

Travel and Displacement

An (Ex)Refugee and

BY ANH HUA

The residue of her body is still in my body. She died, of course, you know. Of fear. I didn't think people could die of fear. I was eight; she must have been 19, so I guessed.

Dans le but de faire le pont entre la théorie et la fiction, cet article commence avec un récit autobiographique de ses voyages en tant qu'une (ex) réfugiée et (ex) immigrante au Viet-Nam d'après-guerre. Ensuite, l'auteure explore l'importance et la problématique inhérentes aux histoires vécues des immigrantes et des réfugiées.

"The Blue Tank"

Nomad body traverses west-north-east-south, takes flight air-borne, acrobatic comet spitting out dust-stars in the night. My nomadic body has traveled from nation to

nation, building homes, destroying homes, rebuilding again, from Vietnam to the Indonesian islands, to Canada. Migrant. Refugee. Immigrant. Ex-immigrant. Am I settled yet? Where is this place called "home?" Nomadic body drifted in the ocean amongst other bodies, the blackened night as impermeable as black plastic, hovering over me, threatening to engulf me, suffocating me, plunge me into my fear of the deep black ocean we drifted on the engine-dead boat for two weeks, "escaping" in the post-Vietnam-war, 1979.

Now 1999, marking time, separating time, excavating time, layer by layer mechanically to achieve a sense of distance, trying to forget the haunting that refuses to release its grip onto memory. To remember is to dig dirt, dust yellow bones and re-mantle them in an imagined order, a memory-image, of an ethereal body of a shattered unity, glued fragments on the pretense of coherence, the telling of a retelling of a story that is told again and again in repetitive trauma and pleasure until the story becomes myth, legend, unbelievable. Memory is disbelief, but wanting and needing to believe. Should I tell the story? I fear the trap of the Confessional: Treaty to Tell the Truth. But there was no original story. The story has changed each time I tell it to myself, to others.

A corpo-real story

The residue of her is still in me. The residue of her body

is still in my body. She died, of course, you know. Of fear. I didn't think people could die of fear. I was eight; she must have been 19, so I guessed. She fainted on the first Thai fishermen/pirate boat we encountered.

The pirates ordered the some 350 people on our boat to go onto theirs, so they could search through our possessions; they wanted gold, watches, jewelry, valuables. We had no choice but to obey their orders, for they had knives and pistols. In the mist of the chaos, I was separated from my family; I was on my own for the first time. I was afraid to leap from our boat to theirs. The gaps between the boats were so wide, with each wave the boats were drifting inward and then apart, inward and then apart. What if I fall into the ocean? I couldn't swim. Where were my parents? A Thai man screamed at me, and then pushed me forward. Before I knew it, I landed on my knees onto their boat. There she was lying in front of me, pale-white. Someone snatched my backpack for her to use as a pillow. Everyone made a fuss; they attempted to bring her back to consciousness.

The pirates ordered us to return to our boat, and then they sailed off into the distance. I resumed my position by the large blue water tank. She was lying next to me, still unconscious. Her flesh was smooth, voluptuous, light-skinned. I watched her sleep. Her chest rose and descended as she breathed quietly in her sleep. She was alone. Where was her family? I was grateful I wasn't alone anymore. Across from me, my mother was holding my four-year-old sister V in her arms; sister H was sitting next to her. Where was my father? He seemed absent in this memory. Both my mother and sister V nodded off in their sleep. Exhaustion slowly seeped into the pores of my consciousness, my skin felt the cool of the black night, as we drifted on the ocean once again away from the pirates (who had taken the collectibles with delight) and I drifted into a sweet sleep, dreaming of the soft girl and her soft cool flesh next to my skin. I was glad she was still breathing...

I woke to crying and screaming. She was still lying next to me, her arm, this time, draped slightly over me. There was a horrible stench in the air. My mother pulled me towards her. "Come here, sit with me!" she said urgently. My aunt gave me some tiger balm to rub over my nostrils, to cover the smell. An older woman bent over the young girl's body and cried. Someone said she must have died in her sleep. "Don't touch!" they call out. Now, she is a grotesque corpse, untouchable, contagious. The others were afraid of touching her, of her smell. Will they get sick

(Ex)Immigrant Woman's Tale-tell

from smelling the dead and then die too? They wrapped her in a dark green plastic sheet, knotted with touch strings, and they tossed her overboard. Someone prayed that she wouldn't be eaten by the sharks; someone else prayed that we all won't be eaten by the sharks.

