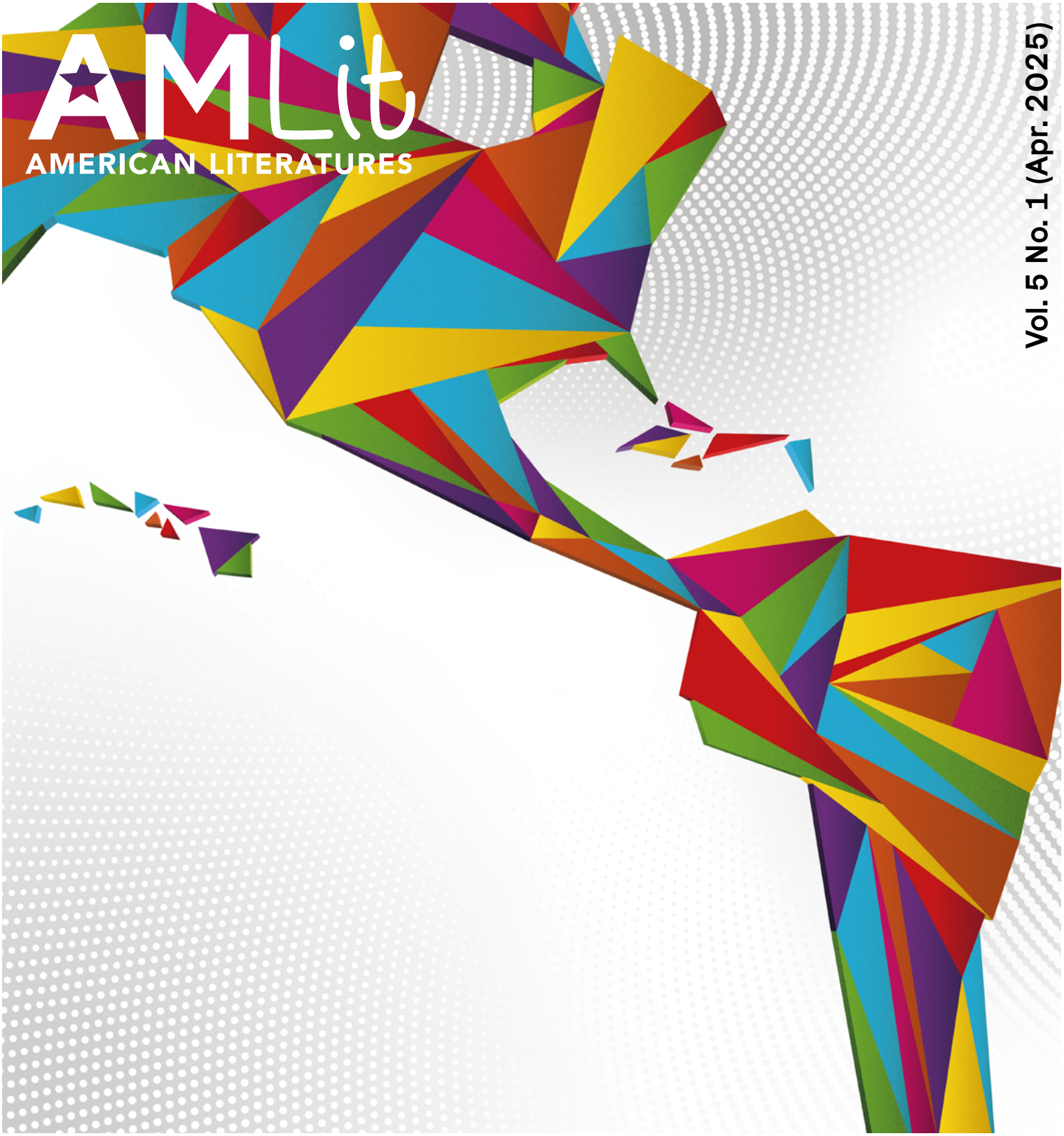
AMLit
AMERICAN LITERATURES
Vol. 5 No. 1 (Apr. 2025)



Potentials of Positionality and/or Ethics of Exclusion?

Critical Reading Approaches to Minority Literatures from the Americas

Atalie Gerhard

(Guest Editor)

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DOI: 10.25364/27.5:2025.1.0

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Imprint

Design Verena Repar
Cover Design Georg Gruber

Typesetting Georg Gruber
Copyediting Veronika Rom, Lisa Buchegger

Media Owner University of Graz
Universitätsplatz 3
8010 Graz
Austria

ISSN 2789-889X

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AMERICAN LITERATURES

Content

Introduction

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Abstract In this introduction, I will approach the special issue's theme of positionality as informing critical reading approaches of North American literatures by and about minority subjects in a personal tone to match the required positionality statements in the essays. As an example, I will outline my own motivation for thematizing positionality after observing lived connections between my travels to Canada and the U.S. as well as becoming aware of how my family's intergenerational experiences against the backdrop of transatlantic relations critically position myself. I will argue that reflections of one's own positionality matter for researchers, while drawing from decolonial scholarship's warnings against knowledge appropriation, extractivism, and a contemporary criticism of identity politics in an age of social protest. Instead, a responsibility towards the minority literatures that are being researched is posited in the essays included in this special issue from which self-reflexive statements are quoted in their original form. This special issue hopes to promote inclusive dialogues, beginning with self-positionings of global contributors within the field of North American Studies.

Keywords Experience; Positionality; Remembrance; Self-Reflexivity; Transculturality.

DOI: 10.25364/27.5:2025.1.1

Positionality—it is a term that appears as apparent as it is crucial, at least as the following special issue of *AmLit* hopes to demonstrate. In fact, as a German woman, descendant of Europeans who either immigrated, fled, or were expelled from their countries of birth, and doctoral researcher with a Master's degree in North American cultural and literary studies, I only first discovered during my travels to conferences in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and Dallas, Texas how positionality is widely understood and made use of in North American academic settings where talks often begin with a brief self-positioning with respect to one's research topic and method. Particularly, land acknowledgements ahead of presentations that I heard in Canada provided ample opportunities for researchers to situate themselves vis-à-vis the settler colonial history of their country without diminishing their ethical responsibilities. On the one hand, such a moment of self-reflexivity seemed to hold potential that had been trained in the German *Erinnerungskultur* (*culture of remembrance*) which had spread in Germany following its liberation from the Third Reich by the Allied Powers. At the same time, there is a disturbing trend in Germany as in North America to delegate memories and knowledges of genocides to the realm of distant history despite warnings against repeating the latter. While strongly dismissing perceptions of positionality statements as a burden, on the other hand, questions such as, "What does your topic mean to you as a person and as a researcher?" or even "Where did your interest come from and what do you hope to achieve?" could also take scholars from the mainstream of their respective societies by surprise. After all, they might already harbor intensely sympathetic feelings if not fascination for the marginalized communities whose literatures they are passionately studying within their own academic safe spaces.[1]

Against this backdrop, two possible ways emerge to contextualize the increase in scholarship on literatures by and about Black, Indigenous, and other people of color and/or with experiences of migration or from religious minorities, women, 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, and people with disabilities simultaneously to the rise of social justice movements on behalf of these communities, such as, for example, Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, and MeToo. On the one hand, much-debated policies with the goal of diversity, equity, and inclusion have enabled greater numbers of researchers from marginalized communities to enter academia. Significantly, these policies have been criticized for superficially prioritizing issues of representation over a genuine transformation of academia away from its complicity with exclusionary formations of power. To this end, researchers from marginalized communities within academia, but also their allies, have contributed unique insights by reflecting on both their scholarly and personal positionalities. For example, Hartmut Lutz, Florentine Strzelczyk, and Renae Watchman begin

their volume *Indianthusiasm: Indigenous Responses* (2020) "[b]y locating ourselves within kinship, our family relationships, our backgrounds" in order to "reveal our intent as researchers, our relationship to the project, and our responsibility as researchers who seek to work with Indigenous researchers" (7). Without such self-reflexivity, researchers from outside the communities of the authors they study face ethical challenges regarding the theories they apply. In addition, the outcomes of research may not reflect the intentions of the researchers due to their limited approaches, as Eve Tuck (Unangax) and K. Wayne Yang state that "the academy as an apparatus of settler colonial knowledge already domesticates, denies, and dominates other forms of knowledge" (235). The latter issue should especially concern literary scholars from Europe, who belong to the mainstream of their societies but whose work participates in global discourses on inequalities resulting from Eurocentric histories of colonialism. Yet, writing about their institutional contexts in Canada, Watchman, Carrie Smith, and Markus Stock advocate that, for example, "Indigenous and German Studies can be bridged (and relations built) by reflecting critically on their mutual influences and definitions of each other" (318).

Building such connections could appeal to scholars worldwide whose engagement with minority cultures invites comparisons to their own contexts while being grounded in identity politics. Here, the second possibility to contextualize the increase of scholarship on minority literatures emerges to point towards desires of learning from previous civil rights discourses and building coalitions for the future. For example, in his criticism of contemporary identity politics, Asad Haider writes from the perspective of a Pakistani American about how the autobiography of the founder of the Black Panther Party, Huey P. Newton, actually "set for me a model of the life of the mind that was far more convincing than the bohemian hedonism of Henry Miller or the self-serving social climbing expected of members of a 'model minority'" ("Introduction"). With an interest in such transcultural approaches, this journal issue aims to center concepts of universality and particularity insofar as they are reflected by minority literatures and as they can inform critical readings. Although the call for papers for this special issue allowed for a broad understanding of "literature" to include figurative narratives with aesthetics referencing their genres and modes of production, the contributions focus on written literatures ranging from autobiographical to novelistic genres. My original goal was to supplement decolonial concerns from North America by allowing contributors to trace overlaps between their local contexts. Accordingly, the contributors were encouraged to use the first person rather than only refer to themselves in the depersonalized third person in order to give space to their own personal as well as scholarly reflections.

Firstly, Dr. Debarchana Baruah from the University of Tübingen titled her powerful essay "Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's *The Undocumented Americans*: Between a Memoir and a Manifesto" to highlight the intersection between literature and activism that cannot be glossed over. Baruah grounds her scholarly interest in Villavicencio's work in her own position as "a migrant myself from the global south" (32) who has

> observed the struggles of outsiders like me to establish ourselves in the First World academia—our dependence on intellectual distinction to get out of the Third World, the expectation of gratitude when allowed entry into the First World, seeking validation from Eurocentric institutions of power and cultural capital, knowing full well many of these draw their accumulated wealth from colonial legacies. (32)

Baruah postulates a vision of collective empowerment rather than individual success echoing

> Villavicencio's bold voice, which claims her undocumented identity and autonomy despite being critically vulnerable, [that] instills courage and faith in the larger (more privileged) migrant community to which I belong. It forces me to imagine a future where we do not wait any longer for a seat at the table, where we have declared a table of our own. (32-3)

Secondly, Dr. Svitlana Kot from Saarland University, formerly from Petro Mohyla Black Sea National University in Mykolaiv, Ukraine, kindly contributed her moving essay "We/They Are Displaced: Children-Refugees in American Literature and Beyond" upon my invitation. After being lucky to know Kot as a dear colleague for years, I contacted her because I could not comprehend how she could possibly cope with the circumstance that her life story came to uncannily mirror her timely research. As she admits, "[w]hile various parts of the world have been suffering from continued armed conflicts, for many, including myself as a Ukrainian and a researcher, wars in Europe seemed to be a barbaric vestige of the past" (37). Yet, Kot's outstanding strength and infectious solidarity shine through, as she draws knowledge from her positionality:

> Despite my status as a displaced individual and a refugee, I am personally privileged to be able to continue working in academia. This privilege not only allows me to research refugee narratives, a primary focus of my scholarly pursuit but also enables me to relate to the experiences of

> those who have been compelled to flee their countries due to conflicts and warfare. (39)

Indeed, the blend of her scholarly and personal voices appears haunting, as she details the circumstances under which she found herself writing her essay and as an editor, as well as a colleague, and, most basically, as a human being, I am in absolute awe of Kot's personal courage and scholarly self-reflection exemplified by the following lines:

> Little did I know when I first read the book for my initial research on refugee children that I would be finishing an article on refugee children for submission in a bomb shelter just a week before embarking on a journey with my own children across five international borders to escape the war. What I must admit is that my perspective has evolved significantly due to the transformation of my life experiences. While my own journey as a refugee may not be as harrowing as some, I resonate emotionally with certain aspects that are emblematic of the narratives shared by displaced individuals. This resonance provides me with a deeper sensitivity and a broader perspective from which to engage in researching refugee narratives and representations in culture. (39)

Thirdly, Dr. des. Steph Berens from the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich submitted the highly contemporary essay, "Bursting the 'Transsexual Narrative': Genre, Form, and Belonging in Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars*." In an age where trans experiences have become mediatized in popular culture to the point of sensationalism, Berens' essay bravely performs vulnerability to bring sensitive issues of gender and sexuality home to readers, so to say. In this sense, Berens challenges any notion of a singular trans experience with the personal recollection that,

> [f]or me, one of these early affirming experiences was when my "Intro to Trans Studies" professor, who was incidentally responsible for my nonbinary awakening, asserted that "if somebody who looks like me is trans," meaning somebody who could easily pass as cis if they wanted to, "then anybody can be trans." After confessing to that professor that I thought I might be nonbinary and them chuckling congratulatorily while offering me their "they" pronoun pin (which I, sadly, vehemently declined at that point because openly wearing my gender still peaked my anxiety), I used the tools I had learned in their class and began a deep dive into fiction that might be able to tell me more about this "transgender thing" and gender messiness in general. A master's

> thesis on trans road narratives and an ongoing dissertation project on contemporary North American trans fiction later, I still often question if I am "really, truly" trans, despite the theory and the fiction and other trans people meeting those doubts with an emphatic "fuck yeah, you are." How is this question so persistent and so pervasive within trans communities? (62-3)

While it is impossible to put into words how moved I was to read the deeply personal account of self-questioning that Berens generously shares, I am also empathetic to the approach to the subject of positionality of Lieutenant Colonel Dr. Jeff Gibbons from the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. In his essay, "Queer and Refugee Positionalities in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*," he reflects on the author's performance of fictionality to address even readers beyond his community. As the last but certainly not least essay in this special issue, Gibbons concludes with regard to the novel's Vietnamese American protagonist Little Dog that,

> In a world currently (and seemingly, indelibly) overwhelmed with war, violence, death, displacement, and suffering, it undoubtedly is quite challenging to attempt to view the plight of thousands of war victims in any type of positive light. Still, Little Dog's conclusion challenges us, again even in the face of immense global conflict, to do so—as he asserted, he and his family "were born from beauty. Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence." (101)

This closing reminder—that Gibbons as a member of the U.S. military derives from his study of a literary text—is as crucial as it is poetic in the current galvanized political climate that fuels the dehumanization of thus perceived "others" who struggle to survive in the face of military invasions and terrorism. Like the previous statements from authors that I have cited, any summary of mine would fail to do justice to their voices which is why I decided to reproduce the selected lines above in their original form.

Indeed, my own understanding of the complexities of postwar positionalities was broadened during the editorial process by my visits to my multiracial military family in El Paso, Texas. To my ancestors, the U.S. had already represented a mythic destination for Transylvanian immigrants at the turn of the last century or the liberator of Germans from the horrors of the Third Reich. In my own lifetime, childhood visits to my relatives' home while they were still stationed in Bavaria, Germany, must have inspired me to later theorize my observations of lived transatlantic and transcultural unity and work towards promoting further dialogues.

Of course, my stay in El Paso was invaluably enriched by the conversations I was privileged to have with Dr. Marion Rohrleitner at the University of Texas at El Paso.[2] My belief in the urgent need to spread, preserve, and mobilize around awareness of genocides as recounted by survivors in life narratives is further strengthened when I consider the waves of extremist ideologies that are currently sweeping across Western democracies. At the same time, the life stories of members of recent waves of unprecedented numbers of refugees should remind comparatively comfortable citizens of the First World to value the European and North American postwar consensus on universal human rights and international peacekeeping alliances. In this sense, I must acknowledge that the mostly unpublished personal narratives that I heard from Syrian, Iraqi, and Ukrainian refugees when I volunteered in a refugee shelter at the height of the German *Willkommenskultur* (*welcoming culture*) have impacted my outlook—my positionality—on some of the essays of this special issue in these regards.

Even if, unfortunately, not every proposed contribution could be included in this special issue, the final compilation is united by the timely and engaging sound of personal but nonetheless theoretical voices that I have sought to echo in this introduction, instead of delivering, for example, an abstract overview of sociological standpoint theories to be made fruitful for literary and cultural studies. To conclude, it is my hope that this special issue, with its experimental objective to showcase contemporary cutting-edge literary and cultural studies research that is informed by diverse and complex positionalities at its core, will inspire innovative visions of "doing" North American Studies comparatively in the future—wherever or however one may be positioned. May reading this special issue give as much joy to readers as guest-editing it has given me![3]

Notes

[1] Indeed, this special issue about the relation between positionality and critical reading approaches would not exist if I had not been one of four Ph.D. students from the Emerging Scholars' Forum of the Association for Canadian Studies in German-Speaking Countries who were challenged to consider our positionalities by our keynote speaker Dr. Renae Watchman (Navajo) from McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, when we co-organized a virtual workshop to discuss with our peers and invited experts how to approach Indigenous literatures and cultures from Turtle Island in our diverse research projects. Our conversations with Dr. Watchman led us to conclude that we are in fact not "doing" the discipline of Indigenous Studies as outsiders from Europe, but, nevertheless, we were pursuing a form of understanding. Furthermore, our second keynote speaker, Prof. Dr. em. Hartmut Lutz from the University of Greifswald, alerted us to the problem of "'German Indianthusiasm'" (12) that he had identified and spent decades studying. Beyond academia, "German Indianthusiasm" might lead to appropriations of Indigenous cultures by

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Germans in the shape of, for example, the Winnetou series of novels by the author Karl May from the 19th century, the Yakari franchise for children from the 20th century, carnival costumes, or theme parks that continue to perpetuate disempowering stereotypes. Within North American academia, however, "Indianthusiasm" knowledge extraction and the legitimization of culturally genocidal policies under the guise of assimilationist welfare, as embodied by the legacy of forced residential schooling.

[2] When she kindly invited me during Black Heritage Month in 2024 to give a guest lecture on Afro-Québécois narratives (re-)imagining the legacy of the black slave Marie-Joseph Angélique, who had been hanged for allegedly incinerating Old Montréal in 1734, the concept of local cultures of remembrance came up during the discussion and I was honored to be able to contribute my understanding as a German.

[3] Nevertheless, with my best intentions for this special issue, I must admit that it would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of the *AmLit* general editors' board, the Graz editorial team, and the reviewers whom I often contacted last minute, as they generously provided their vast expertise on such diverse subjects as discussed in the following essays. In alphabetical order, I would therefore like to thank Dr. Adina Balint from the University of Winnipeg, Dr. Hannah Champion from Bordeaux Montaigne University, Dr. Saskia Furst from the University of The Bahamas, Dr. Verena Laschinger from the University of Erfurt, Dr. Miguel Oliveira from the University of Lisbon, Inés Paris from the Complutense University of Madrid, and Dr. Mareike Spychala from the University of Bamberg.

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Biography

Atalie Gerhard is a Lecturer at the Friedrich Schiller University Jena and Doctoral Candidate at Saarland University as an alumna of the International Research Training Group "Diversity: Mediating Difference in Transcultural Spaces." She taught at the University of Tübingen and Paderborn University and lectured at the University of Texas at El Paso and the University of Potsdam. She is a member of the German Association for American Studies and the Association for Canadian Studies in German-Speaking Countries. Her publications appeared in *Black Matrilineage, Photography, and Representation: Another Way of Knowing* (2022), *Exploring the Fantastic: Genre, Ideology, and Popular Culture* (2018), and *American Multiculturalism in Context: Views from at Home and Abroad* (2017) and the *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*, the *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, *[Inter]sections – The American Studies Journal at the University of Bucharest*, *American Studies in Scandinavia*, and *The International Review of African American Art*. She holds a Master of Arts in North American Studies: Culture and Literature and a double Bachelor of Arts in English and American and French Studies from the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg where she was a student research assistant and interim secretary. She speaks German, English, French, Spanish, Italian, Romanian, and Arabic on various levels.

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's *The Undocumented Americans*: Between a Memoir and a Manifesto

Debarchana Baruah
University of Tübingen

Abstract

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio positions her book *The Undocumented Americans* as a "work of creative non-fiction," experimentally mixing literary genres such as the memoir, personal essay, and testimonio. She draws on journalistic methods of doing interviews and fact-checking exercises, but departs from them at will as she blends these stories from the undocumented community with the personal and the magical. This essay details some of these creative overtures and discusses how and why Villavicencio's work sits uncomfortably between fact and fiction, between memoir and manifesto, as she sets out to represent America's undocumented.

The essay examines the politics of Villavicencio's unapologetic tone, her focus on undocumented life post-migration, and her mapping of the self as an extension of community. It contextualizes her work in relation to the self-narratives that appear during the youth movements surrounding the DREAM Act in the first decade of the 21st century and probes at the limits of self-representation, especially for an undocumented writer. Villavicencio registers her struggles at representing a community that is vulnerable to the extent that it is rendered voiceless, but also overrepresented in the mainstream media as caricatures or through simplified categorizations. Her critical engagement with representing undocumented voices also manifests as complaints against translation biases in the publishing industry. Long after the publication of her book, Villavicencio has continued the behind-the-scenes work to position her voice, doing book readings and interviews. This essay is interested in Villavicencio's efforts to retain the autonomy over her voice within the textual boundaries and beyond.

Keywords

DREAMer Memoir; Karla Cornejo Villavicencio; Magical Realism; Self Representation; Testimonio; Translation; Undocumented Migrants.

DOI: 10.25364/27.5:2025.1.2

Introduction: A list of Nots

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio starts with a list of differentials to orient her book. *The Undocumented Americans* (2020) is *not* a DREAMer memoir, *nor* is it a detached journalistic take on the eleven million undocumented people living in the US. By her own admission, the book should be read as a "work of creative non-fiction" (xvi). What stands out immediately is a strong narratorial voice that is self-reflexive and is uncomfortable with normative genre conventions.

Villavicencio herself is an undocumented migrant and her book is born out of a need to self-represent. The desire motivates a contemplation of a voice that belongs to the undocumented migrant community, and at the same time retains Villavicencio's own individual style and tone. To convey the story of undocumented migrants, she resorts to an experimental mix of literary genres (memoir, personal essay, testimonio); she draws on journalistic methods of doing interviews and fact-checking exercises, but departs from them at will as she blends these stories that she reports with the personal and the magical. This essay details some of these creative overtures and discusses how and why Villavicencio's work sits uncomfortably between fact and fiction, between memoir and manifesto, as she sets out to represent America's undocumented.

I examine the politics of Villavicencio's unapologetic tone, her focus on undocumented life post-migration, and her mapping of the self as an extension of community. I contextualize her work in relation to the first public undocumented self-narratives that appear during the youth movements surrounding the DREAM Act in the first decade of the 21st century and probe at the limits of self-representation, especially for an undocumented writer.

Villavicencio registers her struggles at representing a community that is vulnerable to the extent that it is rendered voiceless, but also overrepresented in the mainstream media as caricatures or through simplified categorizations. Her critical engagement with representing undocumented voices also manifests as complaints against translation biases in the publishing industry. Long after the publication of her book, Villavicencio has continued the behind-the-scenes work to position her voice, doing book readings and interviews. This essay is interested in Villavicencio's efforts to retain the autonomy over her voice within the textual boundaries and beyond.

Not a Migration Story

Already with the title of her book, *The Undocumented Americans*, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio begins her efforts at reclaiming aspects of her identity that are at odds with each other—she is undocumented[1], and she is American. Villavicencio has continuously lived in the US since she was five, when her parents first brought her from Ecuador to join them in the US. Even though her physical presence and cultural assimilation in the US are undeniable, her

"undocumented" immigration status discounts her existence politically (with immense social and economic consequences). She shares this incongruity—between a person's social and political realities—with some eleven million undocumented people living in the US "without papers," that is, without official permission to be in the US. *The Undocumented Americans* is a testament to the existence of this community and an attempt to make its members visible "as more than laborers, … sufferers or dreamers" (xv). She addresses the various myths white America creates around undocumented migrants—undocumented migrants living in the shadows, high-functioning migrant children suffering from low self-esteem and in need of white guidance, migrants who speak like they are kindergartners, migrants who are lazy, migrants who are hardworking and grateful—and shows how these stereotypical ascriptions seek to legitimize the community's direct or indirect exploitation.

Almost as an instant refusal to play by publishing industry expectations from an undocumented writer, Villavicencio announces that her book is not going to be a tragic migration story. In fact, it skips over the border-crossing almost entirely to focus on the migrants already living in the US. In writing her book, she interviews several randomly chosen undocumented migrants of Latinx[2] background in the US but instead of focusing on their migration story, she chooses to focus on their survival story.

