

Refugee Gratitude

Narrating Success and Intersubjectivity in Kim Thúy's *Ru*

Revisiting Success

After recounting a narrative of warfare, migration from Vietnam, and resettlement in Canada through a series of impressionistic vignettes, Kim Thúy ends her semi-autobiographical novel *Ru* with an image of rebirth and renewal: a phoenix rising from its ashes. The narrator writes, “all those individuals from my past have shaken the grime off their backs in order to spread their wings with plumage of red and gold, before thrusting themselves sharply towards the great blue space, decorating my children’s sky, showing them that one horizon always hides another and it goes on like that to infinity, to the unspeakable beauty of renewal, to intangible rapture” (140). In addition, she reflexively draws attention to the existence of the novel as a document that attests to the possibilities of reinvention and immigrant “success.” The novel’s overarching theme of personal and collective resilience in the face of struggle, and triumphant final note, makes it an emblematic case of the Vietnamese refugee success story. Indeed, various glowing reviews in national newspapers have hailed the author as “the perfect immigrant” (Barber n. pag.) and praised her story as one following the path “from riches to rags to riches” (Bartley n. pag.). In turn, the resultant critical and commercial success of the novel reinforces the image of Kim Thúy as a model refugee.

The narrative of social, economic, and psychic “success,” as seen in a text like *Ru*, is a hallmark of *mainstream* Asian North American literature—literature that is, according to Viet Nguyen, “most likely to be read by non-Asian [North] American readers and critics” (147-48). As many scholars have pointed out, the in-text narration of success by minority and immigrant writers can play a crucial role in the mainstream reception of such texts. Read as public

demonstrations of success performed by those who have been rescued by and/or allowed entry into Western democratic nation-states, these narratives help to confirm liberal ideals of freedom, democracy, and equality. They function as proof of the inclusive, tolerant, and fundamentally non-racist constitution of the Canadian and American national space. Thus the immigrant's success can be construed as the nation's own success at multicultural, collective-building projects. Because of their ideologically reaffirming function, stories of immigrant and refugee success are often more palatable and easily digested by mainstream readers and state structures alike.

Yen Le Espiritu identifies the discourse of the "good refugee"—deployed by mainstream society and Vietnamese Americans themselves—as one that coalesced during a historical conjuncture that saw the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the War in Vietnam and the emergence of renewed American imperial ambitions. She writes, "otherwise absent in US public discussions of Vietnam, Vietnamese refugees become most visible and intelligible to Americans as successful, assimilated, and anti-communist newcomers to the American 'melting pot.' Represented as the grateful beneficiary of US-style freedom, Vietnamese in the United States become the featured evidence of the appropriateness of the US war in Vietnam" (xv). The figure of the well-assimilated and successful Vietnamese refugee not only allows for the revisionist casting of America's role in Southeast Asia as defender and savior, but it is also appropriated as justification for present and future US military interventions overseas. The collapsing of refugee success with American "victory" in war has dangerous consequences for past, present, and future understandings of war and militarism. Espiritu's analysis contributes to an ongoing critique of the model minority myth that has shadowed popular discussions of Asians in North America, and rightly warns us of the potentially dangerous implications of their success stories. The success narrative can become regulatory and punitive and, as a result, easily lends itself to appropriation by revisionist, nationalistic, and neo-imperial forces.

While structural critiques of Asian North American success and how it gets deployed are both crucial and urgent, they often neglect the nuanced subjective and contextual specificities that accompany instances of "making it." I turn, thus, to a reconsideration of the success narrative by meditating on how these stories are integral to the intertwined processes of survival and subject formation for those who have experienced intense struggle, loss, and trauma. More specifically, I want to ask: What is the purpose and value of narrating various forms of success for individuals who have lived under

the conditions of war and its aftermath, surrounded by both the imminent threat and immediate reality of destruction, disappearances, and death? How does the attainment of socio-economic prosperity—including educational, professional, and artistic success—signify for war survivors and refugees who have known incredible material lack and deprivation? Are celebrations of success, and affirmations of resilience and survival, different kinds of political statements in contexts where physical survival and livelihood has never been guaranteed?

The aim of this essay therefore is not to dwell on how narratives of refugee success are produced for and deployed by the state and its apparatuses, but to seek a way of examining stories of struggle and triumph beyond the determining frame of liberal-democratic nationalism. I wish to momentarily remove immigrant success stories from the mainstream (white) context, not to suggest that this removal is ever entirely possible but to change the point of emphasis from how these narratives function as “capital” within dominant hegemonic structures to how they might serve the subjects who produce them. Such a shift will work to complicate Asian North American critiques of success and of figures like that of the model minority, and in doing so push for a more nuanced consideration of the complexity and heterogeneity of Asian North American subjectivities, particularly those borne out of the violence of empire.