I lived for the next three years or so haunted by the vision of her body, no longer white, smooth and soft, but a dull purplish gray, her finger nails a pale purple. She was limp and hard at the same time, stiff but without rest, a disquieting stillness.

My childlike imagination sank deep into the water with her. Body heavy weight plunged into the water splash. She can see the bottom of the boat and the sun above. She can hear their voices, their fears, their perseverance to move on, forget what had just happened. Limb by limb, muscle by muscle, she feels her decay, but it is liberating. She can leave her body now and swim with the dolphins. Salt water seeps through the pores of her skin, curls beneath the skin, swells bubbles and bursts. Epithelium, layer by layer, begins to shred, melt, float, become one with the sea; perhaps the fish may even taste it. I live with this memory on my body. I play with this memory on my body, her body next to mine, her body inside of me, pressing me to go on, giving me strength, odd. Stories are told through bodies. Each artery has its line, each nerve its rhythm. My veins sometimes turn to weeds and moss, reaching for the sky, sinking into the earth. I live in nomadic dreams, an open-ended nomadic space, in fantasy of the sur(corpo)real.

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"The Blue Tank" is a fictionalized autobiographical narrative, told from a child's perspective, of my travel with my family on a boat from Vietnam to the Indonesian refugee camps in 1979. It is crucial that the story is read as a historicized fiction, rather than as a "true" representation to "bear witness," since creative writing provides me with the space to play with memory and language, as well as the reconstruction of identities and lived events. As Chandra Mohanty notes,

the point is not just "to record" one's history of struggle, or consciousness, but how they are recorded; the way we read, receive, and disseminate such imaginative records is immensely significant. (34)

In this article, I will examine the importance and problems of telling one's life history or story for refugee and immigrant women. By beginning with the short story

of "The Blue Tank," I point to the significance of bridging theory with fiction, as well as the importance of life story-oriented narratives or marginal experience narratives in feminist theorizing.

Mohanty emphasizes the importance of writing in the production of self and collective consciousness for Third World women. Testimonials, life stories, and oral histories, according to her, are a crucial mode of remembering and recording experiences and struggles. Mohanty argues that the creative process of remembering, reinterpreting, and rewriting lived experience in a collective context can transform the experience, enabling an individual to claim subjecthood and politicized consciousness:

I lived haunted by the vision of her body, no longer white, smooth and soft, but a dull purplish gray, her finger nails a pale purple. She was limp and hard at the same time.

Feminist analysis has always recognized the centrality of rewriting and remembering history. This is a process which is significant not merely as a corrective to the gaps, erasures, and misunderstandings of hegemonic masculinist history, but because the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity. Writing often becomes the context through which new political identities are forged. It becomes a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself. (34)

Thus storytelling or life history can be what Mohanty calls "a discourse of oppositional consciousness and agency"; in fact, the practice of remembering "against the grain of 'public' or hegemonic history" suggests a rethinking of sociality (39). "The Blue Tank," in a sense, is a discourse of oppositional consciousness and agency. As a life story of an (ex)refugee and (ex)immigrant Chinese woman from Vietnam,¹ it is an act of remembering and of rewriting the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and U.S. imperialism. The story provides a different account of the Vietnam War from the meta-narratives of international politics and of nation-states which have reduced the experiences of the refugees to numbers and statistics; it also challenges the sensational media coverage of the "boat people" which has purported to tell the "truth," yet has

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depicted Vietnamese refugees as victims. The story points to the effects of U.S. imperialism and the Cold War beyond the masculinized militarization to a female child's witness to the death of a young woman, and how that haunting memory becomes a site for the rewriting of historical memory and the invention of new forms of resistance. A haunting memory of forced migration, displacement, piracy, trauma, and death is reinvented into a childlike fantasy, in which the narrator imagines the

young dead woman swimming with the dolphins and feeling liberated from her death. Meta-narratives on conflict zones rarely consider children's experiences and perspectives of wars, nor the role of fantasy and imagination for children during such collective trauma experiences.

