

Carole Martin

Tracing Im/Mobilities in Contemporary Vietnamese American
Refugee Literature

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Tracing Im/Mobilities in Contemporary Vietnamese American Refugee Literature

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 Glo-betrotters: Tracing Homes and Homelands in Vietnamese American Refugee Short Stories,” which appeared in *Perspectives of Homelessness (2022)*, edited by Anna Flügge 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-gearred 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