> I would not ask undocumented subjects why they came to America, no focus on push/pull factors, because I believe migration is a human right. I would not ask, except in rare cases, how they came to America. No thrilling, explicit border-crossing stories. I would ask them if they felt American. No apologizing for our illegality. But I would ask them if they had regrets. I would ask them if they had nightmares. (Arthurs)

The product is the documentation of the "slow, day-in-the-life stories" of undocumented migrants that does not feed the industry's appetite (Belli). There are no dramatic plot twists nor emotional meltdowns in the book, and no attempts are made to inspire or evoke sympathy in its white readers. Villavicencio observes that the "stories that came out and had become sort of popular about immigrants, undocumented or not, were stories from people who were pretty grateful to America. It seemed like the point in a lot of these narratives was to change racist white people's minds about us. And that didn't feel right with me" (Lozada). Her response was a book that refuses to play to the tastes and expectations of the white US citizenry: "I didn't write it for you to *like* it" (*Undocumented Americans* xvi). She opts for a bold refashioning of her intended readership instead: "This book is for young immigrants

and children of immigrants[3]. [. . .] This book will give you permission to let go" (xvii). It seeks to forge a connection with the US' undocumented youth and exposes them to the futility and toxicity of narratives of gratitude: be it towards white America in the hopes of making migrant presence in the US more acceptable, or towards their migrant parents who sacrifice a lot to give them the opportunity to live in the US, but in return expect success and distinction from their children (Gurba). She hopes a direct and honest conversation would bring young migrants to a deeper understanding of the full effect of generational trauma caused by migration and allow them to live their lives on their own terms and not according to what others expect of them. Her book is to function as a manual, a template for young undocumented writers, nudging them to allow themselves the freedom to write their own stories in an assertive and unapologetic tone, to claim the first person narratorial voice, to permit themselves to experiment with genres and forms, to be creative and playful while sensitively portraying the violent erasures and exploitations of undocumented people (Villavicencio "Karla Cornejo Villavicencio on 'The Undocumented Americans'"). Critics reckoned with Villavicencio's work as "caustic" and "hardcore," labelling it a "punk manifesto" (Lozada, Gurba, Arthurs). *The Undocumented Americans*' focus, intended readership, tone, and form work together to build its exposition of undocumented migration. The end product is a messy (filled with random stories of undocumented migrants), lyrical (translated as poetry), and complex (written from a place of shared trauma) representation of undocumented life. At its core lies the distilled message: undocumented Americans *are* a part of the US. They exist and they should not apologize for their presence.

The book centers around Staten Island, Ground Zero (site of the former World Trade Center buildings), Miami, Flint, Cleveland, New Haven, intentionally avoiding the Southern border cities, which immediately crop up in discussions on undocumented migration to the US. There is also a personal reason for the selection of these places: as an undocumented writer, traveling too far from home and her network poses a challenge and a risk: "I was scared when I set out to write this book, scared of flying, scared of ICE. [. . .] I wondered if I was putting my parents at risk" (Arthurs). Staying away from the border, however, meant focusing on the local. This shift in focus helped her convey the ubiquity of undocumented migrants in the various cities and towns in the US. Migrants define these American cities as much as these places shape their identities. Her parents, Villavicencio mentions, "are New Yorkers to the core" (*Undocumented Americans* 4). The statement imprints her parents' identity as long-term New York residents rather than identifying them as Ecuadorian migrants in the US. It allows them a life and identity beyond that of the legal transgression, acknowledging the *long durée* of post-migration life

(which involves surviving years in the US as undocumented). The presence of migrants adds (by means of cheap labor, diversity, cosmopolitanism) to New York's cultural capital and preeminence, and migrants both documented and undocumented are entitled to their identities as New Yorkers. Like all New Yorkers, migrants' personal histories are entwined with the history of the city. Her father "drove a cab back when East New York was still gang country" and his driving days were brought to an end when New York suspended driver's licenses for undocumented migrants in the aftermath of 9/11 (*Undocumented Americans* 4). In their family history, that was the night that her father, the most powerful man she knew, "started dying" (41). The city had used his labor and dismissed his services for no fault of his own; he had contributed to New York's economy and its legislations cost him his source of income. Villavicencio includes details of her family history (in the US) to recalibrate skewed perspectives that imagine migrant identities as frozen in time, as if migrants' lives and histories cease to be at the border. Her attempt is to pin migrant presence onto the US map, to visibilize them, to accord the undocumented a place in US history and economy.

The Undocumented Americans is not a migration story, it is a story of survival (despite the long-term mental and physical consequences of surviving as undocumented in the US). Villavicencio begins her book close to home, in Staten Island, where she meets with day laborers, the majority of whom were undocumented. For the undocumented day laborers, this struggle for survival literally plays out on a daily basis. Some start out as teenagers, others are as old as her father—professionals who "represent a wide range of skills, from muscle to flooring to woodwork to welding to painting to cement work to brickwork to carpentry to insulation to stucco to electrical work…" (*Undocumented Americans* 10). But their immigration status diminishes their contribution. Their labor is characterized as "unskilled," a euphemism for cheap labor. These undocumented laborers are on their own, unprotected by labor regulations, exposed to wage thefts and precarious working conditions.

Villavicencio is furious that *The New York Times* describes day laborers as "idling on street corners" (*Undocumented Americans* 9). The article she refers to insensitively portrays day laborers as benefitting from natural disasters, as "finding fortune along the streets of ruined homes and upended lives" (Berger). It postulates an insidious binary relation between citizen-sufferers and migrant-profiteers. It zooms in on what migrants receive (with their pay they bought their children at home "computer, bicycles and new shoes") and glosses over what migrants offer. One interviewee said, "Day laborers are like first responders to this crisis," but this statement doesn't find emphasis in the article. The implicit discomfort at this influx of undocumented day laborers at New York City street curbs (that finds expression in the *Times* article) arises

from an exclusionary attitude that refuses undocumented bodies a place in US public spaces despite a clear demand for their labor. The undocumented body in a public space is matter out of place, an inappropriate presence. The rejection of their bodies is evocative of theories of dirt, which frame dirt as being relational to a system of order: "where there is dirt there is system" (Douglas 44). Dirt as matter out of place is ultimately suggestive of the rational and limits of the ordering system. Undocumented men could be working in the gardens, working in basements, repairing roofs of citizen households, but do not belong idling on public corners and streets. "What an offensive way to describe labor that requires standing in hellish heat or cold or rain from dawn until nightfall, negotiating in a language not your own, competing with your own friends for the same job, then performing it to perfection without the certainty of pay" (Villavicencio, *Undocumented Americans* 11). This denial is offensive and convenient at the same time: it operates as if there is a split between migrant labor (which is almost received as inanimate) and migrant life (which is animated with messy internal conflicts and bodily limitations).

To add insult to injury, undocumented migrants' exclusion from public spaces is attributed to their shadowy lives (which is an effect of their illegality) in the US: "They say we live in the shadows. That's the metaphor the media likes to use about undocumented immigrants. It never made sense to me. We're everywhere" (Villavicencio, "A Theory of Animals"). This selective visibility, which sees migrant labor when the job necessitates it, but overlooks their lives, is a consequence (or continuation) of the split between life and labor. She sets out to redress this erasure, interviewing day laborers (without putting "on the drag of a journalist"), following them everywhere—to street corners, worker centers, city hall testimonials, soccer matches, Christmas parties (Villavicencio, *Undocumented Americans* 15). She collects their stories: the everyday exploitations at work, their attempts to learn English at the local libraries, their aspirations for their children, their medical and mental health conditions, their desire to belong in the US. Together they form a map of the various facets of a migrant's life. The pattern repeats itself in other places she visits: she tells the story of undocumented people, infusing it with details of their private lives affected by their public exclusions.

Not a (DREAMer) Memoir

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio first wrote "publicly" about "her situation"—about her being undocumented in 2010, when she was a senior at Harvard ("DREAM Act: I'm an Illegal Immigrant at Harvard"). The essay was published by the *The Daily Beast* anonymized, to protect her identity. Publishing agents and news reporters however, tracked her and reached out to her for scoops of her private life. A memoir was expected of her at age twenty-one. Her story was to join a

list of student testimonials that appealed for their path to legal residency. She refused to deliver that "interchangeable immigrant [. . .] sad book" that either posited her as a victim or as a hero (Villavicencio, *Undocumented Americans* xiv). She confides her pessimism to her readers: "It is important that I make clear I was the valedictorian of my high school class and got full scholarships to the country's best schools. [. . .] We go running [. . .]. We recycle. But you and I both know this changes nothing" (Villavicencio, "DREAM Act: I'm an Illegal Immigrant at Harvard"). She challenges the argument that socialization and merit could make undocumented students "worthy" of US citizenship. Her article was a response to the DREAM Act (short for Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act) being gutted at the US Senate after a decade of congressional debates and undocumented students' movements. The bill, first introduced in 2001, offered a glimmer of hope—a conditional path to permanent residency—for many young undocumented migrants who, like Villavicencio, were brought to the US as minors. The conditions were many: they had to be long-term US residents who had graduated from US high schools and had no criminal record, were of good moral character, and who promised to attend college or give two years of their life to the US military ("DREAM Act").

During the 2007 congressional hearings titled "Comprehensive Immigration Reform: The Future of Undocumented Immigrant Students," three undocumented youths, Marie Nazareth Gonzalez, Martine Mwanj Kalaw, and Tam Tran, publicly offered their life stories in the hopes of immigration reforms. Their "coming out" to the public marked a historic moment as previously undocumented youths were represented publicly by political figures and activist organizations. Their testimonies "were some of the first public and openly accessible life narratives produced by undocumented youths, narratives that reached a level of visibility previously unheard of for individual undocumented students" (Batzke, "Concealing and Revealing" 308). These testimonies were prototypes that defined the motifs of other undocumented autobiographies that followed soon after. Each of these students stressed their academic performance in American schools and colleges, their integration into American society, their faith in the American Dream, and their willingness to work hard to achieve that dream. "Only in America…" read Gonzalez's statement, affirming US exceptionalism ("Comprehensive Immigration Reform" 9 and 11). These students were both victims and heroes: victims brought illegally to the US by their parents often without their knowledge, and heroes as they persevered against all odds. Like Villavicencio, they were overachievers, exemplary members of the undocumented community. They were high school valedictorians, recipients of full scholarships, bright young minds, fully Americanized—they became the symbols of the DREAM Act.

Befitting the framing of the congressional hearing, these stories played into a narrative of reward and punishment. Michigan Congressman John Conyers Jr. argued in support of the DREAMers: "children should not be punished 'for the sins of the fathers'[. . .] but [we] should instead reward them when they succeed" ("Comprehensive Immigration Reform" 5). These testimonies and supporting arguments mapped DREAMer life narratives onto the cultural narrative of the "hardworking" American, worthy of US citizenship and, by extension, the American Dream. The US had the power to reward these young aspiring people for their hard work. Kalaw pleaded: despite her academic record she was "unable to explore [her] full potential" because of her immigration status ("Comprehensive Immigration Reform" 12). The DREAM Act would give her that opportunity. Phyllis P. Chock problematizes this narrative of opportunity as it demands individual distinction, creating an ethical and moral hierarchy amongst members of the community; it also deludes with a promise of a straight route from handwork to success when in reality there is no guarantee:

> The typical opportunity story centers on an immigrant (man) whose arrival in America, desire for betterment, striving in adversity, and putting down of roots make him a 'new man.' That is, he is the Promethean hero of his own story; the story erases his past, foreign cultural baggage, and restraining social ties. (Chock 281)

In narratives of distinction, the focus on the individual is at the expense of the community, the network of friends and family that the undocumented so strongly relies upon in the absence of institutional support. These early testimonies inadvertently ended up perpetuating the divisive politics of separating the individual from the community. Encoded in these individual self-narratives was a promise of success, that fed into the making of their own exceptionalism. Because of the tightly controlled political setup of the congressional hearings, and for their advocacy of the DREAM Act (which was severely limited and insular in its very provision and ideology), these self-narratives were coerced into being "'neat' and 'normative'" (Batzke, "Concealing and Revealing" 312). They were purged of any criticism against the US state and its immigration policies. Almost as a rejoinder, Villavicencio writes, to tell "the full story, you have to be a little crazy. And you certainly can't be enamored by America, not still. That disqualifies you" (*Undocumented Americans* xv). This is the main challenge for undocumented youth: to criticize the US state while still hoping to get US citizenship; to invest in mobilizing their voice towards a political end when they don't have the power of the vote.

Ina Batzke traces the historical emboldening of the voices within the undocumented youth movement surrounding the rejections of the DREAM Act: post-2007 congressional hearing students realized the limitations of the label of a DREAMer and began claiming their identity as "undocumented" (*Undocumented Migrants* 101), closely followed by "unafraid," and finally around 2011 identifying as "unapologetic" (*Undocumented Migrants* 121). It is within this context that Villavicencio's voice has to be located. Villavicencio distances herself from DREAMer ascriptions, even though she mentions her inductions at premier educational institutions such as Harvard and Yale: "I never called myself a Dreamer. The word was saccharine and dumb, and it yoked basic human rights to getting an A on a report card" (Villavicencio, "Waking Up from the American Dream"). Education, to her, even if it were Harvard, was not an opportunity, but her "birth right" (Villavicencio, "Embiggening [I Can't Be Your Hero, Baby]"). Of course, part of this posturing is performance—"to troll white people" (De León). Its goal is to jolt people out of complicity that accepts migrants as either intellectually inferior or in need of white support and guidance. Her bravado is an act of preservation against racist stereotypes: "Why *would* I have been shocked that I can write a book? I realized that this [presumptions of migrants' insecurities despite achievements] was a white narrative: that there was something lacking in me, and that not only was there something lacking in me and my background, but that I was sort of obviously insecure and had low self-esteem" (De León). Quite clearly hers is not a narrative of gratitude. Compared to another contemporary undocumented writer, Jose Antonio Vargas, who produces a list of white beneficiaries, whom he lovingly calls his "adopted family" for their unconditional support, Villavicencio frames her relationship with her wealthy white sponsors as being mutually beneficial. They were the patrons and she the artist: "They were Gertrude Stein, and I was a young Hemingway. I was Van Gogh, crazy and broken" (*Undocumented Americans* 6). Identifying with Hemingway and Van Gogh announces her potential as a creator of art (and by extension value), and at the same time it claims a space for herself—a queer brown undocumented woman—in the Western traditional canon of artists primarily dominated by white men. She emphasizes that poor undocumented youth might need patronage from wealthy white citizens to receive college education in the absence of government aid for them, but Americans would benefit from this investment: "we'd make excellent permanent neighbors" ("DREAM Act: I'm an Illegal Immigrant at Harvard"). This is a transaction undocumented youth need not be apologetic about; it was not a condition of their making but a survivalist response to their systemic oppression.

Connecting the "I" to "We": Elements of *Testimonio* Tradition

Foregoing the memoir format allows Karla Cornejo Villavicencio other freedoms: she fast-forwards through her life story, retelling episodes at will. She adopts a wide-angle frame that accommodates the stories of her parents and community. How and why she and her parents came to the US is not central to the narrative of *The Undocumented Americans*. She writes, "The story as far as I know it goes something like this [. . .]," introducing an element of ambiguity (4). It was her version of the truth, not an explanation for legitimacy. A problematic aspect that recurred in undocumented youth memoirs such as in Vargas was the motif of the betrayal (a carryover from the DREAM Act testimonials)—the shock at discovering his immigration status when he visited a DMV office to get a driver's permit at sixteen. This is the starting point of a rift between Vargas and his grandparents (Lolo and Lola) who brought him to the US. In the 2007 testimonials, DREAMers attested to their innocence by pointing out how it was not they who had broken the US immigration laws, but their parents. Villavicencio skips this blame game entirely. She identifies with her parents and says had she been in their place she would do the same (*Undocumented Americans* 5). She never had to forgive her parents for bringing her to the US or for leaving her behind in Ecuador during her early childhood (despite the abandonment causing her lasting trauma and mental health issues). She writes, each of them had already paid "daily, privately, painfully" for their undocumented existence in the US, but their punishment isn't visible or "made legitimate by the presence of an audience" ("DREAM Act: I'm an Illegal Immigrant at Harvard").

Villavicencio identifies herself as an (undocumented) "immigrant's daughter," squarely putting the focus on the family (*Undocumented Americans* 115). Though not a memoir, *The Undocumented Americans* does include a fair amount of personal details to underscore the undocumented people's reliance on each other and on their families. "It's always been just the four of us" ("DREAM Act: I'm an Illegal Immigrant at Harvard"). Her parents made sacrifices to give her the education that she had and she in turn hopes to finance their retirement and health care (as elderly undocumented people are not entitled to pensions and medical benefits) ("Waking up from the American Dream"). The recognition of the role of the family in the survival (and successes) of the undocumented is important for Villavicencio. The emphasis also helps understand the isolation of these families, excluded from society, outside of legal aid and protection. It is an important political stance, a marked shift from the individual-centric DREAMer rhetoric. From this standpoint, it is easy to understand Villavicencio's *The Undocumented Americans* as a narrative of inclusion rather than an exclusive personal memoir. The authorial voice, "I," insists on its embeddedness in the community: "I attempt to write from a

place of shared trauma, shared memories, shared pain," and efforts at self-representation therefore become inseparable from the experiences of the entire undocumented community (*Undocumented Americans* xvi). The entanglement of the personal and the community is the legacy of the *testimonio* tradition that Villavicencio borrows from. The *testimonio* tradition, popular in Latin American literature, promotes the merging of the "I" with the collective "we," or positing of the "I" as representative of the "we." "That is, testimonio allows for one individual to tell her story while connecting it to similar conditions across her community" (Saavedra and Pérez 451-52). John Beverly describes *testimonio* or testimonial narratives as marginal witness accounts which come to existence in the 1960s amidst national liberation movements in Latin America. *Testimonio* has elements of resistance literature in its aspiration to represent those "excluded from authorized representation" (Beverley 13). *Testimonio* gives voice in literature to people deprived, disenfranchised, and rendered voiceless. For it to function optimally, the individualistic "I" has to take a back seat and make way for its affirmation in the interdependent collective mode "we."

Villavicencio relates to the community as an extension of her family. When she meets the day laborers at the worker center in Staten Island, she says she sees her father's face in each one of them and "I know that this astigmatism will always be with me" (*Undocumented Americans* 13). This identification is not simply one that is emotionally projected, her father actually does become a day laborer at age fifty-three after losing his restaurant job of fifteen years (16). The connection is one forged by shared precarity. She carries this prism—of seeing undocumented people as members of her family—as she documents the community, bringing into her narration empathy and urgency. She offers readers stories about friendships among undocumented men that sustain them in the US: they become custodians of each other's memories, witnesses to each other's existence (39-40). Esme, a Uruguayan undocumented woman in Florida, is influenced by the Argentine Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and joins a group of women, You Are Not Alone, to protest against mistreatment and sudden disappearance of undocumented migrants from the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) offices. The group stands across the street from the Miramar USCIS offices, sloganeering: "We see you, and you won't get away with this" (79). Bringing in cross-national Latin American cultural influences enriches the representational canvas of the Latinx undocumented people in the US. Villavicencio shows that the community (despite its vulnerabilities) takes on immense duress to sustain its members (the family unit is a microcosm of this) and relies on an extended network of US-born Latinx beneficiaries, people with undocumented family members, for example, who share their medicine, give free car rides and grand

tips to support the undocumented community. *The Undocumented Americans* is an attempt at visibilizing this extended community and the wide range of services its members offer not only to US citizens but to their own community.

Not a (Realist) Journalistic Account

In its aspirations to visibilize the undocumented community, *Undocumented Americans* tests the limits of journalistic objectivity. With its personal essayistic reporting style, it situates itself as a legatee of new journalism—a form of journalism more permissive than traditional journalism. New Journalism emerged in the 1960s, allowing a play of fact and fiction, public affairs and the intimate, seeking to soften the hard edges of journalistic objectivity with a literary sensibility. Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's alignment with New Journalism can be gauged from her admiration of its proponents such as Truman Capote and Joan Didion. *The Undocumented Americans*, in fact, begins with a quote from Joan Didion's *The White Album*: "A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest [. . .] ." Villavicencio teases her readers: first guaranteeing them the veracity of her reportage by mentioning her commitment to journalistic methods of fact-checking and ethical practices such as source protection; and then immediately bringing these claims into question: "Names of persons have all been changed. Names of places have all been changed. Physical descriptions have all been changed. Or have they?" (*Undocumented Americans* xv). She remarks: after the legal review she destroyed her interview notes—the very foundation of this journalistic enterprise. And she had never used a recorder in the first place so as not to intimidate her sources, once again emphasizing her commitment to her community over her commitment to the practice of journalism. The legacies of her book are the memories and the relationships of trust she built with her interviewees. She continues to keep in touch with her interviewees, these relationships assure her "that there are dozens of homes across the country where there is a couch and a warm meal waiting for me should I need it, and a very long hug, and I've never really had that before" (Arthurs). The very act of writing the book, *The Undocumented Americans*, therefore can be read as an exercise in community building. Villavicencio's hierarchical posturing of the affective over the objective is significant for a community which stands little chance at accumulating documentary material. With her book, too, in the absence of any record, or at least with her admission of its absence, Villavicencio enters into a contract of trust with her readers, just as memoirists do as they set out to retell their life stories. The readers simply have to believe her account. Here, embedding her personal story into her "journalistic" account of the undocumented community only authenticates her investment in the community and in their stories. Their stories are inseparable from her own and the truth-effect of one legitimizes the other.

Villavicencio problematizes journalistic standards of objectivity and non-intervention, especially when the subject of representation has been historically denied self-representation. She writes, "Literature about undocumented people in this country is too rare – and too often written by writers who've never been undocumented" ("In This Novel"). Within this context, a hierarchical posturing of emotional distance appears misplaced. When the undocumented begins writing/telling their own stories, expectations of objective distance only diminish the emotional power of these narratives. Without as much as doing the emotional work for her readers, that is cueing them on when to feel sympathy and inspiration (as most of her stories are fragments, without emotional build-up or plot), Villavicencio's book still appeals to emotional affinity. As with the *testimonio*, her documentary work hopes to achieve "an appropriate ethical and political response more the possibility of solidarity than of charity" (Beverly 19). Not posing as a typical journalist (with a recorder and camera) frees Villavicencio: "I was able to get involved in people's lives and gather these stories in unconventional ways" (Belli). She develops personal and long-term relationships with her subjects, inserting herself as one invested in their lives. In one instance, she becomes a mentor to four children whose father was recently deported, because she saw her brother in them (*Undocumented Americans* 119). She holds fundraisers for them and motivates them to study. Her immersion into her subjects' lives is a political act of expressing solidarity and care (towards her community). Documentation, here, serves an inward function of self-validation. These affective approaches of identification and investment allow the space to pause at small details of life and facets of personality that are strikingly revealing and therefore have immense documentary value. These are the particularities that a well-meaning journalistic account with a strict imposition of emotional distance might overlook.

Villavicencio self-reflexively comments at one point, "Journalists are not allowed to get *involved* the way I have gotten involved. Journalists, to the best of my knowledge, do not try to change the outcome of their stories as crudely as I do" (*Undocumented Americans* 114). Here, she is not only talking about flouting journalistic conventions of non-intervention (affecting the course of the narrative) but also about giving herself permission to rewrite people's stories (reimagining an alternative narrative). This has to do with retroactively seeking justice for people who have never had a fair chance at being truthfully represented. The goal is to dig beyond the reality that has been factually transcribed, to explore the realm of the "extra-real"; to do justice to the memories of undocumented people which fade away without mnemonic material objects and cultural narratives that invest in their memories.

> In my mind it was like a belief system in the form of a literary technique that was used to bring justice to the page when there was impunity in real life and in our environment, where there are disappearances, where people's bodies are being mutilated, where we're being thrown into unmarked vans, where we're living under what seems like a banana republic dictatorship. I thought it was the perfect moment to use magical realism. (De León)

Towards the end of the chapter "Staten Island," she reports the story of Ubaldo Cruz Martinez, a homeless alcoholic day laborer, who drowns in a basement during Hurricane Sandy. She reclaims his death story by inserting a squirrel into his last moments, proposing the two died together, witnessing each other's death. Readers are told he cared for the squirrel until the very end: the narrative endows him with values of kindness and compassion, affecting the legacy and memories of the day laborer. The reader is asked to take a documentary leap of faith, to transgress the boundaries of "facts" and embrace a reparative fiction to reclaim the dead, the silenced, and those who disappeared without a trace. The exercise points to the poverty of written record and the heavy reliance on the anecdotal when representing a community written off as undocumented. This layering of real and fabulation, of fact and fiction can be traced to the Latin American magical realist traditions exemplified in the writings of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. "Garcia Marquez suggests that the magic text is, paradoxically, more realistic than a 'realistic' text" for its capacity to supplement exclusive versions of reality (Simpkins 144). By tinkering with the probable outcomes of an undocumented person's life, Villavicencio conveys the acute loneliness and lack of options in the undocumented community. A reader might now be left wondering about other magical scenarios where: i) Ubaldo Cruz Martinez's death is surrounded by family members who were not denied entry at the US border; ii) Ubaldo Cruz Martinez dies in his hometown of San Jerónimo Xayacatlán, never needing to migrate to the US; iii) Ubaldo Cruz Martinez lives out his life, never faced with hopelessness. The multiple scenarios question the very "reality" surrounding Ubaldo Cruz Martinez's death; that Hurricane Sandy had little to do with his death; and that he was already a dead man living in the US with the hopelessness (manifested in his drinking problem) caused by poverty, lack of options, and loneliness. Her use of magical realism becomes a commentary on immigration policies, its gate-keeping functions, its production of the "illegal" subject at the border and its multiple reproductions within the US. It is not just the border "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (Anzaldúa 25); the institutionally normalized exploitation of migrants continues much beyond the frontiers into their everyday lives in the heart of the US.

