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GRATITUDE, RESISTANCE, AND MOBILE MEMORY IN THUONG VUONG-RIDDICK'S *THE EVERGREEN COUNTRY: A MEMOIR OF VIETNAM*

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THE VIETNAM WAR: A PLURICENTRIC MEMORY

The representation of the Vietnam War as a conflict that escapes any framing within a unitarian narrative has become a recurring trope in the existing literature on the subject (see, among others, Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz; Turner; Sturken; V. T. Nguyen; Dittmar and Michaud). Scholars have not only questioned how this conflict should be understood, depicted, remembered, and learned from, but they have also observed that the different communities involved in the hostilities created their own memories of the event and commemorative practices (see V. T. Nguyen; Eyerman et al.). The contentiousness of this conflict is evident if we consider the way in which the event, its participants, and its outcomes are named. While Americans refer to the conflict as the Vietnam War, most people in present-day Vietnam would call it either the American War or the War of National Independence (cf. Eyerman et al.; Schwenkel). The term Second Indochina War is, instead, used to stress that the war resumed old hostilities after 1945, when Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Party declared independence from French colonial rule in Hanoi. Similarly, April 30, 1975, is remembered differently among the communities involved in the conflict. As Thi Bui recalls in her graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do*, "There is no single story of that day, April 30, 1975. In Việt Nam today, among the victors, it's called LIBERATION DAY. Overseas, among expats like my parents, it is remembered as THE DAY WE LOST OUR COUNTRY" (211). In contrast, some American revisionists claim that the "Fall of Saigon" marks the loss of a "noble cause," using a phrase popularized by President Reagan at the annual meeting of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in 1980. On this

occasion, he indeed urged the nation to overcome the so-called Vietnam Syndrome by reminding American citizens of the sacrifices made by the many young Americans who fought and died selflessly: "We dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt" (Reagan n.p.). Reagan used this event to promote a new reading of the recent past and the lessons one should learn from that military debacle. Thus, the United States should have devoted more resources to the armed forces instead of restraining the use of military power, as Carter did in the aftermath of the conflict. Reagan's predecessor limited the resources allocated to the army because he knew that the war in Vietnam, and the images it generated, tore public opinion apart (Schulzinger 338).

The presence of conflicting narratives may be attributed to each (national) group's need to commemorate the dead, the living (their traumas, achievements, and losses), and the war itself. As in previous wars, each nation feels the urge to honor those who served the country, finding meaning in their deaths. However, the creation of a unitarian narrative is hindered by the presence of several tensions that lie at the heart of the conflict. For instance, the US's problematic interventionist policies undermined its claims to uphold the ideals of "freedom," "democracy," and "human rights," leading to the formation of anti-war movements. Yet, in the aftermath of the conflict, the US government used the bodies of injured veterans and the supposed presence of MIAs and POWs in Indochina to reconcile a fractured nation (see Franklin), despite the presence of dissenting voices.

To better understand not only the existence of fractured memories but also their persistence in the present, we must discuss the role that dominant narratives and "carrier groups" play in the formation of collective traumas. As the American sociologist Jeffrey Charles Alexander observed, "cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identities in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (1). Therefore, cultural trauma not only shapes personal memories, but it also informs the development of individual and collective identities. Yet, it is worth noting that a tragic event is not intrinsically traumatic from the beginning. Rather, its definition as "traumatic" is attributed subsequently through a process of meaning-making and is linked to "the social processes that lead to its representation and acceptance" (Eyerman 3). Indeed, as sociologist Neil Joseph Smelser argued, traumas are "made, not born" (37). Given that trauma is constructed by society, it needs what sociologists

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have termed "carrier groups" (cf. Weber; Alexander) and "cultural agents" (cf. Eyerman et al.). In other words, trauma requires groups of people with common interests and cultural producers (e.g., painters, novelists, poets, journalists, filmmakers, intellectuals, etc.), who can express their interpretation of an event in the public sphere.

The constructed nature of memory emerges more clearly if we divert our attention from the communities involved in the hostilities to Canada, a country that did not participate actively in the conflict but nonetheless co-opted its memory. This co-optation aimed at fostering its image as a haven. It is worth noting that the 1960s and 1970s were not only the years of the Vietnam War. It was precisely in this period that Canada began to define its identity through both nationalist political discourses and literary works, giving rise to the so-called Canadian Renaissance (Gebbia 27). Therefore, against this backdrop, it becomes important to understand how Canada appropriated the memory of the Vietnam War for nationalist purposes, and how Vietnamese Canadians have complicated these claims over time. In this article, I will focus on Thuong Vuong-Riddick's *The Evergreen Country: A Memoir of Vietnam* (2007), a book that has received limited scholarly attention. Robert McGill does not mention it in *War Is Here: The Vietnam War and Canadian Literature* (2017), one of the few monographs dedicated to the literary memory of the Vietnam War in Canada, and Mai Truong rapidly dismisses the text as "compliant" with dominant narratives. However, as Vinh Nguyen argued in his essay on Kim Thúy's semi-autobiographical book *Ru* (2009), the performance of gratitude toward the host country should not be confused with compliance or a lack of criticism. Moreover, it is interesting to note that—despite the similarities—Thúy's books (written in French and later translated into English) received more attention from both the general public and scholars than Vuong-Riddick's memoir.

