the literature, which I broached in the last chapter discussing refugees' escapes. The brevity of stays at these stopover sites, however, meant that dwelling was not encouraged. Although dwelling can also occur while being on the move, it is often associated with "an immobile place to rest" (Meier and Frank 363)—in this case, the refugee camp, whose overcrowded conditions frequently undermine the potential for restorative rest. Nevertheless, refugees learn to dwell in the camp; here, I understand dwelling as a practice in which individuals establish routines and engage with their stopover place and, more importantly, with its people. In doing so, the camp does not necessarily have to become home ("conceptualized as dwelling with senses of belonging" (368)), yet it might become home-like for some refugees. In the following analysis, I focus on the refugee camp as an important and diverse transitory site where the three activities of pausing, waiting, *and* dwelling converge. From a mobilities standpoint that challenges methodological nationalism, refugee camps can be understood as crucial in-between or liminal places (Sheller 51). Mobile refugees construct initially temporary structures that paradoxically immobilize them during their flight, yet such spaces may also serve as potential steppingstones for further migration.

20 'Dwelling' is a term that can hardly be mentioned without a reference to the work of Martin Heidegger. In the influential essay "Building Dwelling Thinking," originally published after a 1951 lecture entitled "Bauen Wohnen Denken," Heidegger links the three activities and argues that "[t]o be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell" (147)—the German philosopher "wants us to embrace the notion of human life as fundamentally predicated on dwelling, to think of dwelling as a form of being-in-the-world and making it a 'home'" (Benesch, "Space, Place, Narrative" 102). In Cresswell's words, Heidegger's nationalist framing and conceptualizations are clearly informed by a sedentarist metaphysics. Research within the new mobilities paradigm has problematized Heideggerian rootedness and instead highlighted flexible practices such as 'dwelling-in-motion' (Sheller and Urry 214).

As mentioned in the introduction, 21st-century mobilities research has acknowledged the power inequalities that facilitate hypermobility for some while impeding the movements of others, thereby recognizing that “[m]obilities cannot be described without attention to the necessary spatial, infrastructural and institutional moorings that configure and enable mobilities” (Hannam et al. 3) and exposing the interplays between different mobilities and immobilities. Within this framework, the refugee camp, where these entanglements become visible, surfaces as a meaningful site of interest for the interdisciplinary field of mobility studies. To complement empirical analyses, this chapter contributes to the discourse on refugee camps by engaging with literary works that illuminate the multifaceted dimensions of camp life.

In particular, I will focus on how diverse forms of community-building are nourished as survival strategies in the refugee camp in Aimee Phan’s *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* (2012) and Vu Tran’s *Dragonfish* (2015). A fundamental similarity between the two analyzed novels is that they view the refugee camp as more than just a temporary station to be forgotten once refugees find more permanent accommodation. Instead, refugee camps are pivotal liminal places, and the experiences accumulated during these stopovers are decisive for characters’ later storylines. The novels do not just narrate the camp for embellishment; rather, the camp and the experiences it generates are central to the stories’ later developments. While Tran’s novel portrays the refugee camp as a space for fresh beginnings, highlighting its potential to foster new relationships, Phan’s depiction suggests that it can also serve as a site of enduring trauma. Rather than merely reproducing what the novels discussed here report about the refugee camp, I scrutinize *how* they narrate it, contributing to the growing interdisciplinary scholarship on refugee camp narratives in literary studies.

Before the close reading sections, I will introduce the relevant historical and genre-specific background, distinguishing between different refugee camps inhabited by Vietnamese refugees over the decades and situating the broader context in which refugee camp narratives emerged. Today, insights from and about the estimated

6.6 million people living in refugee camps in 2021 (USA for UNHCR, “Refugee Camps Explained”) come not only from humanitarian organizations or ethnographic research, but are also being captured in feature-length documentaries like *Fuocoammare* (2016) or *Warehoused* (2017). In addition, oral history archives collecting refugee stories and projects such as *Refugee Tales* (2016–21) extend these outside perspectives and give voice to refugees speaking about their experiences in camps. Just like Viet Thanh Nguyen, in his previously-mentioned, powerful introduction to *The Displaced* contends, “the people we call voiceless oftentimes are not actually voiceless” and “[t]he problem is that much of the world does not want to hear the voiceless or cannot hear them” (20). Consequently, what has been heard instead are representations that focus on the physical and political immobility of refugees in camps and camp-like spaces, leading to analogies with the concentration camp: “For several theorists of the refugee experience, contemporary border practices materialize a state of exception that finds its historical emblem in the Nazi camp” (Sanyal 4). This viewpoint is reinforced by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s prominent opus *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), which finds that “[t]oday it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West” (181). Agamben claims that camp dwellers are “stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life” (171). Although he focuses primarily on concentration camps, his work suggests that, in the context of forced displacement, refugees are analogously reduced to “bare life”—or, to the mere biological facts of living—within refugee camps.

Despite its influence, this stance has received ample criticism. Refugee testimonies and anthropologists such as Elena Fiddian-Qasmieh reject these approaches and instead emphasize refugees’ potential for agency in refugee camps, through which they surpass bare life’s constraints. Storytelling is a vital aspect of this survival beyond mere bodily existence and promotes emplacement, or place-making, “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). As Iranian Amer-

ican author Dina Nayeri notes in her creative nonfiction book *The Ungrateful Refugee* (2019), “[i]n a refugee camp, stories are everything. Everyone has one, having just slipped out from the grip of a nightmare” (6). Likewise, outlooks affirming that “refugee camps are simultaneously ‘reservoirs of memory’ of the homeland and are themselves spaces of belonging and longing, both as ‘lived’ home-camps and as potent ‘symbolic’ spaces” (Fiddian-Qasmieh 306) are endorsed.

This contrasts the claim that refugee camps can be viewed as Augéan ‘non-places.’ On the one hand, refugees in camps are connected by a sense of belonging through a shared past in the homeland, and further belonging is evoked through their present collective experience of flight. On the other hand, there is also an element with a future-oriented stance—longing rather than belonging—of hoping to move on. Nevertheless, the time spent waiting for this supposed next step may be indefinite; as Abdon Dantas and Miguel Amado conclude in their recent review of literature on refugee camps (factoring in institutional materials and academic publications), these spaces should no longer be considered temporary, one-dimensional settlements. In any case, dwelling is possible in the camp, even if it is often still *imagined* as a transitory station.

Addressing the Vietnamese exodus, a context in which most camp stays predate the advent of social media and the spread of the internet,²¹ YẾN Lê Espiritu adds another layer of critique of Agambenian refugee camp approaches: they “treat the camp as a unified and monolithic type of space rather than explaining how different types of camps rely on different logics and daily material practices” (*Body Counts* 76). Espiritu’s study shows that, depending on when and where Vietnamese refugees arrived on new shores, their camp experiences varied considerably. In the days leading up to the fall

21 These circumstances give rise to new forms of refugee testimony. Today, smartphones have become a “companion, an organisational hub, a lifeline and diversion” (Alencar et al. 828) for refugees on their escapes and during stopovers. With the use of such digital technologies, refugees can share their camp routines via social media. In addition, organizations such as the UNHCR also maintain active accounts on platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

of Saigon, some 140,000 Vietnamese were evacuated and resettled in the U.S. (UNHCR, *World's Refugees* 81). Before arriving in refugee camps established throughout the United States, these refugees—who were, unlike later arrivals, invariably also termed ‘evacuees’—were first airlifted to U.S. military bases in the Philippines, Guam, Thailand, Wake Island, and Hawai‘i for processing (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 25), where their stay was usually temporary. These operations were only made possible through lingering American presence in the Pacific region, made visible by the military infrastructure: “U.S. evacuation efforts were not a slapdash response to an emergency situation that arose in Vietnam in 1975 but rather part and parcel of the long-standing militarized histories and circuits that connected Vietnam, the Philippines, and Guam, dating back to 1898 [year of the Spanish-American War]” (29–30). Theorizing that “*refugees* and *refuge* are mutually constituted and that both emerge out of and in turn bolster U.S. militarism” (26) and “to expose the hidden and disguised violence behind the humanitarian term ‘refugee’” (xi), Espiritu draws attention to these entanglements by coining the term ‘militarized refuge(es).’

The first refugees to arrive remained only briefly in these makeshift camps, with the explicit intention of moving on. This fact significantly distinguishes their refugee camp stopovers from those of people who arrived later by boat, sometimes called “second-wave escapees,” whose “vast majority . . . languished in overcrowded camps, waiting uncertainly, sometimes indefinitely, to be reviewed and then resettled or repatriated” (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 50). According to UNHCR numbers assembled by W. Courtland Robinson, around 840,000 Vietnamese refugees and asylum seekers arrived in camps between 1975 and 1997, hosted mainly by Malaysia, Hong Kong, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore (294). Espiritu characterizes two different types of refugee camps that allowed for prolonged detention, both of which “racially marked refugees as people needing to be transformed” (*Body Counts* 76): refugee processing centers and closed camps/detention centers. While the latter can be understood through an Agambenian framework, the refugee processing centers established in the Philippines and Indonesia after

the 1979 Geneva Conference were open camps, ostensibly designed to alleviate overcrowding in ASEAN first-asylum countries. Providing language and cultural classes “to transform refugees into good citizen subjects for resettlement countries” (58), these centers acted as shapers of refugee bodies that were digestible and desirable to the West. Nevertheless, their movements were less restricted than in closed camps and detention centers, which effectively immobilized their dwellers.

Indeed, the hostile or even inhumane conditions at closed camps and detention centers made dwelling almost impossible; Espiritu speaks of “human warehousing” to describe the cramped conditions (*Body Counts* 64). In Hong Kong, refugees arriving between 1982 and 1988 were segregated into restrictive closed camps, but after 1988, only 10 percent were granted refugee status and allowed into closed camp spaces, while the remaining new arrivals were placed in detention centers for repatriation (60–1). These measures were implemented in response to the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA), which by 1989 had been implemented in other regions as well. The CPA effectively ended the policy of recognizing arriving Vietnamese as *prima facie* refugees. Instead, refugees were screened before receiving official status and being resettled in third countries; however, the majority were ultimately repatriated (54).

Neither the documentation of lived experiences in closed camps and detention centers nor first-hand testimonies of everyday routines in open camps are readily accessible. Nevertheless, dwelling and emplacement will have occurred for refugees occupying these sites for several months and even years. Espiritu writes that “I *look* for rather than *document* these place-making practices because they are seldom officially archived, not because they do not exist but because refugee life has too often been described only in terms of loss, dormancy, and inactivity” (*Body Counts* 65). In this light, alternative sources, including fictional ones, may be consulted to imagine what has been erased and to complement oral history.

Literary texts narrating Vietnamese refugees’ stays in open refugee camps are not ubiquitous, yet easy to find. However, I was not able to discover any fictional Vietnamese American representa-

tions dealing with the closed camps/detention centers described by Espiritu. Likewise, it is difficult to find research that comparatively examines available literary works in order to establish refugee camp literature as a distinct literary genre.²² Understanding 'refugee camp literature' as a cultural commodity as well as a literary and interdisciplinary genre, Safa Kouki provisionally uses the term in her dissertation on refugee camps in contemporary English language works. She explores how liminal refugee camp spaces influence distinct methods and approaches for expressing personal narratives. The precariousness of life in these camps is met with diverse survival strategies, and Kouki also addresses other thematic patterns across selected refugee camp narratives, such as the prevalence of waiting and the possibility of reinvention.

These common aspects raised by Kouki can also be observed in the two novels that will be analyzed shortly. The two works have been chosen not because they are representative of Vietnamese American refugee camp literature in general, but because they serve as examples for stories of refugees arriving by boat at one particular place: Pulau Bidong. Part of the Bidong archipelago, Pulau Bidong is an island in the South China Sea where the Malaysian government, in collaboration with the Malaysian Red Crescent Society and UNHCR, established and managed a refugee camp that would host around 250,000 refugees²³ between 1978 and 1991 (Q. T. Tran 81). Previously

22 Meanwhile, 'camp literature' is, in some instances, used as a synonym for Holocaust literature, which has been researched extensively from comparative and transnational perspectives. Given the notion of the Shoah's singularity and the consequential differences between the camp types, I will refrain from seamlessly transferring these frameworks to my analysis of Vietnamese American refugee camp literature. Nevertheless, it should be added that one of the most salient features found in concentration camp literature is also prevalent in refugee camp literature and trauma literature in general: namely, the prevalence of 'textual silence.' In her monograph on the subject, Jessica Lang characterizes this as 'unreadability' and defines it as "a textual quality or condition of inaccessibility—blankness, illegibility" (3). While I focus on episodes where something *is* said about refugee camp experiences, it is just as important to consider what is being left unsaid. In the Vietnamese context, this applies even more strikingly to the textual silence around reeducation camps, a topic largely neglected in this book.

23 In the following, I will consider Vietnamese refugees. However, as Quan Tue Tran notes, Pulau Bidong was also the destination of a small number of Cambodian refugees who had escaped the Khmer Rouge's totalitarian regime (110).

uninhabited, the island sheltered thousands of Vietnamese refugees in the first year of its opening: “By the end of 1978, the number of Vietnamese on Pulau Bidong hovered between 30,000 and 40,000 people, making the island the second largest ‘city’ in the region” (Lipman 67). This is even more striking considering the island’s small size of only 260 hectares and central elevation of around 300 meters (Abdul Rahman et al. 2, 9). The novels echo contemporary witnesses’ records of Pulau Bidong, some of which Jana K. Lipman, author of *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates* (2020), collects in her monograph’s subchapter on the politics of waiting in Pulau Bidong (66–73). Whereas Hong, as the narrator of the relevant *Dragonfish* passages, recounts her time at the refugee camp retrospectively, Hoa, the focalizer in the first chapter of *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong*, recounts her camp experiences in real time. Both characters remember staying at the camp for around a year, which allowed them to establish multiple everyday camp routines. This differentiates their narratives from those of refugees who escaped by plane. People who fled right before or after the fall of Saigon usually only stayed briefly at refugee camps, an example of which can be found in *The Sympathizer*: as an airlifted evacuee, the Captain—whose escape by aircraft in late April 1975 is examined in the previous chapter—arrived in a makeshift Guam camp and quickly moved on to a refugee center on the U.S. mainland.²⁴ For later refugees like Hong and Hoa, the passages included significantly longer periods of waiting.

With this background in mind, the two following subchapters zero in on Phan’s and Tran’s literary representations of refugees’ detention in refugee camps. These portrayals describe camp stays of prolonged duration that allowed for routines and dwelling. My close readings will pay particular attention to intersections of class, gender, and race. The objective of the analysis is not merely to demonstrate that the novels provide evidence of refugees’ camp practices,

²⁴ In one of the subchapters of the article “Narrating the Refugee Camp in Vietnamese American Literature: Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer* and Vu Tran’s *Dragonfish*” (2024), written for a special issue of *Mobility Humanities*, I elaborate on the Captain’s and the General’s camp experiences.

or that the texts can be appraised as verbatim reproductions of historical events. Instead, the analysis will examine how these works imagine stopovers and the relationships formed during pauses on the move, and to what effect. To use literary theorist Rita Fel-ski's words: "Rather than treating an artwork as a microcosm of the world—a faithful or deceptive reference to a prior reality—we need to trace out how it hooks up with audiences to *make* worlds" (140). Consequently, while this chapter details how the texts attest to the establishment of the refugee camp as a meaningful social space and a place of attachment, it also explores their theorization of the camp from a literary perspective. In this vein, I examine the camp's role within the narratives as a place where people must take a break, become aware of their status as refugees, and make consequential decisions. In particular, I investigate the relationships formed or forced in camp spaces to argue that there is not only a plurality of refugee experiences—both good and bad—encountered in the camp context, but also that these ties, even if temporary, are of lasting importance for the remainder of the exiles' stories.

Gendered Refugee Camp Experiences in Aimee Phan's *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* (2012)

Aimee Phan is a member of the second generation of Vietnamese American authors, whose works continue to explore themes of war, flight, and memory. Phan, author and associate professor at the California College of the Arts, was born in Orange County, California, as the child of refugees. From her debut, the short story cycle *We Should Never Meet* (2004), I will analyze the final short story, "Motherland," which deals specifically with the theme of return. In the current section, I focus on Phan's first novel, *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* (2012), which spans three decades, traverses three continents, and chronicles the Truong family's stories across three generations. Cherry, the heroine designated in the title, is one of eight central protagonists who recount the family saga in a prologue, twelve chap-

ters, and thirteen letter excerpts. The primary narrative arc is presented in a linear fashion, with interjections from the past added in throughout. The narrative gains a sense of non-linearity through dated but jumbled epistolary interventions. I will primarily attend to the novel's refugee camp passages, predominantly found in the first chapter and focalized through Hoa, Cherry's grandmother. However, I will also draw on later chapters to substantiate my argument that the experiences and relationships formed in the camp are of paramount importance for refugees in determining their future paths.

To avoid confusion, I will begin with a brief character overview of the Truong family. Hung and Hoa have three sons—Phung, Yen, and Sanh—who are all married and have children. Hung, the family patriarch, is almost sixty years old when they arrive in Pulau Bidong around 1978. The oldest son, Phung, and his wife, Ngoan, have one daughter, Cam. Yen's wife, Trinh, and their son, Xuan, share a family tent during their stopover, but Yen himself is not present at the refugee camp. He left for France to pursue his studies before the war's end, and while the rest of the family has to wait for their papers, Yen has already successfully obtained refugee status. The youngest brother, Sanh, is married to Tuyet, with whom he has a son called Lum. The couple's daughter, Cherry, is not yet born during their refugee camp stay, but Tuyet is already pregnant.

Chapter One states Hoa's name in capital letters, announcing that this section will be told from her point of view. In subsequent chapters of the novel, the third-person narration readopts the focalization through her character on two additional occasions. At the beginning of each chapter, the place and the year are disclosed—in this instance, Pulau Bidong, Malaysia, 1979. At this point, the Truong family has already lived in shanties and tents in the refugee camp for “well over a year” (*Cherry Truong* 27), and Hoa has become exasperated with the lack of concrete walls separating her from other camp dwellers. She describes her and her husband Hung's temporary abode as follows: “Their shelter was a four-meter-long thatched roof supported by water-rotted wooden stakes, too small of a space for Hung to properly stalk around. Not even a chair to sit on, only bamboo mats and army blankets on the soft dirt for beds” (26). The

canvas partition is inadequate for shielding her body from others' eyes, and for months Hoa has been troubled by her neighbor's lewd gaze, which follows her whenever she tries to change after taking a shower. There is a lack of privacy: "She only wanted a few minutes alone. She had not been truly alone, and calm, since they left Vietnam" (28). Hoa craves solitude, which she equates with calmness. However, there is an absence of both in the camp; therefore, contrary to its intended purpose of containing movement, it is not a place of stillness.

In this way, the waiting that dominates Hoa's everyday camp life is not static either. The camp's conditions are hectic and characterized by a high degree of mobility, with a constant flux of individuals moving in and out. Although Hoa personally yearns for the tranquility of her prayer room in Saigon, she is aware that others are more inclined to embrace their present surroundings as their new home: "some of their neighbors accepted this as their new home, so desperate to resettle in any place that wasn't Vietnam. They opened hair salons and noodle shops within the township, and joined church choirs. Even when paperwork cleared for immigration, some felt reluctant to leave" (*Cherry Truong* 28). The long duration of waiting in the refugee camp necessitates the continuation of everyday life, prompting individuals to engage in various emplacement practices to sustain themselves. These activities include the establishment of businesses and singing in groups. Consequently, camp dwellers build communities, and the camp on Pulau Bidong can be defined as what Michel Agier terms a 'city-camp,' a "novel sociospatial form . . . in which new identities crystallize and subjectivation takes root" (318). The refugees adjust to their new surroundings, not only perceiving themselves through the lens of their Vietnamese heritage, but also actively engaging in constructing new subjectivities. This collective effort cultivates a diverse and intricate sense of identity within their distinctive camp environment. As a result, some of them are hesitant to depart, despite the camp's status as a supposed lay-over rather than a home. Hoa's oldest son, Phung, speculates that the ability to adjust is a typically Vietnamese characteristic: "their people could acclimate to anything. They'd lived with war and dis-

placement for centuries. Their history allowed them to make anywhere home" (*Cherry Truong* 28). This adaptability, rooted in Vietnam's history of multiple colonizations, has been a defining practice across generations.

For Hoa, however, the camp "isn't a home" (*Cherry Truong* 29). She interacts with other camp inhabitants, but never reaches a level of familiarity that could be considered intimate. Her primary objective is to spend time with her family, which necessitates visits to various areas of the campground that she explores by walking:

Only immediate family could live together in the camp. Phung's family was in Zone E, Sanh's family in Zone B, and Yen's wife and son in Zone D. People could request zone transfers, but they were rarely granted. Refugees preferred to stand in line for their immigration requests. Hoa didn't like her family spread all over Bidong Island; it only spanned two kilometers in diameter, but at times could feel much larger. A day could pass and she wouldn't see one of her sons or grandchildren. Her daily trips to the beach or to their shanties made sure this didn't happen. (29)

Hung and Hoa live in Zone A, and although she despises their shelter, Hoa knows that "[t]he new arrivals in Zone C had it worse—plastic blue tarp shelters barely supported by skinny tree branches" (26). Class factors are not considered when allocating zone affiliation, but the assignment is not random: newcomers are sent to the place with the scarcest resources—Zone C—where Hoa remembers "huddling under a plastic tarp and thin, mud-crusting blankets during the monsoon season" (28) when they first arrived at the camp. Pregnant women could move their families to shelters with solid walls, representing "a slight improvement over the other shanties" (47). Because of Tuyet's pregnancy, she, Sanh, and their son Lum were relocated to Zone B, where "[t]hey had a wooden roof, four walls, and a real mattress on the floor" (47). Such amenities were unprecedented in the tent-like structures prevalent in the other zones.

In addition to the substandard living conditions, Hoa criticizes the "smelly" (*Cherry Truong* 28) food served at the mess hall and

the Malay guards' behavior towards the refugees: "The Malaysians treated the refugees worse than their dogs" (26). At the same time, the Malay authorities' inhumane management engenders a profound sense of solidarity among the refugees, most clearly articulated in the narration of another boat's arrival. On that particular afternoon, Hoa and Trinh are looking after the children at the beach when they see a distant object floating towards them. A number of onlookers gather and, as the shape approaches the coastline, "everyone's suspicions were confirmed: a fishing junk" (32). The armed Malay soldiers try to prevent the passengers from disembarking. Having been on the island for an extended period, Hoa can comprehend some basics of the Malay language, allowing her to discern the meaning of the soldiers' commands: "*Go away. No room here. Go somewhere else. We won't take you. We will shoot*" (33). However, without physically opposing the armed soldiers, the Vietnamese on the shore—probably recognizing themselves in the "salt-crusted refugees . . . look[ing] haggard, starved, relieved, afraid" (32)—swiftly counter the guards' attempts to expel the boat passengers. While two of the camp dwellers leave to get the assistance of UN workers, the "[o]thers yelled instructions to the refugees on how to sink the boat," thus sharing their refugee survival knowledge: "Hammer out the floor!", "Rip off the sail! Throw it in the water!", and "Throw everything in the water!" (33), they shout. In the event that the vehicle submerges and is no longer a viable means of transportation, the admission of passengers to the camp cannot be denied, regardless of the overcrowded circumstances on the island.

One of the soldiers tries to push the sinking boat back, but the people on board, wearing "rags" and "weeping," have already commenced abandoning the vessel and reaching the shore, where "their legs gave out, and they collapsed on the beach" (*Cherry Truong* 33). A dispute between the Malaysians and the Vietnamese escalates, transcending linguistic boundaries. Hoa, who had distributed candy to one of the shipwrecked individuals in defiance of the soldiers' orders, is shoved into the sand. The commotion subsides only when the UN workers—who act as a buffer between the two groups—arrive on the scene. In broken Vietnamese, the agency representatives assure

the newcomers that they are safe and inform them that they “need to be quarantined and examined by doctors” (34). The Vietnamese camp dwellers who have already been there for a long time reiterate the instructions and offer further advice:

“Don’t be afraid of the doctors. They are very kind.”

“But be careful of the Malay guards. Protect your valuables.”

“Don’t eat their chicken! It will make you sick. Wait until you get into camp to eat.”

“You made it! The worst is over!” (34)

These are their parting words as the group disappears into the health clinic. Even before touching the ground, the Malay guards wish to manage the boat passengers’ movements by trying to deny them access to the camp. Nevertheless, the refugees succeed in arriving. Upon setting foot on the island, the UN workers take over and control the newly arrived refugees’ bodies. Meanwhile, the island refugees, themselves survivors of earlier boat journeys, extend welcome gestures, demonstrating solidarity. In this way, refugees are dynamic actors working together, not helpless victims.

Instances such as these are not uncommon for inhabitants of the rapidly growing city-camp, adults and children included. On the surface, however, younger camp dwellers appear to experience the refugee camp in a more carefree manner than their (grand)parents. For the three Truong children—Cam, Xuan, and Lum—studying continues at camp school, while leisure resumes in the form of beachside play. They wade through the waters to collect crabs, which is an entertaining game for them. The adults are aware of the ever-present threat of the engulfing sea and urge the children not to venture too far, telling them they might get carried back to Vietnam:

That was how they kept children from playing too far into the ocean. The strong current could carry you away from your family, back to Vietnam, where the Communists would shoot you. Remembering their stretched-out weeks on leaky boats, staring out at the sea and sky that loomed larger each passing day, the children obeyed, never straying far. (*Cherry Truong* 30)

This passage suggests that water holds ambivalent meanings in Vietnamese culture, functioning as a “a fundamental metaphor for Vietnamese subjectivity” (P. Nguyễn 99). On the one hand, the Vietnamese word for water, *nước*, also signifies the homeland, country, and nation but, on the other, water plays a pivotal role in bringing forth memories of the boat refugees’ hazardous ocean crossings, which I will take up in the next chapter. As the children are implored to stay near the shoreline, they are reminded of Vietnam, their former home, to which they maintain a connection through the medium of water. At the same time, they are confronted with images of the country’s dangerous (post)war conditions, prompting recollections of the harrowing weeks spent at sea. Such memories of war and their perilous boat escape continue to weigh heavily on them, even as games at the camp provide temporary distraction.