Translating the Specificities in Migrant Voices

The attempts at representing the undocumented people are not without their challenges. Initially, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio pitched her ideas as a PhD dissertation project at Yale. The dissertation committee rejected her ideas because it didn't fit the departmental focus "on brown skin, on calloused hands" of migration studies (Lozada). As a book project too, there was a clash between her vision and the publishing industry's expectations. The industry also has fixed ideas about how her voice should be positioned and marketed.

> My imprint treated me very respectfully, but they knew people would want to read the book by one of the first undocumented students to have graduated from Harvard. And I think that condemned my book to not be seen as a work of capital L literature, but instead as a DREAMer memoir. DREAMer memoirs have their purpose. But that's not what I set out to write. My book is a serious work of literature. When I've done interviews, people don't ask me about literary things, people don't ask me about formal things, people don't often ask me about my influences or whether I have any training in writing or who I studied under or things like that. People just ask me about my parents leaving me in Ecuador, or what I do for self-care, things like that. It's very clear that I'm being seen through a sociological lens. (Lozada)

There is a circularity to not being seen and valued as a creator of "capital L literature." It maintains the confinement of migrant voices to certain genres and forms, denying them privileges of formal experimentation, and expects a polite posture that conveys the gratitude for being heard and published. This is exactly what Villavicencio fights against with "the book's punk sensibility" and its "radical experiment in genre" (Gurba, Lozada). But the challenges do not stop with the writing and publication of the book; they continue as she negotiates the terms of marketing, translations, and reception.

Of these struggles, the issue of translation is particularly revealing of publishing industry conservatism. As mentioned earlier, a primary authorial intention was to write *The Undocumented Americans* for the undocumented community, especially for "children of immigrants" (Gurba). Needless to say, a Spanish version of the book would have helped its outreach, however, so far, the book doesn't have a Spanish translation. In interviews, Villavicencio has discussed putting on hold a Spanish translation as she didn't want to lose her voice to a high-brow "aristocratic" Latin American Spanish translation which is what her publishers offered to her ("Karla Cornejo Villavicencio on 'The Undocumented Americans'"). In the book, she employs a conversational tone in Latinx vernacular to reproduce the way children of migrants speak.

In fact, she attests that her way of speaking—a mixture of Latinx telenovela Spanish with New York–New Jersey inflections—helped ease her way into the lives of her interviewees who immediately identified her as one of their own ("Author: Karla Cornejo Villavicencio and Jonathan Blitzer in Conversation"). She understands the value of these specificities of language and expression, and considers the preservation of the distinctive elements of migrant voices non-negotiable, especially for a documentary project like hers invested in representing the undocumented community. Imposing a high-brow Latin American Spanish onto long-term US migrants such as her Ecuadorian parents denies them the specificity of their experiences in the US. It is as if they never left their native countries, or their language calcified at the border. It also doesn't represent the significant number of migrants from minority communities from Mexico and Central America who do not speak mainstream Spanish. Attempts at homogenizing their voices somehow fail to respect the basic tenet of representation. After their arrival, low-income migrants often live in high-density migrant neighborhoods where they jostle with other migrants from the various Spanish-speaking countries in Latin and Central America, and the Caribbean. Add to this mix their interactions with their African American neighbors, and their absorption of idiomatic American English. Migrants' speech then becomes a kind of spongy canvas that is dynamic and alive, where various Spanish versions and vernaculars morph with English, and is rendered distinct by its blending with local accents and slurs. In time, their speech becomes a rich tapestry of all their influences and experiences. Smoothing over these peculiarities for the comfort of the larger Spanish readership is a continuation of the violent erasure of undocumented people from the written document.

One might be curious then, why did Villavicencio write her book in English? The intuitive answer would be that it has to do with her identity as an American, socialized and educated in America, in English. Even though her "maternal language is Spanish," she says, "the language I write in and think in is English" ("Karla Cornejo Villavicencio on 'The Undocumented Americans'"). But she also makes a political point of her writing in English. It visibilizes the labor of translation that is embedded in migrant communities, often carried out by children of migrants, again highlighting her own subject location as a child of migrants. Villavicencio conducts her conversations with her interviewees in (Latinx) Spanish and simultaneously transcribes the auditory feed into her notebook in English (as she doesn't use a tape recorder). This process of writing/transcription is an attempt to embody the instantaneous translation process that children of migrants adopt at an early age. The point is to draw attention to the fact that translation is a difficult job, requiring several layers of interpretative understanding (not only the understanding of

the two languages) and has tremendous emotional consequence. It involves children ensuring their parents' safety, their dignity, negotiating their rights, trying to open doors of opportunities for their parents. It means a forced precociousness for migrant children, where they are expected to know which information to filter out so as not to hurt or offend their parents' sentiments, which sensitive information to withhold to protect their parents. Children have to decode the legal and ancillary social systems to which their families could appeal to, and initiate their parents into American societal mores and culture, skewing normative power relationships between parents and children. Migrant children, socialized in American culture and equipped with the English language, become their parents' mediators to the world around them. Villavicencio uses the term "parentification" of migrant children to refer to this phenomenon, where migration puts children in a position where they "have to become parent figures to [their] parents" ("Karla Cornejo Villavicencio on 'The Undocumented Americans'"). Villavicencio gives an example of a doctor informing a patient's son about his mother's cancer. In this situation, the doctor expects the young boy to carry the emotional weight of breaking the news of cancer to his mother (*Undocumented Americans* 103). Translation thus puts these children not only in positions of power but also of immense responsibility and takes a heavy emotional toll on them.

Villavicencio has other complaints against translation: "I hate the way journalists translate the words of Spanish speakers in their stories. They transliterate, and make us sound dumb, like we all have a first grade-vocabulary" (*Undocumented Americans* xvi). This kind of clinical translation involves no art or poetry, denying the people translated any subjectivity and cultural specificities. Here, too, there is a homogenizing of migrant voices; these translations reproduce racist and classist stereotypes. This is why the emphasis on translation is important. Translation is central to representation: both need care and emotional connection to illicit that care. In the best-case scenario, the translation process involves members of the community. This is why in Villavicencio's writings her subjects are portrayed with dignity and complexity: "I found my subjects to be warm, funny, dry, evasive, philosophical, weird, annoying, etc., and I tried to convey that tone in the translations" (xvi). As is the case in general with representation, the value of a community's self-translations is incontestable; but in the next section I explore the limits of self-representation especially when this self is embedded in a politics of self-censorship.

Conclusion: Limits of Self-Representations

In a YouTube interview, Javier Zamora, another powerful undocumented writer, advises aspiring undocumented writers to stick to poetry (which is what he did with his first publication) or fiction as a measure in self-censorship. I think it is worth reading the transcription[4] of his entire response to understand the full implication of self-expression for the undocumented writer.

> If you can be truthful, be truthful. I would say from a legal perspective, I wouldn't advise you write non-fiction, if you want to get papers and if you want to write about your own story. I would write poetry or fiction because you know, and I guess, this is getting recorded and it's gonna get circled, so I'll leave it at that. But to make it short, I think, I will be a forever green card holder. I don't think I would be, I can become a citizen anytime soon because of the book that I wrote. Because I have an EB-1 visa, which is an Einstein visa, a professional visa, a visa given to me because I was a writer, and because I wrote a poetry book. And so everything that I write, will eventually, if I do want to interview and become a citizen will be judged by a lone person, because that is how fucked up the immigration system is. It is up to one person that interviews you for them to deem you worthy of citizenship, or to check all the background and everything that you have said and done so I'll leave it at that. I would just say that, I would be as truthful as you can be, and sometimes fiction is truer than non-fiction. (Zamora)

The weight of judgment on Zamora over every word spoken is palpable. He is extremely conscious of what he says on recorded camera. According to him, the words of undocumented writers can have life-long consequences, and any information they reveal can be incriminating not only for the writers themselves, but also for their undocumented family members and friends. What seems like an intended paradox is that undocumented writers' attempts at documenting their life stories can get them disqualified from being documented as legal subjects. Their immigration status enforces or expects a kind of self-erasure, which perpetuates the cycle of invisibility (or legal non-existence). In this context, a carefully constructed narrative of gratitude or opportunity in undocumented migrant literature is less a matter of choice but rather a given. And the publishing industry and market with its demand for narratives of gratitude and suffering are complicit in reproducing the undocumented authors' legal vulnerabilities. Zamora's reliance on fiction to convey reality more truthfully than non-fiction is not simply an authorial choice, but an effect of his authorial position. Fiction, or a blend of fact and fiction, is a recourse for undocumented writers. Scholars of the transatlantic

slave trade explore similar narrative techniques: Saidiya Hartman relies on "critical fabulation" and speculative possibilities of the subjunctive, imagining "what might have been or could have been," when narrating intimate stories of African slaves largely absent from the archive (11-12). Undocumented writers, banished from the documented page, rely on fiction or fabulated supplements of their realities to narrate their everyday life stories and exploitations. These variational inventive narrative forms allow the undocumented to tell their stories despite the institutional injunction on self-expression. Experimentations in forms and genres then are more than formal experiments but take new meanings, they become tools of resistance and possibility.

Any discussion on the limits of self-representation of undocumented people has to take into account the publishing industry's hyper-selection of authors based on their individual distinction. Their distinction in turn is conferred upon them by intellectual and cultural institutions, with the academic and journalistic spheres increasingly aligning themselves closely together. Karla Cornejo Villavicencio has her Ivy League pedigree (which initially generates interest in her work); Javier Zamora too was at Harvard as a Radcliffe fellow, in addition to his degrees from the universities of California, Berkeley and New York; Jose Antonio Vargas has his Pulitzer Prize for news reporting; and Dan-el Padilla Peralta his distinguished career at Princeton, Oxford, and Stanford. Peralta writes in his epilogue, "Everyday I feel grateful to this country for the education it has given and continues to give me" (294). Villavicencio distances herself from such expressions of gratitude. And yet, she cannot free herself from being constantly marketed "as the poster child for the American Dream. [. . .] because we needed to sell books" (Lozada). She has come to an uneasy reconciliation of this branding: "When people try to pitch me to media, they're like, she was born in a literal ditch and somehow made her way to Harvard which angers me 50% of the time, and makes me laugh 50% of the time" (Arthurs). To take control of her narrative, she has explored paratextual avenues: in the book, the introduction serves as a manual to reading her book; after the publication of her book, Villavicencio has continued with the behind-the-scenes work, giving interviews, writing opinion pieces to position her voice (many of these have been referenced in this essay). At times, she has actively worked to "sabotage" the marketing plans to retain some degree of autonomy over her own work, at other times she has resorted to self-censorship: "There's some stuff that I can't say because I would like to continue to make a living through out my life in publishing" ("Karla Cornejo Villavicencio on 'The Undocumented Americans'"). A fair amount of these paratextual conversations—curating, clarifying, and publicizing her views—has taken place on social media platforms hosted by these premier institutions (Yale News, Yale University YouTube channel) or the pages of *The New Yorker*

and *The New York Times* (even though Villavicencio publicly criticizes the *New York Times* article on undocumented day laborers), revealing the power of, and dependence on, these cultural institutions. Because of their cultural capital, reviews of her book on these platforms influence sales and recognition of her work. One could even argue that perhaps, she consciously leverages their power: after all, her first public positioning as an undocumented migrant also asserts herself as a Harvard graduate (although in *Undocumented Americans* she does not dwell on it). Irrespective of how undocumented writers position themselves, the constant resurfacing of these labels of distinction speaks to their power and authority. Intellectual distinction (the pressure to bring A grades despite systemic disadvantages, mental health issues, family and financial troubles) continues to present itself as a shield against racial and ethnic stereotypes leveled against minority communities—it is the ticket out of the hood. But individual distinction of any kind, as already mentioned, comes at the expense of the community; and members who then make it as visible cultural symbols stand disassociated from their origin.

As a scholar and teacher interested in undocumented migrants, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's *The Undocumented Americans* immediately appeals to me because it is a self-representation which employs a wide-angle lens to include the entire community. It sits in the interstices between the genres of the memoir and the essay form, allowing insights into the personal and the public aspects of undocumented life. Its focus on migrant lives beyond the moment of border-crossing is refreshing and makes an important political point that urges readers to stop dwelling on the whys of migration (accepting it as a global reality) and turn their energies to understand the effects of migration—for example, the traumas that are borne at a personal level and those carried on generationally. Her book with its assertive, unapologetic tone encapsulates an evolutionary stage in undocumented migrant voices (since the undocumented students' movements around the DREAM Act) and signals to a hopefully bold new generation of undocumented migrant authors (with substantial cultural influence). Her struggles with self-representation and positioning make me wonder if the logical next step to maintaining autonomy and freeing oneself from institutional gate-keeping is self-publication—of collaborative works, primarily made for the consumption and validation of the undocumented community. And one has to believe the sales will follow.

I am a migrant myself from the global south and for years have observed the struggles of outsiders like me to establish ourselves in the First World academia—our dependence on intellectual distinction to get out of the Third World, the expectation of gratitude when allowed entry into the First World, seeking validation from Eurocentric institutions of power and cultural capital, knowing full well many of these draw their accumulated wealth from

colonial legacies. Villavicencio says she "read a lot of James Baldwin to muster up the courage to write this [*Undocumented Americans*]," showing Baldwin's continued relevance in positioning undocumented voices in the twenty first century ("Karla Cornejo Villavicencio on 'The Undocumented Americans'"). Similarly, Villavicencio's bold voice, which claims her undocumented identity and autonomy despite being critically vulnerable, instills courage and faith in the larger (more privileged) migrant community to which I belong. It forces me to imagine a future where we do not wait any longer for a seat at the table, where we have declared a table of our own.

Notes

[1] Karla Cornejo Villavicencio is undocumented at the time of writing her book, but towards the end of 2020, after her marriage with a US citizen, Villavicencio gets her green card and is "no longer undocumented" ("Stephen Miller Will Have Some Free Time Soon").

[2] "Latinx" is a term Villavicencio uses and identifies with, and I retain that in this essay.

[3] Throughout the essay I prefer the use of the term "migrant" over "immigrant" because "migrant" is a more neutral term and conveys more accurately the uncertain nature of the temporal length of the stay most migrants set out with when they leave their native countries. The term "immigrant" tends to disproportionately focus on the end destination and lends itself to the US rhetoric of exceptionalism. However, at certain points in the essay, especially when quoting or paraphrasing Villavicencio's views, I have retained the use of the term "immigrant." For example, when Villavicencio talks about herself or her intended readers as "children of immigrants."

[4] I have transcribed Javier Zamora's video interview, adding punctuations where I thought necessary, and deleting speech fillers such as "um," "uh," and repetitions for conciseness.

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Biography

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We/They Are Displaced:

Children-Refugees in American Literature and Beyond

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a range of literary representations of children who endure displacement to see how fictional and non-fictional narratives shape the perception of refugees. Modern literature as a kind of cultural production can shed light on both the experiences of displaced children and the ways those experiences are perceived nowadays. Moreover, it can delineate how the author's position and their having/lacking the experience of displacement influences the narrative. The critical optic of this paper seeks to unravel the various dimensions of the cultural representations of a refugee's reality as created by modern American writer Alan Gratz in his novel *Refugee* and Malala Yousafzai in her collection *We Are Displaced: My Journey and Stories from Refugee Girls Around the World*. Not only will it help to explore the similarities and contrast in emblematizing images but also demonstrate how the position from which we narrate and view the experiences of these children impacts the narratives and cultural representations. The paper touches upon children voicing and/or representing resilience or victimhood as well as everyday reality of navigating displacement, perilous journeys, prolonged liminality, borders, barriers, and bureaucratic hurdles in search for a new home. By examining the similarities and differences of fictional and non-fictional representations of refugee children, this paper attempts to challenge the stereotypical perceptions surrounding refugee experiences in mass culture and highlights the need for cultural sensitivity when engaging with refugee experiences.

Keywords

Children; Literary Representation; Migration Narrative; Positionality; Refugee.

DOI: 10.25364/27.5:2025.1.3

About 117.3 million people have been forcibly displaced globally, including those fleeing violence, conflict, and persecution, according to UNHCR Global Trends 2023 (posted on 13 June 2024). According to the same data around 40 per cent of them are children who cross borders with their caretakers or unaccompanied. Malala Yousafzai, a human rights activist, describes it as follows in her collection of narratives that amplify refugee voices from around the world, *We Are Displaced: My Journey and Stories from Refugee Girls Around the World* (2019):

> Millions of men, women, and children witness wars every day. Their reality is violence, homes destroyed, and innocent lives lost. And the only choice they have for safety is to leave. To 'choose' to be displaced. That is not much of a choice. (ix-x)

While various parts of the world have been suffering from continued armed conflicts, for many, including myself as a Ukrainian and a researcher, wars in Europe seemed to be a barbaric vestige of the past. The recent cascade of wars is not only causing major geopolitical shifts in the world but also induces the people of the Global North to rethink and reevaluate the effects of the war such as conflict, violence, or displacement. Although refugee and border crises are not a new phenomenon and there are multiple dramatic examples of exoduses both in the present and in the past, the ongoing wars in Europe and the Middle East might contribute to changing the perspective of how we narrate, visualize, perceive, and research refugeedom. There have been many efforts from all fields of the humanities to rethink and reevaluate multiple refugee crises of the world across centuries through various projects, both scientific and artistic. The number of similar research projects is going to increase, inspired by the current mass exodus due to the outbreak of full-scale war in Europe.

A considerable number of fictional and non-fictional refugee narratives aimed at young readers and adults have emerged around the theme of displaced minors travelling to cross various borders. This paper aims to explore cultural representations of refugee children by comparing various dimensions of the refugee reality as created in the novel *Refugee* (2017) by Alan Gratz and the life narratives collected and published by Malala Yousafzai in the book *We Are Displaced* (2019). This paper begins by addressing the problem of representation that refugees face. It will then examine the fictional representations of refugee children in Gratz's novel to demonstrate how they are shaped and viewed today. It will compare these fictional representations to those found in the non-fictional life narratives of refugee children in the book *We Are Displaced*. This analysis will not only help examine the similarities

and contrast in emblematic images but also demonstrate how the position from which we narrate and view the experiences of these children impacts the narratives and cultural representations of refugees.

The primary concern when discussing refugee representations in culture lies in the agency that refugees, migrants, and particularly undocumented migrants have in controlling their narratives and determining how culture depicts them. While, to a certain extent, immigrants can influence their narratives, enabling their voices to be heard and expressing themselves through their own stories, the dynamics of their agency differs due to the prevailing circumstances of their frequently vulnerable and marginalized status. Even those refugees who are privileged enough not to be marginalized and may exert some measure of influence over their representations can intentionally distance themselves from both the label of "refugee" and the social group itself. Typically, displaced activists and artists with enough influence can attract attention and give a voice to the thousands of people displaced around the world, helping them shape their representations rather than being talked about and represented by those without such experiences. At the same time, academics, media, artists, activists, and administrators, who exert significant influence on cultural representations, often have a lot of control over the narrative construction. It is, however, problematic that divergent and unequal experiences create varying perspectives, which may manifest in different modes of representation and sensitivities to various details. As acknowledged by Tom Vickers,

> [p]rivileged Western academics may find borders 'porous' when they travel to give a lecture or join a protest in another country. However, for the majority of the world's people, this is not the reality they face. Instead, the majority of migrants from oppressed countries encounter a very impermeable and ever-expanding repressive apparatus of border police, reporting regimes, tagging, immigration, prisons, and mass deportation. (15)

Linda Tuhiwai Smith's groundbreaking work *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999) suggests that we should consider whose stories are highlighted and whose stories are marginalized in any portrayal of "the Other." Multiple studies which critique essentialist paradigms of research and knowledge and embrace a positionality approach (Haddad; van Manen; Merriam et al.; Smith), and emphasize the need for researchers to be critical of their own values, beliefs, and stereotypical conceptions, recognizing that these are not ultimate truths. Max van Manen, in his approach to researching lived experiences, suggests that on the one hand, experience exists a priori,

but on the other hand, researchers play a role in shaping and creating it (xi). Therefore, the scholar advocates for adopting an "ego-logical starting point" (van Manen 54), which acknowledges one's own position. This approach not only enables researchers to approach lived experiences as unbiased as possible but also encourages ethical and reflective engagement (van Manen xii). Recent investigations (Haddad; Herd; Vickers; Wilson) have further highlighted the necessity of self-awareness in research, particularly when addressing topics related to refugees. Such studies reveal the critical importance of recognizing the inherent power dynamics that often exist between researchers and the refugee populations they study.

Despite my status as a displaced individual and a refugee, I am personally privileged to be able to continue working in academia. This privilege not only allows me to research refugee narratives, a primary focus of my scholarly pursuit, but also enables me to relate to the experiences of those who have been compelled to flee their countries due to conflicts and warfare. As a researcher, I understand that my perspectives, beliefs, and social context influence my understanding of the world, my research, and the dynamics of my life situations. Argus Morales, in his book *We Are Not Refugees: True Stories of the Displaced*, poses several crucial questions, including "Are you a refugee? Can you be sure you never will be?" (23). Little did I know when I first read the book for my initial research on refugee children that I would be finishing an article on refugee children for submission in a bomb shelter just a week before embarking on a journey with my own children across five international borders to escape the war. What I must admit is that my perspective has evolved significantly due to the transformation of my life experiences. While my own journey as a refugee may not be as harrowing as some, I resonate emotionally with certain aspects that are emblematic of the narratives shared by displaced individuals. This resonance provides me with a deeper sensitivity and a broader perspective from which to engage in research of refugee narratives and representations in culture. However, as Carla Wilson rightly points out, "while it is important to recognize shared experiences, it's equally important to acknowledge the differences" (217). Therefore, in my research, I consider it crucially important to reflect on cultural sensitivity and to understand the diversity of backgrounds and experiences among refugees which are shaped by various factors such as race, class, gender, and other aspects of their life situations. In the chapter that follows I will delve deeper into the problem of the rhetorical construction of refugee children.

Questioning the Representations of Refugee Children

The forced displacement of people is not a new phenomenon. Nevertheless, the term "refugee," although tracing its history to the 16th century, gained

prominence in the latter part of the 20th century and has accelerated notably in the past decade of the 21st century. In the 21st century, the use of the term significantly increased, particularly following various refugee crises in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. However, within the public domain, some scholars, such as Raia Apostolova, argue that the term "refugee" has recently become "a consensual substitute for the discredited notion of 'migrant' in public discourse" (Apostolova, online). This shift not only reflects the liberal inclinations of those who use the term but also serves as a tool of manipulation. Apostolova contends that "refugees seem more deserving of attention from 'us' because their situation is more desperate. They are construed as victims, whereas ordinary migrants are not." What this quote highlights is the fact that while there are certain similarities between the experiences of migrants and refugees, culture constructs these concepts in different ways, emphasizing crucial differences rather than similarities.

Indeed, culture attributes certain meanings, narratives, and discourses to refugeedom to make it perceptible. As Anne Rothe writes, "Unlike natural kinds, like thunderstorms or bacilli, humankinds do not exist independently of the knowledge we create about them" (22). Events, actors, spaces, and structures carry various connotations assigned to them through their cultural representations. Roland Barthes, in his seminal work on representations and mythology, mentions refugees as iconic images with the connotation of a vast, faceless mass of people on the move. These representations have nothing to do with real people but rather are empty symbols created by "the nature of the exotic East" (Barthes 236). That is why, among the dominant cultural representations, we can distinctly see refugees talked about in terms of "waves" that flood the host country. Miriam Wallraven also highlights how refugees must challenge their popular media portrayals, whether as adversaries, victims, or heroes (143).

As marginalized and non-privileged societal categories, refugees are often researched and/or represented through the "objective" and "neutral" gaze, constantly facing the challenges of "western discourses regarding the smallness of the Other" (C. Wilson 217). The general perception of the concept of "refugees" is built on the classical paradigm between "us" and "them," where "us" is the settled population while refugees are often seen either as a threat or a victim. Emma Haddad emphasizes that "refugees are the product of political borders constructing separate states which are creating clear definitions of insiders and outsiders" (297). Janet Wilson, discussing in her research "literary narratives of precarious lives," admits that retelling or reporting refugee histories through the mediation of western writers, editors, or translators always raises concerns about the problematic ethics of speaking for the Other (263) or the potential for representational appropriation, and hence for

misinterpretation, while novelists might often see in the refugee stories "the potential for heightened pathos" (262). Refugees frequently have limitations in their narrative accounts because they have endured difficult survival situations which are often the most discussed. This forces them to omit crucial facts and emotions. Furthermore, even when their testimonies are formally recorded, the complete picture of their circumstances may be missed and occasionally, activists stress their victimhood to counter unfavorable depictions (J. Wilson 265).