THE MYTH OF CANADA AS A SAFE HAVEN

Although Canada did not send troops as the US did, and it did not suffer military losses, it is difficult to consider the country's position in the war as truly neutral. In fact, Canada was the main arms dealer for the US and manufactured many of the weapons (traditional and chemical) responsible for the killing of millions of civilians during the war. Victor Levant estimates that "Canada furnished some $2.47 billion worth of war material to the US between 1965 and 1973" (55). The scholar also recalls that Canada benefited not only from the selling of ammunitions, weapons, chemicals, radio equipment, and the iconic green

beret, but also from the selling of raw materials, petroleum, copper, and nickel (Levant 51–62).

Ironically, Canada continues to depict Phan Thị Kim Phúc—the "Napalm Girl" immortalized in Nick Ut's famous photograph—as a symbol of Canada's benevolence, having granted her political asylum. While her story is generally celebrated for putting an end to the conflict, becoming a symbol of healing and reconciliation, Canada avoids taking accountability for its involvement in the war and the scars on her body (cf. V. Nguyen "Vietnamese Canadian Refugee Aesthetics"). Indeed, even though it was an American plane that dropped the napalm on her, many of the chemical weapons used against civilians had been manufactured in Canadian factories (cf. Levant; V. Nguyen "Vietnamese Canadian Refugee Aesthetics").

Over time, Canada's "quiet complicity" (cf. Levant) has been overshadowed by nationalist discourses aimed to emphasize the progressiveness of the state. In particular, the Vietnam War provided Canadian nationalists with an opportunity to define a Canadian identity that contrasted with the militarism and aggressiveness of the US, as Robert McGill observed:

> By introducing Vietnam to discussions of North America, nationalists could distinguish US imperialism and militarism from Canadian multilateralism and peacekeeping […] New nationalists saw America as oppressing Vietnam in ways that paralleled the US economic and cultural domination of Canada, and they suggested that the parallels might grow even more alarming if the United States ever decided Canadians were a security threat. (14)

The image of a liberal and peaceful Canada was also fostered by the fact that the country had no military draft. In the eyes of many Americans, "Canada" thus became synonymous with "freedom" (cf. Steward; Foley; Squires), just as it had been for many African Americans a century earlier when they fled the US to escape slavery after the War of Independence (cf. Nelson). The myth of Canada as a benevolent state committed to human rights was further entrenched by the Underground Railroad in the nineteenth century. Abolitionists' songs, such as those written by George W. Clark, often referred to Canada as a land of freedom: "I told him I had left the whips, and the baying of the hound,/ To find a place where man is man, if such there could be found/ That I had heard in Canada that all mankind were free,/ That I was going northward now in search of liberty" (Clark 296). However, this myth is a retroactive fabrication that erases British and French practices of slavery. Indeed, the enslaved fugitives who crossed the border before 1833 did not enter a free country at all (cf. Whitfield; Nelson). Moreover, even

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after the abolition of slavery, Black refugees in Canada still faced racism in housing, education, and employment. These harsh conditions implicitly aimed at limiting black immigration and settlement. However, despite the hardships, the myth of Canada as a haven endured. As late as 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. stated in his CBC Massey Lectures: "Canada is not merely a neighbor of negroes. Deep in our history of struggle for freedom Canada was the North Star" (King 3).

The rhetoric that casts Canada as a safe haven welcoming those who seek refuge was strengthened by the Vietnam War. During the conflict, many American draft dodgers found a new home in Canada. Their immigration, as well as the securing of legal and permanent entry to Canada thanks to the acquisition of Landed Immigrant status, was eased by the 1967 Immigration Act. In particular, this law facilitated the entry of those immigrants deemed capable of assimilating into Canadian society. As Churchill remarked,

> [t]o qualify for Landed status an applicant needed only 50 out of a possible 100 points. For young, college-educated Americans, the point system was a boon. English-speaking, with high skill levels and a desire to move to communities such as Toronto with high demand for labour, most draft resisters had no trouble earning enough points. (5)

The presence of American draft dodgers popularized the perception of Canada as a liberal alternative to America. Canadian writers played a pivotal role in reinforcing this nationalist myth through their writings, which often featured draft dodgers. Think, for example, of Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* (1993), Linda Spalding's *The Paper Wife* (1994), Mordecai Richler's *Barney's Version* (1997), and Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief* (1999).

