Life Writing and Displacement in Thanha Lai's *Inside Out and Back Again* and Kim Thuy's *Ru*

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Within the realm of postcolonial literatures, it is interesting to look at the differences between first- and second-generation immigrant works. Vast differences in experiences and whether the authors have a direct experience of displacement or rather, must live with some form of intergenerational trauma, make for a wide variety in the texts these authors produce. The work of refugee authors such as Thanhha Lai and Kim Thúy offer something unique to readers. Indeed, both these women fled Vietnam with their families in 1975 in the midst of the Vietnam War, a conflict that pushed several hundreds of people from the country. Lai and Thúy are part of a unique generation of people who were born in Vietnam, left before adulthood, and are the children of refugees, known as the 1.5 generation (Frelier 2022, 138). Thanhha Lai left with her family around the same time and age as Kim Thúy, and both authors' experience of displacement plays a key influential role in their writing, notably in the books that will be discussed in this text, Lai's *Inside Out & Back Again* (2011) and Thúy's *Ru* (2009). While both books can be situated within the large field of life writing, they diverge in their intended audience and writing styles; Inside Out is a middle-grade novel written in verse, and Ru is a collection of 144 vignettes written in prose for a more general readership. Despite these differences, both texts explore the consequences of displacement on motherhood and mother-

child relationships, as well as how the refugee experience affects one's process of identity making. They also address how daunting an adaptation to new environments can be for young children, especially in traumatic contexts such as the ones in which these characters grow up similar to the ones the books' authors lived through. Lai explores these themes from the point of view of a ten-year-old girl who reflects Lai's lived experience, and Thúy travels through time in her novel, describing her narrator's present life as a mother and her childhood experience of displacement, inspired by Thúy's own. Analyzing these books through a perspective grounded in a combination of Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1991, 1244), as well as motherhood, literary and refugee studies allow for a richer understanding of the healing potential of these stories for their authors, Thanhha Lai and Kim Thúy (Lombard 2022, 2).

To perform a thorough analysis of these books, some historical context informing the particularities of Vietnamese 1.5-generation refugees will be offered to readers in the first section of this article. This will be followed by an exploration of how life writing can be and is used as a tool of resistance for auto fictional writers. Finally, an examination of the themes of maternal becoming and parentification within contexts of displacement such as the ones in Lai and Thùy's books will conclude this essay. This will allow for a window into how novels such as *Inside Out* and *Ru* empower their respective authors to revisit childhood memories of their mothers with a new perspective, which in turn makes them reconsider how they perceived their mothers and how this perception might have been warped by their trauma.

In his introduction to *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, Viet Thanh Nguyen explains the dichotomy of the refugee experience:

> Invisible and hypervisible, refugees are ignored and forgotten by those who are not refugees until they turn into a menace. Refugees, like all others, are unseen until they are seen everywhere, threatening to overwhelm our borders, invade

> our cultures, rape our women, threaten our children, destroy our economies (2018, 10).

The struggle of this desire to fit in and the need to stay true to one's culture is simply an added layer in an already-traumatic experience of displacement, especially in contexts of war like the millions of people who were forced to leave Vietnam during the war and after the fall of Saigon (Ngo, 2024). Nguyen describes the experience of refugees as highly reliant on the refugees' politics aligning with their host country's politics. He notes how some refugees try to distance themselves from their experience of displacement, embodying this imagined "perfect refugee", hiding in the safety of their new citizenship, and looking down on "hypervisible" refugees. To Nguyen, this is simply a question of luck; Vietnamese refugees who came to the United States found themselves the beneficiaries of American charity founded on guilt about their role in the war (2018, 11). This is where these refugees' experience would differ, depending on where they decided to (or were forced to) settle; the countries that welcomed the most Vietnamese refugees were the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and Canada (Ngo, 2024). Nguyen theorizes that the United States' charity was based on "an American desire to show a capitalist and democratic country was a much better home than the newly communist country the refugees were fleeing" (Nguyen 2018, 11). With Canada not directly participating in the war, it seems that its humanitarian efforts were not founded on the same political agenda as the United States, which might explain the variation in Vietnamese refugees' experiences. This difference is explored in Lai and Thúy's books since, in the former, the main character, Há, settles in Alabama with her family, while in the latter, Thúy's protagonist, Nguyễn, settles in Granby, Québec. Hà experiences a lot of bullying, mostly based on her gender and racial differences, while Nguyễn seems to have an easier time adjusting to her new environment, but this might simply be a theme Thúy decided not to explore in her novel.