The children, mindful of the adults’ warnings and preferring their new environment to the insecurity of the boat, exercise caution in their games. Nevertheless, they playfully interact with their surroundings. For instance, once the newcomers, the Malay guards, and the UN workers have left, the children curiously start exploring the wreckage of the new arrivals’ boat: “Some of the children, including Cam and Xuan, loitered behind to poke around the boat wreck. Xuan attempted to climb into the wreck, eager to reenact the earlier excitement. Cam scrambled up the rocks, pretending to be a Malay soldier, while Xuan balanced on the sea-soaked planks, pleading for sanctuary” (*Cherry Truong* 34). Cam and Xuan, aware of the social hierarchies on the island, are engaged in a simulated conflict between a Malay soldier and a Vietnamese refugee. Cam/the Malay soldier shouts, “Get out of here, you stinking Vietnamese,” to which Xuan/the Vietnamese refugee responds, “I have nowhere

else to go, . . . Please save me” (34). Despite their young age, Cam and Xuan are keen observers of the social reality they encounter in the refugee camp; hence, they recognize the superior status of the Malay guards and their contemptuous view of refugees. Children often engage in creative role-play, and in this case the cousins use their imitation game to process what they see in the refugee camp. In some respects, their role-play is reminiscent of other types of games that children engage in where different authorities are juxtaposed (e.g., Cops and Robbers), but instead of drawing inspiration from fiction, their impersonation is inspired by a situation that they witnessed only moments ago.²⁵

Moreover, Cam and Xuan’s role-play demonstrates how they are made aware of themselves as refugees during the stopover. They grasp the social order of the camp, in which refugees are seen both as intruders and as people in need of protection. They navigate this tension through pretend play, although it remains unclear whether they fully comprehend the implications of their circumstances. Meanwhile, the refugee camp becomes the space where adult refugees come to understand the significance of their social and legal status. Although they technically become refugees the moment they cross national borders, it is only later—through the prolonged waiting and regulation of camp life—that this status is fully internalized and a shared refugee identity begins to take shape. In a similar vein, *The Sympathizer*’s narrator observes the changed status of himself and his fellow camp dwellers: “Joining a line to turn in our trays to the dishwashers was the coup de grâce, pronouncing us no longer adult citizens of a sovereign country but stateless refugees, protected, for the moment, by the American military” (69). From a mobilities perspective, the mention of “joining a line” indicates that not only are refugees’ long-distance movements suspended, but even their habit-

25 Studies in cognitive and developmental psychology support these anecdotal, fictional observations. In these fields, the practice of what is called ‘pretend play’ is regarded as an important and universal component of early childhood development (Lillard et al. 285; Bowman and Lieberoth 246). Furthermore, as clinical child psychologist Sandra W. Russ asserts in her monograph, *Pretend Play in Childhood: Foundation of Adult Creativity* (2014), correlational evidence indicates an association between pretend play and creativity.

ual micro-mobilities are managed and regulated within the camp. Children's pretend play may offer creative subversions of this body management, yet they are ultimately influenced and governed by the imposed hierarchies, whether they fully comprehend them or not.

Moreover, Cam and Xuan's game reveals that, despite being hundreds of kilometers away from their lost homeland, they regard themselves as specifically *Vietnamese* refugees: their national identity is formed. It is not only the children's own actions that attest to their national awareness and the adults' efforts to remind them of their ancestral homeland. The UN workers and Christian missionaries—who, together with the Malay guards, oversee camp administration—also seek to foster the children's Vietnameseness and sense of belonging by organizing cultural events. For example, Cam and Xuan participate in a performance of *The Tale of Kieu*, a 19th-century epic narrative poem. While teaching the children about this Vietnamese literary classic, the show prompts the adults in the audience to reflect on their own school days. Even after decades and several wars, when she watches her grandchildren on stage Hoa still recalls the famous lines, having “memorized verses of the epic in school” (*Cherry Truong* 37). This exemplifies Fiddian-Qasmieh's previously quoted notion that “refugee camps are simultaneously ‘reservoirs of memory’ of the homeland and are themselves spaces of belonging and longing, both as ‘lived’ home-camps and as potent ‘symbolic’ spaces” (306). Refugee camps become meaningful places in which periods of waiting are not empty but can be utilized for pastimes such as staging and watching a Vietnamese cultural show. These activities cultivate memory and, at the same time, nurture present belonging to a displaced refugee community. Eventually, these ties will outlast stopover stays, and the camps will also become “‘original’ spaces, spaces of origin” (306–7), especially for 1.5-generation children who remember their formative stays.

Not all of the roughly 30,000 to 40,000 camp dwellers inhabiting Pulau Bidong at that moment are interested in the children's symbolic performances. Others choose to watch sports instead; Hoa mentions that “most of the younger people preferred to watch Malaysian soccer games on television in the community center”

(*Cherry Truong* 36). Furthermore, she remarks that as a weekend treat, “the small stage behind the mess hall,” where the Vietnamese cultural show is staged, is also used “to play old film reels from Hong Kong and Taiwan” (36). While the refugees’ Vietnamese identity is formed far from the homeland, they are also influenced by other Southeast Asian as well as East Asian sports and cultural productions, fostering transnational Pan-Asian sensibilities that imaginatively cross oceans. Furthermore, there are other transnational influences present in the refugee camp, including those exerted by the UN workers, the delegates from France, and the American immigration officers. In particular, the cultural and capitalist presence of the United States’ military in the refugee camp (as evoked by Espiritu’s term ‘militarized refuge(e)’), is striking in Vietnamese American literature. The contrast between the instability experienced in temporary camp shelters and the promise of an affluent American life centered around a safe and lasting home is a recurring theme. For example, in Andrew Lam’s previously-mentioned short story “Everything Must Go” (2013), one of the two protagonists spends her childhood in various refugee camps, lacking certain furniture and household items. From her perspective, a page from an American department store catalog manifests as “a piece of treasure”:

For months in one refugee camp she had kept a piece of treasure from America, a page from a Sears catalog that had wrapped her boiled peanuts. It was smeared on one side, but on the other, oh the beauty! Bed frames and mattresses, colorful pillows fluffy as clouds, and flower-print sheets that blossomed into sprawling gardens and red-tiled haciendas in her recurring dreams. (58)

Long before entering U.S. mainland, she is fed with images of the American Dream, which will serve as a guiding principle throughout her formative years. In Bhabha’s terms, the refugee camp presents a Third Space, an in-between space in which multiple allegiances compete and are negotiated to form dynamic and liminal refugee identities.

Likewise, in Phan's chronicle, the youngest Truong brother, Sanh, and his wife, Tuyet, aspire to begin a new life in the United States with their son and unborn daughter. Tuyet is still disappointed that the Truongs could not procure spots for her family, the Vos, on the escape boat, and yearns for a speedy reunion in America. Sanh and Tuyet choose not to join the rest of the Truong family in France, preferring instead to raise their children in the U.S.—the perceived land of opportunity, where it would be easier to help the Vo family come over. They base their considerations on the experience of other camp inhabitants, relying on informal, collective, and oral camp knowledge. Although the other Truongs had observed Sanh's conversations with the U.S. officers, his decision to relocate his family to the U.S. the day before their scheduled departure for France comes as a shock. His parents, convinced that "[f]amilies aren't supposed to live in different countries" (46), strongly disapprove of their youngest son's choice. Hoa is sad to part with her son and her grandchildren, but Hung is less compassionate in his objection; he despises the United States and distrusts Sanh's abilities to make a life without the rest of the family there, even believing that "[h]e won't survive there" (52). From the moment some Truong family members leave for France and others for the U.S., the chapters alternate between French and American settings before providing a final chapter set in Saigon.

The division of the family is thus used as a narrative tool to structure the transnational scope of the remaining chapters. As the point of origin for planning different refugee trajectories, Phan's novel portrays the refugee camp as a socially complex place where new beginnings and life-changing decisions are arranged. The main characters' goal throughout the refugee camp stopovers is to move forward: "Pulau Bidong was a place of limbo, a way station to endure before final resettlement in a third country" (Lipman 68). The indeterminacy of the third country eventually leads to a clash between the family members' different aspirations, leading to long-lasting consequences through their separation.

The novel provides no details about Sanh and Tuyet's passage to the U.S., but it briefly alludes to the other Truongs' transition to

Paris. This destination is chosen because Yen is already there, and Hung resists any attempt to move elsewhere. As the family's decision-maker, he has even turned down an opportunity to immigrate to Australia, despite Hoa's desire to leave the camp. Although she knows that they would have had to move to another country before reuniting with Yen, Hoa "[doesn't] care what country [they] go to first" (*Cherry Truong* 29) and would have preferred any place other than the camp. Finding a passage to France, however, was Hung's plan even before they had left Vietnam—he had already "dreamed of living in Paris" (83) as a student. Their persistent waiting finally pays off: after months of discussions with the French delegates on Pulau Bidong, they are told that their application has been successful, thanks to a Catholic charity that has agreed to act as their sponsor.

Their departure is announced one month in advance, giving them enough time to make sure that their paperwork is in order and to pack one suitcase per person. Conscious of the imminent change in climate, Hoa packs accordingly and, familiar with the camp's practices of exchange, "traded away most of her belongings accumulated at camp—the kerosene stove, sleeping mats, cooking utensils—in exchange for more durable clothes and shoes" (*Cherry Truong* 41). France will not be the family's immediate next step, however. Instead, their mobility progresses in stages, creating friction and more waiting. They must first take another boat trip to reach the Malaysian mainland, where a bus will take them to Kuala Lumpur airport. Not used to traveling by bus after months of unmotorized micro-mobility on the island, Hoa becomes ill, and struggles with "[t]he curving Malay roads, the potholes and dips, the freezing blasts from the air conditioner, the bursts of static booming from the bus radio" (51). At the airport, they have a layover of six hours before taking a plane to Manila. As an elderly refugee, Hoa's experience of mobility and immobility is taxing. In her weakened state, "slumped to the floor" (52), she longs to be in Paris, where she expects her waiting to end. Although she looks forward to leaving the camp's deplorable conditions and relative stagnation, Hoa struggles physically with the demands of the journey. Nevertheless, she recognizes that this mobility is necessary for her quest to "rebuild a home" (49)

characterized by stability and permanence. Before that goal can be realized, she and her family face more waiting and body management: before moving on to France, they must spend three weeks in the Philippines undergoing medical evaluations and attending language and culture seminars, most likely at a refugee processing center that would “transform refugees into good citizen subjects for resettlement countries” (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 58). Yen, already in Paris, would then meet them at the airport with their sponsors.

Hoà’s recollection of the family’s last month on Pulau Bidong and their passage to France provides one of many literary examples referencing the fact that Vietnamese refugees did not simply leave Vietnam and arrive seamlessly in another country. Their journeys were by no means unilinear: escapes involved hazardous sea crossings, arduous encampments, and long-distance movement repeatedly interrupted by bureaucratic processing. During these stages of flight, the camp is indeed, to repeat Lipman’s words, “a place of limbo, a way station to endure before final resettlement in a third country” (68), with the third country itself often uncertain. The lines of flight were varied but frequently intertwined with imperial pursuits and the extension of colonial governance.

According to UNHCR figures compiled by Robinson, the United States received the most refugees, accommodating 1.3 million individuals from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Canada followed with over 200,000, Australia with about 186,000, and France with 119,000 refugees (295). The Truongs’ refusal to leave for Australia demonstrates that camp dwellers had some choice in deciding their destination, but external factors often controlled the direction of mobility. In addition, previous language skills—also linked to empire—mattered. While English was familiar to many due to American involvement, French was the official colonial language, learned and spoken primarily by elites. The Truongs were fluent in French prior to the language classes offered at intermediate stops en route to France, which would have helped them communicate with the French delegates at the refugee camp in the months leading up to their transfer.

Meanwhile, from the adult Truongs’ perspective, neither the immobility and micro-mobility of their refugee camp stay nor the

mobility leading them away from the island are charitably portrayed. Their immobility in the camp is likely related to class factors. Before fleeing to Saigon and, later on, to Pulau Bidong, where “no one was better than anyone else” (*Cherry Truong* 26), the Truong family’s status was considerable. They lived in a respectable house designed by a French architect in Nha Trang, a coastal resort city in southern Vietnam, where they mingled with the “educated elite” (98), social interactions made possible by Hung’s prestigious position as the manager of “a very fancy hotel” (66). Although the refugee camp’s modest accommodations might seem to have a class-leveling effect, their new surroundings do not diminish Hung’s sense of superiority. Hoa, who speculates that her husband’s overbearing demeanor may have contributed to the delay in processing their immigration applications, notes that Hung’s body language gave “the impression that [he] looked down on everything around him” and even suggests that “[he] felt quite proud of his reputation as a snob. He *did* think he was better” (27). As discussed above, other camp dwellers—happy to have arrived at a safe haven after leaving war-torn Vietnam—eagerly participate in various camp activities, cultivate relationships outside of their immediate family, and make a new temporary home of the camp, leading to conflicted feelings about leaving for yet another country. The Truongs, however, only seem to engage with other camp members superficially and primarily stay within their own circle, a pattern actively reinforced by Hung.

Their difference from the other refugees in the camp is evident at mess hall dinnertimes:

While the other refugees at the surrounding tables hollered their conversations, swallowed their food, and rushed out the door to watch a soccer game on the community television or to gossip on the beach, the Truongs observed slow consumption and appropriate conversation. Hoa realized it had to look strange to others—further perpetuating camp rumors that the Truongs were too arrogant for their own good. (*Cherry Truong* 41–2)

Although Hoa disapproves of her husband's snobbish behavior, she and the rest of the family follow Hung's lead. Her deep sense of duty to the family is striking. She insists that she "couldn't endure embarrassing her family" (26), which is why she avoids complaining about her neighbor's inappropriate behavior, fearing the stigma of being labeled "a snitch" (26) by other refugees. Only on special occasions, such as when a new boat of refugees arrives, do Hoa and the other Truongs align themselves with the broader Vietnamese camp community. In day-to-day interactions, however, a palpable sense of disconnection persists, stemming from their distinct socioeconomic backgrounds. In other words, while refugee camp dwelling temporarily levels everyone materially, it cannot be assumed that social relationships across class lines are easily formed.

Given these circumstances—"the cramped quarters; the barely edible food; the crude behavior of their fellow refugees" (*Cherry Truong* 48–9)—Hoa portrays her time in the refugee camp as akin to "enduring . . . purgatorial conditions" (48). She laments the "paltry rations that consisted mainly of canned sardines and a scoop of rice; waking up to rat bites on her legs; dirty latrines; the taunts and insults of the Malay guards" (28). Immobility is characterized by "waiting, thinking, regretting" (52), and Hoa, no longer the youngest, also struggles to manage her micro-mobility across the different zones, especially after the camp lights go out: she finds it challenging to navigate the "muddy trail" and fears "tripping over some brushwood or a stray piece of trash" (48). The night before they leave for the mainland, Hoa is startled to see her neighbor again on her final walk through the camp. She wonders why he is "creeping around the island" (49) and notes his drunken state, which makes her feel uncomfortable. These dynamics suggest that nocturnal walks posed particular risks for women in the camp. In Hoa's case, the potential for bodily harm also lurks in her own shanty; she is used to "instinctively turn[ing] her head" when Hung raises his hand. Her husband only stopped beating her in public because "[t]he last time he struck her within eyesight of the camp gossips, he'd endured dirty looks and pointed whisperings for weeks" (29). However, Hoa is not the only family member to suffer gender-based violence; Trinh, the

daughter-in-law of the absent son, Yen, experiences sexual assault at the hands of the Malay guards.

Trinh's story is not yet elaborated on in Chapter One, but her dynamic with Hoa is established here. Hoa loves her grandchildren and approves of her eldest son's wife, Ngoan, but she has a strained relationship with her two younger daughters-in-law and feels "furthest from Trinh" (*Cherry Truong* 31). At the refugee camp, Hoa describes Xuan's mother as "sullen and impossible to please" and refers to her as "[s]poiled" (31). Hoa's disapproval stems not only from Trinh's demeanor, but also from her "country girl" (32) background; the older woman expresses a touch of snobbish disdain in mocking Trinh's limited reading skills, reinforcing her class-based judgment. Even Trinh's fashion style, often "expos[ing] much of her legs" (31), is a source of irritation; at the beach, Hoa notes that it invites "indecent" (32) looks from nearby fishermen. "Why don't you cover yourself up?" protests Hoa, to which Trinh merely replies that "[i]t wouldn't matter" because it would already be "too late" (32). This and other similarly cryptic comments make Hoa characterize her daughter-in-law as "impudent" and "ignorant" (32).

Fast forward to 1985, about six years after the refugee camp, and the relationship between the two women is explored again. Hoa takes up the narrative again in Chapter Three, focusing on a trip to the shrine of the Virgin Mary in Lourdes, in southwestern France. This outing, organized with Émilie and Michel Bourdain, the Truongs' sponsors, sheds light on Trinh's evolving relationship with spirituality. Though not born a Christian, she was baptized during her son Xuan's ceremony and has since embraced the faith to the point of becoming fervently religious. A devout Catholic herself, Hoa is annoyed by Trinh's loud prayers, lengthy confessions, and spontaneous tears during the Holy Communion. While waiting in line for the baths at Lourdes, Trinh "embarrass[es] herself once again" (*Cherry Truong* 103)—at least in Hoa's opinion—shocking Émilie with her reasons for going on pilgrimage: "I've come here to heal myself, so the Holy Mary can give me back my virginity and I can be whole again" (103). That same day, Hoa tells Hung about the exchange, confiding that she thinks something is wrong with

Trinh and that she is worried about her grandson Xuan. Hung, who had never considered Trinh a suitable wife for his favorite son Yen, remains unsurprised and unfazed: “So she’s crazy, . . . [h]aven’t we always known this?” (104).

Hoa’s fears are ultimately realized when Trinh returns to her quarters on the last day of their trip, laden with bags of holy water stored in Mary bottles, but without her son. While she was deep in prayer at the grotto, Xuan had slipped away into the crowd and could not be found. Yen and Michel go out to look for the child, while Trinh retreats to the bathroom. When Hoa checks on her daughter-in-law, she finds her shivering in a bathtub filled with the Mary bottles. Hoa helps Trinh out of the water and into bed, wrapping her in sheets and a blanket.

Gradually, during their subsequent conversation, Hoa comes to understand Trinh’s frantic actions as a reaction to the hardships she has endured in the refugee camp. “I can feel their hands on me” (*Cherry Truong* 108), Trinh cries, and it starts to dawn on Hoa that the younger woman has been repeatedly raped by Malay guards, who took advantage of the fact that she was an unaccompanied woman. With the support of neither Yen nor her own family, Trinh felt completely alone and neglected by the Truongs: “‘You left me,’ Trinh sobbed, pushing Hoa’s arms off. ‘Every night with those men’” (109). These last two words echo in Hoa’s mind and memory:

Those men. Those men. The realization of who Trinh was talking about gripped Hoa solidly by the throat. Those men. Hoa knew. She wanted to believe Trinh was wrong, that it wasn’t possible, that she was paranoid, but the scattered memories, the whispered innuendo, and Trinh’s words came together so forcefully, and settled upon Hoa’s skin so thoroughly, that she couldn’t deny it. Finally. The Malay guards, who smiled and elbowed one another, their lascivious gestures, when Trinh slumped past them in the mess hall. She never acknowledged them or spoke of them, so Hoa never said anything, either. (109)

Ultimately, none of this is news to Hoa; she had deliberately suppressed her memories of the Malay guards' interactions with her daughter-in-law, pretending at the time not to see them. Hoa's focalization in Chapter One is complicit in this, not revealing Trinh's experiences to the reader until much later in the narrative. The novel's 'textual silence,' to use Lang's phrase, is mirrored by Trinh herself, whose six years of silence make her unreadable to those around her. Shielding herself behind religious fanaticism, she embodies an "inaccessibility—blankness, illegibility" (Lang 3) regarding her memories of the camp. Out of shame and to protect Xuan, who is five years old at the time of the refugee camp stopover and shares the same mattress in their tent during the guards' clandestine nighttime assaults, Trinh keeps quiet. After leaving the camp, she represses²⁶ the memories of the abuse, attempting to render them unthinkable, but the traumatic events cannot be forgotten and leave a lifelong mark. Although she eventually tells Hoa, she still does not want her husband to know, perpetuating the silence that surrounds the unspeakable—and, at this point in the narrative, still mostly unreadable—acts.

In the fifth chapter, set seven years after the third, the narrative shifts to a third-person perspective focused on Xuan in Paris. At this point, he is approximately eighteen years old, and through his perspective, some of the gaps left in Chapters One and Three are filled in. He is studying with his cousin Cam for the philosophy portion of the baccalaureate exams, which they will complete in two weeks. As he ponders the exercise questions, his memories take him back to moments from his childhood. Some of them already resonate with the reader, but others reveal previously unspoken and unwritten experiences, such as the conversation he had with his mother in Lourdes before slipping away into the crowd, triggering her episode in the bathtub. In a discussion about faith and prayer, Trinh insists

26 Despite this recourse to psychoanalytic language, I do not wish to offer a simplistic, remote psychological reading of Trinh's character as if she were a real person. Instead, by tracing (non)references to refugee camp memories, I want to outline how Phan's novel returns to the camp as an important stopover place throughout the narrative, filling in certain gaps while leaving other questions open to reflect the fragmented nature of refugee memory.

that “Mary protects all her children,” a position Xuan disputes. He shouts: “You always said that, but she never did. She didn’t protect us in Vietnam and she didn’t protect you in the camps” (*Cherry Truong* 154). Knowing that he is saying something “he wasn’t allowed to share with anyone” (154), not even his mother, Xuan, not daring to look her in the eye, walks away. In this rare moment of defiance of parental authority, Xuan feels “free, invulnerable,” but the sentiment is short-lived; he falls to the ground trying to avoid a group of people whose sudden appearance “end[s] his flight” (154). Though he initially feels relief in speaking the unspeakable, it remains unclear how this will help them overcome their trauma. Does Trinh even know that Xuan remembers? Has she convinced herself that he has forgotten, and will the knowledge that he carries that pain too worsen her own? Or can this be the beginning of a healing journey the two of them will take together? Alone among the tourists, Xuan is convinced of the negative interpretation, fearing that “[i]f anything, Lourdes had made his mother worse” (155) and mistrusting his decision to release his suppressed memories.

A few pages before recounting the events that led to Trinh and Xuan’s separation at the Virgin Mary sanctuary, Xuan offers another key memory: he recounts how his mother was hospitalized for the first time when he was twelve years old. Since there is no mention of Trinh taking any medication prior to their trip, the implication is that she was under the care of psychiatrists only after the Lourdes episode. On the one hand, this means that by opening up about her history of recurrent rape, she gains access to specialists who could potentially help her. On the other hand, Xuan questions whether his mother is receiving the right kind of support—he notes that she prefers doctors who rely primarily on prescribing medication, suggesting that, rather than confronting her traumatic memories, Trinh numbs her pain through the use of drugs. Xuan is also skeptical of her treatment at the psychiatric ward; returning home after her first extended stay, Trinh barely notices him. Several years later, around the time when Xuan is preparing for his bac, Trinh has just come back from another period of hospitalization: “His mother had returned last week from her most recent treatment and she

appeared significantly calmer—no spells, no crying fits, no inappropriate confessions . . . not yet anyway” (*Cherry Truong* 147; ellipsis in source). As a result of past experience, Xuan remains cautious about placing complete faith in his mother’s recovery.

The novel avoids explicit depictions of Trinh’s assaults, refusing to sensationalize trauma. Chapter One gives only a subtle hint of what happened, and Chapter Three focuses on Trinh’s journey towards confiding in someone, rather than delving into detailed retellings. The first encounter with the guards at her tent is recounted in Chapter Five, filtered through Xuan’s eyes, looking back years later on an event he had experienced only as a young child. The novel does not elaborate on what the three men did to Trinh, but the clarification that she was raped is essential to the text. Xuan’s flashback reveals that, although he was young during his stay at the camp, he remembers his mother’s abuse quite vividly: he recalls smelling “the unfamiliar odor of another body” and feeling a “thick, hairy leg beside him” (*Cherry Truong* 157). During the guards’ visits, he shares a bamboo mat with his mother and the perpetrators, and the memory of the men’s physical closeness triggers a sensory recollection for Xuan that is difficult to forget. One soldier, who speaks broken Vietnamese, insinuates that one of them is more interested in Xuan than Trinh. Fearing for her son’s well-being more than her own, Trinh replies, “Do whatever you want with me If you touch him, I will tell anyone who will listen what you’ve done to him and they will slit your throats” (158). For Trinh, keeping quiet about the assaults is tantamount to protecting Xuan from a similar fate. The Malay soldiers know that she is right: “A woman crying rape, the camp officers would have blamed her—certainly she had seduced them—and said that she deserved it. But the guards couldn’t claim the same about a small boy” (158). Through this, the novel underscores that Trinh’s story is shared by numerous women in the camp, thereby again exposing the gendered hierarchies that structure these spaces. Furthermore, the passage explains Trinh’s silence during their camp stopover, and expands on gendered experiences of the camp.

In summary, for the Truong family, the refugee camp functions as a dynamic liminal place that shapes their hybrid, diasporic Viet-

namese refugee identities. Cultural influences within the camp are diverse: some seek to preserve memories of the homeland, others develop Pan-Asian sensibilities, and still others cultivate transnational ties to Western countries such as France or aspire to the promises of the American Dream. Far from being an impersonal space of transit, the refugee camp holds multiple meanings for different characters. While some camp dwellers find a sense of home in the camp, it is a place of trauma for the novel's protagonists, and the experiences and choices made therein significantly influence the course of their lives. The refugee camp is "a place of limbo" (Lipman 68) from which new destinations are determined and where "social life, power relations, hierarchies and sociality are remoulded" (S. Turner 144). Although their micro-mobility practices and specific collective endeavors demonstrate that refugees can, in some cases, subvert the camp authorities' power, the camp's hierarchies—which are visible even to children—regulate refugee bodies, their movements, and the type of shelter that they may use for dwelling. The incoming refugees fled Vietnam by boat, positioning them within a kinetic underclass in contrast to the evacuees who had left earlier by plane. There are, however, discrepancies in the previous socioeconomic status of the refugees in Pulau Bidong. These do not affect their official treatment at the camp, though interpersonal enmities between refugees of different classes often persist. Additionally, women's experiences during the stopover reveal striking gender differences in how refugees navigate the camps.