Although the figure of the draft dodger can still be encountered in contemporary narrative, McGill noticed a "veteran turn" in post-9/11 novels (32). According to him, these novels present American veterans currently living in Canada as both victims of PTSD and perpetrators of violent acts during the conflict, evoking two American clichés that have quickly become popular across various media: among others, Scorsese's 1976 movie *Taxi Driver* and Tim O'Brien's 1994 novel *In the Lake of the Woods*, respectively. These narratives inevitably cast Canada as a peaceful country that is "simultaneously hospitable to Americans and susceptible to their violence" (McGill 203). Whereas Canada is presented as a welcoming country, the US is portrayed as the aggressor. These narratives ultimately become cautionary tales, warning Canada about the potential threat posed by its neighbors, who do not hesitate to use violence to achieve their goals. A clear example of this trope

is David Bergen's *The Time in Between* (2005). The novel's protagonist, Charles Boatman, a Vietnam War veteran relocated to Canada after the war, is haunted by his shooting of a boy who he took for an enemy soldier. Clearly, the texts hitherto mentioned use the Vietnam War to draw a line between Canada and the US. This operation is not at all surprising; the Vietnam War happened in synchrony with Canada's (literary and political) coming of age, in turn leading to Canada's full independence in the 1980s. Thus, the US is a negative example that should not be followed.

However, the myth of Canada's hospitality is not limited to the presence of American expatriate characters. In particular, scholar Vinh Nguyen has noted the emergence of a "Vietnamese Canadian Refugee Aesthetics" in literary texts and other cultural products from both Anglophone and Francophone Canada.[1] These works shift the focus away from stories about white North Americans to present the perspectives of diasporic Vietnamese characters. This category can be further divided into two sub-categories, based on the ethnic identity of the "cultural agent" (cf. Eyerman et al.) who activates the war's memory. The first group comprises former Vietnamese refugees and second-generation immigrants, while the second one features non-ethnic Vietnamese authors.

REMEMBERING THE VIETNAMESE DIASPORA: TWO DIFFERENT CARRIER GROUPS

Diasporic Vietnamese Canadians document the personal experiences of their community by transcribing them as memoirs or reworking them in fictionalized form. They do so to bring forgotten histories into the public archive. These narratives often allow the reader to enter private experiences through a character that has a privileged point of view, capable of piercing through the complexity of Vietnam (as a war and a country). The centrality of this traumatic event for the members of the Vietnamese diaspora has been discussed by Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, who makes the following observation: "To view Vietnamese American texts only as refugee narratives restricts the full recognition of Vietnamese American experiences and identities. But to view Vietnamese American literature outside the framework of war, in reaction to dominant representations and expectations, is also limiting" (59). Pelaud warns about the risks of separating this group identity from

1 Although this aesthetics has its roots in the 1980s, when Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn wrote *The Will of Heaven* (1983), it was not until the 2000s that these texts gained full visibility, as in the works of E. E. Richey.

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the memory of a foregone war that still haunts the present, because doing so could create an ahistorical category. This statement can be generalized to all the texts produced by diasporic Vietnamese living in Anglophone countries,[2] as the commemoration of that war creates transnational bonds that somehow keep the community together. Indeed, as we have seen, trauma is also a social construct that often serves identity politics. Hence, one might speculate that one of the reasons behind the memory projects related to the war is the desire to protect the community and to avoid being completely assimilated into the Asian Canadian (or American) category.

The uninterrupted production of texts that narrate or at least reference the Vietnam War shows its cultural relevance, as the conflict continues to shape the identity of several ethnic groups and generations. For instance, Thuong Vuong-Riddick—the author of *The Evergreen Country: A Memoir of Vietnam* (2007)—belongs to the first generation; Kim Thúy, author of the celebrated novels *Ru* (2009), *Mãn* (2013), and *Em* (2020), belongs to the 1.5 generation; and Vincent Lam, the author of *The Headmaster's Wager* (2012), belongs to the second generation. The continuity of this literary production across different immigrant generations testifies to the need to process this traumatic event, a need felt by generations who experienced the conflict as eyewitnesses and those who inherited it in the form of what Marianne Hirsch defined as "postmemory" (82). This phenomenon of intergenerational transmission is obviously not limited to Canada; it occurs transnationally across the diaspora. In fact, some Vietnamese American texts, such as Andrew X Pham's *Catfish and Mandala* (1999) and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), reveal that the coming of age of refugee children is haunted by the past. Interestingly, whereas a first-generation author like Vuong-Riddick relies on autobiographical content to describe her migration from Vietnam to Canada in her memoir and poetry collection, Kim Thúy and Vincent Lam do not hesitate to recur to fictional elements. In particular, Lam uses fiction in *The Headmaster's Wager* (2012) to investigate Vietnam's history through the lens of an unsympathetic character of Chinese descent based in Saigon, who relocated to the US instead of Canada. In these cases, the use of fictional elements highlights that those memories are inhabited by projections.