Stories like “The Blue Tank,” as “histories from below” which remember and rewrite historical events, challenge the gaps and silences in hegemonic narratives, and record as well as reinvent the experiences and struggles of refugee and immigrant women and children. The process of remembering and of rewriting creates the

space for the formation of politicized or oppositional consciousness, or what Shari Stone-Mediatore calls “experience-motivated discursive agency” (125). However, storytelling can produce politicized consciousness only if both the tale-teller and the audience avoid naturalizing the experiences, rejecting both positivist appeals to experiences and the homogenizing notions of identity. In other words, “The Blue Tank” can produce politicized consciousness only if the narrator's experience is not naturalized nor homogenized as “an intrinsic experience of all Vietnamese refugees.” For one thing, stories are reinvented with each performance and repetition. As the narrator tells us: “I fear the trap of the Confessional: Treaty to Tell the Truth. But there was no original story. The story has changed each time I tell it to myself, to others.” Furthermore, the narration of such “personal experience” does not simply report spontaneous consciousness, but requires both the tale-tellers and the audience to make connections between the “personal experience” and the common struggles and collective memory of political communities. As Stone-Mediatore suggests:

[Oppositional consciousness] ... involves rethinking and rearticulating obscured, often painful memories, and forging connections between those memories and collective struggle. (125)

Up to this point, I have examined how storytelling can

be a powerful tool for refugee and immigrant women to obtain critical knowledge and political consciousness, as well as to subvert hegemonic historiography with their narratives of resistance. Storytelling is also an empowering tool for refugee and immigrant women, because it provides them with the space to voice themselves. Within a discriminatory society, people belonging to a colonized or oppressed group are often silenced or constructed as silent, mute, unable to speak. Racist representations and narratives often depict the first-generation immigrant or refugee women as unable to speak because they can not grasp the English (or dominant) language. But refugees, immigrants, and the people of non-white communities have not been silent; they simply speak a different kind of talk. As bell hooks notes,

Certainly for black women, our struggle has not been to emerge from silence to speech but to change that nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard. (208)

Moving from “The Silence That Hollows Us” (Anzaldua xxii) into speech or language is for the oppressed, the exploited, the colonized, a gesture of defiance that heals, and thus, makes new life and new growth possible:

It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. (hooks 211)

For writers and storytellers from the oppressed colonized groups, speaking is not only an expression of a creative power; “it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless” (hooks 210). As Gloria Anzaldua argues, women of colour, in our daily lives, are stripping off the masks others have imposed on us, in order to see through the disguises we hide behind so that we may become subjects in our own discourses:

We begin to displace the white and colored male typographers and become, ourselves, typographers, printing our own words on the surfaces, the plates, of our bodies. We begin to acquire the agency of making our own caras. “Making faces” ... for constructing one's identity. (xvi)

However, how do I “make faces” to construct my identities away from the masks others have imposed on me, to inscribe my words onto the surfaces of my own body, without losing face for myself, my family, and my communities? Losing face is an important idiom in Chinese culture/ideology; it means losing family honour and family name. For the Chinese, one's actions, behaviors, life choices, and identity constructs, are closely tied to

one's extended family and community. I may have good intentions in my attempt to speak, to write, to tell tales as a counter story to dominant discourses, but I always have to consider my ethical and epistemic accountability and responsibility to my family and community in that telling, particularly when that tale involves my family and community members as actors of the events.

Storytelling is also an empowering tool for refugee and immigrant women for it allows the passing on of a genealogy of stories. My mother, for instance, has passed on her gift of storytelling, a pedagogical alternative of orality, to her children. The more my mother tells me stories, the more I feel a compulsion to tell her stories and mine. Similar to bell hooks's notion of "back talk" and "talking back" (1990), when speaking as an equal to an authority figure, I have learned to speak and write, to "back talk" to dominant discourses and authorities, from my upbringing within a world of women talk. In particular, I have learned to tell tales from years of listening to my mother's talk-stories. For as long as I can remember, my mother's everyday talk was always in the form of storytelling. In Canada, she would tell my sisters and I stories about Vietnam: the foods we ate, the places we went, our childhood, our experiences on the boat, in the Indonesian refugee camps, and so on. A daughter's image of her "original" homeland is imagined through her mother's talk-stories in the new resettlement. Much of my childhood, and how I have experienced the world, have been filtered through my mother's talk-stories. Sometimes I am unable to distinguish fact from fiction. When do my mother's stories end and mine begin? How much of my memory of our experiences of the Vietnam War is a recall of what really happened or what my mother has told me? For these reasons, stories, or memories, are never isolated; an individual story or memory always fuses, bleeds, caresses, parallels, or overlaps another story or memory.