Various studies in history and memory highlight the fact that refugees have always been a problematic category, evoking controversial attitudes within the settled population. In his seminal works, *The Whole Empire Walking* and *Making of the Modern Refugee*, Peter Gatrell states that in the past, refugees appeared to be an "unprecedented social problem, defined in terms of liminality and loss, damage and danger" (*A Whole Empire* 197). Not only had they been in danger themselves, deprived of their previous "normal" life, with possessions lost and family ties broken, but they also put the settled population in danger, as refugees were vulnerable to infectious diseases that they might transmit (Gatrell, *A Whole Empire* 197). The refugee image is dominated by the concepts of loss and destitution, and their journey is marked by their utter vulnerability, exhaustion, and desperation. Both historically and in present days, there are not only separate "graphic reports of the desperate plight of refugees on the move" (Gatrell, *A Whole Empire* 51) but also vital statistics of fatalities. Therefore, an image of a refugee has long been constructed on a rigid dichotomy: victim/threat. Such a dichotomy evokes contending responses in societies like sympathy and a desire to help on the one hand and fear on the other.

Moreover, refugees have often been seen as a homogenized group of people with no category of difference (Gatrell, *Making* 50). That might be the reason why they are often represented in culture as a faceless mass of people. However, there is a significant difference between the representations of adult refugees and minors. While adults are quite often seen as depersonalized faceless masses denied emotions, children are "allowed" to express emotions. Such a situation might be deeply rooted in romanticized presumptions about children being more sensitive and capable of perceiving the world more deeply (Kot 40). Furthermore, childhood is viewed by modern societies as a time that must be protected from violence, which is seen as a measure of civilization (Honeck and Marten 3).

Children, as a very particular type of refugee, undoubtedly evoke much stronger responses than adults. They are seen as "ideal victims" worthy of help, which is highlighted by various scholars (Barthes, Hart, Nayar, Rothe). They emphasize: "The child victim communicates not by establishing claims

but simply by being a child" (Nayar). An image of a child or a child refugee may become a rhetorical figure assembled with the help of some unambiguous accessories, which, in Barthes' terms used to explain the semiotic power of a photo depicting a child, "literally blackmails us with moral values" (233). In a similar vein, Hart admits that lately, "children have dominated the imagery of humanitarian response to situations of forced migration. Popular imagination has been ignited by photographs of the young having their basic needs met by relief agencies" (383). Such representations are primarily capable of mobilizing financial and political support (Hart 383). Therefore, at some point, a refugee child becomes a rhetorical tool, a form devoid of personality, history, and agency, and loaded with sentimental values by humanitarianism and popular culture. The trap of such representation is similar to the effect of Holocaust narratives. Anne Rothe describes this phenomenon in her book about *Popular Trauma Culture* (2011), where such images often "serve to transform the pain of others into politically anaesthetizing mass media commodities" (15). In the forthcoming section, I will present an analysis of the selected narratives, both fictional and non-fictional, demonstrating how they portray the intricate experiences of refugee children.

Exploring the Literary Landscape of Refugee Childhood: Alan Gratz's *Refugee* and Malala Yousafzai's *We are Displaced*

Drawing parallels between the past and present, artists and writers often focus on retracing the personal geographies and histories of people whose lives were set into motion by conflict, violence, and shifting borders. So do both the American writer Alan Gratz with his 2017 young adult novel *Refugee* and the global human rights activist Malala Yousafzai with her 2019 book *We Are Displaced*. Both books are attempts to shed light on the destinies of children separated by continents and decades but united by the resembling experience of border crossing, displacement, and violence. The young adult novel *Refugee* by Gratz stands out among other fictional refugee narratives not because it is exceptional, but rather for being the paradigmatic literary representation of a refugee. This novel serves as a model text for the fictional refugee story with all three plot lines typically patterned as "refugee chronicles." It meticulously describes the experiences of three teenagers: Josef Landau, a German Jew who fled Germany in the 1930s on the infamous ship St. Louis; Isabel Fernandez, a Cuban girl who sought to emigrate to the US in 1994 due to conflicts and crises in her country; Mahmoud Bishara, a Syrian child whose family crossed multiple borders and spaces to seek asylum in Germany in 2015 after their home was destroyed by a missile[1]. Not only is this trajectory embodied in the three storylines of the novel, but it also reveals fundamental similarities to other fictional refugee trajectories involving children, such as A *Land of*

Permanent Goodbyes by Atia Abawi or *In the Sea There Are Crocodiles* by Fabio Geda.

It is crucial to compare fictional representations with narratives of children refugees told by themselves as such a comparison may shed light on how close or far apart the representations and the true experiences of displaced children are. To study the contrast between the fictional and non-fictional narratives and representation of children I chose *We are Displaced* by Malala Yousafzai. In her book, Yousafzai, a renowned global activist, recounts her personal journey of being uprooted from her native Pakistan and provides the platform for the refugee narratives of various girls she encountered during her visits to refugee camps worldwide. She admits: "I was displaced, and I choose to use the memories of that time in my life to help me connect with the 68.5 million refugees and displaced persons around the world. To see them, to help them, to share their stories" (Malala[2] 196). It is important to note that Malala employs multiple positions in her book which at first presents her own perspective in the section "I am Displaced" and then demonstrates how it resonates with other experiences of displaced girls in the section "We are Displaced." The book, therefore, represents diversity encompassing various racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. It intricately portrays the expansive geographical dispersion of young girls, spanning nearly all continents. They cross distances, borders, and continents while seeking refuge from violence, international conflicts, and civil wars in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Guatemala, Colombia, Myanmar, the Congo, and Uganda. Their journeys lead them towards locations as varied as Egypt, Zambia, Jordan, Bangladesh, the United States, Mexico, Canada, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Amidst this array of distinct experiences and migration routes, a striking semblance emerges within their shared life circumstances. Despite the manifold disparities, common threads intertwine the trajectories of these individuals, binding their destinies inextricably to the refugee experience. This book displays multiple similarities to other non-fictional books about refugees like *Children of War: Voices of Iraqi Refugees* (2009) by Deborah Ellis and others. The next section seeks to uncover the nuances of cultural representations and to explore the extent to which these narratives align with each other or diverge, narrating the complexities of the lived experiences of displaced children.

Narrating Trauma and Choices: Contrasting Representations of Refugee Experience

Literature and culture aim to portray the horrific, profoundly traumatic experiences and significant losses suffered by individuals affected by conflicts and forced displacement, with a particular focus on the portrayal of children enduring the rigors of war and refugee existence. The image of a child as a

"perfect victim" becomes particularly powerful in bearing the connotation of loss and trauma. Therefore, such portrayal emphasizes a high degree of victimization. In fictional narratives, like Gratz's book, featuring children as war refugees, an adversity is typically what occurs just before they begin their perilous trek. Literary depictions of war refugees frequently involve tragedies of people losing their houses, which become obliterated and reduced to ashes by bombs, missiles, or air attacks. Children in these dire circumstances are typically portrayed as confronting horrific losses, encompassing the tragic separation from their parents, siblings, or best friends, casualties of the relentless attacks. Such portrayals resonate notably with fictional narratives, as exemplified by Gratz's novel, where for instance, Mahmood from Syria staying in front of his ruined home realizes that "this kind of thing did happen every day. Just not to them. Until now" ("Mahmoud, Aleppo, Syria – 2015"). As the authors choose to portray the suffering of refugee children, the intensity and variety of the different traumas they frequently describe are sometimes exaggerated to add a dramatic touch to the overarching plot.

While also fearing the dramatic experience of leaving a home and homeland, non-fictional narratives in a markedly more prevalent manner illuminate the reasons and contextual circumstances which led to the displacement. The omnipresence of violence and danger is not always an imminent threat in non-fiction refugee accounts, but rather a looming prospect that parents strive to protect their children from by fleeing. Beyond impending war, which is frequently preceded by warnings and evacuation notifications, non-fictional narratives describe an array of circumstances compelling families to abandon their homes. They include acts of racially motivated, genocidal, or terrorist-related organized or sporadic violence that are accompanied by the fear of death. One of the refugees from Syria to Jordan, Muzoon, sharing her story in Malala's book admits, "I didn't know anything about the camp, but we had no other options. I didn't want to leave my country. It was the only home I'd ever known. But even at thirteen years old, I knew that if I did not leave then, it could be the end of my story" (94). Another narrator, Naila, an internally displaced Iraqi, recounts being trapped in a dangerous circumstance in her homeland controlled by militant groups. She vividly describes the experience of being compelled to take an overnight refuge on the roof and a frantic escape to the mountains where they had to survive among countless numbers of other refugees for many days to avoid danger: "Thousands of people, just like us, were on the run. Some told stories of pretending to be dead, lying among their slaughtered loved ones and family members. We were lucky to be alive and together as a family. And we never went back home" (Yousafzai 105). In some cases, the real-life experiences of refugees prove to be much more dramatic and devastating than what is

depicted in fiction. For example, the tragic experience of 7.2 million people displaced because of the prolonged civil conflict in Colombia is narrated in Maria's story. Driven by a heart-wrenching tragedy—the violent murder of her father concealed by her mother in a bid to protect the children—Maria's family had to escape to a makeshift camp with scarce resources and horrible living conditions. Maria admits: "We all had to leave or risk dying if we stayed. So, we each told a piece of our story in a way that told the whole story of internally displaced people in Colombia. We called it Nobody Can Take Away What We Carry Inside" (117). In another story, Ajida, a refugee from Myanmar to Bangladesh speaks about extreme genocidal violence in her home country. Children fed by jungle leaves, the death threat at home in Myanmar and uncertain prospects across the border in Bangladesh which offered a glimmer of hope narrate the desperate struggle for survival.

However, there are also accounts of children whose families had the means to evacuate. They were provided with resources such as Visa Gold, plane tickets, and the opportunity to permanently leave their countries of residence. The experiences of such refugees are rarely addressed in fictional narratives, as they do not conform to the stereotypical image of a refugee as desperate, dramatic, and miserable. While these families face a spectrum of challenges related to displacement, their experiences are frequently neglected or silenced due to not fitting the typical refugee narrative. Many individuals who were previously well-off in their home countries with resources to evacuate still lost their property, status, and stable income, which makes them equally vulnerable to the challenges faced by refugees. Malala recollects: "We had our IDP cards for food rations, like millions of others. Even formerly wealthy individuals who might have owned fields of grain now stood in line for a bag of flour" (26). A similar situation is exemplified in the story of a Canadian girl, Farah, whose parents came as refugees from Uganda:

> Growing up, I didn't understand how painful it was for my parents to leave Uganda—or how much they had given up. I now know that they had come from wealthy families and had both studied in England, where my sister was born. They moved back to Kampala, where I was born, in 1970. I literally cannot imagine how stressful it must have been to be a young mother, suddenly kicked out of her home under the threat of violence, only to arrive in a country where you hardly knew anyone, nor did you know where you would live or how you would support yourself and your family, or whether you would be welcome, make friends, or find a community. But there was no choice in the matter. (Yousafzai 185-6)

Moreover, it must be acknowledged that many families displaced by war and violence choose not to speak about their circumstances or do not consider themselves refugees:

> It's not that my parents weren't proud of being Ugandan [. . .] I knew that meant you ate matoke, a type of plantain, on Sundays with curry, as well as paya, a stew made from the feet of goats. We never denied that we were Muslim or Africans with Indian heritage [. . .] But the one thing I didn't truly understand until I was at university was how or why we ended up in Canada. My parents never used the word refugee to describe us. (Yousafzai 181)

This reluctance is likely linked to the negative connotations previously mentioned, which are often associated with the term "refugee."

In conclusion, the central theme that manifests itself in all narratives of displacement, whether fictional or non-fictional, is the dire circumstances that pose threats to life in their homeland. These conditions compel individuals to leave, regardless of their previous social or financial status. Staying at home or returning home is no longer a viable option and thus, the choice to be displaced is fundamentally rooted in the absence of viable alternatives. However, the representations which are the most visible in the culture often employ fictional narratives as they reflect a particular stereotypical image marked by victimhood and the harrowing refugee trajectory. The stories not so dramatic and harrowing are often silenced either by refugees themselves trying to distance themselves from the traumatic experience and diminutive status or by the "trauma" culture interested in the stories of extreme pain and loss.

Navigating Notions of Home

One of the key motifs running through refugee narratives is the concept of "home" as a place of belonging. In both fictional and non-fictional narratives, the concept of "home" frequently symbolizes the idea of a lost paradise, bearing romantic overtones that signify a once-ideal and pleasant spatiotemporal reality that has now been lost. Malala opens her book with a moving paragraph in which she reflects,

> [w]hen I close my eyes and think of my childhood, I see pine forests and snowcapped mountains; I hear rushing rivers; I feel the calm earth beneath my feet. I was born in the Swat Valley, once known as the Switzerland of the East. Others have called it paradise, and that is how I think of Swat. It is the backdrop to all my happiest childhood

> memories—running in the streets with my friends; playing on the roof of our house in Mingora, the main city in Swat. (3)

The recurring motif that frequently appears in refugee narratives illustrates the nostalgic yearning for what has been lost or what refugees were forced to leave behind. This picture is frequently regarded as harmonious and even almost utopian. Like the phrase from Malala's book, the spatiality of a home is frequently enmeshed in pristine nature, peace, and calm while temporality is firmly anchored in the idealized past which also manifests itself in the fictional narrative, however in a less intense way.

There is a deep nostalgia for the lost home because of this temporality, which reflects a wish to go back to a simpler, more innocent time that was devoid of the difficulties and complexities of the present. Consequently, there is often a strong focus on the breach between the past and the present. In one such story, Maria, an internally displaced girl from Colombia, says: "She (mother) explained that things were different now. We had to buy our food and needed money to do that, so she went tent to tent asking if people wanted to pay her to wash clothes" (Yousafzai 114-5). The non-fictional narratives demonstrate that while there is sometimes a glimmer of hope for refugees to eventually return home, the possibility of returning to that idealized past remains unattainable, which leaves refugees with a strong sense of loss and induces them to be constantly in search of a new sense of fulfillment and belonging. This is different for the fictional narratives which would be better described by the term "trauma and recovery" plot (Rothe 8). As they lose their home and become displaced, the characters almost instantly set off to look for a new home, seeking not only for safety but also for a new sense of belonging. The new home will then symbolize a happy resolution or the complete recovery, which is not always the case for the actual refugees for whom the sense of belonging is exchanged for a sense of permanent in-betweenness and transition.

Being Displaced: Adventure or Uprootedness

One of the most profound differences between the non-fictional refugee narratives from Malala's book and the fictional refugee narratives like Gratz's novel is their portrayal of displacement itself. While in Gratz's novel, displacement is presented as an adventure, or rather a misadventure, concentrated on the characters overcoming obstacles on their harrowing way to a new home, displacement in non-fictional narratives is the existential feeling of homelessness and insecurity. The emotional impact of being displaced which manifests itself in the feeling "out of place" transcends the geographical location and demonstrates a profound disconnection from the

place of belonging, which is not only about physical displacement but also about the loss of stable ground and a coordinate system.

Malala's book illustrates refugees' nagging feelings of homesickness connected with nostalgia and a sense of loss. The concept of displacement, even if sometimes unknown to the children as a term, is deeply ingrained in them and deeply felt. There are even instances of children refugees who have never experienced home, having been displaced at a very young age or having been born into already displaced families or/and in refugee camps. However, even they report this complex feeling of existential homelessness fed by their parents' reminiscences: "We left when I was four, before many of those memories had a chance to take root" (Yousafzai 112). Children in Malala's book often speak about instances where the options of staying with friends and extended family offer a temporary refuge but even staying with extended family does not take away the feeling of being displaced, as displacement is not only about losing home but also creates a profound uncertainty about the future. Malala herself admits: "It was nice to be with my cousins—I had always loved being in Shangla—but this felt different. Usually, my visits were finite. Now we had no idea how long we'd be staying [. . .] Internally displaced I was in my own country, and with my family, and yet I still felt so out of place" (23). Nevertheless, non-fictional narratives demonstrate that children exhibit a remarkable resilience and modesty when confronting such adverse circumstances.

However, the complexity of feelings created by the experience of displacement is often unrecognized, which Gratz's novel exemplifies by not addressing the complexity of feelings. In her book, Malala states:

> Many people think refugees should feel only two things: gratitude toward the countries that granted them asylum and relief to be safe. I don't think most people understand the tangle of emotions that comes with leaving behind everything you know. They are not only fleeing violence [. . .] but they are escaping their countries, their beloved homes. That seems to get lost in the conversation about refugees and internally displaced people. So much focus is on where they are now—not on what they have lost as a result. (44)

Malala and other protagonists of the stories in her book often challenge the simplistic understanding of their experience and expectations that they should feel exclusively gratitude and relief for being in a safe place. The contributors to Malala's book indeed highlight that they don't miss the war experience, "the sounds of my city under siege: the army helicopters whirring above our home or the bomb blasts that got louder and closer each day" (Yousafzai

48). However, all these stories highlight the emotional turmoil coming from leaving behind everything and sometimes everyone they had. "When I go to a camp, I sit with people and ask them to tell me their stories. That's how this started. Me, listening. And they all have their own lists of sounds and smells and tastes they miss, people they didn't get to say goodbye to. They all have parts of their journey they'll never forget and faces and voices they wish they could remember" (Yousafzai 48).

Fictional and Realistic Promise of a New Home

The refugee narratives portrayed in Gratz's book notably differ from the real refugee accounts from Malala's book regarding the culmination of the trajectory—the arrival at the "promised" new home. The fictitious refugees' hopes are focused on their final destination, which is described in the book as the "heaven" they are eagerly anticipating.[3] As exemplified in this episode from Gratz's book, "Isabel's heart leapt—the US was even more of a paradise than she ever imagined!" ("Isabel, Somewhere on the Caribbean Sea –1994, 3 Days from Home"). Research shows that fictional refugee journeys in young adult literature all lead to a fairytale destination, a place full of comfort opportunities and freedom which is depicted as the logical ending of the refugee experience. The imagery of home in Gratz's novel is an impeccable place where refugees would "live happily ever after" and where all their dreams are going to come true in case they reach them. However, as the comparison with non-fictional narratives demonstrates, this idea is far from being representative. Malala addresses this idea of the new home for refugees that prevails in the culture. She writes: "We assume that once they've found a new home, that's the end of the story. Often, it's the beginning of a new story" (178).

The trauma associated with the loss of a home makes people strive for a new sense of belonging. However, the process of finding and adapting to a new place is often overshadowed by the grieving process, which prevents refugees from feeling at home: "I had lost my home and the world I knew so well. It had been stolen from me by violence and terror" (Yousafzai 193). For those grappling with displacement, the pervasive feeling of in-betweenness, liminality, and transition becomes truly existential. They are suspended between the past, which is no longer attainable, and the present, where they struggle to feel genuine belonging. One refugee girl, Analisa, claims, "Since that first rainy house, I have moved eight times. But I have never felt 'at home' in any other place than the one I keep alive in my head, from when I was a child, before my whole world changed" (Yousafzai 118). Thus, even when the physical journey for refugees is over, there is another quite arduous one where they have to overcome their loss and cultivate a new sense of belonging.

For many displaced people, the idea that the new place is a temporary

solution prevails, so they hold onto the belief that they will return to their original home soon. Even though some refugees are never able to go back, the idea of home remains inextricably intertwined with the home they lost: "So when I dream of home, I dream of mangoes I can pick off the trees. I dream of quiet and grass. I dream of peace. And nobody can take that away from me" (Yousafzai 118). Homesickness as the dominant sentiment manifests in longing for the sounds, landscapes, and cuisine of their homeland—the sole tangible connection to the place they call home. In Gratz's book, we find this idea only once exemplified in the episode when Mahmood's family meets a Palestinian refugee living in Turkey for 40 years, who still believes he will go home to Palestine eventually.

The non-fictional stories demonstrate that the new home not only assumes a striking difference but also can be seen as highly unwelcoming by some refugees. Certain narrators recall the disconcerting experience: "It did feel as if we had landed on the moon—everything looked, smelled, and felt different" (Yousafzai 37). A refugee from Congo, Marie Claire recollects the negative experience of unwelcoming or even hostile attitudes of locals: "People in Zambia did not want us there. They would shout at us in the streets, 'Go back to your country! Why are you here?' Kids would insult me and my siblings at school, even throwing rocks, and shouting, 'You don't belong here!'" (146).

In the unfamiliar space and among strangers, refugees often grapple with a strong sense of displacement. Malala recalls: "Those early days in Birmingham reminded me of being internally displaced in Pakistan—except the faces, the food, and the language here were foreign. We were comfortable; we were being well taken care of—but it had not been our choice to come here, and we missed home" (35). "There was no sense of belonging—she felt like a stranger in a strange land," writes Malala about her mother (35). Another narrator, Marie Claire, states: "We did not belong, but we had nowhere else to go" (Yousafzai 145). Thus, the lack of belonging always naggingly follows refugees, intensifying the traumatic experience of losing their home and pinning them in the liminality between two worlds.

Perilous Journeys and Prolonged Liminality

The quest for a new home is the focal point in Gratz's novel and numerous analogous works centered on the refugee experience. This element represents the most dynamic facet of the refugee trajectory, imbuing novels of this genre, especially the ones with children as protagonists, with the essence of adventure novels. Besides amplifying the dramatic dimension of these narratives, such novels invariably depict the journey as exceptionally arduous, fraught with multiple life-threatening obstacles. Notably, such refugee journeys are always

called perilous. Authors frequently opt for the most formidable paths for their characters seemingly devoid of an alternative. While anthropological fieldwork conducted by Luigi Achilli has shown that

> Syrian refugees had two options to reach Europe: one was legal, through venues such as resettlement programs, family reunification, university fellowships and scholarships, training programs, and private sponsorships. The other option was—for the majority of them—the Balkan route: an exhausting and perilous journey that took them across two continents and several countries (i.e. Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia). (7)

The former was by far the safest and quickest route. Yet, "the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to EU member states remained for the majority of Syrians a chimera" (Achilli 7). Consequently, despite the existence of multiple legal avenues for refugees to cross national borders, such as air travel, cultural narratives about migration predominantly center on martyrdom or ordeal.

Non-fictional refugee narratives highlight the same idea that while the refugee experience in general is never favorable, the journey itself is not always the most harrowing experience depicted in the fictional stories. Two of the stories in Malala's book depict the stories of two refugees from Yemen, who fled to Egypt but ended up in different countries. The protagonist of the first story, Zaynab, had to take the flight while her sister was denied a visa to the USA. Consequently, one sister had to grapple with the devastating choice of opting for a secure life over remaining with her sibling, and the other had no choice but to witness her sister flying away. "I waited for Zaynab's flight to leave [. . .] before I could believe it was true. My big sister was gone. All I had was her oversized and heavy suitcase [. . .] My sister was in the air, flying to a new life, and I was returning to an old one. But different. From that moment on, everything felt so empty: the city, the house, my heart" (71). The weighty suitcase left behind appears to be a poignant real-life metaphor of one sister not being able to take a substantial part of her life with her and the other burdened by the weight of displaced existence in a state of perpetual liminality—a journey shared by many refugees.

However, some of the true stories do describe the journeys as perilous which, apparently, the authors of fictional refugee narratives take as notorious inspiration. A woman from Myanmar, Ajida, with a two-year-old son recalls her journey through the jungle with her child on her shoulders. They could walk only in the nighttime to avoid the danger of being killed. Her husband fell ill along the way as they encountered numerous bodies—Rohingya victims of violence inflicted by extremist Buddhists determined to expel them. She

describes her efforts to shield her son from witnessing the horrors while unfortunately not being able to protect her daughters. In their quest to escape genocide, a family embarks on a nine-day odyssey to cross a river into Bangladesh, emphasizing their vulnerability and inability to swim during the treacherous boat journey which amplifies their fears. She recounts:

> After nine days, we finally made it to the border and crossed a river into Bangladesh. A Bangladeshi man took us on his boat for a fee. The boat was small—it could fit only ten people at a time—and it had no motor, so he had to row. Thankfully, my family stayed together. We were all so scared because none of us could swim. It took four hours to reach the other side. When we arrived in Bangladesh, I fought back tears. We had made it. The threat of the genocide was behind us. It took us three hours to walk to the camp. There were so many Rohingya fleeing that we just followed everyone else. We were a crowd of strangers marching together toward a common unknown destination. But the relief I felt did not erase the fear. I had no idea what to expect in this next phase. (Yousafzai 171)

The protagonist escapes imminent danger and finds refuge in a camp, but the relief is tempered with doubt, symbolizing the shared journey of strangers toward an unknowable future.