The refugee camp is not only relevant in terms of content—it also has an impact on the novel's form. The family separation, which is instigated by the refugee camp, structures the rest of the narrative across two continents (before eventually returning to Asia/Vietnam). The chapters occur between 1979 and 2002, imaginatively returning to the refugee camp without filling in all the gaps. The text is thus marked by indeterminacy, but some of the uncertainties are explained by the fragments of letters that interrupt the chapters. Epistolary revelations are even more critical in Tran's novel, which will be examined in the following subchapter.

New Relationships and Culinary Resistance in Vu Tran's *Dragonfish* (2015)

Letter excerpts are pivotal in Vu Tran's *Dragonfish* (2015), recounting a woman's daily life in the refugee camp on Pulau Bidong. In an interview, the author recounts that he spent four months there in 1980, when he was about five years old, after leaving Vietnam by boat with his mother and sister. The three of them waited until Tran's father, who had already left for the United States just before the fall of Saigon, was able to sponsor them. The family was reunited in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where the 1.5-generation children grew up. Later on, Tran earned a PhD in literature from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where some of his novel's non-epistolary passages are set. He has taught creative writing at the University of Chicago since 2010 and continues to publish short stories ("Convincing and Compelling").

Dragonfish is Tran's debut—and, today, only—novel, but according to the author's website, a second work is forthcoming. The novel's resistance to categorization—it has been described variously as a noir, a detective novel, an immigration saga, a mystery, a thriller, and a ghost story—mainly derives from its two distinct narrative voices. The primary first-person homodiegetic narrator is Robert Ruen, or Bob, a white policeman who narrates the chapters of the novel in parts one, three, and five. Parts two and four, literally interrupting the crime narrative, are notably different, written from someone else's perspective. These sections are printed in cursives and embody the letters that Bob's ex-wife Hong, as the I-narrator, writes in the vicinity of the literary present.

The letters' addressee is Hong's estranged daughter Mai, to whom she recounts their escape from Vietnam and stopover in the refugee camp some twenty years before. Just like the author and the Truong family depicted in Phan's novel, Hong and Mai stayed in Pulau Bidong, where most of the Vietnamese characters in *Dragonfish* lived for months or years. Soon after arriving in the U.S., Hong abandons Mai, leaving her in the care of relatives, and meets Bob approximately a decade later, marrying him just four months after their first encounter. The novel is set around the turn of the mil-

lennium, two years after Bob and Hong's divorce, after which she married Sonny Van Nguyen, a gambling restaurant owner involved in various illegal activities.

Hong's sections are elemental for the story. At the heart of her narrative—acting as the glue bringing together the Vietnamese characters—lies the refugee camp, where they spend a substantial amount of time. Although they all speak Vietnamese, the camp inhabitants constitute diverse groups, and mother and daughter mingle with people of different backgrounds and religions. For example, Hong goes to church, but there is mention of a Buddhist temple, too. The refugees know their stay is transitory, and that they will leave once they receive their papers. But the huts of the refugee camp have become their provisional home nonetheless, and routines like praying and cooking continue. They interact with the local communities as well, especially for trade, or rather, smuggling:

For the two months they'd been at the camp, they had probably eaten nothing but fish. The Malaysians, mostly Muslim, outlawed pork in the camp, but I had bought some that morning from smugglers who secretly visited the island every week. I traded in one of three gold rings that I had sewn into the waistband of my pants, and still had enough money to make a week of meals. (Dragonfish 196)

Despite the constraints, this passage shows that there are options for economic participation at this open camp. Moreover, Hong's purchase of pork allows her to form further bonds; she cooks a traditional Vietnamese dish for fellow camp dwellers Sonny, who will become her third husband decades later, and his son Junior. After having eaten only fish for weeks, Hong's familiar and tasty cooking secures her a spot in Junior's heart, and eventually also gains Sonny's confidence.

The two adults are connected through their shared trauma of escape and losing a spouse—while Hong's husband died in Vietnam after his stay at a reeducation camp, Sonny's wife died at sea during their perilous journey by boat. Hong's initial justification for starting a relationship sounds very pragmatic: *"You lost your wife*

and I have lost my husband. I am here to help us forget that for a little while" (Dragonfish 197). Rather than being consumed by her sorrow, Hong actively chooses to foster new connections during her wait in the refugee camp. While focusing on healing in the present to be able to imagine a new future, cooking with ingredients from home reminds her of her past and her recently deceased husband: *"The smell brought your father's ghost into the hut"* (196). By cooking, Hong actively engages in culinary home-making in new surroundings while simultaneously keeping sensory memories of the homeland alive, recalling Fiddian-Qasmieh's notion of refugee camps as "reservoirs of memory' of the homeland" (306). Cooking is a strategy that she uses to make her stay in the camp bearable; despite limited resources, Hong's creative culinary resistance counters the forces at play in the camp that seek to control her.

As soon as their camp liaison commences, Hong's attachment to Sonny and his son grows stronger day by day, and she distances herself from the other camp inhabitants. Straying from the camp base, they entertain themselves at the untainted beach on the other side of the island that is much less busy, with space for the children to play. Sonny spends his days fishing while Hong writes letters. In this way, she and her daughter and Sonny and his son become a new family: *"For weeks, we hardly saw or spoke to anyone. The four of us were like a conspiracy. People started talking, watching us every day as we walked off to our secret place. Who knows what aroused their judgment more, that I was a young mother taking up with a new man or that the new man was an outcast. What kind of woman forgets her husband so quickly, replaces him so easily?"* (Dragonfish 200). This illustrates that gossip is pervasive here, just like in any community. However, it is notable that the community mostly seems to pass judgment on Hong for spending time with a new partner, revealing "a triple burden of being a refugee and a woman, but also a minority" (Pelaud, "War, Gender, and Race" 112). Highlighting the gendered nature of camp life experiences, as has been discussed earlier, while Sonny is denounced for his indifference and violent behavior, his longing for another woman following his first wife's death raises no suspicion.

In addition to problematizing how the quartet is perceived by other camp dwellers, the passage above divulges how Hong, Son, and their children participate in the same daily repeated camp micro-mobilities and “rhythmic regularities” (Edensor 163) by walking to and spending time at their “secret place” (*Dragonfish* 200). Together, they make sense of the refugee camp by aligning their routines and what David Seamon calls ‘place ballets,’ “the habitual manoeuvres that people make in and around place as part of their daily routines” (Edensor 163; see also Seamon 157). Hong elaborates: “*After lunch we would all make the long, quiet walk together to the promontory where he and his boy fished and swam and took naps on the rocks. . . . [Hong’s daughter Mai] soon insisted on fishing too, so Son obliged [her] with detailed lessons that [she] followed with enthusiasm and care*” (*Dragonfish* 198). In this way, they regulate and coordinate their day-to-day camp life around shared and concurrent habits, which facilitates more enjoyable dwelling; after all, “[h]abit provides us with the comfort of familiarity” (Bissell 483). Perceiving the communal areas within the camp as hectic, Hong finds solace in the promontory’s seclusion and particularly enjoys the calming rhythm of their customary walk to the site.

While Hong depicts their hiding spot as a site of personal contemplation and the cozy companionship of the small group, the *Dragonfish* passages set in the refugee camp do not gloss over the crowded conditions on Pulau Bidong or disregard the characters’ suffering as they remember their losses and recall their gruesome boat escapes. Still, the newly exiled refugees are not portrayed as helpless but as dynamic dwellers creatively making their surroundings livable. In his major work *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (1995), Marc Augé “contrast[s] the realities of *transit* (transit camps or passengers in transit) with those of residence or dwelling” (107), yet in the refugee camp case, these two realities become intermingled. Refugees’ camp stopovers are supposedly temporary but their activities during their stays—playing, cooking, writing, praying, swimming, fishing, trading, gossiping, making love—demonstrate that when pausing and waiting is prolonged and the time of departure remains uncertain, acts of dwelling are nonetheless enabled,

even in hostile spaces. Hence, employing Augé's distinction between 'places' and 'non-places' ("If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (76-7)), refugees' emplacement strategies in the camp constitute the refugee camp as a place rather than a non-place. The camps become places of meaning, opening up dynamic spaces where refugee identities are formed. To speak of "transit camps where the planet's refugees are parked" (34)—a phrasing that sounds more idiomatic in Augé's original French through the verb *parquer* but nonetheless undermines refugees' agency—reduces their bodies to controllable entities and overlooks the ways in which they establish routines, form alternative kinship connections, and make practical choices for survival beyond bodily endurance in refugee camps.

Meanwhile, returning to the novel's main narrative set around the year 2000, life in the refugee camp is also taken up within the detective storyline. These parts, narrated by Bob, expand from California to Nevada's deserts and gambling capital. Hong is now married to Sonny, and her ex-husband Bob, ignorant of their previous camp attachment, arrives at one of Sonny's sushi restaurants to confront him, having heard rumors that he was physically abusing Hong. Bob is brought to the venue's basement, where he finds an underground aquarium with expensive fish that Sonny is dealing with. Most prominently, the collection features the endangered Asian arowana or dragonfish, known as a status symbol "supposed to bring good luck, keep evil away, bring the family together" (*Dragonfish* 38) that allegedly sells for anywhere from a few thousand dollars to a six-figure sum (Voigt). Bob meets Junior, Sonny's son from his first marriage, who hopes to dissuade the narrator from challenging his father. It is at that point in Chapter Two—before the introduction of Hong's letters—that the refugee camp is brought to the foreground of the novel's narrative for the first time. By then, neither Bob nor the implied reader knows that Hong, her daughter Mai, Sonny, his first wife, and their son Junior had all been on the same boat leaving Vietnam and that all of them—except for Junior's unnamed mother who died at sea—had stayed at the same Malay-

sian refugee camp, where the four of them met and Sonny and Hong started their new relationship.

Instead of disclosing this background, Junior tells Bob a story about his father's harrowing deeds at Pulau Bidong. Junior is only seven years old at the time when, after one week on the island and before meeting Hong and her daughter, a group of people steal his rice ration. His father is not intimidated—after all, he was once a soldier, used to be in a gang back in Vietnam, and spent two years in reeducation camps. He shuts down Junior's crying by slapping him, and continues to act in cold blood: he takes his son to the part of the camp where his attackers are gathered, making Junior watch as "[i]n one swift motion he placed the man's hand on the stump and threw down the cleaver and hacked off three fingers" (*Dragonfish* 40). Rather than articulating the deep loss and trauma experienced at sea by Sonny and his son, the narrative focuses instead on the violence experienced and exerted by the former. Junior does not want to "bore [Bob] with a tragedy" (39–40), but aims to convey that his mother's death rendered his father even bolder than before, and that Bob must be wary of Sonny, who, given the opportunity, will inflict harm. His actions in camp are taken as explanations for his later behavior without dramatization or spectacularization: "I'm not telling you this story so that you'll pity me. I simply want you to understand what kind of man my father is" (41), Junior asserts, despite his recurring dreams of the three lone fingers on the tree stump.

Against this warning, Bob's white savior aspirations get the better of him and he drives to Sonny's house, where he attacks him. Unfortunately for the narrator, Sonny videotapes their altercation and, since the release of the footage could cause problems for Bob as a police officer, Sonny can now use it to blackmail him. As a result, the main non-Vietnamese character complies with Sonny's henchmen, who force him to accompany them to Las Vegas; Hong has vanished and they suspect that Bob is involved. To cut a long detective story short: they find Mai, Hong's daughter. After years of silence, she had suddenly received letters from her mother and a huge suitcase filled with cash, stolen from Sonny. Hong had disappeared, never to be seen again. Thereafter, she only appears in the novel in sections that

reproduce her letters to Mai, while the main narrative closes with another fight between her two (ex-)lovers, which ends in a fire that kills Sonny.

When the plot is read as noir, Hong emerges as an unconventional femme fatale (Ha and Greenfield; Van To), the archetypal female figure of the noir genre, “commonly understood as a beautiful woman who seduces a male protagonist into criminality and a web of deceit, causing his demise and . . . her own death too” (Grossman 1). Hong, who captivates both Sonny and Bob, driving the former to his death and involving the latter in illicit activities, certainly shares some of the classic femme fatale features. Like a colorful dragonfish, she is similarly both alluring and hard to catch. In the end, however, she slips away, avoiding the typical femme fatale fate of being killed off. In a recent book chapter theorizing refugee noir, Sydney Van To argues that Hong is a refugee femme fatale who subverts genre-specific assumptions: “But Hong’s role as the femme fatale is additionally inflected by refugee-tude, the endurance of a refugee consciousness from her time in camp. Tran rehabilitates the misogynist trope of the femme fatale gold-digger through the refugee’s memories of material insecurity” (70). Even though Hong robs Sonny of thousands of dollars, she is not portrayed as a selfish seductress or manipulator. The passages that present her letters to her daughter Mai in parts two and four humanize her. Hong, as narrator, recalls her boat and refugee camp memories; in these fragmented passages appearing in italics, her camp recollections become vivid. Finally she speaks, rather than being spoken about.

The letters are a staggering intervention in the reading flow, addressing Mai in the second person singular and thus more actively “hook[ing] up with audiences” (Felski 140). This imaginary excursion into Hong’s past stopover experiences fills certain gaps regarding the relationships between the Vietnamese characters but eventually withholds definite closure. Despite finally unveiling Hong’s point of view, her narrative is rendered opaque since her letters were originally written in Vietnamese—in the novel they appear in English—and she even questions her own reliability: *“I’ve tried to explain myself and lay bare whatever truth I can find in the things*

I've done and the things I've let happen. Yet it seems the more I explain, the more I muddy the truth" (*Dragonfish* 214). Although the circumstances surrounding the production of her letters are markedly different from the context in which Binh in Lam's "Hunger" or Nguyen's Captain draft their confessions, Hong's text shares a confessional tone. Even if it is her wish to unburden herself through writing, she cannot explain everything, and her narrative is mediated by language, temporal distance, and omissions. Eventually, Hong is an unreliable narrator, and there is no true resolution to the story; just like in classic crime novels, there is an attempt to unearth past hidden secrets, but there is no satisfying denouement at the end of this extraordinary mystery. After all, this is a story about displacement, and hence one of dispersal rather than consolidation. There is no Hollywood ending, and just like the thousands of refugees and their children who remain in the dark about their own backstories, *Dragonfish* refuses to provide relief or to offer easy and cohesive answers in a straightforward plot.

Hence, the temporary refugee camp stopovers portrayed in *Dragonfish* and *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* constitute a distinctive type of im/mobility marked by insecurity and impermanence. Refugee camps interrupt hazardous boat crossings and, in doing so, temporarily suspend long-distance movement. At the same time, they provide a malleable space where everyday micro-mobilities can continue. Refugees remain uncertain of the duration of their immobilization and their eventual destinations, yet find inventive ways to deal with disruptions, through nurturing, creating community ties, or practicing culinary resistance. As this chapter has argued, the refugee novel does more than just expose the social spaces enabled by refugee camp situations. The narratives imaginatively encapsulate the experiences of refugee characters as they navigate their camp im/mobilities and strategically scatter ambiguities. Through form-related features and interiorization of characters' experiences, the refugee novel serves as an intervention in the field of refugee camp literature that may complement first-hand testimonies and inquiries from the social sciences.

Furthermore, instead of casting refugees as helpless and passive victims, refugee novels reinstate their voices and agency by highlighting their active efforts to dwell on the move. Their waiting is not empty—they produce and share refugee survival knowledge as a community. This is not to idealize refugee camp experiences or to sugarcoat the horrors encountered there, but rather to emphasize that, unlike many media representations, the novels' depictions resist spectacularization. For example, the first camp passage in *Dragonfish* ruthlessly attests to the violence that rules Pulau Bidong without calling for pity. Phan's and Tran's characters' recollections may be tainted by ulterior motives and blurred in memory, yet the refugee camp, the experiences gathered there and the social relations created during the camp stopovers remain important reference points for later incidents in the novels' narratives. Moreover, the uncertainty arising from the characters' unreliability is a common aspect in many refugee narratives, which also feature fragmentation, non-linearity, and open-endedness, reflecting the ambivalence of displacement in content and form.

Chapter Three: Arrivals

Displaced by war and an ocean away from home, Vietnamese refugees often struggle to feel included in the American social circles they encounter after escaping and enduring precarious stays in refugee camps. Some might, over time, fall into the infamous Asian American model minority stereotype of upward social mobility and work their way towards an affluent life. To return to Viet Thanh Nguyen's guide to writing an immigrant saga, this stereotype is ubiquitously found across a broad spectrum of migrant literature, affirming the American Dream and the superiority of the U.S. as a nation-state. However, most refugees commence their lives in the U.S. with limited economic resources, further marginalizing them in a consumerist society that prioritizes financial success. For instance, recalling her early days in the U.S., the ghostwriter narrator in Viet Thanh Nguyen's short story "Black-Eyed Women" (2017) remembers her mother feeling that they did not belong in their country of arrival due to their lack of wealth. Nevertheless, they are sustained by immaterial treasures: "In a country where possessions counted for everything, we had no belongings except our stories" (7). Storytelling thus becomes a mode of place-making or emplacement, anchoring the family in their new surroundings. Simultaneously, storytelling enables belonging in the Vietnamese diaspora and opens the possibility of nurturing future feelings of specifically Vietnamese American belonging.

Furthermore, arrival produces new stories that will be passed on and remembered, not just for Vietnamese refugees, but also the numerous other newcomers to American soil who arrive voluntarily or through coercion. Arrival may even be considered a quintessentially American experience: "Arrival is one of the archetypal American experiences' that to this very day remains deeply rooted in individual and collective memory" (Kunow 334). Using examples from white male authors from the 16th (Puritan) to the early 20th (influx of Transatlantic immigration from Europe) centuries, Rüdiger Kunow contends that arrival "describes the process of becoming

American" (335). This line of argumentation, which follows the logic of the nation-of-immigrants myth and denies Indigenous presence and the option of transnationalism, is challenged by narratives of people who resist being subsumed into a melting pot. The refugee context further exposes the discriminatory assumptions embedded in the idea of becoming American through arrival, as the refugee label frequently precludes individuals from being considered American. In light of this, refugee narratives that offer alternatives to classic rags-to-riches tales actively participate in practices of counter-memory. Such stories focus on the emergence of hybrid and ambivalent diaspora identities and undermine goal-oriented understandings of arriving on new shores.

The act of arrival is often linked with the conclusion of movement: "All human movement—travel, migrancy, displacement—will, sooner or later, terminate somewhere, and *arrival* is the term for this finality" (Kunow 334). At the same time, the equation of arrival with becoming American inevitably also links American identity to the concept of "national-identity-as-unlimited-mobility," as illustrated by famous American figures (usually white and male) like the lone ranger, the traveling beatnik, or the spaceship commander (Verstraete, "Tracking the Nation" 180). Somewhat paradoxically, arriving refers to the problematic idea of settling as both having the right to stay sedentary and the liberty to move about freely. Both are typically denied to refugees, as exemplified in one of the first scenes in *Monkey Bridge* (1997), Lan Cao's novel that some consider "the first 'Vietnamese American' novel" (Boyle and Lim xvi). Unable to establish a telephone connection to Vietnam from the U.S. in the 1970s, narrator Mai decides to leave for Canada by car and call her grandfather from there instead. However, arriving at the border she finds that "Canada was impossible to tackle" (29) due to the emotional barriers of her own anxiety; she eventually does not dare to cross, overwhelmed by the fear that she will not be granted re-entry to the U.S. Mai is concerned that her right to stay is unstable, which hampers her ability to move.

Even if this larger discourse of 'national-identity-as-unlimited-mobility' is disregarded, the notion of arrival as final is incom-

plete. Although arrival at least momentarily interrupts perilous long-distance mobility, the assumption that setting foot on an unfamiliar continent finalizes mobility is misleading for several more reasons. First, arriving is often not a singular event; it is more appropriate to discuss arrival as a process or refer to refugees' arrivals in the plural. Many Vietnamese refugee trajectories within the U.S. can be traced to centers like Camp Pendleton, which frequently served as the initial station for incoming individuals. From there, many relocated to sponsors' homes across the country before finding their own accommodation (which may include places outside the U.S.). Moving from place to place does not necessarily suspend arrival and feelings of belonging, yet these things frequently correlate. Second, the idea of terminated movement disregards the continuation of refugee mobilities. For example, refugees navigate their unfamiliar surroundings via their micro-mobilities, like walking and other practices that become habitual. These routines serve as active strategies for emplacement, just like storytelling, which dynamically accompanies arriving and sustains transnational ties by enabling imaginative travels. Considering these aspects, refugee arrivals delineate a process, rather than an event, during which refugees' contested movements are limited yet not ultimately finished.

In this chapter, I will consider the representation of the refugee arrival experience in three novels: lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003), Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), and Eric Nguyen's *Things We Lost to the Water* (2021). The focus lies on storytelling and a range of different (micro)mobility practices, in which the involvement of water as a versatile actor is pivotal. As inferred from the title of the last novel, water is a recurring motif in many narratives from start to finish and serves as both a fluid bond to the homeland and a facilitator of hardship. The ocean supports the presented narratives and the characters' development in various ways; the sea—and water more broadly—serves as a vibrant inspiration for contemporary Vietnamese American literature written in English. The metaphorical use and physical reality of water create dynamic webs of ambivalent relationships that are significant in shaping refugee subjectivities.

Unsurprisingly, this applies not only for Vietnamese American contributions written in recent years; especially in coastal regions, sea literature has been popular in diverse historical and cultural settings. In the American imagination, “the imagery of the sea never actually lost its hold on the American mind,” and “seascapes also provided a foil for literary discussion of various national, political, and philosophical issues in America” (Benesch, “Sea Literature” 849). Similarly, Vietnam’s geography inspired water imagery even before people escaped by boat throughout the 1970s until the 1990s: “Rivers, seas, and oceans have long figured into Vietnamese imaginations and politics and can be viewed as necessary starting points for any Vietnam-related inquiry” (M. Nguyen, “Refugee Ecologies” 227). The relevance of water is particularly noteworthy in the first work that I will discuss in this chapter, lê thi diem thúy’s novel.

Coordinating Water, Homeland, and Nation in lê thi diem thúy’s *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003)

The 1.5-generation writer lê thi diem thúy was born in Vietnam and raised in southern California, where she and her family grappled with recurring relocations. lê ran away from her parental home, and in the mid-90s, following her B.A. in cultural studies at Hampshire College, she performed her own plays and wrote poetry (Uno 171). Before the publication of her debut novel *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003)—the earliest published work out of all the novels and short stories analyzed in this project—lê’s short story of the same name came out in *The Massachusetts Review and Harper’s Magazine* (174). In addition to the early publication date, what stands out is the unusual spelling of lê’s name. The name order is Vietnamese, yet some of the diacritical marks are missing (in other places, she appears as lê thị diễm thúy). However, the use of lowercase letters is intentionally unconventional in both the American and the Vietnamese context:

When I decided to publish under my full name (in the Vietnamese fashion) and all in lowercase (because I prefer the way it runs), I knew that both Americans and Vietnamese may find fault with it; it is not how names go in either country. Nonetheless, it felt right to me; I had finally managed to break the name down, rebuild it and reclaim it as my own. (*Gangster* 160)

lê elaborates on this subject in the author's note of her novel, where she also touches upon her first name, Thúy, and her escape as a six-year-old in 1978. In Vietnam, she and her older sister were named Trang and Thúy respectively, but their parents called them Little Girl and Big Girl. When lê left her homeland, her father, who never used his daughters' formal names, accidentally registered her, the younger one, as Thúy rather than Trang. When lê's mother joined them in the U.S. two years later and noticed the mistake, she did not want to correct it because "it allowed a part of my older sister to come to this country with us" (160)—the older sister had drowned at a refugee camp in Malaysia, and keeping the name within the family served as a coping mechanism for their loss.

Like the author, lê's narrator is six years old when she comes to San Diego in 1978. She, her father, and the four unrelated "uncles" they fled with spend two years in the U.S. before the mother can join them. The fictional family is haunted by the memory of the narrator's brother, whose drowning back in Vietnam marks a central traumatic event. Through the eyes of the young girl, the five chapters of the coming-of-age novel explore the topics of loss, displacement, and the search for belonging, weaving together memories of Vietnam with the complexities of refugee and family life in California. The text follows Viet Thanh Nguyen's Steps One to Three to writing an immigrant saga: lê's "fiction informed by memory" (Pelaud, "War, Gender, and Race" 112) chronicles both the "[h]ard life in the old world" as well as the "[d]aunting challenges in the new world" (V. T. Nguyen, *A Man of Two Faces* 157) and, crucially, the theme of generational conflict is also prevalent in the novel. However, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* is not a story about the socioeconomic success of the American Dream and the affirmation of the individual's American

political identity; instead, it examines “what it means in the United States to grow up in poverty with parents buried in the past and whose story is invisible in the narrative of the nation” (Pelaud, “War, Gender, and Race” 101). By denying readers the Hollywood ending made up of Nguyen’s Steps Four and Five, the stream-of-consciousness-like story presents an open-ended refugee narrative characterized by ambivalence, uncertainty, and liminality.