Commenting on the radical, leftist tradition of Asian American studies, Viet Nguyen points out that Asian American intellectuals “prefer to see themselves and the objects of their critical inquiry as bad subjects” (144). Eve Oishi defines these “bad” Asian subjects as “any Asian who makes noise, acts nasty, or in any way flouts the expectations of racist stereotype . . . Bad as in ‘badass.’ Bad as in anyone who does not covet white patriarchal approval; anyone who challenges racism, class oppression, sexism, homophobia” (221). This ideological predisposition to idealize socially and politically resistant subjects leads many in the academy and beyond to disregard narratives of success as automatically and uncomplicatedly playing into nationalistic, multicultural, and assimilationist agendas—that is, to accept the common perception that success breeds compliant, normative “good” subjects, and vice versa. I contend that we need to pause before equating financial, social, and artistic success with absorption into neoliberal forms of capitalist citizenship, with consent to nationalist principles, with a desire for the status quo. An alternate mode of analysis, coexisting with a trenchant critique of ideological structures, could make room for consideration of the complicated niceties of Asian North America in discussions of success and failure, of the

facts of war and other historical atrocities and the ways they imprint themselves on the bodies and psyches of the human remainders, and of the pain, as well as beauty, in the everyday struggle to live and survive.

To this end, I analyze Kim Thúy's *Ru* as a text that reorients the question of success to return the discussion to the specificities of embodied experience and subjectivity. This return, however, is not towards a privatizing discourse of the individual, identified by David Palumbo-Liu as marking model minority discourse; instead, it seeks an investigation of the particularities of experience that views individuals and individual negotiations as indexes of a larger sociality. Unlike theories of post-identity that try to do away with the notion of subjectivity—such as Kandice Chuh's "subjectless discourse"—my approach insists that the problem of subjectivity remains a pertinent concern for constituencies who emerge in the wake of war and atrocities, for whom a whole and healed subjectivity might still be a desired and as yet unfulfilled hope.

In its depiction of a movement towards an intelligible, articulable, and coherent subjective self, *Ru* addresses a problematic central to the study of diasporas: how to conceive of the self when some segments of that self seem so incongruent and incompatible with other segments. Put otherwise, the novel raises the question of how it is possible for former refugee subjects to embody and live multiple, oftentimes discrepant meanings, memories, and histories. It is a question of how to occupy that interstitial space—theoretically celebrated but materially vexed—where the legal designation of refugee has dissolved but a sense of *refugeeness* still lingers. The manner in which *Ru* works through or "resolves" these issues provides an occasion to contemplate the meaning of success, especially as it manifests through expressions of gratitude. This essay takes the idea of success not as the teleological destination of the American Dream, but as a node in the continual process of survival and subject formation for refugee Asian North American subjects. Focusing on the context of the Vietnamese diaspora, I argue that for refugee subjects, success can become a narrative device, a rhetorical strategy, and a mode of articulation for working through and understanding *their* experiences and memories.

The Grateful Refugee

Thus far, I have framed *Ru* in an Asian North American and Vietnamese diasporic context by employing American-centered criticism. This is due mainly to the fact that the bulk of literary and cultural productions as well as theoretical and critical scholarship by and on the Vietnamese diaspora have

come out of the United States. I do not wish to elide the particularities of the Canadian context or to appropriate the novel as an “American” text, as has been done in the past with works such as Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*.¹ I draw on scholarship that focuses on Vietnamese American experiences because many of the arguments, insights, and claims can be extrapolated and applied to other parts of the diaspora, such as Canada, where similar scholarly activity is only just emerging. Considering that the origin of mass Vietnamese migration at the end of the twentieth century is a direct result of American military presence in Southeast Asia, it is also difficult to speak of Vietnam and its diaspora in isolation from the US. Thus, in the novel, Kim Thúy explicitly references the “American Dream” as a master discourse guiding the desires of refugees who have landed in Canada, and Quebec no less, where questions of sovereignty and separatism have long been contentious issues. Kim Thúy’s usage of the blanket phrase “American Dream” in a French-Canadian context not only points to the way American culture and ideology have become transnationally pervasive in the era of globalization, but it also reveals how Vietnamese scattered across the globe continue to remain connected to America through both a backward- and forward-looking gaze.

At the same time, this unique Quebecois Canadian context also complicates many of the arguments that have been made by scholars regarding refugees of the War in Vietnam. Mainly, it poses the question of how those in places *outside* the United States relate to the socio-political-historical specificities of their respective national contexts *in addition to* dominant American discourses surrounding the war and its afterlife. For instance, Canada as a nation did not officially participate in the War in Vietnam, and thus the terms on which it took in Vietnamese refugees are different from those of nations like the US, France, or Australia, which fought, at one time or another, in a country with a defined agenda. In stressing this difference, my intention is not to reinforce what Jason Ziedenisberg calls the “peaceable kingdom” mythology of Canadian benevolence and innocence or to diminish its complicity in a war that needs to be understood as a global racial project. In fact, it must be remembered that while Canada did not join the fighting effort, it acted as the chief arms supplier to the US, providing resources and materials that fueled combat and drove the war economy. This implicates Canada not only in the military-industrial complex, but also in a global war machine directed at racialized peoples during the Cold War era.

Further, historians like John Price have begun interrogating the triangulated connections between Canada, the United States, and Great Britain that have

facilitated the circulation of shared racial discourses and imperial logics between these “Atlantic” nations.² Though never having possessed an overseas empire, the Canadian nation has a long history of restricting Asian immigration based directly on racist and imperialist ideologies. Canada’s relation to its immigrants and refugees is directly shaped by its relationship with empires. These colonial values have also undergirded its foreign policy matters. Yet, a fine distinction needs to be made between the direct ways in which the US waged war in Vietnam and Canada’s supporting or peripheral involvement. The point I wish to emphasize here, and will return to later, is that texts, narratives, and subjects from other parts of the Vietnamese diaspora may not fit neatly into some of the theoretical and interpretive frameworks that have been put forward by American scholars to date.