The journeys of undocumented migrants crossing the US-Mexican border are among the most harrowing. A Guatemalan migrant, Analisa, recounts such a journey with various dangers endured by illegal migrants as they traverse Mexico *en route* to the US-Mexico border. The treacherous odyssey is marked by encounters with criminals, crocodile-infested territories, delving deep into the dense jungle, and crossing a river filled with hazardous whirlpools on a raft. The narratives also bring to light the poignant stories of unaccompanied minors and pregnant women undertaking perilous journeys. One particularly distressing episode involves numerous individuals, including children and pregnant women, squished into a cattle truck in which they travelled for two days, being subjected to dehumanizing treatment. Tragically, as the witness recalls, a similar truck got flipped, resulting in fatalities among the immigrants. Furthermore, the narrative also depicts tragic accidents involving Guatemalan immigrants traveling by train, which prove fatal for some and deeply traumatizing for the witnesses. The gruesome details of the accident and the subsequent panic and confusion highlight the perilous nature of their migration. Amidst these dire circumstances, the migrant expresses gratitude for the kindness shown by benevolent people encountered along the way. This highlights that despite the generally negative experience of

migration, the journeys are diverse. Besides, while fictional refugee narratives highlight the hostility of the authorities *en route* to safety, some non-fictional narratives share the instance of being rescued by an Italian ship and helped by the Red Cross when they had already said goodbye to life.

Non-fictional refugee narratives frequently shed light on the significance of refugee camps which often become the enduring reality for thousands of displaced individuals. These camps provide a temporary stop to their constant movement while preventing them from completing their journey. The narratives consistently highlight the challenges of coexisting with strangers in overcrowded camps, subjected to harsh living conditions, characterized by a lack of furniture, electricity, scarce water resources, and schooling for children, depriving them of opportunities for a better life and future. Access to education is of paramount significance, offering children not only opportunities but also a semblance of normal life. Many young female refugees face limited access to education, with some even being prevented from studying by their own parents, which can "trap girls in a cycle of poverty and deprivation" (Yousafzai 96). Another poignant aspect of refugee camp life is that it is seen by many refugees as a temporary solution. Thus, they put their life on pause, as they await a return to their homelands and homes. Frequently, refugee camps also appear to be places of detention, where inhabitants are effectively confined. Any attempts to leave may result in arrest and deportation back to the restricted environment. The refugee journey, as the non-fictional narratives demonstrate, is not merely the traveling itself, but a permanent state of transition and liminality. Even when they are not on the move, refugees might not yet be anywhere as they find temporary places to stay for short or long periods. This state of in-betweenness is further exacerbated by their undocumented status, rendering them extra susceptible to violence, criminal exploitation, and discrimination. Although seen as a temporary refuge, the camps transform into protracted liminal spaces where some refugees spend a substantial part of their lives.

Borders: Barriers, Bureaucracy, and Battlegrounds

The border in fictional narratives like Gratz's is portrayed as an aggressive power antagonistic to the struggles of refugees, for whom state borders often pose insurmountable obstacles. The dominant characteristics attached to the border in the novel are uncertainty, hostility, impassibility, and exclusion. The novel explores how refugees frequently experience border crossing as a traumatic and life-threatening ordeal, depicting borders as bureaucratic barriers that appear to be more impenetrable than physical walls. Besides, the text sheds light on dehumanizing treatment refugees often face at borders, illustrating the brutality of border patrol and the systematic injustice of border

bureaucracy. Making the border crossing the focal point and the culmination of the novel, the author suggests that state borders play a key role in refugees' fates.

What differentiates the fictional account from a non-fictional one is the spectrum of experiences that border-crossing encompasses. State borders, as formidable dividers, can demarcate and separate spaces marked by conflict and violence from those offering safety and respite. To refugees in search of safety, crossing such borders signifies the potential relief from constant fear. Thus, a border can represent a glimmer of hope for a new life devoid of violence, rendering a deeply compelling aspiration. As one refugee, Marie Claire, from Congo vividly recounts, "One week before we were scheduled to leave Zambia, we were told that our new home was in Lancaster, Pennsylvania [. . .] the 'refugee capital' of the United States [. . .] I was excited—I was finally going to have papers. A home. A life. A new beginning. It started to feel real" (Yousafzai 148). The girl's story highlights the dual nature of borders. On the one hand, they signify the safe space behind the border, but on the other they can serve as a barrier preventing refugees access to safety as border bureaucracy determines who can legally cross into a safe place and who cannot. Tragically, this bureaucratic disposition can lead to avoidable tragedies as exemplified by the harrowing experience of this refugee from Yemen awaiting a visa to the USA for 14 years during which her mother was killed. In this case, the border emerges not only as a beacon of hope for a better life but also as a place of judgment over life and death. Moreover, this refugee has to leave behind her sister who did not get the visa. The border, in this context, is not merely a physical obstacle but an abstract legal barrier, with tangible consequences and profound emotional implications for those allowed entry into safe spaces and those for whom it is denied.

Non-fictional narratives in Malala's book often omit the description of border-crossing experiences unless those are exceptionally emotional, heart-wrenching, or traumatizing. In one such narrative, upon reaching Bangladesh, relief mingles with uncertainty as the narrator and countless Rohingya refugees navigate their collective journey, symbolizing their shared quest for an unfamiliar future while all of them are carrying heavy burdens of past traumas. Within this context, the border appears to be a pivotal and transformative threshold in their lives.

The harsh and intimidating nature of borders so dramatically highlighted in the fictional narrative by Gratz unfortunately exists as a grim reality with tangible consequences for refugees, especially undocumented immigrants. The account of a Guatemalan migrant, Analisa, in Malala's book also sheds light on the antagonistic dynamics between undocumented immigrants and border officials existing on the US-Mexican border. Caught at

the border, processed and confronted by an officer's accusatory questions, the girl however is granted the opportunity to talk to her brother who is waiting for her in the USA. The episode at the border highlights not the indifference or cruelty of the border guard but rather the lack of mutual understanding as well as understanding of the immigrant's circumstances. While the protagonist admits that even in the most difficult parts of the journey, she had no choice but to go on, the border guard's persistent inquiries "Why do you do this? Do you like to suffer?" (Yousafzai 84) epitomize the concept of positionality. These questions demonstrate that people judge the actions and motivations of other people based on their perspectives and experiences. For Analisa, an undocumented immigrant from Guatemala, the border appears to be a point of no return:

> 'If Immigration comes, just run as fast as you can and hide,' our guide hissed. He had been yelling at us since he picked us up—'Hurry up!' 'Be quiet!' 'Stand still!' Treating us like animals. Then the murmurs started: If Immigration caught you, you would go to jail and then be deported back to your country. If you were not caught, you would likely get lost and never make it to the United States. I began to panic because I had no idea how to get back to Guatemala, either. I started to think I had made a mistake in coming. (Yousafzai 121)

This story poignantly illustrates a tense and dehumanizing side of the border and the vulnerability of illegal immigrants. Reflecting on the desperation of immigrants before crossing the border, this episode stresses the dehumanizing effect the border has on people not only being a physical barrier but also as a demarcation line dividing "us" from "them," where some individuals may be subjected to inhumane treatment.

Resilience or Victimhood: Varied Representations of Children Refugees

Alan Gratz's book *Refugee* demonstrates the resilience of refugee children who face the hardships of conflict and destitution yet grow stronger and more resilient. The young protagonists are required to make painful choices, such as Josef Landau who sacrifices himself to be sent to the concentration camps to both save his little sister Ruthie's life and his mother from choosing between them when forced to do so by a Nazi soldier. The novel also frequently emphasizes the initiative of refugee children, pointing to examples like the instance with Mahmoud showing active resistance by leading the big group of Syrian refugees out of a detention camp in Hungary, or Isabel taking the initiative to convince her family to escape. Children are portrayed as assuming leadership roles and showing determination when adults appear to be

overwhelmed. In these stories, the main characters show courage by speaking up against adults, dealing with perilous situations or assuming responsibility not only for themselves but also their siblings and sometimes even adult family members. Thus, the author portrays refugee children as individuals with outstanding determination and heroism, hardened by the experience of war and displacement.

However, while certain children are presented to be resilient and determined, others who are not the protagonists are portrayed as passive, weak, fragile, and in need of protection from older members of the family. Other youngsters are portrayed as being traumatized, clueless, fully unaware of the situation, and frequently getting lost or separated from their parents. Victimhood is indeed a recurring motive in portraying children and refugees unless they are the protagonists. The fictional narratives use the image of a child to emphasize the traumas of the refugee experience, the atrocities committed during the conflicts, and the hardships of their trajectories.

The non-fictional accounts highlight similar themes, showing that displacement brought on by war, poverty, crime, discrimination, and other factors compels young refugees to mature rapidly. They must grapple with complex concepts and navigate harsh realities. Rarely do these children's voice complaints. Numerous stories illustrate that after experiencing distressing displacement, children develop an appreciation for peace, which is not taken for granted. Malala's account conveys this sentiment: "It never fails to shock me how people take peace for granted. I am grateful for it every day. Not everyone has it" (ix). Hence, despite facing distressing experiences, children-refugees frequently exhibit an unbreakable spirit of survival, reflecting their determination to create a better life for themselves. Moreover, children frequently exhibit higher levels of adaptability and stress resistance than adults. In conclusion, the portrayal of children as refugees in both fictional and non-fictional narratives encompasses a wide range of experiences, from resilience and determination to victimhood and vulnerability. Taken together, these narratives shed light on the complex realities faced by children as refugees and the varied ways in which they react to adversity.

Conclusion

As a distinct category of migrants with a very particular experience, refugees are perceived through a particular lens. The meanings which constitute the concept of a refugee today are not solely contingent upon the direct experience of the refugeedom; rather this concept is significantly influenced by the inward narratives created by refugees and outward narratives about refugees and the responses to those narratives which all overlap. These

multifaceted narratives collectively form the core of cultural representations which disseminate further.

As a marginalized societal group, displaced people frequently encounter fallacies in representations, which is a result of preconceived assumptions recirculated in the culture. While refugee narratives, both fictional and non-fictional, aim at representing and sharing refugee experiences through different historical and spatial contexts, highlighting the unpredictable character of human existence within the geopolitical dynamic paradigm, it should be admitted that a certain cultural sensitivity is still required to critically engage in these stories, taking into consideration the position of the author of such narratives. In my research, I compared the fictional and non-fictional representations of children refugees which demonstrated that both types could effectively capture the sheer uncertainty about the future, and the traumatizing experience of displacement. However, it was also visible that the fictional plot lines encapsulate the stereotypical trajectory recirculated in mass culture, which consists of tragic displacement, harrowing journey, horrific border crossing, and finding a new home, which serves as a metaphor for healing and a possible happy ending. Such a narrative pattern places a greater emphasis on the physical challenges and hazards migrants face when escaping danger and seeking shelter, even though true refugee suffering, particularly the loss of home, bears much more tremendous existential weight. Non-fictional refugee narratives primarily concentrate on the ideas of belonging and non-belonging, emphasizing the idea of a "lost home," uprooting, the difficulty of returning to one's native country, and the challenges faced when adjusting to new places of residence. These stories usually reflect that a refugee's journey is more than just a trip, however horrific its representations were in mass culture; it is primarily a transitional stage that might encompass protracted staying with relatives or years spent in refugee camps. While both fictional and non-fictional narratives show crossing the border as perilous, in some cases, it signifies both physical and emotional survival, unlike fictional stories where the border is often the biggest antagonist preventing refugees from a happy life, non-fictional narratives demonstrate how the experience of crossing the border can be diverse, depends on many factors, and also manifests complex feelings where relief from immediate danger and a glimpse of hope coexist with the lingering fear of the unknown future marked by the weight of past trauma.

Non-fictional refugee experiences are seldom confined to a single act of violence, exodus, or adaptation. Instead, there is a complex reality of displacement marked by various interconnected and intersecting contexts. Non-fictional narratives demonstrate that whatever their social or financial status, anybody can fall victim to such adverse life circumstances as forced

displacement. The trauma of existential uprootedness and the protracted liminal phase of accepting it is what constitutes the core of the refugee experience not quite represented in fictional novels like Gratz's. It is clear, though, that the tendency for this fictional refugee narrative to overdramatize the experiences of child refugees, framing their stories almost exclusively through the lenses of victimization and heroism, may be due to the impact of the young adult genre which seeks to make the plot as dramatic and thus engaging as possible.

Therefore, fictional narratives, novels, and especially those involving the image of a war-induced refugee child, draw their inspiration from the stereotypical images of refugees' lives as utter tragedies, pointing out the most harrowing, heartbreaking, or miserable details and episodes connected to refugeedom and adding to the overall dramatization of the child refugee image. However, such novels do not represent the multiple dilemmas, complex realities, and feelings young refugees face in reality, which are far from heroic misadventures and concentrate on the feeling of existential homelessness and the issues of belonging while at the same time demonstrating the resilience of young refugees who are striving to cope with broken universes and devastated home(lands) long after their border-crossings and exhausting journeys are over.

Notes

[1] Gratz admits that although the three plot lines are inspired by real-life events and the stories of true refugees, they are nevertheless fictional narratives. They aim to be an eye-opening exploration of harsh children's refugee realities. Using an artistic lens, Gratz draws upon the most notorious and culturally discernible spaces, events, and phenomena, reproducing the routes of Jewish refugees before, during and after the St. Louis voyage, Cuban refugees and the Wet Foot, Dry Foot US policy towards them, a refugee camp at the US military base at Guantanamo Bay, and a "lost generation" of Syrian children and millions of Syrians displaced from their homes due to the brutal and vicious war in Syria. The author brings many of the events separated by time together to make his story tighter and more dramatic. This book adds to the way refugees are represented, constructed, and seen in the culture.

[2] Here and further to quote the authors from the book *We are Displaced*, I will employ narrators' first names as this is how they are identified in the book. It is also important to note that some of the names are not real to protect the narrators' privacy.

[3] This paragraph emphasizes the idealized vision of the refugees' final destination as a place of ultimate happiness, fulfillment, and peace—qualities associated with "heaven" that the characters in Gratz's book are eagerly anticipating.

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Biography

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Bursting the "Transsexual Narrative":

Genre, Form, and Belonging in Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars*

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Abstract

Within hegemonic U.S.-American culture and society, transgender people are not only socially, politically, and legally marginalized, but also literarily. The historical prominence of the "transsexual narrative," which prescribes a medicalized and binary understanding of gender identity as well as a linear and isolated timeline of transition, has had devastating effects on (self-) perceptions, (self-)representations, and, thus, the material lives of transgender communities. Building on recent scholarship that interrogates trans literature as a genre, as well as theories on home, worldmaking, and reparative reading, this essay argues that contemporary trans literature may act as a space and medium that ameliorates the affective consequences of this marginalization. Using Kai Cheng Thom's 2016 book *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* as an example, I argue that by bursting genre conventions and narrative forms, critically interrogating the concepts of home and trans community, and imagining alternative endings that deviate from prescribed social narratives of transness, *Fierce Femmes* provides not only a space of hope and belonging for trans readerships but also for trans stories that stray from the "transsexual narrative."

Keywords

Home; Kai Cheng Thom; Reparative Reading; Trans Community; Transgender Literature; Transsexual Narrative; Worldmaking.

DOI: 10.25364/27.5:2025.1.4

Introduction

When I teach seminars on transgender theory and literature, one of the first things I try to ingrain into my students' brains is that "the trans experience" does not exist, that trans is an umbrella term and encompasses such a diverse variety of identities and experiences, which makes it impossible to boil down a single unifying experience that could be called "the trans experience." Despite these assertions, I would cautiously propose that perhaps there is, indeed, one unifying trans experience, and that would be the initial questioning if one is, in fact, trans at all, or trans enough for that matter. I have come across this act of questioning in many works of fiction, memoir, and academic scholarship, as well as in personal interactions with other trans people, and still find it deeply ingrained into my own gender-processing. Am I trans enough to claim this label? Am I trans at all? Am I just a cis woman who wants attention? Can I not just subsume the mess that is my gender identity and expression under the label "woman"? Would it, in fact, be more revolutionary or "productive" or honorable to blast open the category of woman instead of "abandoning" it for the harbor of the nonbinary label? If I label myself as nonbinary, can or should I also label myself as trans? I don't want to take away from people who are "really" trans. Am I trans?

Kit Heyam points to this exact scenario in their book *Before We Were Trans* (2022), confirming that trans people often feel incredibly isolated with these questions, even though this experience seems to be nearly universal. When Heyam attended their local trans group for the first time, they describe feeling like they were the only one there not at ease with their identity: "'How do you know this is *real*?' asked a persistent voice in my head. 'What if you just *think* you're trans because it makes you feel special? [. . .] What if you've convinced yourself this is right, but you're wrong?'" (23). It quickly turns out, however, that they were not alone with this at all: "Eventually, I managed to ask the question. 'Did anyone else here … when you first came out, did you have problems *believing* yourself?' Every single person in the room raised their hand" (23).

For me, one of these early affirming experiences was when my "Intro to Trans Studies" professor, who was incidentally responsible for my nonbinary awakening, asserted that "if somebody who looks like me is trans," meaning somebody who could easily pass as cis if they wanted to, "then anybody can be trans." After confessing to that professor that I thought I might be nonbinary and them chuckling congratulatorily while offering me their "they" pronoun pin (which I, sadly, vehemently declined at that point because openly wearing my gender still piqued my anxiety), I used the tools I had learned in their class and began a deep dive into fiction that might be able to tell me more about this "transgender thing" and gender messiness in general. A master's thesis on

trans road narratives and an ongoing dissertation project on contemporary North American trans fiction later, I still often question if I am "really, truly" trans, despite the theory and the fiction and other trans people meeting those doubts with an emphatic "fuck yeah, you are." How is this question so persistent and so pervasive within trans communities?

This essay firstly argues that deeply ingrained doubt about one's gender identity is fundamentally connected to the "transsexual narrative," which originated in tandem with the medicalization of trans identity and prescribes a fixed narrativization of trans experience. Secondly, it examines the reading and writing of trans fiction as a possible avenue for amelioration of the "transsexual narrative's" harmful and restricting effects. I continue to use quotation marks around the term to mark how it constitutes a narrative *about* transness rather than originating *from* trans people themselves, although certain writings authored by trans people historically, and sometimes still today, of course heavily played into the narrative as well. Further, since the narrative is firmly tied to the concept of "transsexuality" as it was understood during the late twentieth century, meaning in an explicit medical sense and in opposition to the more social concept of "transgenderism," I use the term "transsexual" despite its status as outdated terminology today, but do so as a citation rather than as my own wording. While many authors writing between the 1990s and 2010s use the term self-evidently, some scholars, such as Trish Salah, still sometimes apply the term to distinguish trans people who have medically transitioned from others in their writing today. I find this practice quite problematic, since this distinction is what often fuels the aforementioned questions of "real" transness and the general idea of transmedicalism, which is the belief that only people who have medically transitioned are "truly trans."

The first part of this essay will sketch the outlines of the "transsexual narrative" and its effects as well as attempt a tentative definition of trans literature as a genre against this historical and conceptual backdrop. The relationship between "transsexual narratives" and contemporary trans fiction also necessitates the discussion of whether the very stance many current trans texts take on the "transsexual narrative" could be interpreted as a crucial marker of an "emerging" genre. The second part will examine how trans fiction may counteract the "transsexual narrative's" marginalization by providing a literary space of home and belonging for an implied trans readership and for texts themselves that previously were, and partially still are, unthinkable within the hegemonic confines of the publishing industry. Building on theories of home, worldmaking, and reparative reading, while also critically interrogating the concept of home itself, this essay positions Kai Cheng Thom's 2017 *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* as an example that provides not only a space of hope and belonging for trans

readerships but also the tools for critical engagement with harmful narratives by bursting genre conventions and narrative forms, critically interrogating the concept of trans community, and imagining alternative endings that deviate from prescribed social narratives of transness.

Genre-Bending as a Disavowal of the "Transsexual Narrative"

Teasing apart and chronologically organizing the different developments during the twentieth century which influenced the establishment of the "transsexual narrative" seems like a nearly impossible task. Consequently, this chapter can only be seen as an incomplete sketch that hopefully at least roughly outlines the problematics of the concept. Anne Mulhall identifies the origins of queer narrative in the "interrelation among the sexologist's narrative, narratives of the self, and literary narratives" (142); likewise, the emergence of the "transsexual narrative" must be understood as intrinsically intertwined with the medicalization of trans identity as well as medical gatekeeping mechanisms that regulated trans people's access to gender-affirming health care. In *Whipping Girl* (2007), Julia Serano traces the roots of the medical gatekeeping system back to the rise of interest in sexology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (115). Sexologists sought to understand both normative and nonnormative variations of sex, gender, and sexuality; however, Serano argues that because of the researchers' biases derived from their environments of systemic sexism, racism, classism, ableism, et cetera, the research on sexology has never been neutral or scientifically objective. Of course, one might argue that complete objectivity is never possible in the first place, but in this instance, it had especially far-reaching effects, as some researchers made it their explicit objective to eradicate genders and sexualities that differed from the norm (115), a goal fundamentally rooted in colonialism and racism (Mulhall 143-4). This is how queer sexualities and transgender identities came to be not only medicalized, but explicitly pathologized (Serano 116).

One of the key figures in the institutionalization of this attitude towards transness was Harry Benjamin (Serano 117), one of the first doctors in the U.S. to work with trans people in terms of providing hormones and surgeries after having studied at Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin. Benjamin's *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, published in 1966, became the standard reference for gender clinics for many years. Benjamin's categorization of trans people according to a so-called sex orientation scale is of particular interest. Modelled on the Kinsey scale, which theorizes male sexuality as a spectrum ranging from exclusive heterosexuality to exclusive homosexuality along six steps (Kendall), it divided trans people into six different categories and afforded them medical transitioning options accordingly: "pseudo transvestite;" "fetishistic transvestite;" "true transvestite;" "transsexual,

nonsurgical;" "transsexual, moderate intensity;" and "transsexual, high intensity" (Benjamin 16). The question of who is "really, truly trans" can be traced directly back to this diagnostic practice, and although Benjamin notes that the six types "are not and never can be sharply separated" (15), it is likely that many trans people were denied care because they did not fit the criteria.

The justification for the very idea that categorization by "experts" instead of trans peoples' self-profession constituted the grounds for health care provision is illustrated in the way the Stanford Gender Dysphoria Program, founded in 1968, defined a trans person as "confused." Sandy Stone summarizes the program's findings as such:

> A transsexual is a person who identifies his or her gender identity with that of the "opposite" gender. Sex and gender are quite separate issues, but transsexuals commonly blur the distinction by confusing the performative character of gender with the physical "fact" of sex, referring to their perceptions of their situations as being in the "wrong body." (152)

One study from 1979, which was reprinted in *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment* by William Walters and Michael Ross in 1986 despite its only marginally noted questionable scientific merit, describes trans people as "depressed, isolated, withdrawn, schizoid [. . .], immature, narcissistic, egocentric and potentially explosive [. . .], demanding, manipulative, controlling, coercive, and paranoid" (qtd. in Stone 153). This dehumanization and explicit psychological pathologization of trans people served as a justification for stripping them of their agency and relegating the power over gender expression into the hands of cisgender medical and psychiatric professionals.

This dynamic was heightened as mainstream publics became more aware of trans identity, mostly due to fearmongering in the media about trans people in general and gender-related surgeries specifically (Serano 118). While Harry Benjamin had primarily advocated for hormonal and surgical interventions as therapy for gender dysphoria (Serano 118), the focus shifted from alleviating psychological distress for trans people to "protecting" the public from trans individuals (Serano 120). Dean Spade and Julia Serano both aptly illustrate how the practice of accepting certain trans people for medical transitioning options while rejecting others was based on arbitrary, gender-stereotypical categories as well as heterosexuality, and served to uphold the gender binary while discouraging gender-variant expressions (Spade 316; Serano 122). This is where the "transsexual narrative" comes in, as in order to access gender-affirming health care, trans people often had no choice but to

conform to these very specific criteria, which in turn constructed an entire life narrative of having felt "trapped in the wrong body" since childhood, definitely being heterosexual but not engaging in sexual relations due to a deep aversion to one's genitals, and always having exhibited gender-stereotypical behaviors (Serano 123-4). The narrativization of transition, then, as Atalia Israeli-Nevo writes, takes on characteristics of an "extreme makeover" (36) storyline, which portrays an "over-the-top, incredible and almost impossible transformation from one sex/gender to the other [. . .], one moment of somatic change that allows the subject to move to the other side of the gap (without looking back), and change everything" (36). The "arrival" in the "correctly gendered" body is then often configured as "homecoming" (Aizura 144). Jay Prosser summarizes the narrative stages as follows: "suffering and confusion; the epiphany of self-discovery; corporeal and social transformation/conversion; and finally the arrival 'home'—the reassignment" (101). The completion of transition as an arrival home will become especially pertinent later when examining the relationship between home and trans identity. Building on Foucauldian analyses of power, Spade concludes that the medical establishment's handling of trans people should not discourage medical transition per se, but rather enforced normative gender performances for both trans- and cisgender people (321). Of course, the rigid application of the "transsexual narrative" also left room for calculated subversion of the gatekeeping system. Stone notes that many trans people seeking care "had read Benjamin's book, which was passed from hand to hand within the transsexual community, and they were only too happy to provide the behavior that led to acceptance for surgery" (161).