2 The development of Vietnamese Anglophone literature in the US, Australia, and Canada is a result of the post-1975 diaspora. However, in France, which has the oldest Vietnamese community in the West, the emergence of Vietnamese Francophone literature dates back to the early twentieth century and the colonial period. In contrast, French-Vietnamese literature in Québec began developing after 1975.

The experiences of diasporic Vietnamese are particularly interesting because they raise many questions not only about the legacy of the war, but also about transnationalism, diaspora, globalization, and refugee rights, among other things. Indeed, it is worth noting that, after the Fall of Saigon, many of the refugees who migrated overseas became "stateless" when it came to their Southern Vietnamese identity. The US, Australia, Canada, and France were the main Western countries of resettlement for many Vietnamese refugees. As Nathalie Huỳnh Châu Nguyễn observed (8), the US has the largest number of Vietnamese (2.3 million), followed by Australia (334,785), France (between 300,000 and 350,000), and Canada (275,530). This diaspora has given form to a transnational memory that transcends borders and places, creating a complex network of memories as the experiences of Vietnamese Canadians resonate with those of other diaspora members relocated to other countries. The unofficial and unrecognized voices of many diasporic Vietnamese gradually started to emerge, offering a counternarrative to the memories of both the US and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. As Long T. Bui observed, a new focus on the South Vietnamese side might help "to truly 'Vietnamize' the legacy of war, exposing a critical perspective that had been repressed within Vietnam's communist national imagery and reprogrammed through the 'Americanization' of the war's memory in popular Hollywood films" (2). Their experiences of Vietnamese Canadians may also raise questions about the refugee policies enacted by Western countries in the aftermath of the exodus, such as the creation of "non-places" (Augé 79), where the immigrants have to wait to know whether they will be granted the status of refugee. After all, as Giorgio Agamben wrote, "[i]n the nation-state system, the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man prove to be completely unprotected at the very moment it is no longer possible to characterize them as rights of the citizens of a state" (116). Moreover, the notion of refuge often conceals the challenges that newcomers face in their new environment.

In addition to the texts produced by diasporic Vietnamese, we can identify a second group, informed by writers who have no affiliation with the Vietnamese diaspora. They do not evoke the event to expose unknown aspects of the conflict or to give a name to some of the refugees who came to Canada. Rather, they activate this war memory to express opposition to the government by sharing the experience of marginalized groups. Hence, the Vietnam War has become part of a transnational and transethnic shared memory. Since the Vietnam War was used to foster the idea of a liberal, welcoming, and multicultural Canada, these authors feel the urge to revisit that history to dispute Canada's values.

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A clear example of the possibility offered by fictional accounts is Dionne Brand's celebrated novel, *What We All Long For* (2005). The author, a Black Canadian writer and poet, recounts the lives of a close circle of second-generation twentysomethings living in downtown Toronto from the point of view of a Vietnamese narrator. Through her characters, Dionne imagines second generations as being capable of escaping the nostalgia in which the previous generations seem to indulge, while also rejecting the representation of Canada as a tolerant, colorblind, and multiracial society and proactively imagining a future based on cultural syncretism and hybridity (Goellnicht 200). Therefore, memory and narrative tropes are activated to create a counternarrative to national myths that exalt Canada's multiculturalism, exposing its contradictions and failures while advocating for cross-racial forms of solidarity. A similar drive can also be observed in Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer's *All the Broken Things* (2014), where the diaspora experience is reworked through the myth of Orpheus to make a general statement about humanity. Hence, Brand's and Kuitenbrouwer's novels not only enact a form of cultural appropriation, but they also demonstrate that memory is not fixed or linked to a geographic or temporal point of origin. In other words, it is constantly (re)claimed and moves across nations. Memory is not just the creation of a nostalgic look at the past; it responds to the demands of the present. For this reason, it is often subject to revision and contradicting forces, especially in the context of migration.

The two types of diasporic Vietnamese narratives hitherto described respond to two different types of relations. The narratives written by Vietnamese Canadians are informed by what Margalit defined as "thick relations" and are "grounded in attributes such as parent, friend, lover, fellow-countryman" (7). They are anchored in a shared past and respond to loyalty concerns. Thick relations allow communities to survive in virtue of a shared bond. In contrast, refugee narratives written by other ethnic groups are informed by "thin relations" that rely on a more volatile bond, based on the recognition of a shared human condition and the impulse to feel responsible for the pain of others.