First published in French in Quebec in 2009 to critical acclaim, *Ru* went on to receive a host of prestigious prizes, including Canada’s Governor General’s Literary Award for Fiction (French language), France’s Grand prix littéraire RTL-Lire, and Italy’s Mondello Prize for Multiculturalism. While the novel’s narrative arc and details resemble those of Kim Thúy’s own life story, the book was marketed not as a memoir but as a work of fiction, making it the first novel by a self-identified Vietnamese Canadian. Written in a structure that mimics short recollections of memory, the poetic fragments oscillate in both space and time, weaving together the narrator Nguyễn An Tịnh’s childhood in and escape from Vietnam and experiences of settling in Canada with reflections on diverse subjects such as motherhood, autism, prostitution, and Amerasians. Pieced together into a narrative, however, the novel’s story follows a conventional trajectory in which war disrupts the comforts of middle-class life, forcing migration and resettlement in a new country. After enduring numerous struggles, the narrator and her family successfully rebuild their lives through hard work, sacrifice, and the kindness of those around them, rising from the poverty of refugee migrants to the socio-economic success of model minority citizens.

It is undeniable that written into *Ru*’s narrative is a sense of thankfulness, a belief in the benevolence and generosity of the Canadian nation for providing the opportunities and the conditions for the possibility of life and “success.” How that belief circulates in Canadian society, while extremely important to understanding the cultural politics of gratitude, is not my primary concern here. The very fact that *Ru* received the kind of national and international recognition that it did reveals how liberal multicultural ideology responds to such minority voices, as well as the political stakes

involved in official acknowledgement. Countless scholars, including Himani Bannerji and Sunera Thobani, have convincingly critiqued official state multiculturalism in Canada as a discourse that contains and manages “difference” in a way that maintains white privilege and hegemony. The ideological ends and implications of the mainstream exaltation of a refugee narrative like Kim Thúy’s is but one side of the multifaceted story; I am interested instead in thinking through how the refugee subject herself constructs a narrative of intersubjectivity that is able to integrate such beliefs into the formation of a “post”-refugee identity. Kim Thúy has said that the novel is an homage to Canada and to the heroes of her past. *Ru* itself reads like a catalogue of gratitude to the people who have made the narrator’s present a reality. The task at hand is to read the novel *alongside* the interpretation whereby the refugee’s achievement of success and feelings of gratitude constitute a model minority discourse celebrating the goodness of liberal nationalism and multiculturalism.

Ru’s narrator represents what I call a grateful refugee. The figure of the grateful refugee is closely related to that of the highly assimilated and successful “good refugee.” The “good refugee” is often also constructed as a model minority, who is perceived as hardworking and resourceful and, through both innate and cultural qualities, is able to achieve educational, economic, and social success with no or very little assistance from the state. Model minorities are made visible as exemplary ethnic citizens and as disciplinary cases marginalizing other, less compliant minorities who speak out against racism and classism, and refuse to evince seeming independence from social structures for their livelihood.³

The grateful refugee, as I conceive of it, can occupy the discursive and ideological positions of both the “good refugee” and/or the model minority simultaneously. In that way, it is vulnerable to the same critiques that have been launched against both these other discourses. The grateful refugee, however, provides us with a different lens, one less conditioned to liberal judgment, with which to consider the complicatedness of refugee experience. While the “good refugee” is a construct that ultimately directs us to the contours of the nation-state, the grateful refugee allows us to focus in on the lives of refugees themselves. As a figure, it carves out a critical space for the expression of various forms of immigrant success and for feelings of gratitude to those peoples, institutions, and nations that have in one way or another provided the opportunity for such successes to materialize without being necessarily or automatically regarded as fodder for ideology

or ideological maneuverings. What *Ru* demonstrates is that the articulation of success through gratitude can be a powerful tool in making sense of traumatic pasts, and permits—as a technology of the self in the Foucauldian sense—a critical process of self (trans)formation.

Gratitude and Intersubjectivity

Kim Thúy presents us with a model of subjectivity predicated on gratitude, in which gratitude enables the refugee who has had the stability of meaning pulled away—home, nation, family, property, rights, dreams—to reconstruct a life and a sense of identity, and to link that self with others to create an understanding of the individual and individual success as mutually constitutive, shared, and collective. In this way, an expression of thankfulness towards Canada is a fundamental component of the biographical narrative that accounts for her present existence (as a Canadian citizen), one which came into being against the odds, in situations where survival and success were not in the realm of expectation or even possibility. Thus, in the novel she expresses gratitude to the Canadian nation through its nearest representatives, the small Quebec town of Granby and its inhabitants. Granby is described as a “warm belly” (21) and “heaven on earth” (25), while its people are characterized as “angels” who were sent down to earth to care for the refugees: “By the dozen they showed up at our doors to give us warm clothes, toys, invitations, dreams” (22-23). Employing maternal metaphors and images, the narrator characterizes the white Canadians who initially guided her and other refugees in their early days as mothers and caretakers. Marie-France, the narrator’s first teacher in Canada was “like a mother duck”: “she walked ahead of us, asking us to follow her to the haven where we would be children again . . . She watched over our transplantation with all the sensitivity of a mother for her premature baby” (9). Jeanne, another teacher, “liberated my voice without using words . . . It was thanks to [her] that I learned how to free my voice from the folds of my body so it could reach my lips” (97). This picture of a nurturing and inclusive Canada neatly aligns with official state multiculturalism; it also rehearses the common belief in Canada’s “white civility.”⁴