Regarding the frequently discussed theme of uneven experiences of parents and children’s arrival in the U.S., language proves pivotal in understanding these differences. Children’s superior command of the English language may lead to role reversals in which they receive authority ordinarily reserved for parents. This process is called ‘dissonant acculturation’: “*Dissonant acculturation* takes place when children’s learning of the English language and American ways and simultaneous loss of the immigrant culture outstrip their parents’. This is the situation leading to role reversal” (Portes and Rumbaut 53–4). In the beginning, the narrator and the four uncles depend on the girl’s father, who knows at least some English. However, later on, when her father opens a gardening business, he tells his daughter to be his “secretary” (*Gangster* 90) and record a message for customers on the answering machine. By that point, the narrator’s fluency in English has surpassed that of all the adults in the linguistic hierarchy, leading to a reversal of roles. Her father uses this to his own advantage, reasoning that it would be advantageous to hide his identity. He calls himself “Tom” rather than “Minh” and names his business “Tom’s Professional Gardening Service” (90–1) to enhance the enterprise’s decisively non-Vietnamese look.

These generational differences point to disparities of acceptance in the arrival country for members of the first and the 1.5 or second generation that, in some instances, lead to conflict. Furthermore, the novel emphasizes gender discrepancies in experiencing arrival by alluding to domestic violence. The abuse encountered at home, especially when the girl’s father is drunk, makes her leave at the age of sixteen (*Gangster* 101), reasoning that running away is preferable to remaining stagnant. Departing is seen as a “tactics of surviving everyday violence produced by war, racism, and patriarchy” (Pelaud,

“War, Gender, and Race” 100), yet the girl does not condemn her father, reading his outbursts as PTSD. lê’s “tell-without-revealing” narrative (103) usually “describes the presence of domestic violence without directly naming it” (106), even to the extent of not disclosing whether the narrator herself is ever its target. Her mother, however, faced abuse from her own father for choosing to marry against her parents’ wishes and ran away from home only to endure further violence from her husband later on:

When my mother, a Catholic schoolgirl from the South, decided to marry my father, a Buddhist gangster from the North, her parents disowned her. . . . Her father chased her out of the house, beating her with the same broom she had used every day of her life, from the time she could stand up and sweep until that very morning that she was chased away. (*Gangster* 79)

The shadow of male violence trails the narrator’s mother from Vietnam to Linda Vista, a San Diego community home to many Vietnamese. The novel’s eponymous “gangster” shows up in reference to both the narrator and her father. During one of their fights, the mother tells her husband “not to touch her with his gangster hands,” to which he responds, “Let me see the gangster! Let me see his hands!” (92). They do not hide their struggles from their daughter, and the narrator recollects “see[ing] his hands punch hands punch hands punch blood” (92). Through the repetition of “hands” and “punch,” both linked to her father as the perpetrator, a brutal picture ending in “blood” is painted without detailing the vicious actions. Her mother copes by throwing dishes out of the window, making their altercation a scene for the whole neighborhood to witness.

Striving to protect her parents from gossip, the narrator takes on the role of an obedient daughter and tries to distract the curious onlookers: “I run out front and dance like a crazy lady, dance like a fish, wiggle my head and whip my body around” (*Gangster* 93). As the father, the “gangster,” drives away, she declares: “When I grow up I am going to be the gangster we are all looking for” (93). Pelaud reads this affirmation as “the child’s chilling awareness that she will

forever carry her father's anger" ("War, Gender, and Race" 106). A few pages onward, the narrator's comparison of herself to her father bolsters this interpretation: "I grew up studying my father so closely as to suggest I was certain I saw my future in him. I would inherit his lithe figure and beautiful smile. I would build and break things with my hands" (*Gangster* 116). This understanding evokes the notion of transgenerational trauma, which I will expand on in the following subchapter, drawing from Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory.' Through witnessing the daily routines of her parents, the narrator both internalizes their violent behavior and simultaneously inherits their traumatic past. Like her father and mother, she eventually runs away from home, continuing a spiral of restless mobility.

For the characters in *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, restless and other forms of mobility are the norm, even after arriving in the U.S. Arrival is not marked by finality: the family members move from Vietnam to Pacific refugee camps to American sponsors' houses to their various Californian homes. On the first page, the narrator recalls the different San Diego places, each marked by a distinct color, that her family lived in before moving to Linda Vista: "Linda Vista, with its rows of yellow houses, is where we eventually washed to shore. Before Linda Vista, we lived in the Green Apartment on Thirtieth and Adams, in Normal Heights. Before the Green Apartment, we lived in the Red Apartment on Forty-ninth and Orange, in East San Diego" (*Gangster* 3). Linda Vista is not their final destination, as they are later evicted from their bungalow and have to break in to retrieve their belongings. This incident transports the narrator back in time to their escape from Vietnam: "We are time traveling, weighed down by heavy furniture and bags of precious junk" (97)—their experience of flight is not a temporally finished event, but it "resurfaces to haunt them like an endless nightmare" (Chen 73). The family members' mobilities are characterized by moving *away from* rather than *towards* something; they left their parental homes, then their homelands, and eventually are "washed" to Linda Vista rather than purposefully arriving there, only to be displaced again.

The narrator and her father in particular are incessant movers. Because their lives have been marked by frequent escapes, move-

ment comes to them naturally. They live by continually moving from place to place, frequently at a brisk tempo: “I would come to see running as inseparable from living” (*Gangster* 117). The narrator learns to regard mobility and constant delayed arrival as a necessity, a way of life. Similarly, most of her memories of her father relate to his departures. Even after running away from home, she still has nightmares of him leaving (120–1), perpetuating a feeling of abandonment. Nightmares have been a constant companion for both her and her father ever since they escaped from Vietnam. That is, if they can sleep at all; they often battle insomnia, resulting in further feelings of restlessness.

As a remedy, they choose to roam the streets or take long bus rides at night when they cannot sleep, moving and remaining active until they are too tired to stay awake. On the one hand, their acts of walking are therapeutic; Brian G. Chen notes that “[f]or them, the urge to walk and wander is a psychosomatic response to their agony of displacement, functioning therapeutically to vent their frustration and relieve their anxiety from unstable life situations” (77). Walking, which “defines our experience of self and of the world” (Benesch and Specq v), serves as one response to their displacement and at the same time, it becomes a joint practice of active emplacement. By walking and wandering in the urban setting, they get to know their surroundings, and simultaneously become a part of the city themselves: “The body in motion validates their physical presence in the new homeland and contests the collective understanding of *diaspora*. In the wake of reestablishing their diasporic subjectivity, they purport to be active, visible individuals, not passive, temporary guests always seeking to return to their native countries” (Chen 63). In some ways, their nocturnal city walks evoke the movements of a classic figure of urban mobility and modernity famously conceptualized by writers like Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin—the ‘flâneur,’ who “captures a sense of idly walking in the city, with no specific destination, taking pleasure in the act of walking while making observations on urban life” (Coates 28). As refugee flâneurs, the narrator and her father are not individuals strolling anonymously through bustling city crowds. Instead, they study their urban sur-

roundings by night, walking together as a collective but relatively undisturbed by other urbanites. They share the modern flâneur's interest in exploring commercial centers, but rather than strolling through Parisian arcades, they experience American capitalism by window shopping and meandering through San Diego's supermarket aisles after dark.

The novel's dynamic form and style echo this feature of constant movement. Although the five chapters follow the girl from her early days in the U.S. in the late 1970s to her return visit to Vietnam twenty years later, the narrative is only very loosely chronological. The text transitions between different points in time without seeking a straightforward resolution, presenting a disorderly compilation of episodes from the narrative present and past, which sometimes unfold across several paragraphs that span more than a page. Told through the eyes of a child with a vivid imagination, the demarcations between factual memory, dreams, and fantasy are blurry. More often than not, two empty lines separate the relatively short paragraphs. From one paragraph to the next, the narrative either follows the previous storyline or, with spatial and temporal flexibility, introduces new scenes spontaneously. The fragmentation and non-consecutive ordering of time prevent the reader from receiving a holistic picture of the girl's refugee experiences; just like her identity, which is liminal, hybrid, and never entirely fixed, the novel's arrangement of episodic and incomplete recollections mirrors this in-betweenness and ambivalence.

The gaps between paragraphs on the page parallel the gaps of the protagonist's memory, making it impossible to establish a conclusive timeline of events and hence "withhold[ing] from readers the comfort of believing that life stories disjointed by warfare can be smoothly reconstructed" (Le-Khac 122-3). Although the blank spaces lead to uncertainty, the inability of "smoothly reconstructing" the narrator's refugee life story does not inhibit the liquid and flowing quality of lê's poetic prose. The fluid narrative effortlessly jumps around in time and space, connecting people and places across borders. Like the characters' runaway tendencies, these movements echo the ocean's motions of going back and forth without precise

aim—"the instability of waves, as well as the fact that the ocean is fluid and in constant flux, mirrors the refugee experience as well as the postcolonial refugee identity" (Laemmerhirt 301). In many different ways, water imagery is prevalent throughout the novel "as metaphor, a symbol for the reader and the characters, and a physical entity in fluid, gaseous, or solid state" (Cheng 117). The epigraph introduces the multiple meanings of water/nước in Vietnamese culture and language: "In Vietnamese, the word for *water* and the word for *a nation, a country, and a homeland* are one and the same: *nước*" (*Gangster*). Examining lê's novel through an environmental lens, Emily Cheng discusses how "[w]ater evokes the complex meanings of Vietnam and the United States as home countries and the connection between the two through the liquid form of the water that characterized refugee flight by boat and the ocean connecting the two spaces" (117). In the first instance, water facilitates escape—and hence, better chances of survival—intricately tying together people and events across time and space. At the same time, it possesses the power to unleash destruction, as portrayed through the narrator's brother's drowning and chilling memories of boat journeys. Some other examples alluding to the ambiguous connotations of water have been addressed in the previous chapters (for instance, the children at the refugee camp in Phan's *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* who like to play at the beach, both awakening happy recollections of Vietnam and serving as a forceful reminder of their boat escape).

Additionally, the association between water and homeland is unmistakable, even in the narrator's dreams, and also ties it to family. Lacking conversation partners of similar age in her early U.S. days when staying with her father and the four uncles at a sponsor's house, the girl instead tells her stories to a quiet audience of glass animals:

On that day, I told the glass animals about a dream I'd had the night before. In it, I'd stolen one of the school crossing guards' signs and carried it back to Mel's [their sponsor's] house. . . . I ran from room to room, turning on all the faucets in the house.

I told the glass animals that the rushing water in the dream lifted my Ba, the four uncles and me out of the house, down the five steps, into the street, past the school and the uncles' pool hall, beyond the rows of identical apartment buildings, each with its rooms glowing white. As we sailed through the streets on our sign, I held the glass disk like a telescope up to my eye and through the body of my butterfly, I saw Ma standing on a faraway beach. (*Gangster* 31-2)

In different forms (physically and figuratively), water pervades the narrator's dream. She enables her own storytelling process by vocally communicating with her inanimate environment, which "helps to develop the narrative" and "to make sense of the complex world of refugee settlement and racialized poverty and to grapple with the losses and violence of displacement and war" (Cheng 116). The butterfly glass disk the narrator uses as a telescope is another artifact and non-human friend with whom she regularly interacts. Just like the immobile animal-shaped glass figurines, the butterfly in this decorative object remains still, its natural constant movement immobilized. The narrator likens this situation to her own; despite the urban micro-mobilities she shares with her father, she feels confined, ultimately prompting her departure from home. Asha Jeffers elaborates: "the butterfly paperweight is the first symbolic site of the narrative's preoccupation with how the feeling of being trapped shapes subject formation and how escaping it is necessary to come of age with any degree of hope" (4). However, in contrast to the insect's captivity in glass, the girl and her companions dynamically glide through the streets in the dream. Water is imagined as an enabler of potential return mobility for the narrator, her father, and the four uncles. In Vietnam, where her mother still resides at that point in the story, the narrator expects her to be waiting "on a faraway beach." The young girl frames her wish for a reunion with the water and the beach, a place that makes her feel closer to her mother, whom she imagines standing on the shore on the other side of the world.

Regarding the dream of finding a way to reach her mother across the waters, it is interesting to note the narrator is not only joined by

her father—her immediate family—but by the four uncles, too. She is not related to them, yet she naturally includes them in her narrative; they have formed a kind of alternative kinship based on their shared experiences of flight across the seas. This idea of alternative kinship through water is introduced in the novel's very first chapter following its telling epigraph:

Ba and I were connected to the four uncles, not by blood but by water. The six of us had stepped into the South China Sea together. Along with other people from our town, we floated across the sea, first in the hold of the fishing boat, and then in the hold of a U.S. Navy ship. At the refugee camp in Singapore, we slept on beds side by side and when our papers were processed and stamped, we packed our few possessions and left the camp together. We entered the revolving doors of airports and boarded plane after plane. We were lifted high over the Pacific Ocean. Holding on to one another, we moved through clouds, ghost vapors, time zones. (*Gangster* 3-4)

These episodes of flight, perpetually linked with water, strengthen the bond between the narrator and her father and form new familial ties with the four uncles. Through the innocent eyes of a child, forced mobility arises as a jointly experienced practice, oscillating between ease and constraint. The narrator and her blood and water relatives, a collective reinforced by the recurrent use of the pronoun “we,” remain together on mobile and immobile periods of their flight. Their mobilities are “float[ing]” even while “in the hold.” At the refugee camp, “sleep[ing] side by side,” they share everyday micro-mobilities. The list of places encountered reveals yet again that escape is not a straightforward movement from A to B but that “the refugee flight-to-resettlement process is full of detours and snags” (CRSC 92). Water is a salient element in different steps and stopovers of their escape; even when up in the air, the girl is aware that they are crossing the ocean. Furthermore, this passage once more points to the importance of needing appropriate documents to be allowed to move on; papers and stamps act as controllers of im/mobility.

Considering Cresswell's elements of a politics of mobility, the group's subsequent arrival at their American sponsor's home is particularly notable with respect to its velocity. Their unhasty movements defy the stereotype of refugee arrivals as fast and overwhelming invasions. Still, the narrator understands that this is how many Americans, including their sponsor, prefer to recall these events: "He [their sponsor Mel] didn't remember that we hadn't come running through the door he opened but, rather, had walked, keeping close together and moving very slowly" (*Gangster* 8). Vinh Nguyen interprets their collectively experienced and deliberately slowly performed mobility as an attempt to control their arrival: "The collective slow walk, as a temporal experience, is an affective disposition that conveys the refugees' desire and capacity to determine the pace of refuge, and to receive the 'gift' on their own terms" (4). The "gift" refers to refuge, which is usually "construct[ed] . . . as both privilege and humanitarian act" (2), invoking Mimi Thi Nguyen's critique of the 'gift of freedom.' During their escape, various aspects of mobility were determined for the refugee characters, such as the air routes enabling their entry to the U.S. or the duration of their layovers. While they could not dictate the speed of their long-distance travel, they retain agency over the pace of their micro-mobilities. Although this detail goes unnoticed by others and their subsequent movements become increasingly restless, their deliberate initial entrance signifies a conscious effort to regain dignity. However, as noted earlier, this entrance is not a final arrival but only the beginning in the U.S. for the constantly moving refugees in lê's semiautobiographical narrative.

In this section, I have focused on gendered experiences of arrival, the representation of (micro-)mobilities, and the multifaceted use of water imagery in lê's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. Accustomed to running away, the girl narrator eventually leaves her family but still underscores escape as a collective experience, affirming Goyal's assertion of the refugee novel's strength at "navigati[ng] . . . the relationship between an individual and the community" (Goyal 249). In relation to this, my exploration of Ocean Vuong's partially autobiographical work *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* in the next

subchapter will pivot to another subject pertinent to contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature—(collective) storytelling as a means of emplacement. Published fifteen years after *lê's*, Vuong's novel shares a similarly liquid, elusive narration style, featuring water and the ocean as a topic and a polysemous metaphor while reproducing fluidity and instability at the structural level. These aesthetic choices complement the larger context of refugee narratives reflecting the ambivalence of displacement in content and form by highlighting fragmentation, non-linearity, open-endedness, and unresolved gaps.

Refugee Storytellers in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019)²⁷

What's in a name? Ocean Vuong was born in Vietnam as Vương Quốc Vinh and fled with his mother, grandmother, and aunt in 1990, when he was two years old. His novel and poems are read by many as immigrant literature, yet his family's departure from Vietnam was escape-like even though they left comparatively late. Furthermore, Vuong's biography cannot be separated from a history of war, which features prominently in his work: "An American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my mother exists. Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me. / Yikes" ("Notebook Fragments" 67). As a mixed-race child, Vuong's mother was working illegally according to Vietnamese regulations at the time. When found out, the family escaped to a Filipino refugee camp before relocating to Hartford, Connecticut (Armitstead)—leaving Vietnam therefore was a step against prosecution. Vuong's father, who had chosen the author's birth name on the recommendation of a fortune teller, left the family shortly upon their arrival in the U.S. After divorcing him, "as a way of reclaiming her independence," Vuong's mother chose a new name

²⁷ Parts of this subchapter have previously been published as the essay "We Had No Belongings Except Our Stories: Storytelling and Countermemory in Vietnamese American Refugee Literature" in *Displacement, Emplacement, and Migration: An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays* (2024), a volume edited by Touhid Ahmed Chowdhury.

for her son: “She told me, much later, that she chose Ocean because, like the Pacific Ocean, we don’t truly reside in either the United States or Vietnam; like that expansive stretch of water, I touch both nations but belong solely to neither” (“Vessel for Peace”). Accordingly, Ocean Vuong’s hybrid name carries liminality and a connection between the U.S. and the family’s homeland. His name thus recalls the previously introduced meanings of water/nước in Vietnamese culture and language that also imply these associations. Moreover, on a personal level, the name symbolizes the writer’s mother’s emancipation from her ex-husband.

Before releasing his first novel and receiving one of the prestigious MacArthur ‘genius grants’ in 2019, Vuong had already gained recognition as a poet thanks to his acclaimed collection, *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* (2016). Shortly after, his first novel, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), was published and met with widespread popular and critical acclaim. While lê’s formerly discussed *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* focuses on the bond between the girl narrator and her father, Vuong’s epistolary narrative explores the dynamic between a male narrator and his mother. Vuong’s own mother was diagnosed with and died from breast cancer during the book’s release year. While grieving amidst a world engulfed by the escalating pandemic, Vuong wrote poems for *Time Is a Mother* (2022), his second poetry collection (Chung). As announced on Instagram by the author himself, Vuong worked on his second novel for five years and handed in the manuscript in April 2024. Another text by Vuong will stay hidden for some more decades—in 2020, he was chosen as the seventh author to contribute to the Future Library Project, an art project conceived by Scottish artist Katie Paterson (Cain). As stated on its website, the Future Library Project has invited one artist annually since 2014, with all submissions to be kept secret until 2114.

Ocean Vuong’s work is frequently interpreted as autobiographical. In a Guardian interview with Kadish Morris, Vuong touches upon the themes of ethnic authorship raised in the introduction of this book: “I’ve learned that writers of colour are often expected to perform a kind of ethnography in their work that’s devoid of ‘craft’—or, worse, that their work is read as ‘mere’ reportage, creating a

myth that the work is only valuable for its 'exotic' subject and not for its artistic strategies." In his view, as he explains in the same interview, "[w]riting from a memoiristic approach would be too limiting." Instead, he approaches storytelling as "an opportunity to turn from memoiristic transcription of information towards a kind of ultimate artefact, charged and changed by the imagination." Elsewhere, on the subject of his novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the author elaborates on his writing technique: "I begin with the voices of those I care for, family or otherwise, and follow them until they drop off, until I have to create them in order to hear them. My writing is an echo" ("Survival"). The effect is a powerful blend of memoir, history, and imagination, praised for the topics addressed but primarily for its innovative approach to storytelling. In this subsection, I will investigate storytelling in the refugee context, a topic intricately connected to memory. In particular, I will examine Vuong's storytelling style and explore different features of storytelling—writing, listening, writing, representing—as displayed in his novel.

Besides water, both in its tangible and symbolic expressions, storytelling is prevalent at all phases of refugees' escape and arrival. To engage with both the public and the authorities, refugees must take on the role of storytellers to secure their right both to stay and to move forward, which recalls Vinh Nguyen's previously mentioned observations: "If the figure of the refugee is an experiencer, then it is also crucially a *storyteller*. . . . And so, refugees must learn to become storytellers: to prove persecution to officials, to describe trauma to reporters, to express gratitude to the humanitarian state, and to articulate their success to the national community" (xvi). However, storytelling also matters within the community. Before practicing place-making more tangibly, 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 overcome the uncertainties of the present. The link to the past is especially vital for members of younger generations, whose corporeal recollection of their homeland remains blurry or even inaccessible. Storytelling connects people and places across temporal and spatial boundaries and 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, despite their dislocation, while recognizing their own and their family’s past. Concurrently, this awareness not only enacts a spatial and experiential understanding of a place from which refugees have been displaced, but it may also stabilize their sense of belonging in unfamiliar settings, mainly through the typically community-based character of storytelling.

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 U.S.-centered narratives that neglected Vietnamese American perspectives: “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” (V. T. Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* 292). Collective memory is about remembering *and* forgetting and may resurface as counter-memory, which designates “oppositional memory, the memory of the subordinated and the marginalized, memory from below versus memory from above” (V. T. Nguyen, “Memory” 154)—a practice that Vuong’s novel engages in within the text and as the text itself.

My analysis emphasizes the fictional representation of storytelling, which is understood broadly but always as a “coping strategy” (Jackson 18). However, there are parallels to anthropological and sociological approaches in the larger field of refugee studies and transnational migration scholarship. Kirin Narayan, whose definition of emplacement I 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 American refugees illustrate that emplacement through storytelling works on multiple levels and acts as an agent for producing collective memory in the form of countermemory. To begin with, I inspect the practice of storytelling as represented in the novel, contemplating how the depicted refugee storytellers construct their stories and how this affects their own and their audience's sense of belonging. Secondly, I briefly touch upon the role of the author himself, who arguably creates new types of storytelling through his hybrid novel.

Typically, stories in Vietnamese American literature are told by the first generation and transgenerationally spread to members of the 1.5 generation 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, enmeshing the past and the present: "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.

In the novel, the first-person narrator, Little Dog, left Vietnam with his family when he was two. Like Vuong, the narrator is technically a member of the 1.5 generation, yet his embodied memory of growing up is moored in the U.S., similar to second-generation refugees. However, in the family's household, through storytelling and photographs, Vietnam is part of everyday life. Two first-generation women are significant in Little Dog's life—his mother, Rose, and his grandmother, Lan, who dies in the novel's third and last part. Lan used to work as a sex worker back in Vietnam, where she met Paul, a white American stationed with the U.S. Navy. They married in 1967

but were separated four years later when Paul went back to Virginia and did not return. They reconnect much later in the U.S., where Little Dog gets to know Paul as his grandfather. This belief is shattered when, at nine years old, his mother tells him that her biological father remains unknown, “just another American john—faceless, nameless, less” (*On Earth* 55). Regardless of this lack of knowledge, it remains that Rose was born as a dust-of-life child, and her ambiguous hybridity denies her belonging on either side of the Pacific Ocean. “Get the white off her” (63), children in the neighborhood would shout after her when she was still a girl in Vietnam; as a half-white Amerasian child, she experiences the same bias as the Captain in Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer*. Unlike him, however, she grapples with English and thus, language barriers add to the complications of her fitting in in America. Rose sustains a challenging relationship with her son 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. For Little Dog, “fathers were phantoms, dipping in and out of their children’s lives” (*On Earth* 213), which applies to his own father but also to other family constellations that he observes. In other words, fatherly absence is the norm he encounters growing up in Hartford, Connecticut.

In cases where parents’ storytelling remains sparse, stories may be passed down from grandparents to grandchildren, skipping one generation. Little Dog cherishes a deep connection to his grandmother Lan, whose storytelling continues to console and stabilize 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” (*On Earth* 28)—she recounts her own journeys in Vietnam during the war and recites scenes of myth and folklore. Recognizing the mobilizing force of stories, her grandson develops an understanding that “history moves in a spiral” and “Lan, through her stories, was also traveling in a spiral” (27). While listening, Little Dog 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)

The imagined “fantastical landscapes” are vibrant and full of movement. Little Dog has heard his grandmother's stories before, but they retain their force, transcending time and space as her voice carries him from the American East Coast across the continent and the Pacific Ocean to their genealogical homeland and to times before he was born. In this fashion, Lan's vivid storytelling exceeds its capacity of merely sparking her grandson's imagination. Instead, he goes beyond visualizing 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, imagining place, and surpassing linear time restrictions.

In addition to encouraging belonging, stories are also viewed as immaterial possessions worthy of transaction, which is illustrated in the following passage where Little Dog deems the stories his payment for plucking Lan's 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. (*On Earth* 22)

Lan’s stories, repeated over and over, appeal to Little Dog on an affective level, rendering him much more than a passive listener. While simultaneously imagining and feeling Lan’s stories in the here and now, Little Dog is aware that storytelling is a performance; the hair-plucking setting and Lan’s change in voice mean that she has begun narrating her tales, which do not otherwise have a clear beginning or end. Mobilized across time and space, he is regularly reinscribed into the occasionally changing stories. This exemplifies how grandmother and grandson 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” (23). The past is malleable, and the transgenerationally transmitted stories have become Little Dog’s own, as he envisions standing next to Lan when she narrates how she met her husband decades ago as a sex worker.

Their collaborative memory work 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)

His grandmother’s memory has seemingly become Little Dog’s 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 refugee storyteller and her 1.5-generation audience. Furthermore, Lan contributes to Little

Dog's postmemory not only through stories but also images. Her wedding picture, captured in Vietnam in 1967, accompanies the boy throughout his childhood as a central artifact in the family's living room: "As I played with my dolls and toy soldiers, that photo hovered over me, an icon from an epicenter that would lead to my own life" (*On Earth* 46). Feeling as though his own narrative were peripheral rather than at the "epicenter," Little Dog perceives the image as a physical presence and views the depicted individuals as the architects of his existence. The topic of photographs and memory resurfaces in the next chapter, specifically emphasizing its relevance to return narratives.