NARRATING THE VIETNAMESE DIASPORA AND CANADA'S MULTICULTURALISM

Even though the refugees from the Vietnam War and their descendants have been actively engaged in the creation of their own "memory projects" (Leavy 14), the host countries have also sought to co-opt their narratives. As Yến Lê Espiritu demonstrated in *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (2014), American popular culture has

often portrayed the military as "good warriors" defending democracy in order to justify the US's self-appointed role as leader of the "free" world. To achieve this goal, the government often refashioned its history of imperialism into a celebratory tale of benevolence by highlighting good deeds capable of turning the debacle into a "lost cause" for democracy. The presence of refugees who fled after the conflict was seen as proof of the former enemy's wickedness, whereas images of soldiers assisting Vietnamese evacuees and Vietnamese showing gratitude toward their rescuers sought to redeem the military (see Espiritu), whose reputation was severely damaged by both the military loss—an emasculating experience (see Jeffords)—and the images of violence that circulated during the war. This narrative not only tried to overcome the Vietnam Syndrome, but it also conveniently avoided recalling that many Americans did not welcome these refugees and that many Vietnamese encountered difficulties once they arrived in the New World.

Instead, these narratives tended to praise those immigrants who, thanks to their hard work, managed to fit into the new society and become successful. They thus renewed faith in the myth and promises of the American Dream and legitimately embodied the "model minority" stereotype (cf. Osajima 2000; Lee 1999), a construction that emerged during the Cold War. As Robert G. Lee highlighted, this contested myth portrays Asian Americans as the "paragon of ethnic virtue," as their economic and social success is considered the result of stoic patience and political obedience (145–179). In his seminal book, *Oriental: Asian Americans in Pop Culture* (1999), he further maintained that "[t]he successful transformation of the Oriental from the exotic to the acceptable was a narrative of Americanization, a sort of latter-day *Pilgrim's Progress*, through which America's anxieties about communism, race-mixing, and transgressive sexuality might be contained and eventually tamed" (Lee 145). Therefore, this myth had two rhetorical dimensions. First, it presented the US as a liberal democracy where people of different ethnic backgrounds could benefit from equal rights and upward mobility, building upon the old myth that cast America as a melting pot. Second, it sent the message to ethnic minorities that assimilation was welcomed, whereas militancy was (and still is) considered a threat.

The US is not the only nation to have co-opted Vietnamese refugees and the notion of refuge to project a certain image of itself. In fact, Vietnamese refugee narratives involuntarily became a signifier and proof of the success of Canada's multiculturalist ideology and immigration policies. It is worth noting that the government's espousal of multi-

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culturalism coincided with the Vietnam War and the exodus of many people from Vietnam and Southeast Asia. To solve the political tensions between the Francophone and Anglophone communities, in 1971, the Pierre Trudeau administration announced a policy of multiculturalism that institutionalized the Canadian Mosaic. In Canada, the key minority is geographically and linguistically defined, and this condition has forced the state to accommodate Francophone and Anglophone divisions through a multicultural policy within a dual linguistic structure, which was subsequently applied to other minority and immigrant groups in Canada (Peach). In particular, the Multiculturalism Act of 1988 grants all Canadians the right to celebrate their ethnic heritage, values, and beliefs, recognizing these elements as contributing to the nation's diversity, provided they do not conflict with the existing laws and the constitution. Furthermore, the claim to accommodate the diversity that shapes the nation has allowed the Canadian government to rewrite April 30 as a National Day of Commemoration. Whereas many diasporic Vietnamese (mainly refugees from South Vietnam) mourn their exile and exodus, Canada celebrates its benevolence, recognizing the fundamental role that Canadians played in rescuing and welcoming thousands of refugees after the Vietnam War. This different interpretation of the historical meaning of the Fall of Saigon is also testified by expressions used to refer to April 30. Indeed, while diasporic Vietnamese call it "Black April Day," to indicate the moment their misfortunes began, the Canadian government labels it as the "Journey to Freedom Day" (Ngo 64). As a result of this semantic shift, the focus is no longer on the refugees' suffering, but on the acceptance of Vietnamese refugees in Canada, the gratitude of the Vietnamese to the Canadians, and the contribution of the people of Vietnamese descent to the country. Vietnamese Canadians are constructed as part of a nation-building project that de facto removes the history of Vietnam and wishfully forgets the violence that triggered their displacement. This erasure is not accidental, as it removes Canada's complicity in the war and portrays the nation as a refugee haven.

Finally, it is difficult to separate the Vietnamese diaspora in Canada from the one in the US. This does not mean that the diaspora in Canada lacks distinct characteristics. Rather, "it reveals how Vietnamese scattered across the globe continue to remain connected to America through both a backward- and forward- looking gaze" (V. Nguyen "Refugee gratitude" 17). Indeed, as Vinh Nguyen pointed out, the main character of Kim Thúy's *Ru* (a semi-autobiographical novel written in French) uses the expression "American Dream" as a blanket phrase to indicate

upward mobility (V. Nguyen "Refugee gratitude" 21). The presence of this expression in a French novel about Vietnamese refugees in Québec—a territory marked by separatist feelings—is revealing. It signifies the pervasiveness of the "American Way," which is an unsurprising aspect given that the US military presence in Southeast Asia lasted twenty years and American cultural products (and lifestyles) have become transnationally adopted because of globalization.