Yet, through narrating gratitude, what also emerges are formative moments in which an inchoate idea of self, being, and futurity began to crystallize for the narrator: Jeanne’s example taught the silent refugee how to utilize her voice; the sway of Marie-France’s full bum gave the angular narrator her “first desire as an immigrant” (9) and the “power to look ahead, to look far ahead” (10); the kindness of Granby’s residents reaffirmed hope

and the possibility of livelihood. Underscored here is the idea that Canada did in fact give her the chance to begin anew. Her present understanding of “successful” self thus requires an account of these moments through the form of thankfulness, especially because self—existence, livelihood, being, identity—was not a given, but was, at one point, on the brink of vanishing. The importance of gratitude, then, must be read in the context of the narrator’s experience of “nothingness” and “emptiness,” one of material and existential uncertainty, that threads through her narrative of refuge.

Analyzing Vietnamese refugee narratives, Sucheng Chan identifies “immense suffering, deprivation, loss, and violent uprooting” (251) as common features of migration experiences. Many oral narratives and life stories, like those collected in *Voices of the Boat People* and *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation* recount political persecution under a Communist regime that uses imprisonment, indoctrination, torture, and execution in re-education camps; social and economic oppression, like racial discrimination (in the case of mixed-race Amerasians and ethnic Chinese); the confiscation of property and the restriction of access to education and employment; and poverty and lack of future opportunities in underdeveloped, postwar Vietnam as reasons for fleeing the country. For those who escaped, the dangerous journeys often involved illness, starvation, and death, and many boats encountered deadly storms and pirates, who plundered the passengers and raped women and children, on the South China Sea.

Ru’s narrator provides a description of a boat journey, relaying in hauntingly sensuous and visceral images the paralyzing fear felt and lived collectively by herself and her fellow passengers as they sit waiting, drifting in the hold of their boat:

Heaven and Hell embraced in the belly of our boat. Heaven promised a turning point in our lives, a new future, a new history. Hell, though, displayed our fears: fear of pirates, fear of starvation, fear of poisoning by biscuits soaked in motor oil, fear of running out of water, fear of being unable to stand up, fear of having to urinate in the red pot that was passed from hand to hand, fear that the scabies on the baby’s head was contagious, fear of never again setting foot on solid ground, fear of never again seeing the faces of our parents, who were sitting in the darkness surrounded by two hundred people. . . . fear was transformed into a hundred-faced monster who sawed off our legs and kept us from feeling the stiffness in our immobilized muscles. We were frozen in fear, by fear. . . . We were numb, imprisoned by the shoulders of some, the legs of others, the fear of everyone. We were paralyzed. (4-5)

This terrorizing fear expressed by the narrator also reveals a suspension of subjectivity, where fear of the many threats to life forecloses futurity,

constricting and petrifying the self in a physical, psychological, and affective hold. The stunting of hope or a “turning point,” a “new future,” and a “new history,” part and parcel of the migration process, is a necessary frame within which to read the narration of gratitude and success recounted in Kim Thúy's novel. The expression of gratitude for a second chance at life and the narration of how that chance gets utilized need to be understood against a backdrop of an affective and material experience of absence and impossibility. Early in *Ru*, the narrator recalls how this condition of suspended self is exacerbated when the “empty” refugee comes into contact with the newness of Canada in another paralyzing moment—this one of arrival. Upon landing in Quebec, she writes, “I was . . . unable to talk or to listen, even though I was neither deaf nor mute. I now had no points of reference, no tools to allow me to dream, to project myself into the future, to be able to experience the present, in the present” (8).

The sense of physical and psychic disorientation is directly shaped by the time spent in the refugee camp. In a RCI radio interview, Kim Thúy describes the experience of living in a camp as a life-altering event in which “everything went down to zero” and thus “everything else came as a gift afterwards.” She continues, “after that four months of emptiness, of nothingness, you don't compare with what you have before, you're just, I'd say, thankful that you have a new life, that you have a new beginning. Starting over, you're just thankful.” The characterizations of the camp as “empty” and the new life after the camp as a “gift” are two tropes in conventional articulations of a refugee affect of gratitude. Mimi Thi Nguyen calls this the “gift of freedom” that America confers on refugee subjects—indeed it produces a kind of un-being or “poisonous” subjectivity—as a debt to liberal empire. The grateful Vietnamese refugee, who is born from this gift of freedom, first through war then by refuge, is ensnared in an endless debt-payment relationship to the state and its imperial logics. Here, because recompense through gratefulness is always incommensurate to the gift, it compels obligation by tying the debtor to the debtee, binding the refugee to liberalism's governance and its past, present, and future empires of freedom. Among other things, Nguyen demonstrates how gratitude dangerously slips into indebtedness.