Along with the stories and images that shape the postmemory generation's upbringing, Hirsch notes that behaviors can also influence memory. Similar to lê's narrator, Little Dog acquires postmemory wordlessly by internalizing his mother's and his grandmother's PTSD through their conduct. As amplified by Quan Manh Ha and Mia Tompkins, "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" (208). For example, Ha and Tompkins mention an incident in which Lan is unsettled and transported back in time upon hearing fireworks, which trigger her to remember other explosions. She urges Little Dog to join her under the sill and warns him to remain quiet: "Shhh. If you scream, . . . the mortars will know where we are" (*On Earth* 19). In everyday situations like this one, "[t]hrough his intimate proximity to Rose and Lan's psychological damage from the war, Little Dog inherits their memories as postmemory" (Ha and Tompkins 208). This demonstrates how transgenerational trauma is not only relayed through stories and photos but also by behavior or shared living space.

It is crucial to acknowledge the distinctions between oral and written storytelling. Lan's flexible oral storytelling evokes the storytelling of other women in Asian American literature—most prominently, in Maxine Hong Kingston's classic, *The Woman Warrior* (1976). In- and outside of her literary work, Kingston develops the concept of 'talk-story,' a style with roots in Hawaiian pidgin and traditional

Chinese storytelling (de Lucia 44). Vinh Nguyen expands on Asian American renditions of talk-story: “Emphasizing stories as a mode of cultural exchange shared within intimate spaces of family, and retold via factuality and fantasy, talk-story describes a distinct Asian American form of storytelling as inheritance, as diasporic transmission of knowledge and experience” (80). Through this definition, the storytelling practiced by Lan and Little Dog in Vuong’s novel can be perceived as talk-story. By way of this malleable form, they collectively restore the past without claiming or wishing to reproduce it factually: “Whether we want to or not, we are traveling in a spiral, we are creating something new from what is gone” (*On Earth* 28). Their mutual embrace of storytelling in the oral form of talk-story showcases refugee resilience: “The presence of a story is, crucially, the presence of life. A story indicates resilience because there is someone there to tell it, someone who believes that the story should have a life in the world” (V. Nguyen 81). After Lan’s death, Little Dog continues telling her stories, as the narrative demonstrates. He keeps embellishing the tales, yet this is the nature of storytelling in any event, especially when in oral rather than written form.

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 of Viet Thanh Nguyen’s introduction to *The Displaced*, the previously addressed 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 U.S. and their active place-making, both figurative and physical, through businesses that attest to their economic participation, such as his parents' former "mom-and-pop Vietnamese grocery store catering to refugees" (15).

Later on in the same text, Nguyen extends the discussion to displaced writers and their examination of displacement in their literary endeavors:

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 17–8)²⁸

Rather than lamenting displacement, Nguyen proposes that it acts to create writers and, consequently, functions as the main generator of any piece of writing. This interpretation refuses to pathologize refugees' trauma and displacement, emphasizing their productive potential beyond victimization. Furthermore, this passage 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 essentialization of refugees as helpless victims immobilized by suffering, and unveils storytelling's forward-looking stance. For years, the ghostwriter has repressed the painful mem-

²⁸ The last two sentences, addressing the aspect of solidarity in refugee memory and writing, have already been quoted earlier in the section on refugee literature.

ories of her escape, a strategy that obstructed her sense of belonging in her country of arrival. Her profession allegorizes 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—materialized 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 revitalizes the relationship with her mother through storytelling, accentuating the significance of collective memory for processing individual trauma. Moreover, she 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. In a way, by writing a book and capturing stories—a practice unavailable to the lost girls—she assumes Nguyen's challenge of "attempting to perform some justice for those compelled to move" (Introduction 18) and adequately "hearing the voiceless" (20). Literally leaving an imprint on her surroundings, she engages in active place-making and, through her stories, encourages the emplacement of other hybrid individuals.²⁹

The ghostwriter is by no means the only contemporary Vietnamese American literary character who has discovered some belonging through language and becoming a refugee writer-storyteller. Little Dog is set up as the writer of the novel's text, and he does not hide that his narrative is composed rather than spontaneous. The opening line, "Let me begin again" (*On Earth* 3), and the reference to "a previous draft" (15) disclose that the version provided to readers is not the first iteration. It is also not the final one, and "Let me begin again" (173) is repeated in the third part—although the text is presented as a constructed piece of writing, it is characterized

29 I elaborate on the ghostwriter's negotiation of trauma and reconciliation of conflicting sentiments towards home and homeland in the essay "Of Ghosts, Gifts, and Glo-betrotters: Tracing Homes and Homelands in Vietnamese American Refugee Short Stories," which appeared in *Perspectives of Homelessness* (2022), edited by Anna Flüge and Georgia Tommasi.

by incompleteness and fluidity. Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* adopts the epistolary form of a letter written by Little Dog to his mother Rose, who is illiterate. When he was younger, he tried to teach her how to read, but Rose quit the attempt out of frustration; "that act (a son teaching his mother) reversed our hierarchies, and with it our identities, which, in this country, were already tenuous and tethered" (5). While lê's narrator's father in *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* accepts the role reversal in the realm of language, Rose refuses to be taught by her son. In the realm of domestic abuse, however, neither child narrator's household is spared. Little Dog reminisces about Rose's injuries inflicted by his father while she, in turn, strikes her son with her bare hands and various objects.

The letter-as-novel is organized into three parts, each comprising a compilation of episodes. Some sections resemble the structure of poems, most notably, the last few pages of the second part (*On Earth* 153–60). The fragments recall diverse topics such as the family's past in Vietnam and Connecticut, language, history, myth, the narrator's multiple arrivals as a queer Vietnamese American refugee, the relationship with his first boyfriend, and the opioid epidemic. Some of the events recounted are more unexpected than others, yet they are all interconnected. For instance, Little Dog tells the story of Eldrick "Tiger" Woods' father, a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. army who met his wife when he was stationed in Thailand—just like Little Dog's mother, "one of the greatest golfers in the world is . . . a direct product of the war in Vietnam" (53). The three-act structure employed to tell these stories is dominant in Western storytelling, but Vuong's narrative as a whole resembles 'kishōtenketsu,' a four-part concept that is prevalent in East Asian poetry and storytelling (Handler 73): "[*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*] uses a narrative structure called kishōtenketsu, . . . a form that refuses to deploy conflict as a means of progressing the story. . . . There are no villains, no victims, and no clear arcs" (K. Nguyen). Refugees are not victimized, and conflict is present in the narrative without representing the driving factor. For Little Dog, the refugee writer-storyteller, writing provides cathartic insights into his own liminal and hybrid subjectivity.

In contrast, Rose's illiteracy represents a boundary between her son's storytelling and her reception of the story, a restriction that prevents the process from being mutually efficient. While Lan's and Little Dog's oral storytelling is a collective practice, his letter to his mother is a one-sided act. Perhaps its efficacy stems from the very fact that she will never read it; "the chance this letter finds you is slim—the very impossibility of your reading this is all that makes my telling it possible" (*On Earth* 113), Little Dog notes before graphically recounting his sexual coming-of-age. On the assumption that she can never read her son's words, Rose is ultimately excluded from the story, hinting at rifts between different generations of Vietnamese Americans and the recognition that certain traumata are unspeakable. Somewhat paradoxically, it is still only "through the story or its telling that she can exist" (V. Nguyen 89), even though Rose will not receive the story herself. In this way, writing serves as a strategy of emplacement and survival for Little Dog and the other marginalized people featured in his narrative—for his refugee family as well as his "friends . . . dying from overdoses" (*On Earth* 169). At one point, the narrator compares the act of writing to preservation: "I never wanted to build a 'body of work,' but to preserve these, our bodies, breathing and unaccounted for, inside the work" (175), paralleling the author's conception of the novel as "an echo" ("Survival").

Despite the unlikelihood of Rose receiving Little Dog's letter, penning it to her is imperative for the narrator and the story itself. Even if his text never reaches 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" (*On Earth* 85)—to join his narrative actively. 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 recounting his experience, he takes her on a lifelike journey through Hartford, the city of his childhood and adolescence. Like Little Dog's inclusion in Lan's orally transmitted stories, he places his mother into the remembered scenery. His storytelling is engaging, and he 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 writ-

ten 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 through their participation in the model minority paradigm" (Cho 136). Rose is a diligent worker, yet her job as a manicurist does not make her achieve the American Dream in the classical sense of gaining financial freedom. On the contrary, the conditions at Rose's workplace confirm the mythical status of the Dream; the nail salon is soberly described as "a place where dreams become the calcified knowledge of what it means to be awake in American bones—with or without citizenship—aching, toxic, and underpaid" (*On Earth* 80–1). Although Little Dog's language fascination and talent grant access into particular American social spheres, his 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" (Cho 132–3). Hence, while attesting to refugees' agency in engaging with their surroundings, the family's place-making practices must not be romanticized, and their storytelling's potential as a strategy 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" (*On Earth* 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 characterizes as follows: "While storytelling and displacement can sometimes be experienced as opposing forces, it is

important to double-listen and recognize 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 “finally legible” 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 marginalized people, thus cultivating countermemory, which may provide belonging-inducing emplacement.

On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous is categorized as a work of literary fiction, yet it incorporates certain autobiographical elements, too. Noticeably, Vuong shares with his protagonist a love for playing with language to craft displaced stories. Therefore, along with representing writing within the narrative world, the novel itself may be considered a new type of storytelling capable of engendering enduring collective memory of displacement. It is “new” because it does not follow the typical teleological structure of the immigrant saga that Viet Thanh Nguyen criticizes—conflict and the pursuit of the American Dream do not serve as the main impetus behind Vuong’s unique narrative. In regard to specifically Vietnamese American literature, I return to Michele Janette’s previously quoted distinction between texts of an earlier generation of Vietnamese (American) authors writing in English and 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” (“Vietnamese American Literature” 386). Bending the rules of linearity of explanation and time while constructing fractured, lyrical, and liquid narratives, Vuong’s and lê’s episodic novels emphasize these observations most poignantly.

Before moving on to Eric Nguyen’s novel, the discussion of *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*—which has explored multiple modes of storytelling, including orating, listening, writing, and representing—

necessitates further consideration of collective memory. 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 wanting to diminish 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, especially if popular and institutionalized in libraries, just like Vuong’s. Moreover, the subversion of linearity is evident not only in his novel but also in the process of his work’s institutionalization through Vuong’s inclusion as a contributor to the Future Library Project. Although, at this point, no one except the author is familiar with the submitted work’s contents and form, it is intriguing to observe the novelist’s antedated institutionalization in the light of Assmann’s distinctions, and speculate on his renewed impact on future generations in around nine decades.

In this section, I have focused on the various ways in which Vuong and his refugee storytellers of different generations within and outside the narratives employ storytelling as a coping strategy in the face of displacement and to thwart dominant, spectacularizing discourses. Coping, in this context, refers to the way hybrid individuals sustain themselves by assigning meaning to their present surroundings—through remembering and forgetting the past and envisioning future connections—in other words, through transnational place-making practices that foster belonging. Ultimately, this analysis illuminates the critical dialectics between displacement and emplacement; whereas displacement serves as the catalyst for the fabrication of fragmented stories (or, to use Lems’ words, ‘displaced stories’), their production simultaneously creates a durable corner-

stone for enacting collective memory in the form of countermemory and, hence, the opportunity for future generations' emplacement.

In Vuong's novel, water is less significant for the characters' emplacement. On the level of form, though, the storytelling style is indeed characterized by fluidity. Furthermore, by repeatedly revisiting specific episodes and flexibly moving across time and space, the storyline is formed more like a spiral than a line, moving back and forth in wave-like motions. However, despite the author's name, the ocean as such does not feature frequently in the narrative either metaphorically or physically. Growing up in a landlocked city, Little Dog cannot visit the beach, yet rivers in Vietnam and the U.S. serve as crucial settings across the decades. The Connecticut River is the site where Little Dog has "sex . . . for real" (*On Earth* 199) for the first time. When he returns home, Lan notices his damp hair and dries him up. Her comments link the river, Little Dog's site of pleasure, to the sea, where many refugees encountered horrors at the hands of pirates: "I won't tell anyone you been at sea, Little Dog. . . . This way, the pirate spirits won't follow you" (205). Although precarious ocean passages are not part of Little Dog's immediate family's past, the Vietnamese diaspora's trauma is familiar in their household. In the next text under consideration, these links are even more pervasive. Eric Nguyen's *Things We Lost to the Water*—the first and only discussed work set in the Deep South—features many more ambivalent connections and comparisons between the sea and other bodies of water.

Reconnection and Emplacement in Eric Nguyen's *Things We Lost to the Water* (2021)

Eric Nguyen received an MFA in creative writing from McNeese State University and is editor-in-chief of diaCRITICS, DVAN's online publication. His first novel, *Things We Lost to the Water*, was included in Barack Obama's popular summer reading list in 2021. Of the other works I analyze in this project, Nguyen's debut novel most closely resembles Aimee Phan's *The Reeduction of Cherry Truong*, due to its

structure as a generational family saga. Like Phan, Nguyen is a second-generation Vietnamese American writer born in the U.S. Similar to Phan's novel, Nguyen's accompanies several family members across decades and continents. His novel is structured into seventeen chapter-like sections, stretched across five parts. Some sections change focalization mid-chapter, but most focus on one of three main protagonists: Hương (first generation) and her sons Tuấn (1.5 generation) and Bình, who goes by Ben (second generation/born in the refugee camp). The first part is set in August 1979 in New Orleans, opening with the sound of a hurricane alarm that transports the Vietnamese characters back to their homeland during wartime. After this entry, the narrative takes a step back to 1978, when Hương and her sons had just arrived in Louisiana. From this point onwards, the storyline—although interrupted by several gaps and vivid memories from the past—progresses linearly until August 2005, when Hurricane Katrina hit the southern coast. The scene switches back and forth between New Orleans, Saigon, the Mekong Delta, and Paris. In this subsection, I will consider the novel's characters' emplacement strategies across the decades and follow their arcs of reconnection and reconciliation with people, the past, and their surroundings.

The title of the novel ties water to loss. Hương last saw—hence lost—her husband Công at the beach, where he decided not to enter the escape boat that was waiting for them. This was in 1978, when Hương was pregnant with Bình, and their son Tuấn was around five years old. Back when they lived in Saigon, Công taught French literature at university and was resolute about staying, despite the city's impending fall. He had already been displaced two decades prior; when he was still a child, his family moved to the Mekong Delta as refugees from the North. Due to this experience of forced mobility, Công longs to stay in one place rather than move again: "A refugee, he associated movement with loss. Since then, he had looked for a place to put down his roots—to stay" (*Things We Lost* 25). After the communist takeover, curfews indeed cause the small family of three to rest immobile until Công is asked "to report to a military training camp" (27). Despite being promised a two-week stay, he is eventually confined to the reeducation camp for five months. Return-

ing a changed man after enduring unspeakable horrors there, he is eager to leave Vietnam. For this plan, the family initially relocates to their rural hometown, taking on a journey that gets repeatedly interrupted by authorities. The military regulates mobility, with the power to halt buses and question passengers about their intended destinations. Nevertheless, they reach Mỹ Tho, a village in the Mekong Delta, where they start farming and sell some crops on the black market to set aside money for their escape plan.

After some months, they manage to save enough to secure three seats on a boat. On the night of their supposed escape, Công and Hương, who is carrying Tuấn, meet a man who leads them through the jungle, their clandestine mobility concealed by the dark and the trees. They hear gunshots and continue running, making it to the beach where several boats are waiting. Hương is energized and pulls Công towards one of the boats, but he suddenly “paused” and “stopped to gaze back into the jungle” (*Things We Lost* 32). He puts an end to his movements, and this hesitation separates him from the rest of his family. Without their husband and father, Hương and Tuấn depart by boat. In the months and years to come, Hương wonders how their separation came about—was it accidental, or did Công purposefully remain behind?

Although only a few years old at the time, Tuấn’s memories of water and the recognition that this trip is connected to the loss of his father stay with him: “He remembered his dad not being there and the waves and the sick feeling in his stomach like there was too much water in there. . . . And when he asked where they were going, she just shook her head as if ‘No’ was a place” (*Things We Lost* 39). Tuấn remembers their escape and the “cruelties of the sea” (24) as a physically uncomfortable transition that is marked by uncertainty, by not knowing where their hazardous mobility will lead them, other than away from the precarity of their homeland. After ten days at sea, their boat is found by a ship that brings them to a refugee camp in Singapore. Before entering a plane to get to New Orleans, “a place [Hương] never heard of before and still couldn’t place on a map” (24), they spend several months at the refugee camp, where they learn English and Bình is born.

Despite concluding that Công's decision to stay was intentional, Hương cannot accept their separation as final. In the beginning, she and her sons move from place to place, with Hương not wishing to settle; after all, she still imagines that Công will follow them to the U.S. and that the four of them will "move someplace else" (*Things We Lost* 35). When Hương, Tuấn, and Binh arrive in New Orleans in 1978, they first spend some weeks living in a church, their first temporary American home. While many of their fellow Vietnamese refugees were brought up Catholic and appreciate the church's assistance in facilitating their arrival, Hương remains wary of religious ideologies and "slept uneasily under the watch of the statue of Jesus on the cross" (12). Their second accommodation is a shotgun house, which they share with the Minhs, a refugee couple matched to them by their sponsor, a white Catholic priest. Due to the Minhs' tendency to drink and become violent when intoxicated, their cohabitation is short-lived. Hương, who has become "a silent mother" (35) driven by the need to protect her children, moves to a motel before she and her sons spend some more time living at the church. Ultimately, the family relocates to the Versailles Arms apartments, located in a liminal position on the city's eastern periphery. As a six-year-old, Tuấn notices that "everyone else was moving in as well" (34)—a Vietnamese enclave begins to form in New Orleans's Village de l'Est (Souther 211). After 1975, the Associated Catholic Charities (ACC) "relocated the Vietnamese to Versailles Arms because the area was not densely populated, and the complex qualified as low-income, section-eight housing" (M. Nguyen, "Like We Lost" 266). Whereas the other families "looked like they meant to stay" (*Things We Lost* 34), Hương does not unpack for weeks, still anticipating Công's return and perceiving their apartment as yet another temporary stopover. In other words, her separation from Công makes it impossible for her to focus on a more permanent form of arrival.

Even though Công remains unresponsive, Hương continues to send messages sharing their experiences of escape, stopover, and arrival. She sends him letters from the refugee camp also, ceasing finally when she discovers that the communist authorities are reading them and will punish Công for their escape. After that, Hương

conceals her communication by recording tape messages. She reasons that a cassette has a better chance of arriving in Công's hands unaltered: "Unlike the letter, its content wasn't obvious; instead, it was hidden, unless the tape was played. But people would play it only if it looked suspicious. If she were to label it 'Uncle Hổ's Teachings' or maybe just 'Communism,' they would not even bother looking any further into the matter" (*Things We Lost* 22). Hương hopes that her camouflaged messages will reach their intended destination without restrictions. However, Công never replies, and in the U.S., she continues to try to get in touch with letters and tape recordings. Some messages are returned, looking "damaged, packages ripped apart, as if inspected" (55). Eventually, she hears back from him—he writes that he cannot follow her, and that she should stop trying to contact him, and she obeys. Hương, feeling abandoned and "all alone in the world" (64), does not tell anyone, hiding all proof of communication with Công. She cannot stop writing, though: "sometimes she wrote to him in the way a schoolgirl might write in a diary; it calmed her, imagining talking to him, giving him her innermost thoughts" (110). Like Little Dog's epistolary narrative in Vuong's novel, Hương's letters will never reach their addressee, but writing has become a calming habit nonetheless, helping her to process her arrival and to preserve her emplacement in words. She decides to shield her sons from the truth. When they are eleven and four years old, she tells them after a rare visit to Grand Isle Beach that their father died, once again associating the seaside and water with loss.

It is only years later that Hương finally finds out what happened to Công after their last meeting. More than twenty years after her arrival in New Orleans, she returns to Vietnam for Công's funeral. Lan, her former husband's second wife, had contacted Hương and asked her to join the processions so that Công's spirit may rest. In Saigon, renamed Ho Chi Minh City, Lan explains why Công did not join Hương and Tuấn on the boat all these years ago. While Công never opened up about his time at the reeducation camp to his first wife, he shared some of his traumatic memories with Lan. As a professor of French literature, "the literature of the colonizers" (*Things We Lost* 223), he became a target and endured repeated torture through

waterboarding and simultaneous starvation. After five months, he found a way to escape on foot. From then on, he was “scared of the water”—on the night of their intended escape, he was not able to enter the boat because “at the edge of the water, when his foot hit the ocean, something came back to him. Memories” (224). Along with remembering water being poured over him, he recalled an episode from the six months he spent in Paris as a student. Unfamiliar with the city’s streets, he had asked an older French woman for directions, and instead of helping, she started screaming and spitting at him because she read him as Chinese, which she seemingly perceived as a threat. These two experiences tied water—either as a means for torture or as the ocean that acts as a link to a world where he has to face racist discrimination—to cruelty, immobilizing Công and preventing him from advancing to the boat. After that, the authorities captured him again; his inability to escape and cope with long-distance movement across bodies of water precipitated limitations on his everyday mobility. Upon his release, his micro-mobilities were monitored under house arrest, during which he composed the last letter that Hương had received.

After believing for years that he had not loved his family enough to move away, through Lan’s explanations Hương finally understands that “all that mattered to him . . . [was] that [they] escaped, that [they] survived” (*Things We Lost* 225). Finding out about the motive for Công’s immobility presents a form of closure, although hearing about his traumatic experiences at the reeducation camp and beyond makes Hương experience renewed grief for her deceased husband. Nevertheless, she takes solace in anticipating the funeral rites scheduled for the following day, where Công’s ashes will be cast into the water: “Công would ride the current into the Saigon River, then into the Nhà Bè. From there he would be led out to sea. At some point, she thought, he might even see the Gulf and Lake Pontchartrain and then perhaps the Bayou Versailles, where she’d lived all these years” (227). Despite water becoming a source of terror for Công following his torture, Hương envisions that in death, he will find reconciliation with water—and thus with his homeland, the country he had cherished before the communist consolidation

of power—while also remaining connected to his family regardless of their location in the world.

Hương does not travel to Vietnam alone to attend Công’s funeral—her older son Tuấn and partner Vinh accompany her. On this first return flight after two decades, Hương looks at the ocean with new eyes:

She opened her window shade and was surprised to see water. She wanted the water to be blue, like in the maps. In her memory, it was blue the first time she flew over, a fluorescent blue that was strange and wonderful and alive. On the boat ride, she remembered the water being black and threatening. The water was black now, too, but flat; it looked plain and boring. (*Things We Lost* 216)

Hương muses, full of hope, on how she had painted the ocean “a fluorescent blue” in her recollections of her first overseas flight to the U.S. The water’s varying colors throughout the escape stages correspond to her emotional states, appearing “black and threatening” as she remembers the boat journey. In both scenarios from her younger years, the ocean is vibrant and in motion. In this passage, however, Hương, as an older and more experienced woman, is surprised to notice that the water looks once again black but “plain and boring.” Hương’s abstracted memories have taken on a life of their own, and she is even “[d]isappointed” (216) to observe that the sea appears devoid of activity and movement. Unlike the narrator in lê’s novel, Hương rarely visits the beach in the U.S., and so the view from the plane’s window is a relatively rare sight. These circumstances do not mean that water is absent from her everyday American life. On the contrary, living in public housing by the bayou on the city’s eastern outskirts close to the marshlands, Hương and her sons are accustomed to the presence of water, even though they note that “[t]he water in New Orleans acted differently” (46). As a young boy, Tuấn ponders that while “on the shores of Vietnam and beyond, the water had been violent,” the bayou’s “water didn’t move; it stayed still, lazy” (46). In Vietnam and on their ten escape days out at sea, the family’s relationship with water was marked by transformation, by forcefully

moving from place to place. By contrast, after Hương accepted that Công would not join them and started unpacking and decorating, their Versailles apartment became a place for staying and a place of arrival, making it “almost feel like home, or some type of home” (38).

The presence of water, even if its motions are slow rather than dynamic, remains essential to Hương’s home-making efforts in the U.S. At one point, fearing that the bayou will soon become arid, she even contemplates moving somewhere else—after all, she reflects, “You can’t live in a place without water” (*Things We Lost* 166). However, as a convinced first-generation anti-communist (just like many of Reed-Danahay’s research partners), there is no home for Hương to return to in Vietnam. Instead, New Orleans has become her domain. In her 1990 chapter, Hương contemplates her reciprocal relationship with the city after staying there for more than ten years:

It was when they were strolling along the river walk, eating ice cream cones, that she realized this had become her city, the place she lived but also a place that lived in her. She’d picked up its vocabulary, developed a taste for its foods, grown accustomed to its weather—the heat, the humidity, even the minor hurricane here and there. She remembered how scared she was when she first arrived, how she clutched her belongings (and her sons) close to her, afraid that something might happen. Nowadays, she walked freely, unafraid. (113)

Over the years, Hương has found a home in New Orleans. As a manicurist,³⁰ like Little Dog’s mother, Hương “worked all day cleaning people’s hands, their feet, scrubbing calloused heels, inhaling fumes from nail polish removers” (257)—she is a hard worker, but

30 In fact, “Vietnamese immigrants (largely women) now make up almost half of all nail professionals” in the U.S., and in states with larger proportions of Vietnamese Americans, like California, this number even reaches 80% (Vu 162). The origins of this dominance are often traced back to American actress Tippi Hedren, who arranged for her manicurist to teach the craft to refugee women at a Vietnamese camp in Sacramento in 1975 (161). On the one hand, this reveals that refugee women are also involved in American capitalist frameworks. On the other, the job is not prestigious, the working conditions are often inadequate, and the pay is low, undermining the model minority stereotype.

the family does not live a financially viable American Dream, and they had “nothing growing up” (257). Hường’s job does not define her hybrid identity; instead, she expresses belonging through other mundane experiences, like the ones illustrated in the block quotation above. She feels emplaced in New Orleans, and has made it her own through micro-mobility routines and habits. Her place-making strategies bring to mind Ly Thuy Nguyen’s concept of ‘refugee futures’: “Refugee future, as such, is not ensured through capitalist success story or an inherited bloodline, but rather by enacting a sensory connection” (229). Engaging with the city through all of her senses, Hường has become accustomed to its tastes and learned from its sounds. When she had just arrived, she was constantly on alert, and her urban mobilities were uncomfortable and marked by anxiety. Over time, her fear of losing her belongings and her family again has lessened, and Hường has started to move “freely, unafraid.” By exploring the city as a stroller and walker, her sense of sedentari-ness has become more pronounced—Hường has experienced and created place through movement and sensory connection.