In addition to the loss of friends, family members, homes, countries, sense of belonging, stability, and safety, what characterizes displaced persons is how they are "mostly unwanted where they fled from; unwanted where they are, in refugee camps; and unwanted where they want to go" (2018, 13). This undesirability weaves its way into their identity, affects identity building in refugee children, and adds to the likelihood of them being unremembered, which is where the work of refugee writers becomes crucial, as they build a collective memory. Even though the United Nations imposes a temporal limit to the definition of "refugee", Nguyen argues that this descriptor never *truly* leaves a person. Trauma and displacement stay with someone throughout their life even if these memories might take less and less space in a person's life with time; they linger and leave a lasting impression, especially for children who are still in the process of finding who they are and where they might belong. Nguyen cultivates the feeling of what it was to be a refugee in his writing because he believes that what characterizes a good writer is their ability to go where it hurts, whether that be through memory, imagination, or empathy (2018, 13).

Additionally, these refugee stories offer a space of reflection for readers who might have lived through similar situations as the representation of relatable stories in fiction or non-fiction might make them feel less alone in their experience. Vietnamese refugees have had their just memories overwritten by dominant U.S. and Canadian narratives portraying them as something Quynh H. Vo describes as "ideological figures," (Vo 2022, 14) similar to the idea of the "perfect refugee" suggested by Viet Thanh Nguyen (Nguyen 2018, 11). These constructed narratives portray this group of people as the perfect subject for Western fantasies of rescue and liberation and so, as these authors use their writing to revisit war and displacement, which continue to haunt survivors to this day, they reclaim and reaffirm their *own* narratives.

Quynh H. Vo describes the work of Vietnamese writers in North America as reminders "of their painful genesis and shattered bonds, taking us through lives of the displaced who constantly struggle as

outcasts in the margin of their new homeland or are strategically forgotten like specters of history" (Vo 2022, 13). In this, Vo is specifically referencing writers of the 1.5 generation who make up most Vietnamese North American writers and who have a distinct experience of displacement. Their generation is defined by scholars as a group of people who were born in Vietnam, left before adulthood, and were forced to flee the country as young children. These people are often only left with some fragmented memories of the war that shaped the environment in which they grew up and that displaced their family (2022, 14). In addition to this, they had uniquely difficult childhoods, characterized by instability, bullying, and parents that were often less emotionally available because they were burdened by their family's immediate survival and working through their own trauma. The literary work of authors such as these is a key component of collective healing for this community. By portraying these traumatic stories and economically and emotionally insecure lives in the United States and Canada, authors like Thanhha Lai and Kim Thúy, among others, refuse the unrealistic optimist futures that were imagined for them—futures in which they would become successful simply through hard work and resilience (2022, 19). The work of these authors, Vo argues, exemplifies "a creative space of resistance and imagination in the face of historical amnesia" and manifests "a mosaic of unassimilable, peripheral, and rejected lives whose struggles to survive reclaim the heterogeneous history of Vietnamese refugees larger than war and violence" (2022, 19). This is why these works are important to communities of Vietnamese refugees, but also to anyone who is interested in deconstructing narratives of the "perfect refugee" as theorized by Nguyen (Nguyen 2018, 11).