MEMORY IN FLUX: THUONG VUONG-RIDDICK'S RECOLLECTION OF VIETNAM IN *THE EVERGREEN COUNTRY: A MEMOIR OF VIETNAM*

The final part of this article will explore how Thuong Vuong-Riddick's memoir *The Evergreen Country: A Memoir of Vietnam* (2005) complicates Canada's memory of the conflict. I have chosen this text for a variety of reasons, including the fact that it is one of the first memoirs written by a Vietnamese Canadian, which began to challenge the prevailing understanding of the diaspora, at the same time enforcing and resisting dominant narratives that cast the Vietnamese as emblematic victims and/or successful immigrants, as well as grateful beneficiaries of liberal freedom, democracy, and wealth. The text seeks to educate the Canadian readers about the complexities of the war while introducing them to an exotic land. A similar attempt and intention can also be observed in many memoirs published in the US by authors of the Vietnamese diaspora in the 1970s. As Michele Janette observed in her introduction to the anthology *My Viet: Vietnamese American Literature in English, 1962-present*,

> most of the memoirists of the 1970s and '80s wrote because they felt American audiences needed to hear their stories. Their narrative contains hopeful, generous explanations of why they are sharing their stories, such as the desire to promote healing and reconciliation among veterans or the proffering of their lives as examples to other immigrants. (xvii)

It is probably the awareness of being one of the first Vietnamese Canadians to remember the war and her belonging to the first generation that compels Thuong Vuong-Riddick to express gratitude to the host country (Canada) in her memoir. However, I argue that this gratitude never translates into forms of oblivion toward Canada's complicated (racial) history. Rather, the text evokes historical events that undermine the myth of Canada's multiculturalism. At the same time, the author tries to resist voyeuristic and orientalist gazes by using vignettes. Finally, like Vincent Lam's *The Headmaster's Wager*, the memoir emphasizes the demographic diversity of Vietnam, an aspect that is often ignored in Western narratives.

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VIGNETTES FROM VIETNAM

The style of the memoir reveals that, while the narrative may serve as a guide to Otherness for a Western readership, the dry style acts as a form of resistance. Each chapter functions as a sort of vignette focusing on a particular place or time, while all the other elements are blurred. The lack of adjectives and the essential nature of the narrative leave many details in the background, making it the reader's responsibility to reconstruct the full scene. Hence, these chapters resemble photographic images, displaying a "punctum" (Barthes 1981): a partial object that is powerful enough to provoke a response from the observer. This photographic rendering is not at all surprising, given that the Vietnam War was one of the first conflicts to be fully televised, and the presence of compact cameras—including the famous Leica—together with news cameras allowed data to become easily portable and rapidly transferable. This created a de facto semiotic space that ended up shaping the collective memory of the conflict (see Hallin; Sontag). Yet, in this case, the evoked images do not belong to the public archive but to the family album. Hence, it is no coincidence that the text also includes family pictures to validate its veracity, exploiting the indexical value of photography.

Moreover, the decision to leave many details in the background could be seen as an attempt to abide by what Edouard Glissant called "the right to opacity" (209), indirectly implying the right to exist beyond the Western gaze. In fact, the narrator seems aware of the Western tendency to look at Vietnam with patronizing eyes. In the last chapters, she describes her return as a tourist in 1995—after the "normalization of relations" with Vietnam—to the places of her childhood. Interestingly, she is accompanied by two Canadian friends, and when one of them solicits the Vietnamese to speak French, she scolds him, saying: "The French stayed one century and did not learn Vietnamese" (167). The text here seems to mediate between the need to express gratitude to the new country and inform readers, who must be introduced to the history of the author's homeland, and the desire to prevent her personal story from being co-opted into nationalist narratives or viewed through an orientalist lens. The decision to use personal vignettes allows the author to allude to violence without describing it in graphic terms, avoiding a pornographic rendering of the war and the enactment of what Chong termed the "Oriental obscene" (10–12).

AN ETHNIC CHINESE PERSPECTIVE

As the title suggests, *The Evergreen Country: A Memoir of Vietnam* (2007) is a biographical account that recalls salient moments in the life of its author, Thuong Vuong-Riddick, a Vietnamese Canadian with Chinese ancestry who migrated to France, and later to Canada because of the Vietnam War. At the very beginning of the memoir, the author reveals that her family name is a transliteration of the Chinese surname Wang (Vuong-Riddick 10). By recalling her ancestry, she makes the Western reader aware of the polysemous expression "boat people." In the Western world, the term is often used generically to refer to the humanitarian crisis that led many Vietnamese people to leave their country between 1975 and 1995, but Vuong-Riddick reclaims the term to show how her family's migration preceded the so-called Vietnam War:

> My family's story begins with the first flow of "boat people" at the end of the 19th century. My grandparents and great-grand-parents came to Vietnam from mainland China — from Fukien, now called Fujian […] At the end of the 19th century, the Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, British, and French controlled Southeast Asia. Thousands of Chinese peasants fled the wars of empire and resistance in sampans. The Vietnamese called these people nguoi tau, which means "boat people." Chinese migrants populated cities, covering the streets with a latticework of small businesses. (Vuong-Riddick 6)

Through this biographical note, the author teaches Western readers about the complex history of this geographical area. At the same time, she complicates the understanding of Vietnamese identity, showing the existence of different ethnic groups, and colonial stratifications. The narrative outlines some cultural differences between Chinese and Vietnamese cultures (food, astrology, etc.) and the historical tensions that characterized the relations between these two countries, while highlighting some core similarities, as both cultures shared Confucian values. However, the memoir never turns into an uncritical celebration of hybridity, as the text makes the reader aware of the cultural clash and how the prolonged contact with (neo)colonial agents created new outcasts: the Métis, mixed-race orphans who were left behind by French (and later American) soldiers when they returned to their (respective) homelands. The memoir also portrays several attempts to assimilate the Chinese minority by both the government of Saigon and communist Vietnam.

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CULTURAL MEDIATION BETWEEN RESISTANCE AND COMPLIANCE

In the memoir, the author-narrator is both an ethnographer and a cultural mediator who gives the reader insight into Vietnamese and Chinese cultures by drawing parallels or highlighting the differences with Western culture. For instance, in some passages, she recalls the texts she read while attending Sainte-Marie Catholic school during the colonial years to explain how the Vietnamese and Chinese parenting model diverged from the French (and Western) one: "The French education I was getting made me look at my mother and my relationship with her through foreign eyes" (Vuong-Riddick 57). While French mothers were present and affectionate, her own mother never showed any form of physical affection, despite caring for her children.

The memoir not only stresses the different parenting models, but also different "values dimensions" (cf. Hofstede et al.) based on identity (collectivism vs. individualism), hierarchy (large power distance vs. small power distance), gender, caring, and obligations. For instance, the author explains the gendered and hierarchical structure that governed Vietnamese and Chinese families while stressing how and to what extent her family diverged from that model, but also how French colonialism partially transformed family relations, providing imaginary alternatives and models for comparison:

> The French had introduced the notion of individuality to Vietnam, and they had also brought the concept of personal happiness. In *Spring Uncompleted*, the heroine is against the practice of concubinages, because it contradicts and undermines both notions. "Better to be a peasant's wife than to be a king's concubine." (Vuong-Riddick 40)

As the author recalls, French books started to circulate and foster the idea of romantic love in a country where marriages were transactions between families and individual consent was not necessary. These new ideas contrasted with the established values transmitted across generations through oral stories and traditional Vietnamese literature. In many Vietnamese traditional narratives, the main heroine often sacrifices herself because of filial piety, as in the famous early nineteenth-century poem *Truyện Kiều* [The Tale of Kiều], written by Nguyễn Du.

The text makes it clear that individual desires and aspirations were often sacrificed in the name of the community's well-being:

> I also began to realize that my father was not the free man defined in the French world. On the contrary, he was indebted by a thousand links to many people

> in every aspect of his life. He had not chosen his wife, his profession (he had wanted to be a scholar), or the place where he lived. He was entangled in his family relations. (Vuong-Riddick 58)

While describing the cultural difference separating the Vietnamese from the Chinese, and these two groups from Western countries such as France and Canada, the narrator avoids making qualitative judgments and favoring one or the other model. Rather, she ponders how those cultural notions shaped her understanding of the world and history while trying to trace the moment she came into contact with certain values, manifesting a hybrid upbringing. The themes of hybridity and porous borders pervade the narrative on several occasions, as many of the characters must display multicultural savvy and mediation skills in order to survive and adapt to different circumstances. For instance, her father uses his limited knowledge of the French language to beg colonial soldiers to spare his shop—the family's main source of income—from destruction, whereas her sister skillfully uses her knowledge of English to do business with the Americans in Saigon. As for the author, French schools made her education possible, allowing her to defer the obligation to marry at a young age, while her French language skills enabled her to escape Vietnam thanks to a scholarship and subsequently provided her with an income to support her family in Canada. Furthermore, the memoir acknowledges the role that French books played in her formation, alongside Chinese and Vietnamese tales.