However, Hường’s ease in her adopted city is impacted by Hurricane Katrina which uproots her once again, at least temporarily. Her concerns about the bayou drying out are countered by the storm, which instead floods and ravages the whole neighborhood. Eric Nguyen’s novel ends in August 2005, but other sources document that Versailles, despite severe damage, quickly became operational again. Within a year, approximately 3,000 of the 5,000 Vietnamese American residents had returned (Tang 123), and a few years later, nearly ninety percent of the community had come back (Li 25). It seems likely that Hường, determined to defy renewed displacement, would have returned to her Versailles apartment, the place she had embraced as her own following her multiple arrivals within New Orleans.

In part five, which closes the novel, the storyline moves back and forth between the three protagonists as the “storm of the century” (*Things We Lost* 272) approaches and passes New Orleans. The characters’ hasty actions and overall restlessness as Hurricane Katrina looms nearer are mirrored in the section’s structure. Notably, the focal point shifts every few paragraphs or pages, and the narrative

is interspersed with succinct and hurried dialogue. Amidst the chaos and rain, Hương and Tuấn try and fail to find each other to evacuate together, while Bình follows the events of the “*désastre complet*” (285) via TV from Paris. In Hương’s narrative, temporalities overlap as time starts circling back to the past, connecting her present with the night she escaped Vietnam. This evokes Little Dog’s comments about how “history moves in a spiral” (*On Earth* 27), and how sounds like fireworks act as triggers for his grandmother, transporting her back to wartimes. Similarly, in response to the unfolding natural catastrophe and state of emergency in New Orleans, Hương experiences a sense of “traveling in a spiral” (28), instinctively shifting into survival mode. As traumatic memories resurface, they transcend simple visual recollections shadowing her thoughts; instead, they are embodied in the present, making it momentarily impossible for Hương to distinguish between past and present. The past guides her, and as she searches for her son, she breaks into a frantic run reminiscent of the night she escaped. Hearing her partner Vinh running behind her, she mistakes the sound of his approaching footsteps for the communist authorities who pursued her through the jungle nearly thirty years ago to thwart her escape by boat. At the same time, the present moment also changes her memories of the past: “She remembers running through the jungle, the rain—it must have been raining, too, that night” (*Things We Lost* 276). Her memory is pliable; although prior retellings of that night mention an impending storm, the rain is a novel detail introduced by Hương. Water is pervasive, drenching her memories from the present to the past, regardless of whether it actually rained.

Aware that they must seek shelter strategically rather than give in to panic, Vinh catches up with Hương, grasps her firmly, and “they crash together onto the flooding ground” (*Things We Lost* 277). This reorients Hương to the present, and they proceed to knock on doors, looking for a place to wait out the storm. Having crashed their car, they are restricted to movement on foot. However, with the streets submerged in water, pedestrian mobility has become a faster option, even for those who still have motor vehicles available to them (nearby, Tuấn and his girlfriend have likewise begun running

once “the water is up to their knees” (280), realizing their bike can no longer aid their progress). Vinh and Hương come across a house where a woman chose to stay instead of evacuating with her two children. Together, they endure a sleepless night in the attic, which is the safest option in case the house floods. As the storm rages outside, their movements are restricted, and all they can do is wait and pace around the room. The following morning, after a loud explosion, the rising water breaches the house, prompting them to seek refuge on the roof. Up there, their city has become almost unrecognizable; “New Orleans is drowning” (284), and “with all the water, [Hương] can’t tell where anything is anymore” (288). Amid this atmosphere of uncertainty and disorientation, they watch “all the water, all brown, all flowing like they’re in a river, but instead of rocks, there are cars and rooftops” (283)—things lost to the water, just like their physical house and home, given the inevitable destruction of Versailles.

For most of them, anxiety turns into hurried excitement as they finally see helicopters initiating their search and evacuation. While the other temporary roof residents “yell and wave their arms for help,” Hương remains pensive and “doesn’t move” (*Things We Lost* 286), even after one of the helicopters has found them and tells them to climb into a basket to be lifted to safety. Vinh repeatedly tells her to leave, and Hương manages to stand up just in time. Once more, timelines begin to intertwine; “the roof fades and the trees below fade, too, the same way the shore shrank from view that night so long ago” (288). As she sways in the air, she is dragged back to the morning after the first night on the boat. The text briefly indicates that “[s]he remembers” (288) and switches to the past tense, yet in the following lines, it seems as if Hương does not just *think* of the boat but actively relives the moment. As the sun rose, she stopped “staring out the back of the boat” (288) where she imagined Công and her past in Vietnam, and “turned around toward the front of the boat . . . facing east” (289). This passage does not demand intricate decoding; on the boat, when confronted with the necessity to persevere, Hương chose not to dwell on the past and instead directed her gaze towards the future. Regardless of its associations with loss, she opted to accept water: “The water, she realized, wasn’t that bad. The

waves, you got used to them. With time” (289). From one moment to the next, separated only by a line on the very last page of the novel, the narrative returns to the present tense, and Hương is back in August 2005 in New Orleans. By remembering her resilience when she left her homeland as a young woman, Hương is woken from her trance-like state: “She knows exactly where she is now. These weathered buildings. These streets. These waters. All these years” (289). Despite the similarities and the prospect of renewed displacement, these insights instill in her a renewed confidence in navigating her way once more in the place she arrived all those years ago, in the place that she has claimed as “her city” (289). This time, she does not just decide to focus on the future but simultaneously asserts that she has found stability in the U.S., a steadiness that she did not know thirty years earlier on the boat.

Things We Lost to the Water ends with two words in Vietnamese. As Vinh lifts Hương into the basket, her phone rings, and she receives her son Bình’s call with “Mẹ đây”³¹ (289). This is a common motherly way of answering the phone in Vietnamese that literally translates to “Mother here” (T. Nguyen). “Mẹ đây” follows only a few lines after Hương draws new hope from recognizing that the random place of arrival has become her own; in that way, as the novel’s final word, “đây”/“here” affirms her survival amidst destruction³² and reinforces her emplacement, her active and embodied belonging to New Orleans. However, countering the Nguyenian critique

31 More than any other of the analyzed novels and short stories, *Things We Lost to the Water* features many terms, exclamations, and sentences in Vietnamese. The words appear with diacritical marks but remain otherwise unaltered. In an interview, Nguyen explains this typographical choice: “It was M. Evelina Galang [second-generation Filipina American writer] who told me to never italicize my Vietnamese words, to never make them seem other/ed. People have the context after all, and there is Google if they want to confirm their suspicions.” As a suspicious person who has Googled each and every Vietnamese word in the novel, I agree with this statement, although I would add that this process of translation has helped me gain more nuance as a non-Vietnamese speaker. Interestingly, the French phrases are italicized throughout the novel, rendering Paris typographically more foreign than any other of the three main settings.

32 Hurricane Katrina took 1,392 lives and the flooding resulted in the destruction of thousands of homes and businesses across entire neighborhoods within the New Orleans metropolitan area (Knabb et al. 11–12).

of immigrant sagas' Hollywood endings, Hương's place-making in the U.S. does not have to be equaled with "accentuat[ing] how AMERICA™, for all its flaws and challenges, is THE GREATEST COUNTRY ON EARTH" (V. T. Nguyen, *A Man of Two Faces* 159)—Hương is not "here" but "đây," solidifying her emplacement as a hybrid character.

Furthermore, on the plot level, Hương's phone call with Bình hints at reconciliation, after a relationship that has long been turbulent. Just like his mother, Bình—whom I will refer to as Ben from here on, adopting the Americanized version of his name that he has embraced as his own—vows in the novel's final section to cultivate a forward-looking stance, "to think about the future and what he would do now" (*Things We Lost* 270). Previously, the past and his inability to comprehend it shaped his actions and hindered the pursuit of his personal trajectories. Five years before, he had moved to Paris, initially convinced that he would mold his own path there:

His hero of a father sacrificed his life under Communist bullets while his mother played reverse Penelope, cast away from her homeland waiting for her Odysseus until the news of his death arrives and she is transformed into a tragic widow who weaved fables for her children (because that was what his life was—a fable, a series of twisted truths, outright lies). His immigration to Paris was a story made of flesh and bones written by himself, and no matter how horrible things turned out, he was the one who wrote it. That was the important part—to be the writer of his own story. (249)

Ben links his parents' story to the *Odyssey*, establishing a connection between the Vietnamese American mass exodus of the 20th century and the Greek classic of travel literature. Unlike Hương, who has found herself in New Orleans, Ben, feeling "like a foreigner" (249), has never truly experienced belonging there. As a queer Vietnamese American who is not proficient in his parents' first language, he is Othered on different levels and constantly in-between, finding himself in a liminal position rather than ever arriving anywhere. He has no recollections of Vietnam and their escape, and there is no grandmother figure such as in Vuong's novel to fill the gaps. Ben even

avoids approaching Hương, feeling betrayed by her deceit regarding his father's death.

Because of this varied inaccessibility, Ben cannot endorse a hybrid Vietnamese American refugee identity and decides to travel to another continent instead. Nevertheless, he soon recognizes that his decision was not unconstrained by external forces and that he chose Paris "to know more about his father, a French literature professor, to connect with him in some deep way" (*Things We Lost* 257), not knowing that Công had actually disliked the city when he was there as a young man. However, the life he has built with his partner Michel over the past few years has become tedious for Ben, catalyzing his newly-found determination to change. The main objective of the phone call to his mother is presumably to check on her after the storm, but the Paris passages in part five also hint at the chance for reconciliation and a fresh start between them.

In the week preceding Hurricane Katrina's arrival in New Orleans on the other side of the Atlantic, Ben dreams repeatedly of water and drowning. His nightmares reveal that, although only Hương and Tuấn retain active memories of their boat escape, Ben has nevertheless inherited their trauma, despite having been in his mother's womb during the hazardous passage. In one of the dreams, he watches as a member of the boat community tosses one of the boys overboard as an ostensible sacrifice. The boy's mother seemingly descends after him into the darkness of the water, and Hương covers Tuấn's eyes. Is this a memory of Hương or Tuấn that Ben has been told about or overheard? Is it the story of another refugee? Or is it just a dream, a mere fabrication of Ben's mind attempting to piece together fragmented elements that elude him in waking moments? Although Hương remembers that they ran out of food after only a few days at sea and "all the babies, including her son, were crying and screaming of thirst" (*Things We Lost* 23), neither Hương's nor Tuấn's narratives feature the gruesome episode of getting rid of another mouth to feed. Either way, Ben has been impacted by transgenerational trauma—he has internalized the collective memory of the boat escape, even though he cannot correctly assemble the disjointed pieces.

As a teenager who was afraid to learn how to swim, Ben did not connect his fear of drowning to his family's past at that point. He makes these associations when he is in his later twenties, in the boat dreams in the novel's last section, establishing that "collective memory possesses a sort of latency" (Fassin and Rechtman 16). Furthermore, in another nightmare, he visits his mother's Versailles apartment that he had moved out of long ago. Ben encounters his childhood home in a flooded state, full of the bayou's brown water. He hears screaming but cannot locate its source, wading through the rooms with the water up to his waist. Before finally waking up on the park bench in Paris where he had fallen asleep, he slips and starts drowning. His unconscious thoughts foresee the disaster; Ben imagines this dreamed-up account of what the place might look like underwater before he hears of Hurricane Katrina: the TV news informs him only later that day when returns to his apartment. The dream ties water yet again to loss, but Ben is not given the words to talk about it: "He wants to scream—he feels like he needs to scream—but he can't" (*Things We Lost* 278). In his dream, he cannot find his voice, reflecting his struggle with the vocabulary needed to articulate his family's refugee experiences as a second-generation individual. The novel does not clarify if he will bridge this gap by reconnecting with his mother, but the ending reveals that they do manage to establish some form of contact.

In this way, despite the gaps and partial open-endedness, *Things We Lost to the Water* ends with more closure than most of the other examined works. In Ben's case, many uncertainties persist, but Huong has found resolution in at least two aspects, presenting water as a means of reconciliation rather than focusing on its destructive nature. First, she uncovers Công's motives for immobility and finds comfort in knowing his ashes will be cast into the water, reconnecting him with his family. Second, despite facing another crisis that results in temporary displacement, she finds a strengthened sense of belonging in New Orleans, realizing that "water . . . wasn't that bad" (*Things We Lost* 289) and that, through her daily emplacement practices including sensory micro-mobilities, she has slowly grown accustomed to and begun to enjoy her surroundings. Ben is still in

the process of arriving, trying “to be the writer of his own story” (249)—refugeehood is a process rather than an event or a static condition—while his mother’s arrival, though just as dynamic, is more confident.

Focusing on reconciliation and reconnection, Hương’s more optimistic reframing of water still does not deny its role as an ambivalent actor—the ocean is constructed as a liminal space, a threshold where nothing is fixed. Commenting on the equivocal symbolism of water present in many Vietnamese American refugee narratives, Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt observes that “the ocean frequently serves as both a route of escape as well as the root of loss” (290). On the one hand, water reminds refugee characters of sites of conflict and traumatic escape. On the other hand, it is what makes escape possible, and may function as a connector across continents. Reflecting the multiple meanings of the Vietnamese word nước, water serves as a physical but also a metaphorical intersection between Vietnamese refugees arriving on American shores and their ancestral homeland in *Things We Lost to the Water*. This parallels the other two novels examined in this chapter, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* and *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*. In contrast to lê’s and Vuong’s narratives, though, water is not as closely mirrored in terms of style in Eric Nguyen’s novel; although reemerging memories occasionally introduce overlapping timelines, the novel’s form is less fluid and flexible—there is arguably more telling than showing, particularly in comparison with the other two works.

As refugee storytellers, then, the characters in *Things We Lost to the Water* are quite different from the narrators in *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* and *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*. In Nguyen’s saga, the narrative advances more or less progressively from decade to decade, mainly by way of internal focalization through one of the three protagonists, who rotate chapter by chapter. Due to its absence of self-referentiality and metatextuality, Nguyen’s novel exhibits less of the ambiguity that is prominent in Vuong’s work, and easier access and proximity to its characters. Readers get a distinct insight into Hương’s, Tuấn’s, and Ben’s feelings, and their actions are examined from different viewpoints, delivering a more straightfor-

ward picture of their situations across the decades. This does not mean there are no gaps or uncertainties in Nguyen's novel, but there is not as much fragmentation. However, the vulnerability of lê's and Vuong's I-narrators—despite their potential unreliability and the fractured quality of their narratives—provides an intimacy that is hard for third-person narration to match.

In any case, the three novels avoid spectacularization, instead empathically foregrounding interiority and problematizing the dynamic relationships between individuals and the community. My analysis in this chapter has been “looking for the hidden political forces within the site of intimate domestic and familial interaction” (CRSC 23), an approach resemblant of the mode of analysis that the Critical Refugee Studies Collective terms ‘Feminist Refugee Epistemology’ (FRE). The stories “change, embellish, and preserve” (*On Earth* 85) refugee bodies of different generations, demonstrating their resilience and active place-making even in the face of aggravated new beginnings or repeated displacement. To use Vinh Nguyen's words: “The presence of a story is, crucially, the presence of life. A story indicates resilience because there is someone there to tell it, someone who believes that the story should have a life in the world” (81). Within the three novels, characters keep telling stories to the next generation(s) and (re)producing collective memory rather than forgetting the past. Furthermore, the novels themselves supply new types of countermemorial Vietnamese American refugee storytelling. Along with private forms of storytelling, refugees manifest their emplacement in the U.S. through micro-mobility practices like exploring their surroundings on foot, and hence participating in public domains. Nevertheless, at the core of the three narratives is the family, and emplacement also occurs in the private spaces of their new homes (even if they only feel like “some type of home” (*Things We Lost* 38) in the start).

Chapter Four: Returns

Despite their traumata and antagonistic stance towards the communist politics of today's Socialist Republic of Vietnam, many first- and 1.5-generation Vietnamese Americans wish to return to the now-lost Republic of Vietnam where they used to live. Regarding refugees of the first generation, Deboarah Reed-Danahay observes that many aspire to return for burial (606), while their children seek to return as cosmopolitan subjects (603) and/or to reconnect with their family's past (613). Although connecting the notion of home to materiality is not only misleading but may also be problematic, many refugees who actively remember their homeland link their memories of Vietnam to the houses they grew up in. In one of Andrew Lam's short stories, "Sister" (2013), the protagonist Ivory's first association with her homeland includes "a little villa with tamarind trees in the garden" (121). However, her happy recollections are usually overshadowed by the memory of her mother drowning at sea during their escape. In contrast, her little brother Jaden's memories of flight are incomplete, and instead, he distantly and readily remembers—or imagines—everything from before they left by boat: "Home as in over there—cross the Pacific, yonder and long ago, home once-upon-a-time home. . . . [T]amarind trees, guavas, kite festivals, moon cakes, lanterns, sweet rice with coconut, monsoon rain. Home-home" (113). These nostalgic fantasies, full of sensory experiences that recall tastes, excitement, and a sheltered childhood, dominate his memories. At the same time, Jaden's idea of home is fairytale-like ("once-upon-a-time home"), constructing an idealized vision of the "yonder and long ago" past that would be hard to retain if he were to return in person.

If he wanted to, though, Jaden could actually board a plane and travel to Vietnam—it seems like he could afford a ticket and the short story takes place after the trade embargo was lifted in 1994, permitting many to return, at least as tourists. Nevertheless, even though physical travel is possible in the present day, time travel remains within the realm of imagination, and today's Vietnam is no

longer the homeland refugees remember. Concerning this impossibility, Lam quotes another returnee in one of his non-fiction volumes: "It is easy now to return, but impossible to go home" ("Viet Kieu" 115). Still, many literary Vietnamese American (ex-)refugees desire to return and express a specific wish to see their former houses, if they are still standing, to regain embodied access to their past. In many cases, however, this leads to disappointment. For instance, one of Viet Thanh Nguyen's short story characters, Mrs. Khanh, remembers a frustrating trip back to Saigon with her husband. Initially, they struggle to find their old house again because all the street names have changed. When they finally arrive, they are shocked to discover the dilapidated state of their prior home. Through the taxi's windows—they prefer to remain unnoticed to "avoid the revolutionary cadres from the north who had moved in after the Communist takeover" ("I'd Love You to Want Me" 117)—the Khans, now merely observers in their once-familiar neighborhood, "were nearly overwhelmed by sadness and rage, fuming as they wondered who these strangers were who had taken such poor care of their house" (117–8). The image of their deteriorating house corroborates what they already knew: their home is a "lost home" (118), confined to the past, and it lives on only in their imagination.

Others, like the older brother in Eric Nguyen's novel discussed in the previous chapter, are not even able to find their old home. When he returns for his father's funeral together with his mother and her partner Vinh, Tuấn's goal is to find their former residence in Vietnam's most populous city. Ever since he knew that he would return, he has had dreams in which "he walked through the maze of Saigon" (*Things We Lost* 228) without properly arriving anywhere, feeling like a stranger in the city of his early childhood. Once he is finally there again physically and locates the correct renamed street, he is confused to find a row of stores, rather than the block of houses that he remembers. A current resident of the neighborhood tells him that his childhood home had been demolished years ago. Tuấn is disappointed to experience what his dreams forbade: "It was exactly like his dream—cruelly, a dream come true. . . . It was all clear and he was

still lost" (230). His blurry memories of home are fading and there is no tangible house that can stabilize his feeling of disorientation.

Returnees like Tuấn not only sense their own unbelonging; this is also how they are perceived by those Vietnamese who stayed. Lam's previously quoted essay "Viet Kieu" takes its title from the term 'Việt kiều,' used to refer to the Vietnamese of the diaspora. It translates to "Vietnamese sojourner" (Hoang 121), indicating the temporariness of their return. In his text, Lam explores encounters with various members of the Vietnamese diaspora and how those who stayed view the returnees. In Lam's interpretation, the "archetypal Viet Kieu . . . returned a jet-setting cosmopolitan" (120). Lam, who is perceived as a Vietnamese living outside Vietnam because of his "Viet Kieu face" and "Americanized Vietnamese accent," notes how "[i]n Vietnam [his] face and body take on mythological proportions" (128). He is seen as "an icon against hopelessness" (129), more of a symbol than a person. In the Vietnamese American context, "The Viet Kieu, in short, is the United States incarnate, the embodiment of the American Dream" (Wang 179). The promises of the American Dream, combined with assumptions related to the Asian American model minority stereotype, have infiltrated the Vietnamese image of the U.S., fostering the country's contemporary desire for "glamour, . . . cosmopolitan and borderless life" (Lam, "Viet Kieu" 130) epitomized by the Othered Việt kiều body.

The previous chapters' analysis reveals how Vietnamese American refugee literature debunks both the idea of the American Dream and of the model minority as myths. Even so, people like Tuấn, who grew up in public housing, might still be perceived as privileged Việt kiều by those who stayed in Vietnam. Moreover, some depicted Vietnamese American characters have benefited from social mobility and uncritically relish the cosmopolitan lifestyle their socioeconomic status provides, as I will discuss in the following close readings of short stories by Viet Thanh Nguyen and Aimee Phan.³³

³³ Some parts of the following analysis parallel a shorter version of the juxtaposition of the two short stories that I provide in another essay: discussing the ambivalences of the notion of 'home,' I consider the two short stories as well as others by Nguyen and Phan

Nguyen's and Phan's 1.5-generation characters, whose memories of Vietnam and their escape are blurry at best, return to Vietnam in the hope of finding answers about their past, but end up leaving with further questions about their diasporic, hybrid refugee identities. Both stories demonstrate the significance of photographs in the refugee context, as mementos of the past or new memories in the making. Furthermore, in accordance with the "recognition that writing from a minoritarian perspective should involve an author presenting to the reader a plurality of voices that often contradict each other in their goals, desires, and methods" (August, *The Refugee Aesthetic* 105), Nguyen's focalizer reflects the viewpoint of someone who did not move, yet longs for transnational mobility.

While the return of Vietnamese from the diaspora to Vietnam has historically unique features, the theme of return is prominent in literary works from different time periods and geographical contexts. Many a hero in the Western canon has embarked on a testing journey to return back home with improved understandings about the self and the world. Spotlighting American literature about return, Maria Antònia Oliver-Rotger chronicles American return narratives written in the 19th century and earlier, in which mobile subjects return to what is today called the United States to affirm the American nation: "In this context, returning home may be seen as a kind of 'rebirth' of the self, and as a renewal of his national identity based upon the experience, growth, and wisdom acquired after a journey into the unknown" (2). In contrast, American return narratives of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by displaced authors center another home to return to outside the United States.³⁴ For example,

in "Of Ghosts, Gifts, and Globetrotters: Tracing Homes and Homelands in Vietnamese American Refugee Short Stories," which appeared in *Perspectives of Homelessness* (2022, edited by Anna Flügge and Giorgia Tommasi).

³⁴ Oliver-Rotger arguably neglects Indigenous voices in her overview of American literature of return. An alternative genealogy of return writing might include important works like N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) or Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977). These two novels are typically considered to be part of what Kenneth Lincoln termed the "Native American Renaissance" and center on protagonists who served in World War II and physically return to their reservations, where they undergo a spiritual reconnection with their culture.

Asian American literature of return has been a transpacific tradition at least since 1909 (Chu 3). Earlier texts of this type “show a tendency to regret the alienating forces of modern America and contrast them with nostalgic memories of home” (Oliver-Rotger 2). Yet, the characters’ yearning for return can rarely be fulfilled, as international travel has only become widespread and feasible in the last few decades. Only in a globalized world has physical travel to their (family’s) homelands become increasingly attainable for migrants, refugees, descendants of enslaved ancestors, and exiles. The question of belonging, however, is more complex; literary examples highlight the dilemma of “characters that can neither adjust to the home culture nor fully embrace the values of the American people as a final solution” (Oliver-Rotger 3), emphasizing the ambivalences of hybridity and liminality of displaced subjectivities. Oliver-Rotger contends that in this more recent body of literature, “return is not definitive, but . . . it is a sort of transitional stage that brings knowledge” (3). The subsequent two subchapters likewise frame Vietnamese American return as another temporary stage in the mobile existence of refugees, providing knowledge on some matters while introducing more complex questions in others.

Rifts Between Those Who Stayed and Those Who Left in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s “Fatherland” (2017)

After the success of *The Sympathizer*, Viet Thanh Nguyen published a collection of short stories, *The Refugees* (2017). Although published after his first novel, the author had been working on the short story collection for around seventeen years (V. T. Nguyen, “In Praise Of”). Both the American (Grove Press) and the European (Corsair) covers for *The Refugees* proudly suffix the author’s name with the designation “Winner of the Pulitzer Prize,” potentially enhancing the marketability of the work. The title of the collection must be seen in connection with Nguyen’s plea to reclaim the term ‘refugee.’ This aim is made more evident in the book’s first U.S. edition, where the critical

essay “On Being a Refugee, an American—and a Human Being” (originally published in the *Financial Times* in 2017) is included as part of the book after the final short story. The essay discusses American identity and exhibits certain overlaps with the previously-quoted introduction of *The Displaced*.

Just like the other short story collections discussed in this book, Nguyen’s anthology features a diverse range of characters from different backgrounds. Unusual for the author, one of the short stories, “War Years,” contains autobiographical elements. While this short story was censored in the Vietnamese version of the collection due to one of the character’s overt anti-communism (*A Man of Two Faces* 284), it was part of the most recent edition of the Norton Anthology of American Literature, canonizing Vietnamese American literature for students of American literature across the globe. In this section, I will focus on “Fatherland,” the eighth and final short story centering on return. This analysis enables me to return to and problematize the discussions on kinetic hierarchies from Chapter One, where I argue that contemporary Vietnamese American refugee novels and short stories expose classed politics of mobility in order to complicate simplified interpretations of displaced people’s im/mobility. In the present subchapter, I take up the notion of classed politics of mobility in the context of return tourism, an approach that highlights critical differences between those who stayed and those who left: the returning Vietnamese American refugee in “Fatherland” once left by boat as part of a kinetic underclass, but now embodies the glamorous transnational mobility of a kinetic elite, while the Vietnamese characters have never experienced long-distance mobility and see themselves controlled by the power of global mass tourism in their everyday (micro-)mobility within the country they never left.