Vu Tran addresses the pertinence of writing as a healing strategy for Vietnamese refugees of the 1.5 generation in his essay "A Refugee Again," which can be found in Nguyen's 2018 anthology, *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*. Tran fled Vietnam with his family when he was only five years old, so he has expressed that he does not remember much, if anything, about his life pre-displacement. He explains how he

was perhaps too cocooned in safety in Oklahoma, "too immersed in white America to focus on anything but the need to look and act like those around" him (2018, 151). Being sheltered in this way prevented him from processing his prior state of need and trauma or the fact that he would perpetually be close to that state—until much later in life (2018, 151). It is then, when he matures into himself and lets himself take time to reflect on his past that he realizes to what extent his childhood experience of displacement affects different parts of his life. He suggests that to write meaningfully or honestly about anything, writers must first confront who they are. While he believes his refugee experience does not define who he is now, it has nevertheless strongly informed how he sees himself, how he sees others, and how he wishes to be perceived (2018, 152). Thus, refugees' sense of identity remains in constant evolution as they know they should assimilate to earn acceptance, to survive and prosper, and through this, their new identity slowly bleeds into their original one (2018, 153–154). Writing, then, is a way to heal, but also to negotiate the boundaries of the space they occupy and attempt to find a more permanent sense of belonging while navigating their hybrid identity.

Conducting a comparative analysis of Thanhha Lai's *Inside Out & Back Again* and Kim Thúy's *Ru* is highly pertinent, especially in regard to their place within the larger field that is postcolonial refugee literature. In an article written for the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, Claire Gallien discusses the place of refugee literature within the movement. She suggests that, since a constitutive principal in postcolonialism is "to intervene in and disrupt the power dynamics as embedded in discourse and as they regulate the relationship between north and south," refugee literature has much "to say with regard to the violence and the unevenness of the current world order" (Gallien 2018, 722). With this in mind, she sees an urgent need for postcolonial scholars to confront "consensual yet politically, ethically, and ideologically problematic modes of representation of forcibly displaced people" and she also encourages showcasing and analyzing what refugee literature might propose in terms of alternative narratives, discourses, and voices (2018, 722).

Beyond this, she argues that refugee literatures have a long-term impact in how their uprootedness and extraterritoriality unsettle traditional literary geographies based on arbitrary national borders, as well as the perceived monolingualism of these nations. By examining refugee texts through a postcolonial eye, one can see how they constitute influential experimentations with forms, genres, and languages, while suggesting possibilities for postcolonial futures (2018, 722). Texts like Lai and Thúy's are prime examples of how Vietnamese refugee writers use the art of literature—and more specifically, of life writing—to interrogate established narratives, with both books analyzed in this essay exploring truths about displacement that confront preconceived notions people might have about Vietnamese refugees in North America.

Thanhha Lai's first book, *Inside Out & Back Again* (2011), is a semi-autobiographical, middle-grade novel written in free verse. It is separated into four distinct parts, "Saigon" (1–69), "At Sea" (70–111), "Alabama" (113–234), and "From Now On" (235–260), and follows a year in the life of a young girl, Há, whose experience closely mirrors Lai's own childhood. As Há grapples with where she might belong, struggles to find herself, and navigates relationships with her friends and family, readers get a unique account of the refugee experience from the point of view of a feisty 10-year-old. Lai's story is set in 1975, when Há's family is forced to flee Saigon and attempts to reestablish lives in a small town in Alabama. Through this, Lai "examines the transitory nature of national and cultural places and spaces as well as the bodies and subjectivities that develop along and between their borders" (Hamilton-McKenna 2021, 319). Kim Thúy explores similar themes in her debut novel, *Ru*, published in French in 2009 and translated in several languages over the following years. Her book is life writing, like Lai's *Inside Out*, but it is written for a more general readership, and in it, Thúy recounts a fictionalized version of her family's displacement from Vietnam to Québec after the fall of Saigon in 1975. She tells this story through a series of 144 time-travelling vignettes, narrated by a character called Nguyễn An Tịnh, which is based on the author's own life. In these vignettes, Nguyễn revisits childhood memories and shares recent

experiences of motherhood as a 1.5-generation immigrant, making connections with her and her mother's relationship through the years.