Though illuminating in the way it reveals the complex forms of power and violence at play in obliging the refugee to give thanks, Nguyen's analysis does not account for the situation whereby the state power in question is *not* “an uncontested superpower on the world stage” that “instrumentalizes

an idea of human freedom . . . to reinforce a politics of war, terror, and occupation” (xi). In other words, the concepts of debt and gratitude take on different significations outside the United States, for instance, in contexts like Canada—a nation that is not a global military power committed to a politics of defending the free world against terrorism, a nation that did not directly bring about the upheaval and displacement of Vietnamese populations but did play an important role in their rescue.⁵ Much of the ally guilt and what Gil Loescher and John A. Scanlan term “calculated kindness”—the strategic rescue and admittance of refugees directed by a Cold War anti-communist ideology—woven into US policy is missing from Canada’s decision to admit Vietnamese asylum seekers.⁶ To be clear, I am not simply advocating a position of Canadian moral superiority or global benevolence. My suggestion here, and *Ru* provides a good example, is that a different relationship between the Vietnamese refugee and the state arises in the Canadian context. For a grateful Vietnamese-Canadian refugee like *Ru*’s narrator, gratitude does not necessarily bind her (or him) to liberalism’s empire of freedom, because the nation did not extend, in the first instance, that violent “gift” to the refugees it took into its care. Thus, one of the major contradictions of refugee gratitude—that it elides the historical forces that created the conditions of flight and the need for asylum-seeking in the first place—is ameliorated when the recipient of that gratitude did not directly and actively create those very conditions.⁷

But, as *Ru*’s public reception demonstrates, gratitude towards Canada affixes the refugee, like a piece of a puzzle, into the hegemonic mosaic of Canadian multiculturalism. The “stickiness” of gratitude that Nguyen culls out in her analysis remains, and this adhesion bears further critical elaboration. At the end of her book, Nguyen takes a turn from her line of argument to gesture at alternate attachments to debt that have the potential to trouble the oppressive force of freedom. She writes,

[a]gainst the commodity logic of race, gender, or property, can we think of debt as producing another economy of intense contact with all the multiple, heterogeneous, not-same strangers . . . Clearly we cannot acquit the debt (indeed, we cannot but default), but, moreover, we can refuse to be circumscribed by the horizons of significance or obligation brought to bear on us . . . Debt points toward a different social order, keeping us in contact with alternate collectivities of others who bear the trace of human freedom that falls apart, or seizes hold, in its giving. (189)

Here, Nguyen opens up different possibilities and directions for debt attachments. The debt incurred by the gift of freedom may in fact become the very basis for the emergence of alternate forms of resistance, solidarity,

and sociality; it may facilitate contacts and engagements that are unintended byproducts of violent freedom. My contention that gratitude—as a kind of debt repayment—can also facilitate the formation of “post”-refugee intersubjectivity builds on Nguyen’s prompt, but is in no way an adequate response to her complex treatment of the “subject” under the layered envelopments of freedom. What I suggest, however, is that gratitude can engender the kinds of multiple attachments that constitute diasporic refugee subjects.

In my formulation, gratitude can be regarded as an affect or social feeling—as theorized by Sara Ahmed and Teresa Brennan, among others—produced in moments of contact and exchange between the refugee and the state and its extensions—that is, as a “structure of feeling” in Raymond Williams’ sense, both produced in and constitutive of social moments. As such it exists in the interstices as a binding agent, linking subjects and institutions together within a larger socio-political and cultural field. Yet, gratitude’s ability to attach also allows the refugee to exist as part of a larger sociality and think of the self and its successes beyond terms of individuality. If gratitude is a binding agent, functioning to secure the refugee to the state in an interminable relation of debt-repayment, as in the American context, or to position the ethnic immigrant as an included and participating member in a multicultural mosaic dominated by a white, Anglo-Francophone dyad, as in the Canadian case, it can also facilitate the fastening of the refugee to *other subjects*—kin, lovers, teachers, kind strangers, benefactors, communities—and thus provide a potential model of subjectivity based on relationality, connectivity, and sociality.

Ru instantiates the various ways in which gratitude can be directed, as well as its multiple receiving objects and/or subjects. Feelings of gratitude are not solely directed at white Canadians or the Canadian nation, but also at other refugees and survivors. Thus, in addition to a celebration of Canada, the novel makes room for telling of the generousities, wisdoms, and altruisms of those “small” individuals who have had a hand in saving the narrator’s life and in shaping the contours of her subjectivity. For example, she pays tribute to Anh Phi, a family friend who found and returned the lost taels of gold the narrator’s family eventually used to pay for their passage out of Vietnam. His selfless and heroic act during postwar Vietnam’s “chaotic peacetime,” where “it was the norm for hunger to replace reason, for uncertainty to usurp morality” (89), established the condition of possibility for any kind of physical existence for the narrator and her family. Her aunt Six, who labored in a chicken processing plant in Quebec, enabled the narrator to form her

own dreams of the future. By giving the narrator a simple gift of ten pieces of paper, each containing a different profession, her aunt showed her that there were other options besides medicine, a career that many refugee parents expect their children to enter into because of both its professional prestige and its perceived stability. She writes that, “[i]t was thanks to that gift . . . that I was allowed to dream my own dreams” (76).