The name of this returnee is Vivien, who comes back to Vietnam as a tourist after twenty-seven years of absence. Her return story is marked by disillusion and crushed notions of the ancestral homeland and the American Dream. Whereas Vivien managed to flee with her two brothers and her mother “on a perilous trip by boat” (“Fatherland” 187), her father was sent to a labor camp after the war and built a new family with his former mistress upon his

release. The story is told from the perspective of Phuong, the eldest daughter of the father's second family. The father had named the children in his second family after the ones from his first, whom he had lost to America—"a most peculiar thing to do" (181). Phuong's namesake is Vivien, who has since chosen to adopt an American name and has played an important role in her upbringing despite her physical absence: "[Their father] often compared Phuong with her absent sister, which had cultivated in Phuong a sense of yearning for Vivien but also some undeniable jealousy" (187). Supplied with information from the first wife's correspondence, Phuong excitedly awaits the arrival of the half-sister she had admired and envied from afar for years. As "[e]vidence of their good fortune" (181), Vivien's mother has diligently chronicled her children's accomplishments and enclosed photographs with the letters, mementos traveling across the globe that have stimulated the non-moving Vietnamese family's transnational imaginations. Proud of his first "set of children" (181), supposedly living the American Dream as prosperous Việt kiều, Phuong's father "laminated each of the photographs to protect them from humidity and fingerprints, keeping them neatly stacked on a side table by the couch in the living room" (182). The living room, which forms the core of the family's home, becomes the residing place for the photographs, which are shielded from external influences by a plastic coating. Like the photograph of his grandparents that "hovered over" (*On Earth* 46) Vuong's Little Dog throughout his childhood, Phuong grows up in a household under the gaze of numerous pictures.

These two examples—Phuong growing up in Saigon with pictures of the "good life" in America, and Little Dog growing up in Hartford with the constant presence of the photograph of his ancestors' wedding in Vietnam—showcase how material culture influences the everyday imagination of those who stayed and those who left. In today's (social) media culture, where access to the world seems to be available at arm's length through the smartphone, this is hardly news. Scholars of globalization have noted these trends at least ever since the late 1990s; for instance, Arjun Appadurai argues in his important work on imagination as a social practice that "the

imagination in the postelectronic world plays a newly significant role . . . and has now become a part of the quotidian mental work,” relying on both people and images on the move, motion *and* meditation (5). These discussions on social imaginaries have led to further conceptualizations of the notions of ‘diasporic imagination’ and ‘transnational imagination.’ The former term is more often invoked to refer to the imaginations of those who have left, while the latter is used more flexibly.³⁵ Zhu Hua and Li Wei define the diasporic imagination as “a conscious, self-reflexive and creative thinking about the potentialities of one’s dislocated situatedness” that “comes out of one’s awareness of the differences between the place of origin and the place of presence” (107). In this way, the diasporic imagination of mobile people is directed toward their supposed homeland. However, the imaginations of those who have never traveled outside of their country of birth can also transcend borders. In these cases, transnational imagination as a broader concept may be more appropriate: “transnational imagination develops not only within those who are mobile, flexible and deterritorialized but, perhaps more poignantly, within those who cannot, will not, and have not travelled” (Sun 11). Working with this approach, the formation of transnational imaginations can be observed in different contexts: it accounts for practices like Little Dog’s storytelling, performed with his grandmother and accompanied by photographs, that transports him to Vietnam, while also proving useful for thinking about Phuong’s longing to begin a life in America, aspirations catalyzed by border-crossing letters and images.

Meanwhile, at the hostess job she has had since college graduation two years prior, Phuong is confronted with an additional outside gaze, observed by the hungry eyes of tourists who watch “her slim

35 While ‘diasporic’/‘diaspora’ and ‘transnational’/‘transnationalism’ are sometimes used interchangeably “to describe the ways in which globalization challenges social organization and identity construction” (Quayson and Daswani 7), some definitions prefer to distinguish between the terms. In Thomas Faist’s words, “diaspora has been often used to denote religious or national groups living outside an (imagined) homeland, whereas transnationalism is often used both more narrowly—to refer to migrants’ durable ties across countries—and, more widely, to capture not only communities, but all sorts of social formations, such as transnationally active networks, groups and organisations” (9).

and petite body sheathed in a golden, formfitting *ao dai* (“Fatherland” 185) and her “black and silky” (186) hair. They objectify her on a daily basis, arguably only interested in her exterior and unaware of her degree in biology. Occasionally, some of them even “ask to photograph her” (185–6), thereby Orientalizing her not only in the fleeting moment but also seeking to capture and preserve the memory of her body across time and space. Phuong’s accommodating performance of presumed authenticity, presenting herself in Vietnamese national clothing, concurs with Western stereotypes and racial fetishization of Asian women as docile and sexually desirable (see, for example, Bow). For tourists in Southeast Asia, “[t]he combination of gender and ethnic subordination . . . has colluded to construct young Asian women as objects of a tourist/sexual gaze for male visitors from other societies” (Urry and Larsen 70). Dependent on her job, with her employer having hinted that non-compliance could jeopardize her position, Phuong must tolerate their gaze.

Uncritical tourism is also questioned in regard to her father’s job; he works as a tour guide and “emerges as another representative character embodying the forgotten South Vietnamese, paradoxically now serving the very government that was once considered the enemy” (Zhu 90). The tourists are mostly American and “knew only one thing about this country, the war” (“Fatherland” 193), reproducing the often-criticized fact that U.S. representations construct Vietnam as a war rather than a country. During Vivien’s return visit, their father asks his two daughters to accompany him on one of his trips to the Cui Chi tunnels, an underground complex that the communist forces used to attack in secret, located on the rural outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City. Like Phuong, her father lets tourists take pictures of him in absurd contexts. He poses as if he were a soldier of the Viet Cong (VC), although they had actually been his enemies during the war. While Phuong’s female Asian body is subject to hypersexualization, her father uses his male Asian body to stage a performance that presents him as dangerous and barbaric, thereby serving the ‘yellow peril’ trope. Typically read as the antithesis of the model minority stereotype, the yellow peril image—popular since the late 19th century (Tchen 12) and still raised today in

Sinophobic discourses—establishes “Asian bodies as a threat to the health and civilization of white Americans” (Yoo 121) and other Westerners. Phuong assumes that the uninformed people in the group, “[f]oreigners that they were, . . . could not tell the difference between a Communist and a man the Communists had exiled to a New Economic Zone” (“Fatherland” 193).³⁶ Despite Phuong’s resentment of the situation, she assures her sister that their father’s performance is “only an act” (193). Although Vivien is a tourist herself and seems quite American in many ways, she still came to the U.S. as a Vietnamese refugee and is aware of the historical contexts that led to her displacement; accordingly, she remains frustrated by the other tourists’ perfunctory memory-taking.

In other respects, Vivien seems indistinguishable from other visitors, packing generic souvenirs like “T-shirts emblazoned with Ho Chi Minh’s avuncular face” (“Fatherland” 194) or dining at a restaurant with “tourist prices” (184) frequented mostly by white travelers. While her long-distance flight twenty-seven years ago produced an instance of forced mobility, her transpacific movements today are presented as playful and self-determined. In contrast, classed politics of mobility are impeding Phuong’s free movement, and she feels trapped in Vietnam. She dreams of the independent lifestyle of traveling embodied by her sister, and admires Vivien’s transnational mobility: “I want to be like you. . . . I want to travel anywhere I want, anytime I want” (200). Phuong is also impressed by Vivien’s distinctively non-native appearance: even after some time, she “would appear no more of a native than on the day she arrived” (183) and “was easily mistaken for a Korean businessman’s frazzled wife or a

36 In Nguyen’s novel *The Sympathizer*, this inability of many non-Vietnamese people to distinguish between different Vietnamese groups is satirized in the scenes unfolding at the movie set in the Philippines, where the narrator serves as an advisor. He recruits South Vietnamese refugees living at a Filipino refugee camp, who get paid to play extras. Some of them stand in as VC soldiers and eventually get credited as “VC RAPIST #1, VC RAPIST #2, VC RAPIST #3, and VC RAPIST #4” (374). Preparing for a torture scene, the American director tells them to “have fun, be [themselves], and just act natural!” (215), ignorant of the fact that “it’s not natural to act like a VC” (216) for the four South Vietnamese veterans.

wearry Japanese tourist" (183). In Phuong's opinion, these identities are desirable, alluding to her own cosmopolitan aspirations.

Vivien has no memories of her former home, and her cultural identity remains unquestioned by what she sees in Vietnam; instead, she experiences her trip like a foreigner and tourist. Except for her appreciation of the local cuisine, she seems disconnected from her birthplace, and towards the end of her two-week stay, she starts missing her car, a quintessential American symbol. Hybrid refugee identities are dynamic, and affiliations may change over time; at this point in the story, however, Vivien explores liminal diasporic experiences through her jet-set lifestyle, but less in terms of belonging, as she remains culturally anchored in the United States. Whereas family is usually a crucial component of individuals' quest for belonging, Vivien feels alienated from her father, which suggests that Vietnam can neither become her home- nor her fatherland: "He remembers me. I don't remember him. Can you love someone you don't remember?" ("Fatherland" 200). Vivien's loss of memory makes it impossible for her to gain a true attachment to Vietnam, her father, and her extended Vietnamese family.

Instead, the splendid stories she fashions about her life in her Chicago home imply that she has found her place in the U.S. However, the day before her departure—which "would divide the world once more into those who stayed and those who left" ("Fatherland" 200)—Vivien avows that her American Dream has only been a deception. When Phuong confesses that she wishes to be a doctor like her older sister and asks for her sponsorship, Vivien can no longer sustain the lie and admits that she is, in fact, an unemployed receptionist, fired after an affair with her married boss. Consumed with thoughts about her own financial predicament, she is not interested in meeting her sister again. In reality, her life is far from the glamorous one she pretends to live, since she dreads having to pay off her credit card and student loan debts (203). Phuong's hopes are shattered as she realizes that "Vivien was never going to return" (204) to Vietnam, the return remaining a singular event rather than something to be repeated. When Vivien flies back to her adopted homeland, both she and Phuong suffer from a feeling of disillusionment; Vivien

had wished that she would grow to love her father upon returning, while Phuong is devastated by her sister's hypocrisy. Vivien's story of return, facilitated by the lack of traumatizing memories, is thus extremely different from that of refugees who remember their birthplace. Nevertheless, her wish to reconcile with her father reveals that she, too, feels a lingering sense of loss after escaping Vietnam—one for which she has found no resolution.

Interestingly, Vivien and Phuong's conversation takes place at a fantastical, exciting site of mobility and reverie—the amusement park. Theme parks, many of which are “importing places and stimulating imaginative travel elsewhere” (Urry and Larsen 125), offer escapism and spectacle “to challenge everyday life” (Lukas 7). In an unusual moment of togetherness, the two sisters find themselves alone in a cabin of the Ferris wheel. Below them, the lake at the park's center and the water slides refer back to the relevance of water as a prevalent and ambivalent feature in Vietnamese American refugee literature, as previously demonstrated in Chapter Three. The attraction's structure remains in place, but its cabins are constantly moving, repeating their spinning motions all day without variation and following a “measured pace” (“Fatherland” 203). Although their ride's mobility is not as fast and exhilarating as that of the nearby rollercoaster, the conversation between Phuong and Vivien soon becomes just as tumultuous. Before they arrive back to the platform, Vivien categorically refuses Phuong's request for sponsorship: “When I return, I'm putting my life back together. I've got to pay off four credit cards and my student loans and hope my house won't be taken from me” (203). Vivien returned to Vietnam because she had just been fired and experienced a breakup—her transnational mobility was triggered by a wish for a change of scenery, and seeing her family was only secondary to her endeavor of moving on. After the unsuccessful effort to reconnect with her father, her priority has shifted to returning to the U.S.

As Phuong and Vivien leave the cabin, “their father was waiting, disposable camera held to his eye” (“Fatherland” 203), and takes a picture in which “Vivien was visible in the doorway, eyes moist and makeup smudged, but by an accident of timing or composition

Phuong herself could not be seen" (203). Through the use of the disposable camera gifted to them by Vivien's mother, Phuong's existence is symbolically erased from the event at the precise moment she realizes that Vivien values her individual freedom far more than her sister and other relatives in Vietnam. Through their father's lens, Vivien will always come first, as it always has seemed to be. In another picture, "her sister's face looked more like her father's than her own, the symmetry rendering clear what Phuong could now say. Their father loved Vivien more than her" (206). Just like in the mysterious Ferris wheel photograph, Phuong has stood in Vivien's shadow her whole life, trying to achieve the same goals as her sister and wishing to join her in the U.S. After their eye-opening conversation in the amusement park, however, envy turns into aversion.

In contrast, the rest of Phuong's family remains absolutely enchanted by their lustrous Việt kiều relation; spiritedly, they go through the developed photographs from Vivien's disposable camera, mailed one month after her departure. Phuong feels sickened by her sister's sentimental letter: "*I looked out the window of the airplane until I couldn't see the country anymore. . . . The moments the clouds covered it, all I wanted was to return*" (204). From Phuong's skeptical perspective, Nguyen's short story crushes the hope for renewed return and "contemplates how the affective concerns of privileged refugees may, over time, have a greater influence [than nation-states] over the obstruction or flourishing of fellow refugees" (Rose 62). Knowing that "Vivien was never going to return," Phuong is sorry for her father, who is "smiling and cheerful" as he plans to laminate the pictures "[s]o that we'll have something to remember her by until she comes back" ("Fatherland" 204), unaware that he might well have seen her for the last time.

The next day, Phuong takes action against the pictures' immortalization, planning their funeral instead. Before her father can laminate them, she takes all the photographs sent by Vivien and burns them, watching the wind "catching the ashes and blowing them away" ("Fatherland" 207). Arthur Rose interprets the short story's ending as follows: "In symbolic recognition of this decision to sacrifice her fantasy—that the good life might be found in America—

Phuong also burns the photographs of the trip, the better to efface memories of their encounter” (62). Indeed, burning the photographs is an active attempt to erase the memories of Vivien’s return, for her and her family (although technically, they could easily ask for another reproduction of the digitally available images). In my reading, however, the pictures’ ceremonial destruction does not symbolically extinguish Phuong’s desire for transnational mobility. On the contrary: she stays resolute about eventually leaving—“one day, perhaps not soon, but eventually” (“Fatherland” 204)—and sees burning the pictures as a new beginning for that plan without counting on her sister’s help or standing in her shadow. In a way, this also means that Phuong has decided to act independently rather than relying on her family to support her cosmopolitan endeavors.

Phuong’s and her father’s viewpoints offer insights into the experiences of a relatively underrepresented group in Vietnamese American refugee literature: those who stayed. This additional perspective matters and reveals a lasting American capitalist presence and influence in Vietnam through practices of mass tourism. Phuong and Vivien’s father was not able to escape due to his detainment in the labor camp, yet he did not decide to leave for another country upon being released. As a hostess and tour guide, respectively, daughter and father are actively involved with many tourists from the U.S. and other places, through whom they receive a transnational outlook on the world, even though they are not moving themselves. The tourists belong to a kinetic elite, and their cosmopolitan lifestyle is sustained by relatively immobile people like Phuong and her father, who themselves cannot afford repeated long-distance travel.

Just like most other works, Nguyen’s “Fatherland” defies the classic immigrant saga script that the author criticizes in his memoir (*A Man of Two Faces* 157–8). Hardships past and present are addressed without victimizing the Vietnamese and Việt kiều characters in the process. Generational conflict is present, yet it does not dominate the narrative as such. Vivien does not live the American Dream that is expected of her, even though, on a global scale, she is financially still far more privileged compared to her family in Vietnam. Only Nguyen’s last step to writing an immigrant saga—“Your only politi-

cal identity is as an American, which is, paradoxically, synonymous with being an individual. Not with being part of a collective” (158)—is, in some ways, Vivien’s mantra. From her perspective, her return might indeed have affirmed her American identity rather than fostered new connections to any Vietnamese community. Efforts at “the navigation of the relationship between an individual and the community” (Goyal 249), although eventually not very successful, come from Phuong rather than Vivien. Phuong initially attempts to establish a connection between herself, who wishes to flee the country (though she would arrive in the U.S. as an immigrant rather than a refugee), and Vivien, a former refugee. Ultimately, Phuong’s hopes are crushed, alluding to an ostensibly unsurmountable rift between those who stayed and those who left. In many ways, Vivien’s return is a failed attempt at finding closure, ending with more ambivalence and uncertainty on both sides. Similarly, the characters presented in the next subsection do not find comforting resolutions through their returns, yet Phan’s work maintains a more optimistic outlook overall.

Gifts of Freedom and Ambivalences of (Orphan) Return in Aimee Phan’s “Motherland” (2004)

Many of the refugee stories discussed so far have focused on individuals who struggle with processing their own or their family’s traumatic memories. For members of the 1.5 or second generation like Ben in *Things We Lost to the Water*, the origin of unease is the inability to access their own or their family’s past. The stories of orphans epitomize this; they will never have the chance to ask their parents or grandparents about their life in Vietnam. Aimee Phan captures this conflict in *We Should Never Meet* (2004), a fragmented short story cycle spanning from times before the war to moments of return in more contemporary times. For the narrative of this debut, Phan drew upon her mother’s profession as a social worker and her personal experience with Vietnamese American foster children (“Someone You’d Love”). The short story cycle was published before

the author's first novel, *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* (2012), whose refugee camp passages have been discussed in the stopovers chapter. Similar to the novel's storytelling style, the collection's eight short stories traverse decades and continents to present a variety of disparate perspectives on the mass exodus and its aftermath.

Phan's fictional exploration of refugees' escapes and their trajectories in the U.S. accompanies Vietnamese American orphans who escaped their homelands either as unaccompanied minors or through Operation Babylift. This operation was orchestrated by the American government during the final weeks of April 1975 leading up to the end of the war. Babylift orphans were part of a group of around 2,700 South Vietnamese children who were evacuated by plane to the U.S. and other countries, to be adopted or placed in foster care (Choy 153). Most of these evacuees were children born to Vietnamese mothers and American fathers—Amerasian children, or bụi đời/dust of life. As such, they would face discrimination even if they had grown up with their biological parents, like the Captain in *The Sympathizer*, who gets called names because of his Eurasian-ness. However, unlike Nguyen's narrator, those who would later become Babylift orphans were relinquished to orphanages. Many of their parents were still alive, but as Amerasians, the children risked being seen as the offspring of wartime liaisons, sex work, or rape. To protect the women from social ostracism and the children from the stigma of signifying American presence, orphanages were deemed the safest option. Hence, the most important characters in the short story cycle entered the world as unwanted babies whose alienation in the U.S. is, at least, threefold: besides knowing nothing 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 different kinds of racial prejudice. These combined circumstances lead to unresolved ambivalences regarding questions of belonging that are reflected in literary form through gaps, fragmentation, and open-endedness, as I will contend in this chapter.

Pivoting between Vietnam and Orange County's Little Saigon, the focalized characters that appear alongside Babylift orphans encompass a diverse range of narrative voices. This spectrum spans South

Vietnamese citizens, including those in the war-torn countryside or employed at international organizations in the city, an American doctor working in Saigon, Vietnamese American adolescents who fled as unaccompanied minors, and an older Vietnamese man who joins his daughter's family in the U.S. as a later refugee arrival. Each of Phan's stories can be read on its own, yet they are loosely interconnected—some characters reappear across chapters, their evolving opinions and changing efforts over a lifetime highlighting the ambivalences of hybrid refugee subjectivities. Indeterminacy is also highlighted by other aesthetic choices; for example, quotation marks are omitted from the characters' direct speech, just like in *The Sympathizer*. On the one hand, this forces readers to pay closer attention; on the other, it suggests that, although the focus is on individual life stories, the question of who is speaking becomes secondary, since many refugees have experienced similar fates. Additionally, this claim is reinforced by the structure of the short story cycle. Whereas many characters assertively reappear throughout the interlinked stories, readers are also encouraged—without ever receiving confirmation—to infer that certain unnamed characters are, in fact, familiar protagonists from other chapters. Huan, the final story's focalizer whose return will be examined shortly, is most likely the boy that Bridget takes on a plane in the preceding short story, "Bound." Furthermore, he might be the baby that Lien gives up in the opening story, and the one that Truong accompanies to Saigon in "The Delta," the cycle's third short story. In this way, Huan's personal story denies exceptionality, which resonates with an important statement in one of Viet Thanh Nguyen's short stories: "These kinds of stories happen all of the time" ("Black-Eyed Women" 20). Phan's style supports the assertion that there are many who have lived the same stories, once again emphasizing collective memory and collective processing of trauma by reconciling conflicting sentiments about the location of one's home(land).

Hence, similar to Nguyen's work, Phan's *We Should Never Meet* rejects the pathologization of trauma. While boats and refugee camps have appeared previously as sites of traumatic experience, the short story cycle's central characters lack memories of Vietnam,

and their recollections of escape are sporadic at best. As a result, it is not their memories but their inability to remember that constitutes a primary source of crisis. Moreover, they remember other challenges from childhood, identifying the shortcomings of the American social service system and the racism of U.S. society as further factors shaping their troubled relationship to home and homeland. Like many of Nguyen's characters, Phan's 1.5-generation characters move across unpredictable spaces in-between Americanization and the continuing impact of loss, resulting in states of uncertainty intensified by the stories' open-endedness. Jungha Kim refers to this liminality as "hesitancy" (57), which "stands ambivalently between traumatic injury and developmental reparation," and "interrupts repetition compulsion, the mimetic tendency to return to the same traumatic scene, but it does not entirely liberate the individual from damage nor allow the individual to move forward without the residue of damage" (58). Trauma, while still evident, can thus be read productively "as the condition that makes visible the relationship between war, race, and violence" (Espiritu, "Critical Refugee Study" 422) instead of as an immobilizing force.

Although Nguyen's "Fatherland" and Phan's "Motherland" envision strikingly dissimilar returnees, both stories share an interest in portraying the ambivalences of visiting and experiencing one's supposed homeland—be it mother- or fatherland—for members of the 1.5 generation, as well as an awareness of the concerns confronting those who never left Vietnam. The stories' titles deserve further inspection, as they reveal a gendered politics of mobility. Men, rather than women, were typically sent to labor camps, which allowed Vivien's mother to flee to the U.S. while her father remained behind. In the case of many Vietnamese American adoptees, however, the mobile biological parent was the American father stationed in Vietnam. Thus, their fathers' mobility as soldiers not only makes their existence possible but also, paradoxically, propels them into orphanages, where they are rejected as visible evidence of American military intervention. Later, as Babylift orphans, their Amerasianness facilitates their passage to the United States and departure from their motherlands.

The exact trajectories of the orphaned characters before their arrival in the U.S. remain unknown, creating a source of ambivalence. These uncertainties are rarely resolved. Instead, as orphans, they learn to be grateful to the institutions that took them in, and as adoptees, to their adoptive parents. Furthermore, as refugees, they learn to be grateful to the state, which may be overwhelming: "To receive refuge is to encounter the weight of gratitude" (V. Nguyen 29). Once again, this evokes Mimi Thi Nguyen's critique of the 'gift of freedom.' The gift of freedom is "a world-shaping concept describing struggles aimed at freeing peoples from unenlightened forms of social organization through fields of power and violence" (M. T. Nguyen 3). This gift is bestowed on individuals with an expectation of lifelong gratitude, as "the debt it imposes . . . troubles the recipient far into the foreseeable future" (19), and may arguably never be repaid. Kim, exploring the affects and ethics of the gift of freedom in Phan's *We Should Never Meet*, explains:

[T]he gift of freedom entails a particular economy of life giving and life receiving between altruistic America and grateful refugees after the war; at the same time, it hides from view the protracted duration of dislocation and loss for the uprooted refugees and enforces liberalist epistemology and ontology based on the logic of development and progress. (59)

While some refugees remain grateful for America's opportunities, the stories of Babylift orphans and Vietnamese American foster children unveil the gift's complexities. Since the gift of freedom—granted both by the U.S. government and by individuals such as adoptive parents—inevitably entails the gift of life, refugees are expected to show gratitude, and critique is rarely welcome. According to Viet Thanh Nguyen, he and others who express dissent are considered "bad" refugees because they "insist on seeing the historical reasons that create refugees and the historical reasons for denying refugee status to certain populations" ("On Being a Refugee"). Phrased differently, by denying refuge as a gift and instead viewing it as a consequence of imperialism and militarism, "bad" refugees

subvert the narrative of the U.S. as an innocent and selfless savior of vulnerable individuals.

The protagonist in Phan's "Motherland" is Huan, "a lanky half-black, half-Vietnamese with fuzzy black hair" (217). He stands out in American and Vietnamese crowds; when he visits Vietnam with his friend Mai and his adoptive mother Gwen, he is eyed suspiciously by native residents and fellow travelers alike. Just like Vivien, he takes on the role of a tourist and is seen as a symbol of *Việt kiều* cosmopolitanism, a "rich American" with "[l]ots of dollahs" (216). However, rather than staying with family, Huan and his companions travel as part of an extensive American tour group, with whom he does not feel particularly comfortable. Their means of touristic mobility within the country is the bus, on which three older U.S. war veterans and fellow travelers "stare at Huan when they think he's not looking, almost tempting Huan to ask if they left behind their own bastard child in Vietnam" (218). As an Amerasian, Huan is Othered both inside and outside the travel group's vehicle. While wandering through a marketplace, local authorities detain him for a search, despite no apparent evidence of theft. Unable to communicate in Vietnamese, he remains immobilized until Mai, who is proficient in the language, intervenes.