In *Lives Beyond Borders: Us Immigrant Women's Life Writing, Nationality, and Social Justice*, Ina C. Seethaler addresses how "racialized and minoritized immigrant women's rootedness in multiple spaces grows life writing as a social justice instrument that establishes a communal and relational sense of self and offers crucial intersectional insights into varying forms of multilayered oppression" (Seethaler 2021, 1). For this essay, I use a definition of life writing upon which Seethaler grounds the theory in her book; she defines it as an "umbrella term that encompasses the extensive array and diverse modes of personal storytelling that takes experiential history as its starting point" (2021, 2–3). In the introduction to *Lives Beyond Borders*, Seethaler also suggests that due to life-writing's long history as a tool of resistance for marginalized communities, it offers a productive foundation for important discussions about social justice, intersectionality, displacement, and migration—all of which are themes that can be seen in one way or another in Lai and Thúy's books (2021, 2).

In *Inside Out*, for example, Lai brings up the subject of gender inequality as early as in the first poem with Hà expressing her disappointment at the fact that "only male feet / can bring luck" (Lai 2011b, 2). The intersection of gender and racial discrimination is something Lai's main character deals with throughout the novel, which contributes to her having a difficult time assimilating and making friends in a new and foreign environment. As she tries to integrate her new school, she realizes she is "the only / straight black hair / olive skin" in a sea of "fire hair," "skin shiny as lacquer," "honey hair," and "pink" boys (2011b, 142). She is bullied because of these ethnic differences, she gets called "pancake face" (2011b, 196–197), she is pushed around, and she is yelled at (2011b, 145). Indeed, the subject of race is not something Lai avoids as Hà's classroom is described as being divided by students' skin colour. This process of segregation in the classroom adds fuel to the fire of these students' racial discrimination of Hà, as teachers at her

school condone social exclusion practices based on perceived race (Saikia 2022, 39). In *Ru*, an example of a form of social injustice portrayed by Thúy is when the narrator describes the difficult time her parents had when arriving in Québec. According to the government, they were simultaneously overqualified for French immersion courses, while also being underqualified for everything else (Thúy 2009, 20). This might seem like an innocuous anecdote, but it is a concrete example of the plethora of systemic issues that litter refugees' path to stability and financial independence in their host country. By sharing experiences like these, even if they are somewhat fictionalized, Lai and Thúy demonstrate the power of life writing as productive tool of resistance for communities that are often silenced or forced to stay silent as a means of self-preservation.

In *Lives Beyond Borders* (2021), Seethaler also seeks to establish how displaced and immigrant women's life writing not only disrupts literary norms, but also "has the potential to change cultural and social perceptions that shape traditions, laws, and understandings of nationality and social justice" (Seethaler 2021, 2). This is supported by Eva C. Karpinski's theories on the subject as she brings up the presence of a "borrowed tongue" in these texts, which is the idea "of living, communicating, and working in a language that is not one's mother tongue or mother's tongue" (Karpinski 2012, 2). She asserts that this idea has been consistently present in autobiographical and auto fictional narratives written in English by Canadian and American immigrant and refugee women (2012, 2). Using English and French in their writing, Lai and Thúy reclaim the language as their own, as they do with refugee narratives; they establish their own stories as memory and history. Seethaler touches on this as she notes how it is through life writing that writers build a common history of peace and respect, which is exactly why life writing matters so much, especially works by refugee and immigrant women writers (Seethaler 2021, 2). As these women negotiate their identity through their writing, they cross places, boundaries, and times, and by doing so, they challenge "fixed identities based on nationality, essentialisms, stereotypes, and patriarchal hierarchies to use

memoir as a rhetoric of social justice" (2021, 4). Thanhha Lai plays with genre in *Inside Out* by choosing to write Hà's story in free verse to imitate the musicality of Vietnamese, her mother tongue (Mililli 2022, 64). In an interview included in the first paperback edition of her book, Lai explains how she chose free verse to tell Hà's story because it is what felt most authentic to the character, who only begins her journey of learning English towards the end of the novel. Lai feels like a third-person narrator would have been too distant, while short, Hemingway-style sentences would have felt cold to readers; quick, sharp sentences filled with rich imagery are what felt right for her characterization of Hà (Lai 2011a, 5). Kim Thúy also challenges notions of a fixed time and place through her use of vignettes and her play with temporality to explore the memories and feelings that shuttle the protagonist through Vietnam and Canada. As her large family forms a complex immigration network between the countries, it follows that the protagonist seems to have a hard time assimilating to the West, feeling tied to memories of Vietnam and the war. Thúy also uses these time capsules to showcase the larger destruction of a country caused by war, while also shedding light on the harsh reality of women who faced more struggles but held strong with courage and determination (Liu 2020, 117).