So far I have shown how storytelling can be seductive, and a (coloured, refugee, or immigrant) woman's story is crucial to refute masculinist and racist constructs or meta-narratives, as an opposition to established knowledge. However, Sherene Razack warns us about the perils of storytelling for refugee women:

Often women of colour are asked to tell their stories while others will do the theorizing and the writing. Yet the chance to speak, to enter your reality on the record, as it were, is as irresistible as it is problematic. What kind of tale will I choose to tell, and in what voice? (1996: 170)

Thus, Razack concludes, "... storytelling serves various groups differently and ... it should never be employed uncritically in mixed groups" (1996: 169). In the context of law and critical pedagogy, Razack argues that one needs to consider "... the difference in position between the

teller and the listener, between telling the tale and hearing it" (1993: 83):

There is an assumption that the living voices (and sometimes the written texts) of the oppressed express a truth that will win out. There is little room for questioning that voice or text as the transmitter of authentic "human" experience.... Language is seen as simply representing reality rather than constructing it. (1993: 87-88)

Therefore Razack concludes: it is critical to reflect on how we hear, how we speak, the choices we make about which voice to use, as well as paying attention to how we know rather than primarily what we know.

From Razack's warning, it is evident that the context, as well as the power differentials, between the tale-teller and the listeners are important. The story of "The Blue Tank," for example, will have different readership in different contexts. A court room, an immigration office, a classroom employing critical pedagogy, a classroom with little critical thinking, an academic journal, a community-based journal, a "mainstream" newspaper, a gathering of close kin and friends, will create different social spaces for the expression of such stories. Storytelling may be empowering or disempowering depending on the contexts, the audience, and the purposes these stories serve. It depends on who has control over the telling, the writing, the theorizing, the publishing, or the funding of such stories; who interprets or translates the stories; who appropriates the stories; who benefits; as well as the gender, class, ethnicity, age, nationality, experience, and power differentials between the tale-teller and the audience.

In summary, storytelling is an empowering tool for refugee and immigrant women to pass on a genealogy of stories, from grandmother, to mother, to daughter, to granddaughter, and so on. Storytelling can be empowering for refugee and immigrant women when told amongst their close kin and friends, and when told in a language or talk style that is comfortable to them, for it gives them the space to voice themselves. Storytelling is crucial for women of colour since racist and masculinist meta-narratives and constructs have often rendered coloured women as silent or silenced. Storytelling might be one of the few sites in which refugee and immigrant women can claim political voice and epistemic terrain. Storytelling can enable refugee and immigrant women to subvert hegemonic historiography with their narratives of resistance, thus developing an oppositional consciousness necessary for the collective struggles of politicized communities. Story-

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telling is crucial for the remembering of personal and collective lived events. Through memory, rememory, forgetting and reconstruction, storytelling allows refugee and immigrant women to refashion, reinvent, and remember their personal and collective identities and identification. However, the context of storytelling changes the readership or hearing of the tale, and in some contexts, such hearing or reading of a tale may render the refugee or immigrant women disempowered. Thus storytelling should not be celebrated uncritically but needs to be employed with caution and self-awareness, yet still accedes to its power of resistance and voice.

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I use the words (ex)refugee and (ex)immigrant as resistant, re-labelling terms for the following reasons: to acknowledge the history of exclusionary immigration acts in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom; to point to the experience of the narrator as a former refugee and immigrant woman; and to reappropriate the international definition of what it means to be a refugee or an immigrant.

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HEATHER DUFF

Witches in the Narrows

They plan another clearcut up Narrows Inlet,
to carve roads out of blasted stone.

In protest, like witches' castle, mountains jut
from deep water, sink shadows.

they plan to dynamite the home of white
mountain goats, and where I stir caul-
drons—abandoned, trapper's pots, upside
down helmet from 1916, steaming
kinnicinnick, wild ginger tea, the brew of
death—camas.

*I am among the cackling dead
losing earth, rock, sea, air
the five senses
the seven deadly sins
the twelve apostles*

Corporations sip my lethal broth;
like feathers of the owl and turkey vulture,
they flutter to the sea.

*I am an unsung Siren
a silkie
the screech of history*

I swallow their chain saws for breakfast,
flatten their trucks with boulders,
feed their carcasses to dogfish; they will never
forget the witches in the Narrows.

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