Furthermore, the narrator describes how Monsieur An, a survivor of the communist re-education prisons, taught her about the important notion of nuance. His tale of facing the barrel of the execution gun and surviving through a defiant upward gaze to search for the sky’s blue colour is a lesson in the importance of life’s subtleties and the niceties of meaning. Monsieur Minh, another re-education survivor, who had “written” many books in his mind, “always on the one piece of paper he possessed, page by page, chapter by chapter, an unending story,” during his incarceration, was “saved . . . by writing” (88). He gave her the “urge to write” (88) and the gift of words, showing the narrator the power of stories and storytelling in the struggle to stay alive. In addition, the narrator reveals how her parents, who were “unable to look ahead of themselves” because of the opportunities closed off to them in Canada “looked ahead of us, for us, their children” (10). She emphasizes, “[f]or us, they didn’t see the blackboards they wiped clean, the school toilets they scrubbed, the imperial rolls they delivered. They saw only what lay ahead” (11). The gratitude expressed establishes her parents’ hard work and sacrifice as the foundation for the narrator’s own success, and renders the “gifts”—material and immaterial—from various individuals as fragments that fit together to create a conception of a future self.

Vignettes of intersubjectivity such as those mentioned above are littered throughout *Ru*. Taken together, they sketch and constellate a subject whose boundaries are expansive, whose constitution is based on multiplicity, whose presence is built on the sediments of others. It is possible, then, to view the narrator’s act of writing as a cataloguing or indexing of gratitude, one that actively gathers moments of self-emergence and -creation. In doing so, writing generates the self through the citation of others. Hence, the fragmentary and elliptical structure of the novel not only mimics the nature of everyday storytelling and memory, something Kim Thúy has said she tried to capture during the writing process, it also reflects the narrator’s method of self-construction. From this perspective, the self is an assemblage of others, an archive of, in the words of Judith Butler, the “enigmatic traces of others” (46). As a refugee who started with next to nothing in a foreign

place, the narrator relies on individuals around her to provide the dreams, lessons, and material foundations for the formation of a wholly unique and legible self. In other words, the impression of others gives shape to the self, which becomes a network of interpersonal contact and relations. Gratitude, as an affect or emotion that has the potential to catalyze this process of intersubjectivity, enacts Ahmed's understanding of emotion's role in the social arena: "it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces and boundaries are made: the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others" (10).

Oblivion and the American Dream

Intersubjectivity, performed in the novel through narrativization, presupposes remembrance in order to establish a complex, hybrid presence. As a constructivist modality, intersubjectivity is generative, drawing on and creating memories, subjectivities, and relations. Also part of the process, however, is the role of forgetting. In *Ru*, forgetting is a fraught process, both crucial to survival and reinvention and lamented as a kind of loss. The erasure of the past contrasts starkly with the accumulative pursuit of the American Dream. *Ru*'s narrator characterizes this dream, this ideal of success, which sits on the horizon for new immigrants, as something material and tangible that can eventually be grasped, put on (to the body), and occupied.

To become the dream, or to have the dream become a part of you, means to be indelibly changed, to gain an addition or extension, but also to lose something in the process. She tells us that "[f]or many immigrants, the American dream has come true" (74); "[o]nce it's achieved, though, the American dream never leaves us, like a graft or an excrescence" (77). Here, the attainment of success, the accumulation of social, cultural, and economic capital latches onto the body and weighs the subject down even as it propels her "upward." In a scene of (mis)recognition, the narrator describes how a waiter in a Hanoi restaurant was taken aback when she, on a return trip, spoke Vietnamese to him. Explaining his surprise, the waiter tells her that she was "too fat to be Vietnamese" (77). She then goes on to reflect: "I understood later that he was talking not about my forty-five kilos but about the American dream that had made me more substantial, heavier, weightier. That American dream had given confidence to my voice, determination to my actions, precision to my desires, speed to my gait and strength to my gaze. That American dream made me believe I could have everything" (77). Revealed in this encounter are the physical and psychic ways in which

the American Dream alters those who come into contact with it. Success functions to mould the refugee into another guise of being, one that may not be identifiable or reconcilable with past versions of the self: “the young waiter reminded me that I couldn’t have everything, that I no longer had the right to declare I was Vietnamese because I no longer have their fragility, their uncertainty, their fears” (78).

Success thus creates gaps—distances between experiences, or elliptical spaces in the continuity of identity. For many refugees who have succeeded, present prosperity and past suffering become points of contradiction. In the novel, this condition of tension and incongruity is poignantly elucidated in an episode where the narrator points to the irony that accompanies success through the example of her Aunt and Step-uncle Six. Describing how they currently lead a comfortable life in Canada, especially in comparison to their refugee past, she writes: “Nowadays . . . [t]hey travel first class and have to stick a sign on the back of their seat so the hostesses will stop offering them chocolates and champagne. Thirty years ago, in our Malaysian refugee camp, the same Step-uncle Six crawled more slowly than his eight-month-old daughter because he was suffering from malnutrition. And the same Aunt Six used the one needle she had to sew clothes so she could buy milk for her daughter” (74). The disjuncture that the American dream brings about necessitates a way of negotiating differing realities that press against the limits of a coherent conception of self. Forgetting, in the way that it mitigates these contradictions, offers the possibility of a subjectivity that is legible to the subject who must negotiate and live it herself.

In her analysis of Vietnamese diasporic popular culture, Nhi T. Lieu argues that “the formation of contemporary Vietnamese American identities . . . rests simultaneously on resisting the refugee image as well as constructing a middle-class ethnic identity under consumer capitalism” (xvii). Lieu’s formulation pivots, on the one hand, on the shedding of a past life, whether that refugee life was experienced first-hand or inherited through immersion in a diasporic social field, and on the other hand, on the assumption of a new idea of life and social existence. This project of identity formation through hybrid cultural forms that define a new, bourgeois Vietnamese ethnic identity within multicultural America is described as a translation of the “American Dream” to Vietnamese. The larger arc of Lieu’s argument posits forgetting as a means of subjectivity, one that attempts “erasure” of the impoverished refugee image that circulates widely and has the potential to constrain Vietnamese (diasporic) subjects.