Huan's initial reaction to this encounter is a desire to disappear—"I want to leave" ("Motherland" 221), he tells Mai. As a first, immediate step, he wants to leave the bustling Binh Tay Market in the Cholon district, yet more broadly speaking, he has already had enough of Vietnam. He has not made the trip for his own sake, but as a favor to his ex-girlfriend "because he liked that she was so interested in his past" (228). Huan is still hurt from the recent breakup with Emily, a second-generation Korean American who "was close to [her parents] and her extended family of cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents" (228). As an orphan *and* a refugee, Huan does not have the genealogical closure familiar to other Asian Americans, and lacks contact with members of an extended biological family with comparable racial experiences in the United States. Moreover, as a half-Black Amerasian, he encounters further Othering from Asian American communities; in retrospect, he "realized . . . that [Emily's]

motivation to learn about Vietnam was to prove to her family that he really was Asian, not just black" (228). Accepted by neither white nor Black nor Asian American society, "[h]e has experienced discrimination before, plenty of it in America, though his parents did their best to shield him from it" (222). As an Amerasian in Vietnam, he struggles with rejection yet again: "it bothers him that the Vietnamese are looking down at him, angry at him. They want to show him how un-Vietnamese he is. Well, he knows that. He always has" (222). Mai assures him that it is not just "Amerasian children, the despised products of American military men" (226), but Việt kiều generally, perceived as "rude and arrogant" (222), who drive the local population's hostility.

Mai, who shows up in several of the stories in *We Should Never Meet* and focalizes one of them ("Emancipation"), is similarly perceived as foreign in Vietnam although she is not Amerasian. She grew up with other Vietnamese Americans in Orange County's Little Saigon and speaks Vietnamese, which makes passing as a local easier. Unlike Huan, though, she did not come to the U.S. as a Baby-lift orphan, but as an unescorted refugee minor. When she was only "five years old, [she] was smuggled on a boat with forty-eight other refugees to escape Vietnam" ("Emancipation" 145). In hopes of a better future for their daughter, Mai's parents put her on a boat, not knowing she would end up in American foster care instead of the more stable adoption system. Speaking for a generation of unaccompanied Vietnamese refugee minors, she exclaims: "They sent us to America because of you [Baby-lift orphans]. . . . Our parents saw pictures of you full of food and in rich people's arms. They thought we'd get that, too. But we came too late. We weren't babies anymore, so nobody wanted us. It was no different from Vietnam" ("Motherland" 242). Mai "came too late"; her story accentuates the relevance of contrasting different mobility and immobility timelines, which demonstrate the uneven politics of mobility.

In terms of motive force, the first of Cresswell's six elements for a politics of mobility, there is not much difference between Huan and Mai. They were both forced to leave Vietnam for similar reasons: to escape hardship in Vietnam and profit from the ostensible gift of

freedom in America, although they did not have any say in the matter as children. Their narratives, however, expose striking differences regarding other constituent parts of their im/mobilities. Mai's status as a boat refugee differs from that of the Babylift orphans, whose transition by air represents a higher (and less hazardous) status in a kinetic hierarchy. In Cresswell's terms, Huan's escape mobility was more seamless and far less dangerous than Mai's journey across the ocean in terms of speed, rhythm, route, and experience. Rather than Cresswell's notion of friction (the sixth facet) and the question of "*when and how does [mobility] stop?*" ("*Politics of Mobility*" 26), Mai's story bears the question, "when does it start?". Whereas Babylift infants left just before the end of the war as part of a program that promised to have refugee children adopted, Mai's belated arrival in the U.S. destined her to enter foster care, a less stable system.

Tracing the characters' passages within the U.S. reveals that the politics of mobility continues to influence them beyond their flight, especially in relation to social mobilities. Huan is adopted by a wealthy white couple who can afford to send him to Brown University. Mai, who will not receive any more support from her foster parents after she reaches emancipation at eighteen, is dependent on a scholarship to support her studies. Nevertheless, her final foster parents provide her with "a sense of security . . . she'd never experienced before" ("*Emancipation*" 154), allowing her to eventually live a model minority American Dream by studying at university and gaining financial autonomy. Two other characters, Vinh and Kim, who are not adopted, instead move from foster home to foster home, never staying in any one place for a prolonged period of time. They do not go to college, and are instead involved in illegal gang activities. Kim endures sexual abuse by several foster fathers, although her initial situation was more promising: "She . . . was promptly adopted by an American family. But the family had given her back, something about not realizing how difficult it would be to raise a foreign child" (151). Racialized mobility politics sends Kim into a spiral of foster care placements, reducing her chances of finding a stable home and receiving her share of the gift of freedom.

All of these circumstances directly affect the characters' return mobilities. Huan and Mai are able to move around the world as cosmopolitans, an option for which Kim and Vinh lack resources, rendering them immobile by comparison. These discrepancies demonstrate that broad generalizations about refugees of the same generation can be misleading, and that America's promises remain unattainable for many. Aware of the ambivalences of the American Dream and the gift of freedom, Nguyen's and Phan's tales thus serve as counternarratives that can help shape countermemory against prevailing U.S. ideologies. Just like Vivien's, Huan and Mai's return is not romanticized, but the story's tone is more sentimental, and the open ending suggests more hope for the future.

Huan's heightened transnational mobility, however, does not mean that he automatically finds closure upon returning to Vietnam. Like his ex-girlfriend, his mother Gwen had encouraged his "belated quest to discover his roots" ("Motherland" 217), yet he remains dispirited even after visiting the adoption center in Saigon and the orphanage in the Delta, both of which form part of his history. Calmed only by conversations with Mai and his mother, he eventually finds solace in the idea of a new generation of Vietnamese children temporally removed from the horrors and direct consequences of war. In some ways, "Motherland" ends on a positive, or at least more reconciliatory note. Nevertheless, although Huan's demeanor in his motherland significantly differs from Vivien's, rejecting the consumerist mass tourism that she embraces, he is similarly unable to achieve resolution through his return to Vietnam, and continues to battle ambivalent notions of home.

Mai, however, seems to have found a certain kind of stability within the uncertainties of her hybrid, liminal refugee existence, living not merely between cultures but across many. Still, she did not want to return alone or be accompanied by her partner. Instead, it was important for her that the return be an intra-communal collective experience, hence her decision to travel with a fellow refugee and orphan: "When Gwen called, I knew this was my chance. . . . I knew I could come here with you and your mom. Even if I wasn't completely ready yet" ("Motherland" 239). However, once Mai arrives,

Huan notices that “[s]he seems comfortable in Vietnam” (218), while remaining “absolutely unaffected” (235) on a deeper emotional level. In conversations with Huan, she emerges as more reflective and mature, reminding him of his privileged position while recognizing her own opportunities. The ability to discard her anger is of pivotal value to her: “It’s not our parents’ fault. Or anyone else’s here. How could I be angry with them, expect them to do the right thing when there was no such thing? When everything here was wrong?” (243). This passage demonstrates that Mai seems to have accepted her own fate without lamenting the past. After college, Mai left for England, and then worked as a consultant in Beijing. At the time of their trip to Vietnam, she lives in Japan with a Canadian teacher, and also teaches English herself (218). Whereas Vivien’s cosmopolitan subjectivity is enacted through ways of being rather than of belonging, Mai not only lives a cosmopolitan lifestyle, but also feels comfortable with it. Rather than trying to forge a connection to either American or Vietnamese culture, Mai has come to terms with and distanced herself from both, finding a home on the move without denying her origins.

Huan struggles to do the same, although his traces are better documented than Mai’s. In today’s Saigon, they visit his former adoption center, which is still operated by its American founder, Sophie. The center’s occupants have changed: almost thirty years after the war, the orphans are Vietnamese and not Amerasian. Huan does not trust Sophie’s memories of him or her reassurance that he was loved, suspecting that “[s]he probably says this to every orphan” (“Motherland” 227), yet he cannot deny the physical proof of his admittance, or the medical records stating that his biological parents are unknown and that he was first given up at an orphanage run by Catholic nuns in the Delta. Despite his initial unwillingness to find out more about his past, he even consents to visit the orphanage—“his first home” (241)—together with Mai, whom he needs not only for emotional support, but also as translator. At the orphanage next to the convent, the two of them meet an aged Sister Phuong, who focalizes the collection’s third short story, set before the end of the war when she was a young woman and not yet a nun. Phuong remem-

bers Huan and shows him a book containing “the first evidence of his existence” (237–8). Overcoming his skepticism, Huan “realizes the information is sketchy and unreliable at best, [yet] he believes it” (238). By allowing himself to believe certain details of his early childhood, even without ever uncovering the full truth, Huan ultimately comes to accept an uncertain version of his past, which is a significant step forward.

Another “memento” (“Motherland” 227) shown to him on his return trip is his identification photo. He was already familiar with this photograph of himself as an infant, as Gwen had received a copy of it. Huan was too young when the picture was taken to actively remember it, and it holds no postmemorial influence for him, since he cannot connect it to anything. Moreover, he resists taking photographs as a form of postmemory for potential future generations, and cannot comprehend his fellow travelers’ obsession with the camera as an essential tourist accessory. Earlier in the short story, Huan is irritated by the other tourists, whose “[c]ameras and camcorders, of various sizes and qualities, emerge frantically” (214) at every opportunity. In particular, he is embarrassed by his mother’s eagerness to capture rural scenes of assumed authenticity: “During the bus ride through the rice paddies, Huan’s mother spots a peasant family plowing a field with a water buffalo. Though Huan pleads with her not to, his mother convinces Leah [their tour guide] to stop the bus to take pictures” (235). Undeterred by her son’s disapproval, Gwen “insists he take her camera” (236) on his trip to the orphanage with Mai, in case he wants to take pictures after all.

Surprisingly, Huan actually does end up using the camera. After an emotional conversation with Mai, he asks her for a favor: “Huan hands her his mother’s camera. He jogs over to stand in front of the orphanage and waits for her to take the picture” (“Motherland” 241). In that moment, using the camera becomes an instance of repair for him and Mai after their dispute over refugeehood and the associated gratitude. At the same time, it is also a favor for his mother; Huan might still not like the idea of taking pictures, but he acknowledges the importance it holds for Gwen. Arguably, he even begins to seek

the creation of new memories for himself, defying the gaps in his past that he knows he cannot reconstruct.

It is not despite, but because of the ambivalence emerging from the variety of different perspectives offered on refugee (orphan) subjectivities, that the fragmented form of *We Should Never Meet* is particularly fitting. Its open-endedness, lack of quotation marks for direct speech, and numerous unresolved gaps mirror its themes of displacement and hybrid, dynamic identities, which function as both products and producers of transnational and postcolonial connections. Discussing Phan's work as a prime example of Asian American transnarrative literature that aptly imagines globally entangled lives, Long Le-Khac argues in a previously-quoted article that the short story cycle "withholds from readers the comfort of believing that life stories disjointed by warfare can be smoothly reconstructed" (122-3) and "confronts readers with the difficult task of imagining political communities that address rather than smooth over such ruptures" (123). Thus, tracing—or rather attempting to trace—the mobilities and immobilities of the characters across continents and time, before and after their escapes, and, importantly, upon their returns, not only reveals discrepancies based on class, gender, and race, but also underscores that, even after decades and despite humanitarian promises, refugeehood is an ongoing process that is not resolved by simply surrendering one's official refugee status.

This can be linked back to the arguments of Oliver-Rotger and other scholars of return literature quoted at the beginning of this chapter: the examples of Vivien in Nguyen's "Fatherland" and Huan and Mai in Phan's "Motherland" attest that "return is not definite" and "a sort of transitional stage that brings knowledge" (Oliver-Rotger 3), even if this knowledge is situational and not presented as an unchanging solution to the characters' dilemmas. Both short stories appear at the end of the two Vietnamese American writers' collections. Yet, rather than providing closure that might allow readers to "cast the book aside once the narrative ends" (August, *The Refugee Aesthetic* 127), their ambivalent endings question the gift of freedom and introduce new complexities that invite sustained reflection on the dynamic identities of both refugees and those who did not flee.

Furthermore, the two short stories demonstrate that in situations where return tourism is easily accessible, refugees' mobilities are rarely unidirectional. They move back and forth between different geographical locations, continuously shaping their liminal and hybrid identities. Meanwhile, for better or worse, their returning Việt kiều bodies, and even the photographs of their adopted American homeland that they share with family members who live in Vietnam, influence the transnational imaginations and aspirations of those who never left.

Conclusions: Steps to Writing Refugee Sagas

In this book, I have considered refugee im/mobilities and refugee identities through the lens of selected works of contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature. This approach reveals emerging shifts in writing about the refugee experience, which I would like to discuss by returning once more to Viet Thanh Nguyen's "steps for anyone wanting to write their own immigrant saga for the American and Western marketplace" (*A Man of Two Faces* 157). Throughout my analysis, I have repeatedly come back to Nguyen's text to argue that contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature subverts dominant notions of what immigrant writing is supposed to look like. In his list, Nguyen identifies the classical components commonly found in migration literature and humorously packages them in the style of a satirical instruction manual, thereby highlighting and criticizing the expectations that the literary marketplace imposes on displaced writers. To summarize the key features of contemporary Vietnamese American refugee writing that I have identified in this project, I want to propose an adapted version of Nguyen's five steps. My list is a non-exhaustive collection of features rather than a manual, and unlike Nguyen, I refrain from using sarcasm or the imperative. Instead, I engage with his points of critique to specify how the novels and short stories presented in this book rework traditions of immigrant writing.

As mentioned previously, Nguyen's steps list immigrant sagas' attention to writing about 1) the "[h]ard life in the old world," 2) the "[d]aunting challenges in the new world," 3) "[g]enerational conflict," 4) "[r]econciliation . . . [by] achiev[ing] the AMERICAN DREAM™," and 5) the adoption of an American identity as the "only political identity" (*A Man of Two Faces* 157–8). In my proposed five steps to writing refugee sagas, I contend that contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature confronts this familiar script as follows:

STEP ONE:

The homeland in the past, present, and future

As a country, not a war, Vietnam is not forgotten and remains an important reference point in these narratives. Refugee characters imaginatively revisit their homeland through storytelling and the evocation of nostalgic memories. However, Vietnam is not only the “old world” and a place of the past visited in the mind; physical return is desired and achieved by many, thereby adding contemporary outlooks on Vietnam and broadening the views on Vietnamese American refugeehood by including perspectives from those who did not escape. In doing so, the stories accentuate past and ongoing U.S. interventions. While previous and current hardships are not minimized, they are present, accompanied by positive associations with the homeland and by future-oriented visions of diasporic (re)connection.

STEP TWO:

Multiple perspectives on refugeehood in the U.S.

Similarly, life in the United States is neither condemned nor idolized. Typically, the narrative is not afraid to be decolonial and Marxist, even questioning the supposed gift of freedom granted by the U.S. The focus is on interiority, yet the perception of Vietnamese American refugeehood is complicated by not only representing views from within the community but also featuring perspectives from the outside.

STEP THREE:

Emphasis on community

Whether genealogical or newly shaped, family ties are central to Vietnamese American refugee narratives. Experiences of escapes, stopovers, arrivals, and returns are framed as collective. The novels and short stories focus on relationships between individuals and

their communities, emphasizing collectivity over individualism. Although often resolved in the end, generational conflict is inevitable. The origins of these clashes between different generations are not only found in personal differences; instead, the trope of the generation gap is used to problematize histories of displacement.

STEP FOUR:
Challenging the American Dream

Many of the Vietnamese American refugees portrayed in the literature have achieved what is commonly referred to as the American Dream, but for many others it remains an unattainable prospect. As the narratives address the heterogeneity of Vietnamese American communities, they also reveal striking socioeconomic disparities. Not everyone is reconciled by the American Dream because not everyone benefits from its promises, and not everyone wants to. In this vein, some wave the flag while others would rather burn it.

STEP FIVE:
Hybrid and liminal refugee identities

Contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature spotlights the collective experience of flight and ongoing movement. Group heritage is preferred to the embrace of radical American individualism. This does not mean that these diasporic affiliations develop in a vacuum; instead, the protagonists of the novels and short stories cultivate dynamic Vietnamese American refugee identities characterized by liminality and hybridity.

As I have shown in my analysis, these five steps are prevalent throughout the nine works discussed and beyond. While more conventional immigrant writing affirms the U.S. as, “for all its flaws and challenges, . . . THE GREATEST COUNTRY ON EARTH” (V. T. Nguyen, *A Man of Two Faces* 159), the refugee sagas presented here subvert American superiority and offer diverse refugee portrayals that func-

tion as empowering self-representations while pointing to global interconnections that have led to war and displacement. Some of the works are more radical in overthrowing traditional migration literature, while others remain reconciliatory and sentimental in certain respects, but most of them deny readers a comfortable Hollywood ending in favor of a more sustained reflection on refugeehood. In any case, by revising mainstream media depictions, Western-centric historiography, and literary marketplace expectations, contemporary Vietnamese American refugee novels and short stories can serve as powerful counter-memories for the community from below.

This list of steps is a non-exhaustive response to Nguyen's manual-like observations, but the five features are insufficient to account for the complexity of contemporary refugee writing. Significantly, the works discussed also display other salient features such as reflecting the uncertainties of displacement in form (through open-endedness, non-linearity, gaps, indeterminacy, and/or ambivalence), refusing the spectacularization of trauma and refugeehood, and discussing the importance of (counter)memory for marginalized groups while offering new forms of collective memory. The steps, however, highlight the significance of im/mobility to refugeehood and suggest that literary representations can deepen our understanding of it. Refugee sagas contribute productively to contemporary discussions of displacement and thus invite an interdisciplinary approach informed by mobility studies. Refugees' movements and confinements exemplify the dialectical relationship between mobility and immobility, such that tracing their trajectories broadens our understanding of human im/mobility, Vietnamese American refugeehood, and the literary texts themselves.

Following Vincent and Murray's approach of "attempt[ing] to go beyond 'quoting' from fictional texts as a means to 'illustrate' particular points and aim to more systematically interrogate the text based on . . . mobilities theory" (60), I closely examined the representations of refugee im/mobilities in nine contemporary works by and about Vietnamese Americans of the 1.5 and the second generation through an intersectional lens. In this way, I highlighted different politics of mobility related to critical factors of class, gender, and

race. In the first chapter, I introduced the various classed politics of mobility at play in forced migration: the means of transport available for escape is not a simple distinction, but an essential component that affects refugees' experience and memory of flight while opening and closing doors for future mobilities. This illustrates Cresswell's definition of a politics of mobility as "the ways in which mobilities are both productive of such social relations and produced by them" ("Politics of Mobility" 21)—individuals' socioeconomic status and personal connections gave them access to faster and less dangerous plane mobility out of Vietnam, which facilitated their social standing upon arrival and promoted later return mobilities. In addition, many air evacuees had shorter stays in refugee camps, while those who fled by boat were detained for longer periods at stopover places. Camp experiences were taken up in Chapter Two, where I identified refugees' strategies for dwelling amidst uncertainty and drew attention to gendered politics of im/mobility and everyday micro-mobility practices. It is not only classed, gendered, and racialized politics of mobility, but also several emplacement techniques that permeate refugee arrival stories, three of which I examined in my third chapter. In Chapter Four, I traced some cosmopolitan refugees' privileged return mobilities, addressed the perception of returnees by those who have not and cannot move, and discussed how the case of returning Amerasian orphans complicates racialized politics of mobility.

In engaging with these narratives, I approached im/mobilities with attention to the six components of a politics of mobility that Cresswell distinguishes: motive force, velocity, rhythm, route, experience, and friction, which can be scrutinized by asking why, how, in what rhythm, on what routes, with which feelings, and when people or things move. As my analysis has shown, literary representations are particularly well suited to explore the facet of experience and highlight an experiential politics of mobility, which may be of interest to mobility studies research in general. My im/mobility-focused chapter structure allowed me to draw attention to four critical moments of refugee im/mobility: escapes, stopovers, arrivals, and returns. However, it is difficult to separate these four elements completely—these

stages are intertwined and not as straightforward as my chapter outline suggests, and it is challenging to analyze them independently when considering contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature. Nevertheless, disentangling these four im/mobility moments and attempting to accentuate them individually has shed light on different politics of mobility.

Simultaneously, the focus on im/mobilities is entangled with tracking the formation of dynamic refugee identities. Like other postcolonial and transnational identities, these hybrid and liminal refugee identities defy essentialist conceptions of identity and result from imaginative and physical border crossings. They are not fixed, but in constant flux; hence, it is worth considering their development over time rather than looking at them at one point in history. In this respect, representations in refugee novels and short stories prove particularly well suited to the study of refugee identities: they offer longitudinal views of refugeehood, often accompanying characters over the course of years or traveling back and forth in time through memory to achieve the same effect. Because these literary productions offer “interiority and psychological depth” (Goyal 249), they closely and empathetically follow the identity-constructing paths of individuals. However, identity is shaped not only by what individuals identify with, but also by how they are perceived by others, for which the inclusion of outside perspectives in the novels and short stories adds several more layers to the complex representation of refugee identities.

These at times conflicting perspectives, and the overall liminality of refugee identities, are matched by other uncertainties encountered in contemporary Vietnamese American refugee literature that emerge through narrative conspicuities such as open-endedness, indeterminacy, non-linearity, unresolved gaps, and fragmentation. Together, these aspects create ambivalence of content and form, which is not a shortcoming but an appropriate quality for discussing the ambivalent topic of displacement. Moreover, these features reflect the impossibility of narrating refugee escapes and subsequent im/mobilities without gaps. The reluctance to offer simple explanations of refugeehood resists one-dimensional repre-

sentations of refugees that portray them as immobilized victims or dangerous invaders. Instead, literary representations present their refugee protagonists as actors who, despite imposed constraints, resiliently navigate the ambivalences of belonging, home, war, and history. Contemporary refugee novels and short stories by 1.5- and second-generation members such as Viet Thanh Nguyen, Andrew Lam, Aimee Phan, Vu Tran, Lê Thị Diễm Thúy, Ocean Vuong, and Eric Nguyen encode a variety of different refugee identities in order to provide vibrant self-representations. These can complement current discussions not only in mobility studies but also in the emerging field of critical refugee studies, an interdisciplinary domain that re-theorizes the refugee position beyond victimization and foregrounds the critical and creative potential of refugee subjectivities.

In the broader context of refugee representation, the Vietnamese American angle testifies that refugeehood is a process that is not simply discarded when legal labels change. Meanwhile, the approximately three million people who fled Southeast Asian countries between the 1970s and 1990s have become naturalized citizens in their countries of arrival. Those who came to the U.S. as refugees from Vietnam, for example, now hold American citizenship, as do their U.S.-born children. Nevertheless, 1.5- and second-generation Vietnamese American writers refuse to forget their own and their family's displacement and continue to produce stories that not only rewrite Vietnamese American refugee experiences but also speak to contemporary contexts, as Viet Thanh Nguyen writes: "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 17–8). Despite the temporal distance from the war, these fictions continue to foreground themes of exodus and dislocation, problematizing the long-lasting transgenerational and individual consequences of trauma and refugeehood.

Given the complex and productive insights into Vietnamese American literature generated by an im/mobilities framework, future research could expand on this approach and further examine the mobilities represented in the works discussed and beyond.

In particular, the inclusion and closer analysis of the im/mobilities of those who stayed could be further developed. The interplay between a politics of mobility and religion, as a crucial aspect for many Vietnamese American refugees, deserves more attention. Further, a more engaged new historicist approach might shed new light on these texts and emerging trends in the literary marketplace. While history informed my analysis, it did so primarily through the lens of the collective memory of the war in Vietnam, rather than through consideration of the specific historical circumstances during the texts' production (e.g., whether they were written and published during Democratic or Republican administrations, or before or after the first Vietnamese American won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction). Moreover, while their novels and short stories offer nuanced views of class differences within Vietnamese American communities, the group of Vietnamese American writers studied here remains college-educated and thus, in some ways, relatively homogeneous, which might be something to consider when approaching the material circumstances of refugee writing. In any case, new literary productions offer despectacularized refugee narratives that continue to find their way into the marketplace—despite, or perhaps because of, their recasting of writing about displacement.

Everyday activities such as reading a newspaper, watching a political TV show, or simply browsing social media remind us that refugeehood remains a contested topic, one often debated by those who did not have to abandon their homelands under duress. For now, a life without international borders remains utopian; displacement is a reality for well over 100 million people, and disputes about the displaced feature in heated discussions about the frameworks for communal life within the nation-state, whilst rarely involving displaced people themselves. Literary (counter)memory by and about refugees remain relevant in the current moment because they can impact societal attitudes towards refugees; however, refugees' own perspectives are neglected in mainstream representations, with tangible and potentially destructive consequences. For example, Donald Trump's wall rhetoric played a key role in his first presidential victory, and his second-term agenda promises even more restrictive

immigration measures, including suspending the nation's refugee program (Savage et al.). Across the Atlantic, the UK recently started controversial deportations to Rwanda, and the 2024 European Parliament elections triggered a rightward shift that diminishes hopes for less violence and control at the EU's external border. Anti-refugee sentiment is strong, and refugee voices, while numerous, are rarely spotlighted. In the Vietnamese American context, although this can be extended to other contexts of displacement, I would like to quote Viet Thanh Nguyen one last time: "Vietnamese people are not voiceless! They are really, really loud!" (*A Man of Two Faces* 171)—we just have to listen!

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Prevalent portrayals often reduce refugees to symbols of crisis, framing them through shocking numbers, overwhelming statistics, or sensationalist imagery. But what about their stories? What about the individuals behind the (photo)graphs? In this context, literary interventions can open up new perspectives, prompting a reconsideration of refugee experiences beyond the language of emergency and spectacularization.

This book addresses that concern by exploring representations of im/mobilities and refugee identities in contemporary Vietnamese American literature. It focuses on novels and short stories by 1.5- and second-generation writers, including Viet Thanh Nguyen, Ocean Vuong, Aimee Phan, Lê thi diem thúy, and Eric Nguyen. Their works interrogate the politics of mobility inherent in forced migration, offering nuanced narratives that challenge dominant discourses of displacement.

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