Interestingly, although perhaps not that surprisingly, autobiographies written by trans people during the 20th century often echoed and reinforced the "transsexual narrative" as well. Since publishers were usually not interested in writings by trans people unless they catered to a cisgender appetite for sensationalism and an "explanation" of trans experiences, autobiographies became the prime genre through which trans narratives were able to be expressed. In one of the first scholarly works which reckons with the "transsexual narrative" from a trans-affirmative perspective, Stone analyzes multiple autobiographies by, for example, Lili Elbe, Hedy Jo Star, and Jan Morris. In concurrence with Israeli-Nevo's earlier mentioned observations, she notes that,

> besides the obvious complicity of these accounts in a Western white male definition of performative gender, the authors also reinforce a binary, oppositional mode of gender identification. They go from being unambiguous men, albeit unhappy men, to unambiguous women. There

> is no territory between. Further, each constructs a specific narrative moment when their personal sexual identification changes from male to female. This moment is the moment of neocolporraphy—that is, of gender reassignment or "sex change surgery." (Stone 156)

Stone sharply criticizes these autobiographies' complacency with the "transsexual narrative" as they confirm and uphold harmful constructions of gender and passing. In an attempt to leave behind the "transsexual narrative," to become "posttranssexual," as she puts it, she calls for trans people to "read oneself aloud—and by this troubling and productive reading, to begin to write oneself into the discourses by which one has been written" (Stone 168).

In opposition to trans autobiography in the 20th century, the kind of trans fiction which has been appearing since the 2010s—first out of small, independent publishing houses like the now-defunct Topside Press, Metonymy Press, or Arsenal Pulp Press, and more recently out of more mainstream presses such as Torrey Peters' *Detransition, Baby* (2021) with Random House and the ten-year-anniversary reissue of Imogen Binnie's *Nevada* (2013) with Farrar, Straus & Giroux—might be interpreted as a new emergent transgender literature written by trans people for trans people, which explicitly avoids catering to the "transsexual narrative's" medicalized, sensationalist cis gaze. Even though any attempt to stabilize a definition of trans literature poses more questions than curating answers, most contributors to the discussion seem to agree on the importance of "work that resonates with or illuminates or otherwise serves transgender communities" (Bellot). Working with this reference point, trans autobiographies which follow the "transsexual narrative" could, on the one hand, be discarded from the category of trans literature as it can be argued that their portrayal of transness serves cisgender voyeurism more than trans communities themselves. On the other hand, the influence of trans autobiographies cannot be disavowed, as Salah emphatically asserts in her essay on "Transgender and Transgenre Writing" (2021). Criticizing the fact that "we hate our autobiography" (186), Salah argues that the dismissal of 20th century "transsexual" autobiography disavows pieces of important history that have made the "emergence" of a "new trans literature" possible in the first place, while simultaneously obscuring other works within this period of "intense cultural production" (187) that have received little to no attention from literary critics so far. She quotes César Domínguez when explaining how the concept of an "emergent literature" is "predicated upon the idea of an 'evolutionary phase of a national literature' as well as upon ideas of 'all non-national and non-canonical literature, whether it be ethnic, regional or minority'" (Salah 178). Salah concludes that "the thinking of emergence then consequently risks a presentist, dehistoricizing rendering of the past as well as a certain telos for the future" (179).

Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* can be read as a hybrid form encompassing both elements from the "old" history of trans autobiography and the "new" developments of trans literatures. As such, it nods to earlier works which created a distinctly trans genre by mixing autobiographical elements with other genres, such as Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) or Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw*, published in 1994 (Prosser 174, 191). Akio Tamura-Ho formulates this "persistent ability of trans people to combine, modify, transform and circumvent generic convention" (4) as remix and analyzes how works following the aforementioned, such as Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby* and Grace Lavery's *Please Miss: A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Penis (2022)*, "disrupt the binary between research and fabulation, nonfiction and fiction, reality and unreality" (4). In breaking away from the "transsexual narrative," genre-bending thus emerges as a prime strategy through which trans writers are able to convey the complexity and multiplicity of trans experience.

Fierce Femmes follows a nameless protagonist, who is a young Asian trans woman, as she leaves her hometown of Gloom and moves to the City of Smoke and Lights, where she meets other trans women like herself and is integrated into their tight-knit community on the Street of Miracles. Many of the femmes work in the sex industry to survive on the Street. When one of them is murdered, the femmes form a gang and enact revenge on clients that have mistreated them. During a street fight, the protagonist accidentally kills a police officer while protecting another femme, but his body mysteriously disappears into a magical fountain. As the protagonist grapples with her deed, bodily dysphoria, the complicated relationships within her community, and her first romantic involvements, the text continually blurs and questions the boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy. This is achieved by playing with genre conventions and mixing elements of memoir and magical realism, as well as poetic, epistolary, and dramatic forms, which displays the richness of possibility within transgender cultural production and negates the "transsexual" autobiography's firm generic borders.

The text's subtitle, *A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir*, marks the book as memoir, while the words "liar" and "confabulous" signal a casual relation to truth. Opposing the genre marker of memoir is the customary disclaimer that this work is purely fictional and a product of the author's imagination, pointing to the idea that the boundaries between the storytelling of memoir and fictional storytelling are more porous and unstable than clear-cut. These boundaries are further questioned by the fact that the protagonist remains nameless and that her identity seems closely related to the author's, who is also a Chinese Canadian trans woman. The first chapter in the book further takes on a crucial role in blurring the memoir-fiction and

realism-fantasy boundaries, as the first-person narrator describes watching a white trans woman, who bears distinct similarities to real-life Caitlyn Jenner, accepting an award on TV (Thom 2). The protagonist derives her motifs for writing from what she sees in the woman:

> Looking at the ivory face of the trans lady on the TV, I decided then and there that someone had to write us girls a dangerous story: a transgender memoir, but not like most of the 11,378 transgender memoirs out there, which are just regurgitations of the same old story that makes us boring and dead and *safe* to read about. I wanted something kick-ass and intense with hot sex and gang violence and maybe zombies and lots of magic. Which is, you know, pretty much my life, right? So I thought I'd give writing a try. (Thom 3; original emphasis)

The next chapter begins with "the story of how [the protagonist] became a dangerous girl and the greatest escape artist in the world" (Thom 7), suggesting that the text on hand is the product of her writing the story she wanted to and breaking the inferred rule of fiction and literary analysis which preaches that the author and the narrator should never be conflated. Before, however, she describes her anger at the ivory lady and the urge to kick the TV, which belongs to her boyfriend. Instead, she

> blew a kiss at the TV. A spark jumped from [her] lips, skipped off [her] palm, and darted through the air to touch down gently on a close-up of her face. The screen exploded in a glorious symphony of electricity and shattering glass, and a thousand razor shards flew through the air and turned into crimson butterflies that danced through the room on their way out the window. (Thom 4)

The intense juxtaposition of beauty and softness with violence and sharpness that this scene evokes foreshadows the general mood of the text and picks up images, such as the razor and the crimson color, that will become relevant in the story later. Most interestingly, however, one of the final chapters returns to the exposition and reveals that the TV was actually destroyed by the "kiss": "So Josh came home and found his smashed-up TV this afternoon. I wanted to tell him that I didn't break it on purpose, it just kind of happened: I blew a kiss at the screen and the kiss was literally electric. But that would have just sounded like a lie to him. And maybe it would have been" (Thom 184). This full-circle moment not only, again, questions the boundaries between reality and fiction or imagination, but also raises the question of the role of magic within the narrative, which I will return to later.

Creating Transgender Home—Physically, Emotionally, Generically

Stone's conceptualization of trans literature as reading oneself aloud (168) and Tamura-Ho's idea of trans literature as remix (4) converge in Salah's argument that trans genre writing "works to both problematize and collectivize enunciation, which is not to say that the literature is homogenous, but rather that it works 'to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility'" (182). The idea of another, different possibility, whether of narrative, literature, or community, also emerges in Prosser's *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998). Like Stone, Prosser is extremely critical of trans autobiography as a genre, but he specifically configures the departure from the "transsexual narrative" as a possibility of homecoming for transgender people (174). It might be surprising at first to learn that one of the first academic pursuits into transgender literature as a genre places trans identity into a firm connection with home; at second glance, however, the enmeshment of "transgender" and "home" is less striking, considering how the term transgender historically emerged from the tug-of-war between "transsexuality" (interpreted as folding gender aberrations into cisnormative passing) and queer (interpreted as a deliberate embodiment of difference). Prosser writes that "the relations between these projects often get played out in debates about narrative and territory [. . .], about what it means to cross gender or sex, to share or distinguish identity space, to establish, differentiate, and affiliate plots and movements" (176-77), showcasing how home as a trope arises at the very birth of transgender as a concept.

Home, then, in a trans context, is fundamentally fraught. The "transsexual narrative" points "nostalgically toward home—identity, belonging in the body and in the world" (Prosser 177), promises closure, assimilation, and the "refuge of fully becoming the other sex" (178). In fact, Prosser postulates that every narrative is directed towards home, and if home is nonexistent, this throws into question the entire existence of the narrative as well (205). Consequently, both home and narrative are fabrications, myths (Prosser 205). By giving up both the constructions of home and narrative implicated in the "transsexual narrative," Prosser argues, "we relinquish [. . .] the recognition of our sexed realness; acceptance as men and women; fundamentally, the right to gender homes" (204). Earlier, however, he also proposes that in parting with the right to gender homes, and therefore being in need of new homes, "the queer/posttranssexual/transgendered transsexual comes out and creates home in the transgendered community" (Prosser 174).

Prosser's analysis points to the ambivalent nature of home both explicitly in his writing but also implicitly in the way his argument seems to exhibit a contradicting tension between the need to deconstruct both home

and narrative as myth, but also a desire for home within the trans community. Nael Bhanji articulates his frustration with "the 'imagined community' of transsexual belonging" (157) and the fact that both theoretical and actual journeys are so highly influenced by "our attachments to the perplexing edifice of 'home'" (157). Considering how trans theory has systematically excluded racialized and diasporic trans people, Bhanji asks which kind of home is left, which other home is strived for, and what these directives say about the trans subject undertaking them (158). "Through challenging our own investments in the protective cocoon of homeliness," he writes, "we may envision a trans politics that is critical of its (re)turns to 'home'" (Bhanji 158). If home, within Western hegemonic culture, is conflated with the stability and protection of the nation, of whiteness, and bourgeois family values (Birke and Butter 119), is home something trans subjects even can or should strive for?

While the problematics of home as a concept cannot be denied, I would also like to suggest thinking about what is lost if home is undisputedly relinquished to the hegemonic forces that use it to protect white-supremacist, settler-colonial, patriarchal, capitalist, cisheteronormative, ableist power and values. Especially for trans people, the traditionally homely ideas of safety, coziness, familiarity, and stability could also offer a welcome retreat from the marginalization and suspended liminality of existing within social structures that routinely seek to eradicate their being. Trans people deserve spaces to rest, to be at home with people and narratives that nurture and uplift. Of course, when reading trans literature as a home for trans readerships, crucial questions of which narratives make it into production (writing takes time and money, publishing takes a publisher willing to publish that particular narrative) and which readerships are able to gain access to them (reading takes time, money, and education, which itself also takes time and money) quickly arise—like everything else, trans literature is always already bound up in white-supremacist cisheteronormative cultural-imperialist capitalist structures. And yet, *if* the opportunity arises to find home and belonging in trans literature, should that opportunity not be fiercely grasped?

Home plays a fundamental role in *Fierce Femmes*, in a physical, emotional, figurative, as well as media-practical sense. In "Imaginative Geographies of Home: Ambivalent Mobility in Twenty-First-Century Literature and Culture" (2019), Dorothee Birke and Stella Butter suggest three lenses through which to analyze home in fiction: first, the representation of home; second, the figurative meanings of home; and third, media practices as forms of homemaking. Within these lenses, they consider aspects such as spatiality and materiality, as well as social, cognitive, and affective dimensions of home (121-2). While this rather neutral lens of analysis provides a good basis, home must be viewed as an inherently fraught complex in queer and trans contexts,

as queer and trans people are, from the outset, usually assumed to be not-at-home, whether this pertains to not being included in the unit of "the heterosexual family, the nation, the homeland," as Anne-Marie Fortier writes (408), or to not being "at home in one's body," as the normative formulation of trans embodiment in terms of dysphoria goes (Prosser 178).

In *Fierce Femmes*, this tension within the concept of home is played out, for example, in the physical houses/homes the protagonist moves in and through; from the house she grew up in in the city of Gloom to a tiny, dingy apartment on the Street of Miracles in the City of Smoke and Lights, and finally to her boyfriend's fancy apartment in a more affluent part of town. Gloom is described as a sad, ugly place suffering from the effects of European settler colonialism (Thom 7), and the protagonist's house of origin similarly seems to be distressed: "I was born in the crooked house whose walls curved and bulged in the middle and narrowed at the top and the bottom, like a starving person with a swollen belly" (Thom 7). The house is not only compared to a starving person, but also to a spider web that trembles, haunts its inhabitants, and eventually swallows them (Thom 42). Contrary to the safety commonly associated with a home, this house "kept you in it, but it didn't keep things out" (Thom 42). The extensive personification of the house works to obscure the actual source of isolation and confinement that the protagonist experiences: her Chinese immigrant parents have high expectations for her academically, keep her locked in her room to study, and physically abuse her when she does not meet their requirements (Thom 9). Like the house itself, they are described as afflicted by "an ever-present feeling of hunger" (Thom 8) for more success and stability than they had been afforded as immigrants. Early on, the protagonist learns to escape periodically by picking locks, and finally decides to leave for good when it becomes clear that her parents would never accept her being a girl.

The City of Smoke and Lights does not seem to be too different from Gloom at first, "the streets are crooked, and the light is heavy, and the air is stained ash grey from the glamorous cigarette lips of hungry ghosts swimming through the fog" (Thom 20). In contrast to Gloom and her crooked house of origin, though, the city offers the freedom to "be anything you want" (Thom 20). Particularly the Street of Miracles is described as beautiful and mysterious, with the languidity of a never-ending night and the enticement of red lanterns and fragrant smells (Thom 37-8). This beauty, however, is laced with the implicit dynamics of exploitation of a place where mainly men seem to go to enjoy themselves, and women, especially trans women, provide the enjoyment. The presence of other trans women has the most alluring effect on the protagonist: "The City of Smoke and Lights is full of fierce, fabulous femmes. Dangerous trans women, hot as blue stars. You can find them

anywhere if you know how to look, and believe me, I am *looking*. Can't take my eyes off them: these visions of what I could be. What I am becoming. My first trans woman friend found me the minute my feet touched the ground here" (Thom 37; italics in original). While Gloom and the crooked house seem altogether an unviable place for the protagonist to live, the City of Smoke and Lights seems more complicated in that it holds beauty and ugliness, safety and danger, longing and belonging at the same time.

This mixture is concretely represented in the protagonist's first own apartment, which is described as "a little tin box that someone decided to charge rent for" (Thom 42). Despite its bleak furnishings, the protagonist immediately feels at home: "Little tin box apartment, I know you aren't strong enough: not to keep me inside, nor to keep monsters out. But I don't care. You have a door that closes, and only I can lock it from the inside. [. . .] Little cocoon apartment, I love how you rattle and shake in the wind. You are mine like nothing has ever been before" (Thom 43). Even though the apartment comes across as physically unstable similarly to the crooked house in Gloom, the crucial difference between them lies in the fact that the apartment, whether imagined as a tin box or a cocoon, gives the protagonist the agency of constructing it as a home herself.

The protagonist's move into her boyfriend's apartment at the end of the book signifies a circling back into the confinement embodied by the crooked house in Gloom, albeit more in the fashion of a "gilded cage." This apartment has a "heavy oak door that opens into a vast carpeted open-concept living room about eleven times the size of my tin box apartment" (Thom 181) and is "furnished with tasteful leather couches, a glass coffee table that looks like a sculpture in a contemporary art museum, a state-of-the-art television, and wall-to-wall windows overlooking the City skyline" (Thom 181). What prompts the protagonist to escape once again in the end, however, is the fancy toilet paper: "There was no toilet paper like that in my house in Gloom, or on the Street of Miracles, I was pretty sure. And it was this tiny thing, this insignificant experience, that finally made it hit me: *I don't belong here*" (Thom 182-3; italics in original). In summary, the protagonist's physical housing situations are only experienced as home when she retains her agency and independence as a trans, Chinese Canadian, working-class subject, which detaches the notion of home from the aforementioned traditional values of whiteness, biological family, and bourgeois affluence. Being at home, then, becomes a radical act of subversion rather than a practice of being folded or folding oneself into the dominant.

Fierce Femmes not only critically interrogates home in a sense of physical shelter and safety, but even more so as belonging within a community. The first friend the protagonist meets in the city is Kimaya, whose smile is

described as evoking notions of home: "Kimaya's smile is a slice of the yellow moon. [. . .] It is a map, guiding the way. It's warm butter, melting on toast. It feels like sisterhood. It feels like open arms. It feels like home" (Thom 40-1). Kimaya's homeliness extends from her smile into her actions when she organizes an open mic night for her community of femmes during a time in which they struggle with heightened police violence. The open mic night is an explicitly t4t event, where the femmes can care and perform only for each other without the constraints of a cis/male gaze: "She spends the whole day calling the girls, telling each one that she's hosting an open mic night—private, just for trans girls. She asks them about their lives, how they're doing in these hard times. She tells them how much she's missed them, how good it would be to see them soon" (Thom 138). For Kimaya, her community's interconnectedness arises from narrative and storytelling: "I've brought us all together on this darkest of nights so we can tell our stories. We live in difficult and dangerous times, it is true. But as long as we have our stories, and we have each other, then we have hope. And this is the greatest magic of all" (Thom 139). Laura Bieger articulates the importance of narrative agency and its entanglements with belonging in *Belonging and Narrative* (2018), where she writes:

> Belonging as I conceive it is an inescapable condition of human existence [. . .], the desire for a place in the world without which both place and world would crumble. To feel and direct this longing we need a mediating structure; narrative is that structure. [. . .] Narrative's sweeping allure (it can be found in any culture) thrives on its promise to give meaning and mooring to our lives. [. . .] Where, how, and to whom we belong depends on the stories we tell (or do not tell) ourselves. (13)

Narrative, then, is not only crucial within *Fierce Femmes* as a glue that keeps the community of femmes together, but also "outside" of the book where trans readerships may experience feelings of home and belonging through reading, and perhaps even read themselves into the narrative.

Trans community is also more complicated than t4t care, however. When the protagonist visits the Femme Alliance Building, a community center, for the first time, she describes a profound sense of isolation: "Except for Kimaya, no one pays attention to me. I hate it, which surprises me, because back in Gloom, being ignored always made me feel safe. Here in FAB, though, being ignored makes me feel small and invisible, makes me hate myself. I long to be a part of the conversations, to talk, to join the glittering flock" (Thom 51). When one of the femmes, Lucretia, calls her "fresh meat" and comments on her flat chest—"She doesn't even have boobs yet! How old are you, kid?" (Thom 51)—the protagonist twists her wrist to gain her respect. Later, the for-

mation of the vigilante gang to avenge the murder of Soraya is preceded by intense discussions within the community over whether the use of violence is an appropriate response to the situation (Thom 74-5), which, in the long run, drives a deep wedge between Kimaya and her partner Rapunzelle. And finally, the gang's leader Valaria illustrates how mentorship and abuse can go hand in hand when she encourages the protagonist to keep fighting back against the violence on the Street, but then kisses her without her consent (Thom 121-2).

In a media-practical sense, *Fierce Femmes* creates a home for narrative outcomes that would seem impossible within the real-world structures trans women have to grapple with. As Soraya's murder illustrates, the femmes are continually faced with violence, either stemming from their clients or from the police. Outside of novels, we are inundated with news of trans women, particularly those who are racialized and/or poor and/or work in the sex industry, being murdered without much hope for justice, with news coverage and posthumous narrativizations often disrespecting their identity even in death (Snorton and Haritaworn 69). *Fierce Femmes* undertakes a rerouting of the narrative tropes that fix trans women of color in a perpetual state of tragedy, isolation, and death. This practice is most explicitly accomplished through a literal rewriting of violence to create a multiplicity of outcomes. When the protagonist kills a police officer in a small courtyard in order to save Lucretia from him, she subsequently remarks:

> "I'm gonna go to jail and get fucking raped and die there all because I saved your stupid worthless bitchy ass," I finish, breathing heavily. For a second, Lucretia just stares at me in total silence. Her beat-up doll face is totally expressionless, except for a slight twitching in her cheek. The moonlight glints off her blue eyes. Then she says, quietly, "You're not going to jail. You're going to be fine." (Thom 113-4)

Lucretia offers to turn herself in for the officer's death since she is white and can pass more easily than the protagonist, when the narrative voice suddenly interjects, jumps backwards, and rewrites the ending of the scene:

> "I'm a pretty white girl, right? Maybe they'll go easy on me." I start to laugh, but it turns into a sob. I want to reach out and hug her. I want to turn and run away. In the distance, I can hear the sound of sirens—
> No, wait. That's not what happened. This is what happened: "I'm gonna go to jail and get fucking raped and die there all because I saved your stupid worthless bitchy ass," I finish, breathing heavily. For a second, Lucretia just stares at me in total silence. Her beat-up doll face is totally expressionless, except for a slight twitching in her cheek. The moonlight

> glints off her blue eyes. Then, suddenly, those eyes widen. Her perfect bee-stung lips part in a gasp. "Look," Lucretia says, pointing behind me with her good arm. (Thom 115)

The vines around the fountain in the middle of the courtyard then begin to move, slowly envelop the officer's dead body, and draw it into the fountain. As the vines retreat, the fountain's statue is revealed as a beautiful and majestic trans woman, who has been mythologized on the Street of Miracles as the First Femme (Thom 116). As evidence of the crime disappears, Lucretia and the protagonist are granted an alternative future, one in which they don't "go to jail and get fucking raped and die there" (Thom 115), as the protagonist had initially predicted, because "whenever blood is shed on the Street of Miracles, it's trans girls who pay, in the end" (Thom 115). The prescribed narrative structure of violence and death that permeates trans women's lives, especially within the sex industry, is thus replaced with a different narrative, in which self-defense is not prosecuted more heavily than the initial assault and where the fierce and protective bonds between trans women prevail in the end, even despite their individual disdain for each other.

A similar scene in which magical intervention aids the protagonist occurs when she bakes a red velvet cake in Kimaya's kitchen at the height of the femmes' struggles with the surveillance and violence from the police. As she pours sugary icing on the hot cake, the scent travels through the open window onto the Street of Miracles, and when she takes the first bite, everything wrong seems to magically right itself instantly: Kimaya and Rapunzelle reconcile, Lucretia likes her appearance in the mirror, Soraya's mother is comforted after the death of her daughter, the First Femme's fountain spits up the police officer's spirit, who ceases to haunt the protagonist's nightmares, and the swarm of killer bees (signifying the protagonist's gender dysphoria) leaves her body through her open mouth (Thom 160-2). In the end, no matter how difficult things are, the magical powers of trans community, embodied in the figure of the First Femme, are able to ameliorate the situation.

This provides a good opportunity to return to the earlier question of the role of magic in Thom's text. On the one hand, the magical elements of the narrative allow room for more positive things to happen to the femmes and keep them safe. On the other hand, the fact that only magic can accomplish this in the story, and that the non-magical narrative strands are set up to end in great harm, can be read as a commentary on how the reality for trans women is indeed so dire that, at this point, nothing from the "real" realm could change the situation. While acknowledging the current, difficult situation for trans people, however, the magical narrative can provide a space of home for trans readerships, an imagination of how things could be better, and a hope

for the results of the magical narrative strands to become realistic as well. In the introduction to *Worldmaking: Literature, Language, Culture* (2019), Tom Clark, Emily Finlay, and Philippa Kelly emphasize the importance of literature in imagining other or more extensive worlds than the present. They write that "worlds are never entirely new; they emerge out of old worlds and reshape them, a prerequisite that means worldmaking is always at least transformative, but also potentially powerful or subversive" (Clark et al. 2-3) and position literary works as a prime vehicle for worldmaking, as they are able to critique and question dominant narratives and continually reshape the old to make something new (Clark et al. 4). Their approach invokes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading by which "selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them" (35). This reading strategy eschews a more paranoid practice, which focuses on preventing pain by constantly foreseeing and exposing it, and instead opts for an approach that concentrates on the seeking of pleasure and amelioration. Finally, Leslie Feinberg argues that imagination, or fiction, is essential for trans narratives. Reflecting on hir approach writing *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) in an interview, zie asserts:

> We're always being told who we are, either physically or emotionally—strip or be stripped, you know? [. . .] "Let's see your body. We'll find out who you are. Let's hear what your innermost thoughts and feelings [are]." [. . .] I really felt that by fictionalizing the story, that I would be able to tell more of the truth; be more brutally honest than I would if I were telling my own story. (Horwitz 13)

Within a trans context, then, magic and fiction may allow for more truth than realism and fact.