While *Ru* does not resist the refugee image—in fact, it reproduces refugee experiences as a means of visibility—it speaks to Lieu's argument in the portrayal of oblivion, the conscious forgetting of a refugee past, as a strategy that allows the former refugee to exist in the present moment of success without mental torment, psychic split, and affective guilt or shame. In one narrative fragment, the narrator brings us into a “smoky lounge,” where she socializes with friends and strangers, exposing herself as she regales them with bits of her past “as if they were anecdotes or comedy routines or amusing tales from far-off lands featuring exotic landscapes, odd sound effects and exaggerated characterizations” (136). The narrator is aware, in this candid moment, of how her past becomes a spectacle for white, mainstream consumption. As she performs this ethnic minstrelsy, however, she is not only catering to the desires and expectations of a particular audience hungry for stories of trauma, but also rendering the traumatic past for herself in a particular way that can be accommodated by the present. Put differently, the “selling-out” or “bastardization” of her past allows the narrator to forget, or, to let forgetting shape memory. She admits:

I like the red leather of the sofa in the cigar lounge . . . When I sit in that smoky lounge, I forget that I'm one of the Asians who lack the dehydrogenase enzyme for metabolizing alcohol, I forget that I'm marked with a blue spot on my backside, like the Inuit, like my sons, like all those with Asian blood. I forget the mongoloid spot that reveals the genetic memory because it vanished during the early years of childhood, and my emotional memory has been lost, dissolving, snarling with time. (136)

It is this critical work of forgetting, which may be seen negatively as assimilation, that enables the “post”-refugee subject to accommodate the profound contradictions, the existential ironies, and the complications that make daily life difficult or impossible to live. Most importantly, forgetting, rather than creating the breaks and fractures of identity, makes critical space for them to occur—in a less devastating way—within the conception of a coherent and livable self.

The narrator goes on to explain how forgetting permits actions in the present that may seem foreign and unexplainable in the context of the past. She tells us that the fissures of forgetting, what she calls “estrangement,” “detachment,” and “distance,” “allow me to buy, without any qualms and with full awareness of what I'm doing, a pair of shoes whose price in my native land would be enough to feed a family of five for one whole year” (137). A Marxist critique might view the narrator's explanation as a neoliberal rationalization of middle-class capitalist consumerism, but I suggest that

this statement pinpoints a *difficult moment of living*, a moment knotted with contradiction and irony for the subject who was once a refugee, who still retains the memories of that experience but is also distanced from it, who has known impoverishment and has been touched by the hands of success. To “forget” in such moments is not simply a matter of a newly (recovered) middle-class self effacing its un-middle-class components for continuity. Rather, the novel presents us with a theory of selfhood that demonstrates how “impossible” versions of oneself must be actively “forgotten” or remembered differently in order for the self to experience itself as a reality. In buying the pair of shoes, the narrator is participating in capitalism, replacing a past of deprivation through an act of opulence, claiming an existence without guilt—she is both forgetting and remembering to *become*. For the narrator, these difficult moments are lived, experienced, and contained “[w]hen we’re able to float in the air, to separate ourselves from our roots—not only by crossing an ocean and two continents but by distancing ourselves from our condition as stateless refugees, from the empty space of an identity crisis” (137).

The Persistence of Memory

Yet, what the quotidian requires one to “forget” in the act of living and survival the body remembers. Even as she speaks of the necessity of forgetting, *Ru*’s narrator recounts a transcendent moment of recognition in which the sight of an immunization scar—one that many immigrants acquire as a prerequisite for border entry—precipitates a kind of communion, a conjuring, a (re)kindling of memory. She writes:

I was approached in a gas station by a Vietnamese man who had recognized my vaccination scar. One look at that scar took him back in time and let him see himself as a little boy walking to school along a dirt path with his slate under his arm . . . One look at that scar and our tropical roots, transplanted onto land covered with snow, emerged again. In one second we had seen our own ambivalence, our hybrid state: half this, half that, nothing at all and everything at once. A single mark on the skin and our entire shared history was spread between two gas pumps in a station by a highway exit. (132)

As a shared history, a common experience of homeland and migration is remembered as a new sense of identity is revealed for the narrator and the anonymous man: the diasporic state of “half this, half that, nothing at all and everything at once.” The painful history of displacement, interlaced with nostalgic joy, is condensed in the bodily mark of citizenship. The retention of such memories in the form of a scar, no matter how painful, allows both refugees to accommodate the disparities, differences, and ambivalences that

constitute the self. In other words, memory in conjunction with oblivion permits a kind of complex personhood, where, according to Avery Gordon, “people . . . remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others” (4).

Khatharya Um writes, “[w]hen refugees cast their sight onto the past, it is not simply nostalgia but a way of reconnecting with the many parts of their selves, of bridging this present that still shocks them with its foreignness, with a past that is familiar even in its painful reveal, and inspiring *because* of its painful reveal” (847). For the refugees of America’s war in Southeast Asia, memory acts as a connective, as a way of being so that existence is simply possible, to survive in a present impregnated with the past and a still uncertain future. Remembering, then, is not an act that indulges in a bygone era or one that longs for that which has been lost, but an active practice that pieces together the broken shards of selfhood. In its “painful reveal,” memory facilitates an emergence in the present, a legible subjectivity not necessarily burdened by a pathological splintering.