Claire Gallien notes how interventions by refugee artists and writers also serve to "expose what is not visible to the eye of the mainstream media or what is deliberately kept invisible" (Gallien 2018, 722). Through their work, these creators become the face of climate change, environmental and economic inequalities, and armed conflict, which demonstrates how "moments of ecological crisis and population displacement are also periods of intense linguistic activism and literary creativity" (2018, 722). It is in this way, Gallien argues, that "refugee literature acts as a mode of resistance and resilience against the perpetuation of colonial control, predation, and destruction, in 'postcolonial' times" (2018, 723). Lai and Thúy are prime examples of this and how the temporality of refugee literature reaches beyond the past, nostalgia, and trauma, as well as the present and its several urgencies (2018, 725).

In a comparative study of Kim Thúy's *Ru* and Thi Buí's *The Best We Could Do*, Jocelyn Frelier discusses how these authors engage in a unique form of "maternal time travel informed by their transtemporal existence in the refugee diaspora" (2022, 146). I would argue this theory also applies to an analysis of *Ru* and *Inside Out & Back Again*. By this I mean that in both books, these authors explore maternal becoming, mother/child relations, and how these bonds, as well as their own identities, are impacted by the refugee experience. While both stories are told from the literary present, Ru's narrative highlights how its protagonist, Nguyễn, revisits her experience of displacement as an adult; and by writing Hà's story, Lai allows herself to reconceptualize her own childhood with a new perspective as she is now a mother herself. There are moments in Lai's novel that demonstrate how aware Hà is of her mother's efforts and struggles, an example of which is Hà's reflection after one of her brothers seems to want to disobey their mother. When her brother quickly complies to their mother's demands, Hà thinks,

> Who can go against
> a mother
> who has become gaunt like bark
> from raising four children alone? (Lai 2011b, 54)

As these words come from a ten-year-old girl, they are that much more impactful, and they show how heartbroken Hà is for her mother. In this context, it is also important to consider the author's intent since this is an auto fictional text. With words like "gaunt" and "bark," that carry such rich, yet harsh imagery of being run down by suffering and hunger —and knowing that "bark" has a harsh and worn protective outside layer—Lai conveys the admiration she has for her mother's strength (2011b, 54). This is a feeling that might have been unclear to Lai as a child in similar circumstances, but that is now expressed through her writing as she revisits these childhood moments. This same connection with her own mother is shared by Thúy's protagonist, Nguy n, as she

expresses how it is only as she had her own children that she fully understood the sacrifices her mother went through to ensure a stable future for her child. Reflecting on her childhood, Nguyễn shares the following thoughts: "Quand j'ai eu mes propres enfants, j'ai finalement compris… que ma mère avait certainement des rêves pour moi, mais qu'elle m'a surtout donné des outils pour me permettre de recommencer à m'enraciner, à rêver" (Thúy 2009, 30). This quote is a strong example of how becoming a mother herself affected the protagonist's own identity formation. She most likely did not fully understand her mother's intentions when she was growing up, and it is only when she experienced similar feelings that she could connect with her mother in that unique way. These excerpts exemplify what Frelier discusses in her text; "transdiasporic identity formation (an identity formation that resists home and homeland, that is ambiguous and shape-shifting, and that is outside of time and place) and… maternal becoming (a process of shape-shifting maternal development characterized by fluidity)" allow "the protagonists of these texts to travel across time, revisit, reread and revise their ideas about their mothers, and discover an identity that relies on fluidity and time travel" (Frelier 2022, 137).