To conclude, this essay has highlighted the problematic nature of the "transsexual narrative" and sketched its relationship to more recent, "emerging" transgender literature that is written by trans authors with trans audiences in mind. I have argued that this genre of "new" trans literature may be capable of ameliorating the harmful effects the "transsexual narrative" has had on trans (self-)perceptions and communities. Kai Cheng Thom's book *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* represents an intriguing example of this practice through its critical interrogation of the concepts of home and community, as well as its use of magic and reparative rewriting to imagine alternative endings that deviate from prescribed social narratives of transness. Therefore, I read *Fierce Femmes* as a narrative that provides a space for trans readerships to imagine themselves as part of the fictional community of femmes and gain

hope that this community and sense of belonging can translate into their real lives. Similarly, a practice of trans reparative writing might be able to restore narrative agency for trans characters, especially in the wake of the histories that have constrained trans stories into very particular formulas. This restoration of narrative agency may then extend to trans readerships and broader trans communities as a concrete tool to affectively work against the psychological effects of social vilification. By rewriting the typical narrative for trans women, as well as the typical way trans stories are able to be told, *Fierce Femmes* ultimately creates a space in which more is possible: more diverse narratives, different possible outcomes for trans women, more truths than one.

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Biography

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Queer and Refugee Positionalities in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

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Abstract

This article examines the representations of positionality in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Published in 2019, Vuong centers his narrative around the narrator, Little Dog—a queer Vietnamese American refugee struggling not only to understand his mother's and his family's traumas from war, displacement, and abuse, but also contending with his own path as a queer person of color and as a writer hindered by the inadequacy of language to reflect his thoughts and emotions. While *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* undoubtedly challenges readers to examine individual responses to trauma, displacement, and loss, the text's conclusion ultimately emphasizes that the characters' struggles do not define them—instead their abilities to find comfort and understanding in each other afford them paths toward long-term healing. Accordingly, by employing lenses offered by trauma studies, queer theory, and refugee studies, I argue that Little Dog's narrative illuminates both the obstacles presented by his myriad positionalities, as well as the ways that we might read his and his family's refugee narrative through a more redemptive and transformative perspective.

Keywords

Ocean Vuong; Positionality; Queer; Refugee; Subjectivity; Trauma.

DOI: 10.25364/27.5:2025.1.5

At the beginning of Ocean Vuong's novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the narrator, Little Dog, reflects on the Vietnam War's impact on his mother; he observes, "I was an American boy parroting what I saw on TV. I didn't know that the war was still inside you, that there was a war to begin with, that once it enters you it never leaves—but merely echoes, a sound forming the face of your own son" (4). The vulnerability expressed in this reflection is representative of Little Dog's narration throughout the text. In this instance, he confesses to his mother his lack of awareness and understanding: he "didn't know that the war was still inside [her]"—that the war, even decades after the cessation of combat, remained with her and continued to affect her (and by extension, himself) in myriad, diverse ways. Indeed, an idea that reverberates throughout Vuong's novel is that "once [war] enters you it never leaves." Yet, just as important, the text simultaneously presents a journey of understanding, compassion, and healing at both individual and collective levels. It is in this regard that Little Dog continually seeks answers about his and his family's past—"where have you been? Where have we been ma?" (Vuong 137).

Furthermore, his narrative also seeks answers to questions about his identity and subjectivity. At one of his most vulnerable points, he confesses to his mother:

> I don't know what I'm saying. I guess what I mean is that sometimes I don't know what or who we are. Days I feel like a human being, while other days I feel more like a sound. I touch the world not as myself but as an echo of who I was. Can you hear me yet? Can you read me? [. . .] Even when I know something to be true as bone I fear the knowledge will dissolve, will not, despite my writing it, stay real. I'm breaking us apart again so that I might carry us somewhere else—where, exactly, I'm not sure. Just as I don't know what to call you—White, Asian, orphan, American, mother? (Vuong 62)

Little Dog's vulnerability in this statement illuminates ideas crucial to this essay focused on queer and refugee positionality in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Little Dog poses questions about his identity and broader subjectivity. He seeks knowledge, understanding, healing, connection, communication. He seeks answers in the face of significant doubt—and yet suggests a comfort even within the ambiguity, without the answers. He desires communion in its broadest sense, whether with his mother and grandmother, with his first love, or even with the reader. All of these questions ultimately center around questions of positionality: meaning, the various ways that Little Dog's identity—queer, refugee, Vietnamese, Asian American—affects his subjectivity, his place in the world, and especially his relations to the people in his life.

Early in the text, he posits that "whether we want to or not, we are traveling in a spiral, we are creating something new from what is gone" (28). This creation of "something new"—from the trauma of war, from the displacement from a homeland, from the loss of loved ones, and especially from positionalities that serve to marginalize—is what inspires this article and is most significant to our understanding of positionality in the text.

Vuong published *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, his first novel, in 2019. The narrative focuses on the relationships and experiences of a family of Vietnamese refugees in Hartford, Connecticut; it is set almost exclusively in the urban inner city, though there are periodic reflections back to the war in Vietnam decades earlier, given the war's impact on the main characters. Most notably, Vuong employs an epistolary form to organize the story: the narrator, Little Dog, crafts a letter to his mother, "Ma," which consists of reflections on their life together and his personal struggles coming to terms with their traumatic past and his queer identity. Moreover, the letter offers insight into the traumas that both Ma and Little Dog's grandmother experienced during the war and their journey to the United States—traumas that continue to affect both them and Little Dog into the present day. Through the course of the narrative, Little Dog develops a better understanding of his mother, their relationship together, his identity and subjectivity, and his place in the world. The resolution of the text eventually presents a means of healing for Little Dog. It is thus a text that forces its audience to reflect on the lives of refugees—of trauma, displacement, instability, love, and healing.

Critical to this examination of Vuong's novel is an understanding of the concept of positionality. To start, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) offers two pertinent definitions. First, the OED defines positionality within the field of sociology as "the occupation or adoption of a particular position in relation to others, usually with reference to issues of culture, ethnicity, or gender" ("positionality"). The OED also includes a second, more general definition: "the fact or quality of having a position (in various senses) in relation to other things" ("positionality"). While these two definitions are relatively broad, the emphasis on the "relation" between individuals, particularly with regard to "culture, ethnicity, or gender," is critical to the study of Vuong's work. Indeed, Vuong's text emphasizes the evolving positionality of both Little Dog and his family members. Little Dog inhabits multiple, shifting positions of subjectivity based on his ethnicity, his sexuality, and even his labor class. Mitsunori Misawa, in his work on the positionality of LGBTQ individuals in education, establishes framing that complements and amplifies the OED's more generalized definitions. Misawa writes that "all parts of our identities are shaped by socially constructed positions and memberships to which we belong. Such automatic categorization is embedded in our society as a system" (26). He continues,

"marginalization and discrimination are particularly inescapable issues for minorities in contemporary society," since positionality affects "everyone's daily life" (Misawa 26). Consequently, the significance of positionality on an individual is not just one's relation to another; rather it illuminates the ways that our socially-constructed identities reinforce structural inequalities and dynamics of power, subjugation, and marginalization. This framing speaks to a central aspect of Vuong's novel: Little Dog's unstable subjectivity, given his evolving positionality and marginalization. The narrative of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is thus, at one level, an examination of Little Dog's evolving subjectivity, given the instable positionalities that he inhabits as a queer refugee in America. Little Dog's personal journey forces the audience to reflect on the obstacles that his intersectionality presents, as he comes to terms with both his past and his present.

In addition to a framework of positionality, our understanding particularly of queer and refugee subjectivity likewise is critical to an examination of Vuong's novel. While we never encounter the term "queer" within the text, it is an essential concept for our understanding. Michael Warner emphasizes that

> the insistence on 'queer'—a term initially generated in the context of terror—has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence. Its brilliance as a naming strategy lies in combining resistance on that broad social terrain with more specific resistance on the terrains of phobia and queer-bashing, on one hand, or of pleasure, on the other. 'Queer' therefore also suggests the difficulty in defining the population whose interests are at stake in queer politics. (xxvi)

Indeed, Vuong's text focuses on each of these elements—both the "pleasure" that Little Dog experiences, as well as the violence, "terrains of phobia," and the resistance to such. Jack Halberstam's work within queer theory amplifies the significance of the term. He argues, in his work on queer time and space, that "'queer' refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (Halberstam 6). In addition to Warner's formulation of combining resistance and pleasure, Halberstam's framing emphasizes queer non-normativity; the term "queer" crucially offers malleability in multiple forms. Furthermore, Warner augments this conceptualization by adding that queer "means being able, more or less articulately, to challenge the common understanding of what gender difference means, or what the state is for, or what 'health' entails, or what would define fairness, or what a good relation to the planet's environment would be" (xiii).

Consequently, the non-normative nature of queer-ness offers a transgressive characteristic as well—to "challenge" assumptions of normativity in myriad aspects of our lives. Finally, Jose Esteban Muñoz builds upon this framework with his study of the ways that queer individuals "disidentify." He writes that,

> identification, then, as Sedgwick explains, is never a simple project. Identifying with an object, person, lifestyle, history, political ideology, religious orientation, and so on, means also simultaneously and partially counteridentifying, as well as only partially identifying, with different aspects of the social and psychic world. (Muñoz 8)

He expands upon this later in his monograph, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), by asserting, "disidentification, like the subjective experience Michele Wallace describes, is about expanding and problematizing identity and identification, not abandoning any socially prescribed identity component" (Muñoz 29). This construct helps to explain Little Dog's path as well; we will see how, in the narrative, he oscillates between identification and disidentification, as part of his struggle to come to terms with his queer subjectivity and positionality. The text, in its broadest sense, represents a queer narrative, given the emphasis on positionalities, war, trauma, and suffering.

In addition to Little Dog's queerness, his and his family's status as (former) refugees likewise is a critical component for understanding his journey and the text as a whole. The narrative centers on the refugee experience—of displacement, trauma, instability, survival, suffering, and liminality. Yen Le Espiritu's monograph, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (2014), presents essential framing for this study. In an effort to redefine our understanding of refugee studies, she writes, "the field begins with the premise that the refugee, who inhabits a condition of statelessness, radically calls into question the established principles of the nation-state and the idealized goal of inclusion and recognition within it" (10). Indeed, the narrative of Little Dog, Ma, and Lan certainly "calls into question [. . .] the idealized goal of inclusion and recognition." Khatharya Um, in her remarkable work on Cambodian diaspora, reinforces this perspective when she asserts that "mass displacement, statelessness, and refugees are features of modernity, conditions that reveal both the vulnerability of the modern age and the resiliency of history's battered subjects" (20). As we will see, a central element of Little Dog's letter is the desire for recognition, whether from his mother, his first love, or from the greater community, just as his family's journey speaks to both the "conditions" and "vulnerability of the modern age." Yet, Timothy August's work in *The Refugee Aesthetic: Reimagining Southeast Asian*

America (2021), also challenges us to emphasize the humanity of refugees; he criticizes the representation predominant in our culture: "instead of refugees being recognized as structural attributes of global capital accumulation, images of the refugee and the refugee face present viewers with a type of abject experience that is seen as exceptional and best avoided altogether" (2). August suggests that refugees are represented as "exceptional," as alien, when their experiences actually are representative of the norm in modern society—of structural inequality within "global capital accumulation." In this regard, Espiritu also writes that "the messiness, contingency, and precarious nature of refugee life means that refugees, like all people, are beset by contradiction: neither damaged victims nor model minorities, they—their stories, actions, and inactions—simultaneously trouble and affirm regimes of power" (2). On the one hand, Little Dog's narrative speaks to the contradictions of his positionality: of a refugee, of the "messiness, contingency, and precarious nature of refugee life" that Espiritu asserts. Moreover, his personal journey both troubles and affirms the "regimes of power" that he encounters. Despite the myriad obstacles, Little Dog consistently seeks inclusion—not necessarily at the collective level but certainly at the individual level, in his relationships with family, friends, and his first love. Thus, his narrative emphasizes the humanity of him and his family—or, in Um's terms, the "resiliency of history's battered subjects." Consequently, as much as the characters in the narrative endure significant challenges due to their respective positionalities—and particularly their status as refugees—they ultimately encounter forms of healing and discover stability in their hybrid positionalities.

In order to consider their positionalities, we first must understand the traumas that the characters within the narrative experience and endure. As Viet Thanh Nguyen notes in his work on war and memory, the stories of the impact of war are not exclusive to just the soldiers on the battlefield; he challenges us to reflect on the expansive impacts of combat on diverse populations: "what if we understood that war stories disturb even more when they are not about soldiers, when they show us how normal war is, how war touches and transforms everything and everybody, including most of all, civilians?" (145). This certainly is the case within Vuong's novel; no one in Little Dog's family—Ma, Lan, Little Dog—engaged in combat in Vietnam, but the war's effects reverberate and permeate through each of their lives.

Most notably, Little Dog initiates his narrative with a litany of examples of abuse from his mother. He notes that he "must have been four" the first time his mother hit him (Vuong 5). Throughout the first part of the letter, he continues to reference various episodes of abuse from Ma, whether physical or psychological: "the time you threw the box of Legos at my head," "the time with the gallon of milk. The jug bursting on my shoulder bone," "the time with

the kitchen knife" (Vuong 6, 9). The tone is nonchalant, but the repetition of violence is profound. Little Dog emphasizes both the trauma his mother inflicts on him and his inability to comprehend why she does so, as well as the ways that her wartime traumas affect their relationship and affect her understanding of motherhood.

In the midst of the abuse, Little Dog struggles to comprehend his mother's treatment; with time, however, he develops a level of understanding and corresponding acknowledgement of his mother's traumas. At one point he notes that "I reread Roland Barthes's *Mourning Diary* yesterday, the book he wrote each day for a year after his mother's death. *I have known the body of my mother*, he writes, *sick and then dying*. And that's where I stopped. Where I decided to write you. You who are still alive" (Vuong 7; italics in original). This statement is a crucial step—the first of several—in Little Dog's evolution in understanding. While he struggles to communicate with his mother, he ultimately turns to writing as a means of communicating his love and understanding. In addition to her PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), Ma's inability to communicate in English traumatizes her as well; it is just one of several obstacles that negatively affect her relationship with her son and her ability to establish a stable life in America. Little Dog describes an instance when he attempts to teach Ma to read in English; he notes, though, that "that act reversed our hierarchies, and with it our identities, which, in this country were already tenuous and tethered" (Vuong 5). Ma is a remarkable, resilient woman who sacrificed body, mind, and home to try to find a better life for her own son and mother in America—but Little Dog's youth and naivete generate tremendous friction between them. In the end, though, Little Dog reverts to writing and describes this process evocatively: "I am writing you from inside a body that used to be yours. Which is to say, I am writing as a son. If we are lucky, the end of the sentence is where we might begin. If we are lucky, something is passed on, another alphabet written in blood, sinew, and neuron; ancestors charging their kin with the silent propulsion to fly south, to turn toward the place in the narrative no one was meant to outlast" (Vuong 10). Little Dog's statement encapsulates so much of what his narrative entails—an epistolary novel of love, trauma, survival, and yes, writing. Still, his statement also reflects the effects of his Ma's war traumas on him—"something is passed on," both with regard to his mother's love and the violence she likewise inflicts on him as she suffers through her own pain. He ultimately remarks that "at thirteen [. . .] I finally said stop," though neither the abuse nor Ma's suffering in fact does (Vuong 11).

In addition to Ma's PTSD, Little Dog's grandmother, Lan, presents a second exemplar for the physical and psychological traumas of war; Little Dog's relationship with Lan also emphasizes the idea of inter-familial

trauma in a mode distinct from his relationship with Ma. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory introduces a valuable lens in this regard; she writes in *Family Frames* (1997) that "postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated" (22). Lan's experiences are different from her daughter's, and Little Dog's description of her is particularly illuminating: "they say that trauma affects not only the brain, but the body too, its musculature, joints, and posture. Lan's back was perpetually bent—so much so that I could barely see her head as she stood at the sink. Only the knot of tied-back hair was visible, bobbing as she scrubbed" (Vuong 19). Lan suffered multiple traumas during the war, and Little Dog's description implies that the effects are so enduring and exhausting that her body comes to represent them—her back "perpetually bent" with "only the knot" of hair visible at the sink. Yet, as much as her body came to represent her trauma in a physical sense, Little Dog still struggles to comprehend what genuinely ails her. He describes the contrasts that he would observe in his grandmother: "it was stillness, I realize now, not of her body, which kept ticking as she slept, but of her mind [. . .] I'm watching a stranger, I thought, one whose lips creased into an expression of contentment alien to the Lan I knew awake, the one whose sentences rambled and rattled out of her, her schizophrenia only worse now since the war" (Vuong 16). The narration exposes us to the challenges Little Dog faced in comprehending his grandmother—on the one hand, awake, her "sentences rambled and rattled" as her post-war schizophrenia worsened; on the other hand, a "stillness" of mind when at rest. Thus, Little Dog confesses shortly thereafter that "I came to know, in those afternoons, that madness can sometimes lead to discovery, that the mind, fractured and short-wired, is not entirely wrong" (Vuong 23). His epistolary narrative accordingly provides us with a sense of discovery, as he progressively builds a more empathetic comprehension of what his Ma and Lan suffered through in Vietnam and continue to endure in the United States.

Lan's traumas in Vietnam were myriad; none more so than her decision to sell her body to provide for herself and her daughter. She admits at one point, "I never asked to be a whore," but she needed to be, after estrangement from her family (Vuong 47). Little Dog presents her story carefully: "Leaving Mai in the care of her sister back in the village, Lan rented a windowless room from a fisherman by the river, where she took the soldiers. How the fisherman, living below her, would spy on her through a slot on the wall. How the soldiers' boots were so heavy, when they kicked them off as they climbed into bed, the thumps sounded like bodies dropping, making her flinch under their searching hands" (Vuong 47). The implications are clear,

though; the circumstances created by the war forced Lan to prostitute her body, to save herself and her daughter from destitution. The effects are enduring and generational—they immediately affected Ma as a child, and in turn reverberate into her own treatment of Little Dog. This familial trauma is a crucial element of the narrative and informs our understanding of their subjectivity and positionality. Early in the text, Ma says out of nowhere, "'I'm not a monster. I'm a mother'" (Vuong 13). This forces reflection in the narrator; he posits, "to be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once. I read that parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children. Perhaps there is a monstrous origin to it after all" (Vuong 13). Little Dog comes to realize that an explanation for his family's suffering is not simple; as the narrative eventually demonstrates, it takes time, empathy, and listening to develop understanding. Still, the traumatic effects on Ma, Lan, and Little Dog are myriad and enduring; they remain visceral elements within their respective relationships, both internal to the family and external, too. As Judith Herman notes,

> Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community. Those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others. The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim; the group exults her. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity. (214)

Consequently, while Little Dog establishes the familial traumas and conflicts early in the narrative, they remain a critical element of the text writ large.

Traumas are foundational to each of the individuals within his family—and to several other individuals whom we encounter in the text. Little Dog's narrative emphasizes how these traumas create dysfunction within the family and confuse and complicate the internal relationships. In her groundbreaking monograph, *Inhuman Citizenship* (2012), Juliana Chang offers a helpful lens for understanding one of the crucial consequences of such trauma(s) for a family of refugees. She writes, "if ideological norms of domesticity are posited as crucial to the health and stability of the nation, then private homes and families become sites of surveillance, knowledge production, discipline, and regulation. In this way, apparently deviant domestic formations are subject to regimes of hypervisibility. And as Avery Gordon elucidates, hypervisibility can shade into invisibility" (Chang 16). Indeed, this deviance from societal norms

particularly affects Ma and Little Dog as they navigate life in the United States. On the one hand, their inability to assimilate into supposed cultural norms—whether with regard to language, labor, social class, or sexuality—results in hypervisibility at times; on the other hand, they "shade into invisibility" as well, due to their multiple positionalities as refugees, as persons of color, as minorities within their community, and as economically disadvantaged individuals struggling to survive. Chang also argues that "this is the teleological narrative or fantasy of the nation: America as the natural endpoint for all persons. While the immigrant is imagined as hoping and dreaming of the future, the child is the site where dreams are supposed to be realized, actualized. Put simply, the child is the very telos of America" (23). Presumably, this was Ma's hope for her son and mother: the actualization of life's dreams, away from the traumas of war and economic collapse in Vietnam. Yet, her enduring PTSD and their refugee subjectivity serve to stifle such hopes. Certainly, there are other significant traumas within the text—Ma's abortion, their collective displacement from Vietnam to the United States, Little Dog's father's abuse of Ma—all of which amplify, complicate, and exacerbate their suffering. Nonetheless, the physical and psychological traumas that Lan and Ma suffered during the war in Vietnam undoubtedly affect Little Dog through their enduring post-traumatic wounds. Little Dog's narrative illuminates the false "fantasy" of assimilation and the ostensible "telos" of the American Dream, particularly given his family's positionality as refugees and minorities.

This emphasis on the characters' traumas was deliberate, as one of the critical aspects of positionality that Vuong reflects in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* centers on the refugee experience. Little Dog's family's experience in America clearly is shrouded by their liminal status as Asian refugees. As Angelo Ancheta describes in his canonical work, the racial hierarchy in the United States presents a complicated position for Asian Americans:

> in terms of representation, a black-white model ignores or marginalizes the experiences of Asian Americans, Native Americans, Arab Americans, and other groups who have extensive histories of discrimination against them. A black-white model discounts the role of immigration in race relations and confines discussion on the impact race has had on anti-immigrant policies that affect the nation's growing Asian American and Latino populations. (13)

This is crucial to considering Little Dog's and his family's post-war, post-traumatic paths and positionality in the narrative—the racial model in the United States "ignores or marginalizes" minority groups that do not fall within the black-white binary. Leslie Bow amplifies the significance of this

position; she writes that "interstitial populations reflect the cultural ambiguity of what anthropologist Victor Turner has theorized as 'liminal personae,' initiates who are temporarily shorn of social status prior to undergoing ritual transformation" (11). Moreover, "the interstitial is the site of multiple forms of cultural anxiety, as well as a place where status hierarchies are publicly interpreted and subject to evaluation and discipline" (Bow 21). The refugees within Vuong's novel clearly embody the "interstitial" as Bow defines it—they are "liminal" personas who struggle with both their traumas and the forced need to assimilate, yet they are also sites of "cultural anxiety."

The text extends this liminality further by stressing Asian Americans' stereotypical status as "foreigner." Ancheta offers one formulation of this racist trope: "anti-Asian subordination is centered on citizenship, which divides racially between American and foreigner. Asian Americans are thus perceived as foreign outsiders who lack the rights of true 'Americans'" (17). Bow offers a similar but notable extension: "the figure of the foreigner or alien is one that is irreducibly tied to Asian racialization in the United States [. . .] 'the foreigner' is a point of identification that resists one of lesser status, the 'minority' who is understood to be something less than white" (137). As I will examine shortly, the individuals within *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* indeed represent each of these elements—those of the liminal persona as emblems of cultural anxiety, and those of the perpetual foreigner. Muñoz adds one final aspect to this subjectivity. In his work *Disidentifications* (1999), he argues that "the migrant status can be characterized by its need to move back and forth, to occupy at least two spaces at once [. . .] The very nature of this migrant drive eventually wears down the coherency of borders" (32). Indeed, the liminal characters within Vuong's text "occupy two spaces at once"—and sometimes even more than that. While for Muñoz this is liberatory and potentially deconstructive, we also encounter in the text instances where this liminality is debilitating and stifling. As Bow writes, ultimately "the issue is not merely one of inclusion or exclusion, integration or segregation, or racial classification as a sign of assimilation or its limits, but how the in-between exposes the complex interplay of multiple axes of social status and normativity" (232). And this is the core of Vuong's work—Little Dog's family's subjectivity as refugees on the margins of society "expose the complex interplay of multiple axes of social status and normativity"—their positionalities inevitably are grounded in this marginal identity.

Their subjectivity as refugees starts, of course, with their displacement, the traumas which I discussed earlier. Little Dog, however, returns throughout his letter to reflect upon his family's displacement, in an attempt to comprehend the reasons behind it and the significance of the upheaval in the present. Early in the narrative he offers, "sometimes, I imagine the monarchs fleeing

not winter but the napalm clouds of your childhood in Vietnam [. . .] so that, looking up, you can no longer fathom the explosion they came from, only a family of butterflies floating in clean, cool air, their wings finally, after so many conflagrations, fireproof" (Vuong 14). Thus, Little Dog knows the traumas of his mother's suffering on one level—a visceral, violent level for him at times—but at the same time it is hard to comprehend, since he has no memory of it. He knows her history, and he understands that he is intertwined in it:

> like the time she told of how you were born, of the white American serviceman deployed on a navy destroyer in Cam Ranh Bay [. . .] How, by then, she had already left her first husband from an arranged marriage. How, as a young woman living in a wartime city for the first time with no family, it was her body, her purple dress, that kept her alive [. . .] I had forgotten myself in her story [. . .] But I wasn't asleep. (Vuong 23)

But their collective displacement remains a central trauma for the family; Little Dog later emphasizes the gravity of their situation upon leaving their home country: "in two years, Vietnam—which, thirteen years after the war and still in shambles—would grow so dire that we would flee the very ground he stood on, the soil where, a few feet away, your blood had made a dark red circle between your legs, turning the dirt there into fresh mud—and I was alive" (Vuong 21). He thus was born into destruction and violence; he even originally was named after Vietnam.