The objective of this paper was not simply to rehearse the experiences of loss and trauma that mark Vietnamese refugees—a vast body of literature, including artistic/literary and academic, that does this already exists. My insistence that we consider the trauma in tandem with, or as context for, success and its articulation through gratitude is an attempt to express that the specificity of experience *matters*, that it has material implications and should factor into our interpretations and critiques. That said, the abjection of refugee migration experiences and the sometimes “successful” endings do not justify a kind of patriotic gratitude that can become congratulatory, triumphal, and regulatory. Indeed it only comes to bear partial meaning in an experience that is so complex and heterogeneous, wrought with tensions, contradictions, and elusive or slippery significations. What this paper has tried to do was open up a dialogue on how a different way of approaching and thinking through gratitude and success might be valuable to understanding “post”-refugee subjects who have passed through war and “rescue.” Individual and collective success is thus not simply to be critiqued or defended, but engaged in a way that gets to the complexities of experience and positionality.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I’m deeply grateful for feedback on previous versions of this paper from Donald Goellnicht, Eugenia Zuroski-Jenkins, members of the UCSD writing group, and the anonymous reviewers.

NOTES

- 1 See Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's influential book *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* for a prime example of this appropriation.
- 2 Price argues that Canada "actively encouraged" US intervention in Southeast Asia, and that, "[i]n an era of decolonization, the Canadian government aligned the country with American imperialism" (804).
- 3 The term model minority first emerged in the late 1960s in reference to Japanese Americans who managed to "recover" from the ravages of internment, and was later used to refer to other Asian groups and the privatized, ethnic/cultural ways they "overcame" racial discrimination. It gained traction during a time of racial conflict, in which Asian "success" was positioned punitively against African Americans and Latinos. See Osajima.
- 4 Daniel Coleman uses this term to refer to a British derived gentility that defines a normative, white Canadian identity as progressively and superiorly civil.
- 5 In claiming that Canada did not pursue overseas empire in the same manner as the US, I am not suggesting that it is without a colonial history. On the contrary, scholars in the fields of Indigenous and Postcolonial studies, among others, have demonstrated the colonial relationship the country had and continues to have in its dealing with and treatment of the First Nations.
- 6 Canada took in 200,000 Indochinese refugees from 1975-1992, behind the US and China, who took in 1.4 million and 260,000 refugees respectively. See Nghia M. Vo.
- 7 Other notable Canadians who have publicly expressed gratitude to the nation include Phan Kim Phuc, the infamous girl burned by napalm, and Nguyen Ngoc Ngan, an influential figure in the Vietnamese diasporic culture industry.

WORKS CITED

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Bannerji, Himani. *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism Nationalism, and Gender*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars, 2000. Print.
- Barber, John. "Kim Thuy's river of life." *Globe and Mail*, 5 Feb. 2012. Web. 11 Oct. 2013.
- Bartley, Jim. "From riches to rags to riches." *Globe and Mail*, 10 Feb. 2012. Web. 11 Oct. 2013.
- Brennan, Teresa. *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004. Print.
- Chan, Sucheng. *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2006. Print.
- Chuh, Kandice. *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian American Critique*. Duke UP, 2003. Print.
- Coleman, Daniel. *White Civility: The Literary Project of White Canada*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2006. Print.
- Espiritu, Yen Le. "Thirty Years AfterWARD: The Endings That Are Not Over." *Amerasia Journal* 31.2 (2005): xiii-xxiii. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1988. Print.
- Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008. Print.
- "Kim Thuy, author of Ru." *Feature Interview*. Radio Canada International. 2012. Web. 12 Feb. 2013.

- Lieu, Nhi T. *The American Dream in Vietnamese*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2011. Print.
- Loescher, Gil, and John A. Scanlan. *Calculated Kindness: Refugees and America's Half Open Door, 1945 to the Present*. New York: The Free Press, 1986. Print.
- Nguyen, Mimi Thi. Preface. *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*. Durham: Duke UP, 2012. ix-xii. Print.
- Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Print.
- Oishi, Eve. "Bad Asians: New Film and Video by Queer Asian American Artists." *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*. Ed. Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Lui. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2000. 221-41. Print.
- Osajima, Keith. "Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and 1980s." *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*. Ed. Min Zhou and James Gatewood. New York: NYU P, 2000. 449-58. Print.
- Palumbo-Liu, David. *Asian/American: Historical Crossing of a Racial Frontier*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999. Print.
- Price, John. *Orienteering Canada: Race, Empire, and the Transpacific*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 2011. Print.
- Thobani, Sunera. *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2007. Print.
- Thúy, Kim. *Ru: A Novel*. Trans. Sheila Fischman. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2012. Print.
- Um, Khatharya. "Exiled Memory: History, Identity, and Remembering in Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Diaspora." *positions: east asia cultures critique* 20.3 (2012): 831-50. Print.
- Vo, Nghia M. *The Vietnamese Boat People: 1954 and 1975-1992*. Jefferson: McFarlane & Company, 2006. Print.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 1978. Print.
- Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993. Print.
- Ziedenberg, Jason. "Canada's Vietnam Legacy." *Canadian Dimension* 29.5 (1995): 24. Print.