The narrator's role as a cultural guide to an exotic land that must be unveiled and explained to a Western readership allows the author to delve into the cultural differences between North and South Vietnam before the country was politically partitioned. It also complicates the attempt to conflate the diasporic Vietnamese experience with the history and exodus generated by the Fall of Saigon. Indeed, although she belongs to the Vietnamese diaspora, she grew up in Hanoi, moving to Saigon with her family after the Geneva Conference because of her father's business relations with former French colonials. Once she arrived in Saigon and encountered other children, they pointed out her otherness: she wore different clothes, had a different accent, and manifested different manners. While stressing these differences, the memoir also explains that this division does not do justice to the cultural diversity of Vietnam. For this reason, she mentions Vietnamese people with different faiths (e.g., Catholics and Buddhists) and from different ethnic backgrounds (the Khmer, the Cham, the Jarai, Bru, and Rade, among others). The acknowledgment of the presence

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of several minorities allows the author to present (South and North) Vietnam as both a victim and a perpetrator, that is, a colonized country and a colonizer throughout its history:

> More than two million ethnic people had been conquered and destroyed by the Vietnamese. Our guide emphasized the cruelty of the Nugent lords at the end of the 17th century, who had decreed that for every Cham man and woman arrested together, the man would be beheaded and the woman would be forced to marry a Vietnamese. (Vuong-Riddick 167)

Interestingly, this duplicity is also evident in the depiction of other nationals. For instance, the memoir presents French colonials as both offenders and victims of the Viet Minh's ruthlessness. Furthermore, it acknowledges that the Vietnamese diaspora did not start with the war and reminds the reader that many Vietnamese living in the Tonkin area were forced by French colonials to immigrate to New Caledonia.

QUESTIONING CANADA'S MULTICULTURALISM WHILE PERFORMING GRATITUDE

Vuong-Riddick's attempt to engage with an ethical form of remembering, acknowledging the suffering inflicted and endured by each side, allows a critical stance toward Canada to emerge. To explain certain historical events to a Western (if not Canadian) readership, the memoir draws an uncanny parallel to Canada's history, which ends up undermining the myth of Canada as a safe haven. Indeed, while explaining how the deterioration of the relations between China and Vietnam in 1975 led the Vietnamese government to take repressive measures against the Chinese minority, forcing the latter to either leave the country or go to work camps euphemistically labeled "New Economic Zones," the memoir mentions the incarceration of many Japanese Canadians during World War II. Interestingly, the year the Canadian Multiculturalism Act was established (1988) coincides with the year redress was given to Japanese Canadians who were relocated and imprisoned from 1941 to 1949. This reference challenges the portrayal of Canada as a tolerant and multicultural society, because it reflects a resurgence of repressed issues that compel the nation to reconsider its approach to ethnicity.

Similarly, Vuong-Riddick acknowledges contemporary Vietnam's attempts to "Vietnamize" the Indigenous Mountaineers culturally, linguistically, socially, and ideologically. To explain this coercive form of assimilation, the text recalls and draws parallels to the experiences of many Indigenous peoples in Canada, whose children were abducted

by government agencies in order to promote their assimilation into mainstream culture. Beginning in the 1880s and continuing until the second half of the twentieth century (the last federally run residential school closed in 1996), Indigenous children were regularly removed from their homes, families, and cultures in order to be assimilated into the Canadian way of life and converted to Christianity (see Castellano et al.). By reminding the reader of this event, the memoir shows how the gift of freedom that Canada offers to the refugees is built upon the deterritorialization of another community. As the Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard remarked, Canada "has been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their land and self-determining authority" (42). Therefore, even though Vuong-Riddick expresses gratitude toward Canada in the memoir, which follows a rather traditional trajectory in which the war disrupts the comfort and tranquility of middle-class life and forces the Vuong family to migrate and resettle in different countries, the narrative is not oblivious to the shadows cast by Canada's benevolence. Given the above, the memoir's closing lines should not be interpreted as an attempt to align with a nationalist, multicultural, and assimilationist agenda: "In Canada, as another immigrant wrote, 'I can be like a newborn and begin a new life,' in this tender green from the beginning of the world." Instead, they show that the feeling of gratitude does not impede the formulation of a critical stance. Rather, expressing gratitude is a way to recognize one's own good fortune. Although Vuong-Riddick managed to escape Vietnam before the war reached its most dramatic moment, she acknowledges that many other Vietnamese were not so lucky. The stories that she shares at the end of the memoir not only seem to constitute a testimonial archive of what happened in the country after the war, but they also function as "what ifs," reminding her of what might have happened had she not received a government scholarship to go to France.

Abstract: This article discusses how Canada has appropriated the narrative of the Vietnam War to present itself as a progressive country. Specifically, it analyzes how the Land of Maple Leaf co-opted diasporic Vietnamese narratives to promote a nation-building project that exalted the country's multicultural ideology and fostered its image as a peaceful kingdom. The article also examines how one of the first memoirs written by a Vietnamese Canadian, Thuong Vuong-Riddick's *The Evergreen Country: A Memoir of Vietnam* (2007), complicates our understanding of the diaspora by both enforcing and resisting dominant narratives that portray Vietnamese Canadians as emblematic victims and/or successful immigrants who are grateful beneficiaries of liberal freedom, democracy, and wealth.

Keywords: Canada, Vietnam War, diaspora, memory, Thuong Vuong-Riddick, mobile memory, resistance, gratitude

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