This lineage of violence extends into Little Dog's liminal positionality as refugee, as foreigner, within the United States. He offers an overwhelming description of an instance of abuse he experienced on a school bus, in which several young boys bully him for his physical stature and introversion. He writes, "knowing the face I possess, its rare features in these parts, I pushed my head harder against the window to avoid them [. . .] I realized the spark came from inside my head. That someone had shoved my face into the glass. 'Speak English,' said the boy with a yellow bowl cut, his jowls flushed and rippling" (Vuong 24). Little Dog's suffering is palpable—his "face [shoved] into the glass" of the bus window. His reflection is curt; he observes that "[the white boy] was only nine but had already mastered the dialect of damaged American fathers" (Vuong 24). And the effect of the bullying on Little Dog's understanding of his subjectivity and positionality was clear and visceral; after his extended description of the incident, he notes that "I willed myself into a severe obedience and said [the boy's] name. I let [the children's] laughter enter me" (Vuong 25). He includes this experience early in the narrative as a means of establishing the violence, both physical and psychological, of his experience as an Asian refugee within America—and the palpable consequences of this

subjectivity. While the violence of the bullying on the bus is shocking, it is just as significant that Little Dog "let the laughter enter" (Vuong 25) into him; the bully's words and characterization remain.

Ma's reaction to her son's bullying illuminates yet another chilling aspect of refugee subjectivity—that of the charged concept of "assimilation." Her mode of care is not necessarily one of comfort and empathy; instead, she questions his acquiescence to the boys' bullying demands. She slaps him and challenges him to find his own path: "'You have to find a way, Little Dog [. . .] you have to because I don't have the English to help you. I can't say nothing to stop them. You find a way. You find a way or you don't tell me about this ever again, you hear?" (Vuong 26). And her son's response is quite telling; Little Dog confesses to the reader,

> I drank so much of that cold milk it grew tasteless on my numbed tongue. Each morning after that, we'd repeat this ritual: the milk poured with a thick white braid, I'd drink it down, gulping, making sure you could see, both of us hoping the whiteness vanishing into me would make more of a yellow boy [. . .] The milk would erase all the dark inside me with a flood of brightness. (Vuong 27)

The imagery of assimilation cannot be starker than this description: of Little Dog numbing his tongue through the drinking of so much cold milk, of both mother and son "hoping the whiteness vanishing into [him] would make more of a yellow boy," of his attempt to "erase all of the dark inside me." Anne Anlin Cheng writes in *The Melancholy of Race* (2000), "this is racial melancholia for the raced subject: the internalization of discipline and rejection—and the installation of a scripted context of perception" (17). We can't help but see the "internalization of discipline and rejection" in Little Dog's response to the bullying and his desire for assimilation. His attempt both to please his mother and to "erase all the dark inside" through the consumption of milk manifestly illuminates this internalization. To read this episode in a more positive light, we might turn to Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts* (1996). In defining hybridity, she argues that the concept "does not suggest assimilation of Asian or immigrant practices to dominant forms but instead marks the history of survival within relationships of unequal power and domination" (Lowe 67). Moreover, on a larger scale, she emphasizes that "'Immigrant acts' names the agency of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans: the acts of labor, resistance, memory, and survival, as well as the politicized cultural work that emerges from dislocation and disidentification" (Lowe 9). We certainly can read Little Dog's response to the bullying as emblematic of the need to survive "within relationships of unequal power and domination," as Lowe writes. Indeed, throughout *On Earth*

We're Briefly Gorgeous, we encounter myriad instances of this inequality and subordination.

In this regard, a final significant element in Vuong's depiction of a refugee's experience and positionality relates to the relationship between language, labor, and subjectivity. Throughout the novel, we encounter reflections on the power and significance of language within our lives. At a more granular level, though, we also encounter multiple instances where Ma's and Lan's and Little Dog's challenges with language directly reflect their positionality. Ma's relationship with language is especially circumspect—she cannot communicate effectively in English, which leads to numerous conflicts both public and private especially in her relationship with her son. After a particularly embarrassing situation at a grocery store, when Ma resorts to acting out words that she does not know in English, Little Dog reflects, "what if the mother tongue is stunted? What if that tongue is not only the symbol of a void, but is itself a void, what if the tongue is cut out? [. . .] Our mother tongue, then, is no mother at all—but an orphan. Our Vietnamese a time capsule, a mark of where your education ended, ashed" (Vuong 31-2). Little Dog was embarrassed and ashamed for his family at the grocery store; it reinforced his awareness of the significance of language within one's life. Accordingly, he concludes, "That night I promised myself I'd never be wordless when you needed me to speak for you [. . .] From then on, I would fill in our blanks, our silences, stutters, whenever I could. I code switched. I took off our language and wore my English, like a mask, so that others would see my face, and therefore yours" (Vuong 32). Their roles reversed; son becomes caregiver and provider for mother. Moreover, he becomes her "mask" in public, to protect her. As he concludes, "one does not 'pass' in America, it seems, without English" (Vuong 52). Little Dog later connects language with labor, which is yet another aspect of refugee subjectivity. On the one hand, his first job offers him a literal and figurative way out; he notes that "the work somehow sutured a fracture inside me [. . .] A work of myriad communications, I learned to speak to the men not with my tongue, which was useless there, but with smiles, hand gestures, even silences, hesitations" (Vuong 90-1). Thus, his work at a tobacco farm allows him to develop kinship with other liminal figures in his community; he communicates not with verbal language but instead "smiles, hand gestures, even silences." On the other hand, the narrator likewise critiques his mother's positionality as a laborer in a nail salon. He observes, "The most common English word spoken in the nail salon was *sorry*. In the nail salon, *sorry* is a tool one uses to pander until the word itself becomes currency. It no longer merely *apologizes*, but insists, reminds: *I'm right here, beneath you*. It is the lowering of oneself so the client feels right, superior, and charitable" (Vuong 91; italics in original). Accordingly, Little Dog's narrative emphasizes the complications

in such liminal subjectivity: the deference involved, the shame that a son feels for his mother's laboring. He tells his Ma, "I hate and love your battered hands for what they can never be" (Vuong 81).

Ultimately, the final crucial element that Vuong contends with in his novel is the positionality as a queer person of color. In his groundbreaking work on queer theory and politics, Michael Warner offers a critical lens for understanding the significance of queer theory towards understanding other frameworks, such as the consideration of refugee subjectivity above; he writes that

> theory has to understand that different identity environments are neither parallel—so that the tactics and values of one might be assumed to be appropriate for another—nor separable. Queer struggles and those of other identity movements, or alternatively of other new social movements, often differ in important ways—even when they are intermingled in experience. (xviii)

Furthermore, as noted earlier, the term "queer" offers malleability in multiple forms: Warner's work emphasizes resistance, while Halberstam's study on queer time and space stresses transgressive and deconstructive non-normativity. Vuong's emphasis on Little Dog's queer subjectivity in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* thus presents us with a final critical element for our consideration of positionality within the text.

To start, Little Dog emphasizes the tremendous challenges and obstacles that he faces with regard to societal norms, in contrast to his own identity. As part of his discussion of his queer and refugee subjectivity, he describes how during recess at school "the kids would call me *freak*, *fairy*, *fag*. I would learn, much later, that those words were also iterations of *monster*" (Vuong 14; italics in original). In a text that is especially concerned with language, he stresses the ways in which even at a young age he was exposed to terms of derision, violence, and subjugation—through which he learns to equate himself with "*monster*." In a similar vein, in one particular description of his nascent sexual relationship with his co-worker, Trevor, he observes, "the rules, they were already inside us" (Vuong 120). On an immediate level, this refers explicitly to their romantic relationship—and particularly Trevor's discomfort with his feelings—but the phrase certainly is malleable and speaks to the myriad "rules" and norms and obstacles that Little Dog and his family encounter as refugees and minorities as well. Hence, the malleability of the term "queer." Little Dog's relationship with Trevor illuminates these complicated positionalities of his intersectional subjectivity: refugee, queer, Asian.

Little Dog's relationship with Trevor transforms his perspective on himself and his subjectivity. In his extended reflections on Trevor, he offers a succinct description of the impact of the relationship: "I was seen—I who had seldom been seen by anyone. I who was taught, by you, to be invisible in order to be safe" (Vuong 96). This reflects back to the conceptualizations of Asian American subjectivity offered by Juliana Chang earlier, in which Asian Americans seemingly are both hypervisible and invisible. For Little Dog, though, the love he feels and receives from Trevor elicits a different mode of visibility—a legibility via recognition and care from another human being. He "was seen." This feeling also stems from a deeper bond with Trevor—a mutual understanding of struggle that Little Dog previously had not known. He comments that "up until then I didn't think a white boy could hate anything about his life. I wanted to know him through and through, by that very hate. Because that's what you give anyone who sees you, I thought. You take their hatred head-on, and you cross it, like a bridge, to face them, to enter them" (Vuong 97). Trevor's home life was just as dysfunctional as Little Dog's, something he could not comprehend. Their similar life experiences allowed Little Dog to reframe an understanding of his own home life. Moreover, though, he felt love from Trevor, both physical and metaphysical. He states, "there were colors, Ma. Yes, there were colors I felt when I was with him. Not words—but shades, penumbras" (Vuong 106). He adds, "Why did I feel more myself while reaching for him, my hand midair, than I did having touched him?" (Vuong 106). And later he introduces a more macabre rendering of his feelings: "Sometimes being offered tenderness feels like the very proof that you've been ruined" (Vuong 119). Little Dog's relationship with Trevor transforms him. There is an ecstasy in his descriptions. He struggles to find words to properly describe his emotions. And much like his life at home, there is love and violence and vibrancy. Yet, the romance with Trevor challenges Little Dog to reckon with his sexuality and positionality in ways he has not experienced previously.

At the same time, Little Dog emphasizes Trevor's intense struggles with his homosexuality and the impact of both Trevor's homophobic father and heteronormative society writ large. In the nascent stages of their sexual relationship, Trevor tells him, "'I can't. I just—I mean [. . .] I dunno. I don't wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch'" (Vuong 120). While Trevor clearly is attracted to Little Dog, he is not fully comfortable with his sexuality; as this statement shows, societal norming has influenced Trevor to view homosexuality as weak, as feminine. Thus, he cannot reciprocate some of the sexual acts that Little Dog performs. Notably, Little Dog describes how, "surfacing from the sheets, [Trevor's] face shone through the wet mask we made of our scavenge. He was white, I never forgot this. He was always white" (Vuong 102). It is hard to find

a more direct discussion of queer and minority positionality within the text. After intercourse Little Dog looks up to see his partner, and the immediate recognition goes to Trevor's skin color—"he was white [. . .] he was always white." Even in his first romantic relationship, Little Dog cannot escape his minority positionality—there is a hyper focus on skin color. In *Racial Castration* (2001), David Eng offers an insightful examination of queer subjectivity; for Eng the intersection of the homosexual and the primitive in Freud "asks us to consider how the assumption of a normative social identity requires a heterosexualizing imperative bound to a hegemonic structure of whiteness—how the assumption of a 'pathological' social identity is circumscribed by a homosexual prohibition bound to a racialized position" (13-4). In other words, societal norming equates heterosexuality with whiteness, and this is the positionality we encounter with Trevor. Trevor continually questions his sexuality—and his understanding of sexuality; he asks Little Dog, "'Is it true though? [. . .] You think you'll be really gay, like, forever? I mean [. . .] I think me…I'll be good in a few years you know?'" (Vuong 188). In a separate instance, he even reverts to a slur, in the midst of having sex with Little Dog: "*Please tell me I am not*, he said, *I am not a faggot. Am I? Am I? Are you*?" (Vuong 155; italics in original). Trevor's discomfort is palpable; his words and reactions make clear the impact of societal norming of equating homosexuality with weakness and abnormality. He views his homosexuality as temporary, as a fling; he cannot fathom that it is his natural sexuality. Needless to say, this wounds Little Dog. He concludes, "I had thought sex was to breach new ground, despite terror, that as long as the world did not see us, its rules did not apply. But I was wrong" (Vuong 120).

Jack Halberstam argues in *In A Queer Time and Place* (2005),

> if we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity and come closer to understanding Foucault's comment in "Friendship as a Way of Life" that "homosexuality threatens people as a 'way of life' rather than as a way of having sex." (1)

This is critical for understanding both Little Dog and Trevor. Trevor simply cannot "detach queerness from sexual identity"; he views his homosexuality as weakness, as wrong, as abnormal—a result of the heteronormativity that he has absorbed at both familial (via his father) and societal levels. Little Dog's relationship with Trevor, however, has the opposite effect—it is affirming. In the midst of their relationship, he reflects, "I let the mirror hold those flaws—because for once, drying, they were not wrong to me but something that was wanted, that was sought and found among a landscape as enormous

as the one I had been lost in all this time" (Vuong 107). While Little Dog's subjectivity as a queer person of color seemingly situates him in myriad forms of minority positionality, his relationship with Trevor affords him an affirming understanding of self and sexuality.

In a path similar to the trajectory of his relationship with Trevor, Little Dog's narrative reveals the evolution of his relationship with his Ma. As noted earlier, he begins his narrative with an emphasis on the physical and emotional abuse he experienced from her; however, as the narrative progresses, he emphasizes the ambiguity and complexity of their relationship. Most significantly, halfway through the text, he describes the poignant moment when he develops the courage to come out to his mother, in a Dunkin Donuts; the description offers us a compelling example of the intersection of trauma, queerness, and healing. Little Dog tells his mother, "'I don't like girls'"; he admits that he does so in order to avoid employing the Vietnamese word for homosexual, which stems from the French word for pedophile (Vuong 130). She responds by asking a variety of questions, to attempt to understand how and why—"'Tell me [. . .] when did this all start? I gave birth to a healthy, normal boy. I know that. When?'" (Vuong 131). Yet, she does not criticize him and ultimately suggests acceptance. Moreover, she proceeds to convey her own secret to him—that she had to abort his brother, in yet another trauma that she endured in the aftermath of the war. Little Dog confers to us that "we were exchanging truths, I realized, which is to say, we were cutting one another" (Vuong 133). The setting of this deeply vulnerable conversation—Dunkin' Donuts—is particularly telling. Quintessentially northeastern United States, a region in which Dunkin' seemingly is ubiquitous—some might stretch it further to say metaphorically American and labor class, as well. Regardless, the dining area of this fast-food coffee shop is public, which ostensibly offers both Little Dog and Ma safety in the presence of others; it likewise serves to de-emphasize and reduce the dramatic nature of their discussion. Their conversation is more elaborate than described here; Little Dog takes his time conveying the significance of the discussion and the vulnerabilities that both he and his mother show in opening themselves up—a vulnerability that they could not reveal when Little Dog was younger. In the same way that Little Dog's relationship with Trevor transforms his understanding of his sexuality and subjectivity, his conversation with Ma at Dunkin alters his understanding of his mother. He concludes the section by remarking, "we leave Dunkin Donuts heavier with what we know of each other" (Vuong 139).

Accordingly, as the narrative reaches conclusion—and frankly as his family's and his own challenges evoke more existential questions—Little Dog reflects more deeply on life, particularly with regard to his intersecting positionalities and understanding of his own subjectivity. The final third of the

narrative directly involves loss: Trevor overdoses on drugs (albeit long after their relationship has ended) and Little Dog's grandmother Lan succumbs to cancer. His description of Lan's death is particularly moving; he describes it thus: "two hours later, she stirs awake. We crowd around her, hear the single deep inhale pull down her lungs, as if she was about to dive underwater, and then, that's it—no exhale. She simply stills, like someone has pressed pause for a movie" (Vuong 209). These losses transform Little Dog; they force reflection on multiple aspects of life—not simply mortality and loss, but even the inadequacy of language, as the narrative proceeds to break down from direct prose into a cacophony of ideas. At one point, he comments,

> we try to preserve life—even when we know it has no chance of enduring its body. We feed it, keep it comfortable, bathe it, medicate it, caress it, even sing to it. We tend to these basic functions not because we are brave or selfless but because, like breath, it is the most fundamental act of our species: to sustain the body until time leaves it behind. (Vuong 198)

At a separate point he also reflects, "sometimes, when I'm careless, I believe the wound is also the place where the skin reencounters itself, asking of each end, where have you been? Where have we been, Ma?" (Vuong 137). Accordingly, while much of the text indeed focuses on subjectivity—whether queer, Asian American, refugee, or minority—the narrative ultimately emphasizes, more simply, the humanity of Little Dog, his Ma, and myriad others in similar positions. Indeed, the narrative is framed as a letter from Little Dog to his Ma, and we're immersed in the middle of their epistolary conversation throughout. His question, "where have we been, Ma?" echoes throughout this narrative, as he comes to terms with their history and its enduring, continuing reverberations into their current lives.

Consequently, even though the text seemingly overwhelms us with trauma and loss—from the taxidermized deer that initiates the narrative to Ma's war story at the very end—Vuong's novel likewise emphasizes to us the means of acceptance, healing, and agency in the midst of human struggle. The healing this text offers may not be whole, or full, or complete, but it is still present and achievable. On the one hand, Little Dog's losses undoubtedly affect him. In a reflection on the way(s) that Duchamp's "sculpture" of an upturned toilet challenged viewers to see something anew, simply by changing its orientation, Little Dog admits that "before Lan's illness, I found this act of malleability to be beautiful, that an object or person, once upturned, becomes more than its once-singular self. This agency for evolution, which once made me proud to be the queer yellow faggot that I was and am, now betrays me" (Vuong

199). Thus, the "malleability" he discovered via his subjectivity as a queer Asian American betrays him as he envisions the loss of Lan, whose body betrays her with the cancer destroying her from the inside. Nonetheless, Little Dog reflects on the slang from his adopted hometown of Hartford, Connecticut:

> because being knocked down was already understood, already a given, it was the skin you wore. To ask *What's good*? was to move, right away, to joy. It was pushing aside what was inevitable to reach the exceptional. Not great or well or wonderful, but simply good. Because good was more often enough, was a precious spark we sought and harvested of and for one another. (Vuong 214; italics in original)

While on the surface this is a reflection on the malleability of language, it likewise directs us towards a revised worldview for Little Dog—as "good was more often enough" (Vuong 214), even in the face of subjugation and loss.

At the end of the narrative, when he and his mother return to Vietnam, Little Dog encounters a remarkable scene in the middle of the night on a street in Saigon: a funeral where the mourners are dressed in drag. Little Dog has traveled with Ma to Saigon to return the ashes of his grandmother Lan to her native country following her death. In a text filled with depictions of trauma, both physical and psychological, this trip serves as a journey of memory and healing, as Little Dog attempts to come to terms with the significance of his grandmother's death. His descriptions of the drag funeral on the Saigon street are remarkably compelling and evocative. He initially notes, "I stepped closer and that's when I saw on the table, impossibly still, the distinct form of a body covered in a white sheet. By now all four members were openly weeping, while, on stage, the singer's falsetto cut through their racked sobs" (Vuong 225). From afar, he had perceived the scene as one of revelry and celebration; yet, as he engages more closely, he observes the seriousness and significance of the event—the "body covered in a white sheet," "four members [. . .] openly weeping," and a "falsetto" cutting through the weeping. The emotion is palpable, as is Little Dog's melancholic surprise. His reflection on the funeral establishes a crucial lens for our examination and understanding of the narrative as a whole; his description of the memorial is profound:

> It's through the drag performer's explosive outfits and gestures, their overdrawn faces and voices, their tabooed trespass of gender, that this relief, through extravagant spectacle, is manifest. As much as they are useful, paid, and empowered as a vital service in a society where to be queer is still a sin, the drag queens are, for as long as the dead lie in the open, an othered performance. Their presumed, reliable fraudulence is

> what makes their presence, to the mourners, necessary. Because grief, at its worst, is unreal. And it calls for a surreal response. The queens—in this way—are unicorns. (Vuong 226)

For Little Dog, the drag performance and memorialization in the middle of the night in Saigon transcend multiple boundaries: international, cultural, and gender. The "othered performance" ultimately is "necessary" to respond to the "unreal" nature of grief. It suggests that we as humans must embrace a nonnormative response—a "surreal response"—to engender healing. Or, as Little Dog puts it, "in Saigon, the sound of music and children playing this late in the night is a sign of death—or rather, a sign of a community attempting to heal" (Vuong 226). In communist Vietnam, the drag revelers, performing a public memorial for a loved one, on the streets of Saigon in the middle of the night, transgress multiple cultural norms—seemingly with tacit approval from authorities, given the immense security structure in the country. For an individual who struggles throughout the narrative to come to terms with his liminal status as a refugee, a minority, and a queer person of color, the significance of the "othered performance" is indeed profound—most notably as a process of healing in the midst of grief but also as a means of comprehending his queer subjectivity in a new light.

Little Dog concludes his narrative with an evocative image which ostensibly encapsulates so much of what we've examined: the intersections, solidarity, humanity, healing and affirmation. He writes to his mother:

> I look at you and see, through the pitch dark, Trevor's eyes—Trevor whose face has, by now, already begun to blur in my mind—how they burned under the barn lamp as we dressed, shuddering quietly from the water. I see Lan's eyes in her last hours, like needful drops of water, how they were all she could move. (Vuong 216)

The convergence of eyes here is quite remarkable—Trevor, Lan, and Ma's eyes all converge and ostensibly coalesce into one, from Little Dog's perspective. Herman, in her work on trauma and recovery, asserts that "recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation" (133). This certainly is crucial to understanding the way that Vuong concludes the novel. In this imagery of the converging eyes, we encounter not isolation but rather the blending of the past and present. Trevor, who is gone; Lan, who is gone; Ma, who remains, still, with Little Dog. There is death—and loss—but there is life. And memory. Herman also asserts that "survivors challenge us to reconnect fragments, to reconstruct history, to make meaning of their present symptoms in the light of past events" (3). And this is what we

encounter throughout *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*: Little Dog engaging with the "fragments," with the past as it echoes into and shadows the present, in an attempt to connect with his mother, while simultaneously navigating towards an understanding of his own subjectivity and positionality.

Bow argues that "the space of the interstitial where culture is consciously interpreted—whether minutely, forcibly, or over an extended period of time—can be a site where the terms of culture not only become visible but are subject to potential reenvisioning" (15). Little Dog and his family indeed embody the interstitial—refugees, stereotyped "perpetual foreigners," Asian Americans, queer, nonnormative. His narrative reinforces the immense challenges individuals face in their positionalities. Yet, the end of the narrative indeed suggests a re-envisioning of both subjectivity and post-traumatic healing. As Halberstam argues, "queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (2). The nonnormative subjectivities of Little Dog and his family force them to imagine futures outside of the normative logic(s) that they encounter in the United States; their survival presumably requires this, given the marginalization, harm, and derision they experience solely due to their positionality. As Kandice Chuh so powerfully argued, "Asian American is in this sense a *metaphor* for resistance and racism" (27; italics in original). Little Dog's narrative certainly reflects just this—the racism *and* the resistance.

As I noted at the start of this article, Little Dog offers the following reflection early in his letter to Ma: "whether we want to or not, we are traveling in a spiral, we are creating something new from what is gone" (Vuong 28). In a narrative centered on a refugee family's experiences, I continually return to this framing—of a life (or lives) oriented in a spiral, "creating something new from what is gone." Indeed, this represents so much of Little Dog's experience: his grandmother's prostitution in war and the traumas it provoked; his mother's own traumas from poverty, displacement, and abuse; Little Dog's abuse in turn; Little Dog's loss of his first love and his grandmother. And yet, again, even in the aftermath of these hauntings, he continually discovers "something new from what is gone." He discovers comfort and malleability and agency in his queer positionality. He discovers love and care from his mother. He discovers a different framing for life from his grandmother. Little Dog concludes his narrative with a succinct formulation of his family's history:

> yes, there was a war. Yes, we came from its epicenter. In that war, a woman gifted herself a new name—Lan—in that naming claimed herself beautiful, then made that beauty into something worth keeping. From

> that, a daughter was born, and from that daughter, a son. All this time I told myself we were born from war—but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty. Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence—but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it. (Vuong 231)

In a world currently (and seemingly, indelibly) overwhelmed with war, violence, death, displacement, and suffering, it undoubtedly is quite challenging to attempt to view the plight of thousands of war victims in any type of positive light. Still, Little Dog's conclusion challenges us, again even in the face of immense global conflict, to do so—as he asserted, he and his family "were born from beauty. Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence."

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Biography

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AMERICAN LITERATURES

ISSN 2789-889X