Despite their mother's best efforts, Hà and Nguyễn's childhoods were difficult, marked by trauma and hardship, which forced them to grow up before they should have had to. Stella Mililli indirectly explores the consequences of this in chapter 4 of *Reclaiming Migrant Motherhood*, "Writing About My Mother," in which she discusses Lisa Long's theory of "transmaternalism" (Mililli 2022, 73; Long, 2008, 16–17). This theory addresses instances of first-and-a-half-generation Vietnamese refugees becoming not literal, but figurative mothers to their parents. Mililli understands this as a concept characterized by "an affective bond defined by care and love… that crosses the normative and ordinary association of motherhood to the mother" (2022, 73). While she suggests that Hà is not necessarily portrayed as a figurative mother to her own mother, but rather as a daughter who is capable of showing care, compassion, and empathy towards a parent, I would argue that Hà

is parentified to some extent. Parentification, as defined by Dariotis et al., "occurs when youth are forced to assume developmentally inappropriate parent or adult-like roles and responsibilities… Parentified children and adolescents are expected to become pseudo-parents and pseudo-adults long before they are cognitively and physiologically equipped for these roles" (2023, 1). Parentification, which I would suggest closely relates to Long's theory of "transmaternalism," typically results from intentional or unintentional abdication of parental responsibilities or maltreatment of children by primary caregivers and these conditions tend to occur when parents are unable to fulfill their role for any number of reasons (2023, 2). Despite her mother's best intentions, she was not able to be fully emotionally present for Hà, given extraordinary external circumstances that were out of her control; not only was she focused on her children's immediate survival, but she was also carrying the burned of single motherhood while mourning the loss of her partner.

It is important to note that nuance is critical if one is attempting to understand the situation in which these children were raised and forced to live in, through no fault of their parents. In extreme circumstances such as war and displacement, there is no right answer for how parents should or should not act, as long as their actions are in line with an intent to protect their children to the best of their abilities. In *Reclaiming Migrant Motherhood*'s first chapter, "We Were Born From Beauty," Quynh H. Vo discusses difficult choices refugee parents must make out of love for their children (Vo 2022, 16). In this text, she analyzes Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, but her points can be applied to my analyses of *Inside Out* and *Ru*. She suggests how, in Vuong's novel, the protagonist's mother, "like other refugee parents who soldiered through the brutal war… assiduously endures her violent memories in silence to protect her son" (2022, 16). In *Inside Out*, readers can see how, even if Há understands some of what is happening around her, her mother carries most of the emotional burden of displacement to try and lessen the effects this trauma will inevitably have on her children. Despite her mother's best efforts to conceal her emotions, Há can see the toll that

raising four children alone during wartime has on her as she explains how she would never say certain words in front of her mother in fear of upsetting her:

> I would never say *tuyết sút*
> in front of Mother.
> None of us would want
> to make her sadder
> than she already is. (Lai 2011b, 23)

This excerpt demonstrates the sadness that Hà sees in her mother, but one can only imagine how much deeper her mother's sorrow goes, beyond what she allows her children to see. Not only is she living in a war-torn country in precarious conditions, but she is also raising her children without their father, and simultaneously grieving knowing her partner will most likely not come back to them. Another passage, that can be found in the book's third part, on page 158, shows how hard she tries to hide her suffering from her children; Hà wishes "that Mother wouldn't / hide her bleeding fingers" (2011b, 158). Despite Hà's mother trying to preserve some innocence in her children, they still notice her struggling and they are concerned. Vo notes how, often, stories of war suffering are left untold by Vietnamese refugee parents to prevent their children reliving their torture, but this silence may create an invisible distance between generations that can trouble their relationship (Vo 2022, 16). Another example of this is a scene in which Hà tells her mother that her birthday wish is to hear stories from her mother's upbringing, but her mother is reluctant to share much. She explains how,

> It's not easy
> to persuade Mother
> to tell of her girlhood
> in the North. (2011b, 27)

The scene ends with Hà telling readers how she wants to hear more from her mother,

but nothing,
not even my pouts,
can make my mother open her eyes
and tell more. (2011b, 29)

This is exactly what Quynh H. Vo describes in her text; some distance is unwillingly created between a mother and her children as she censors her words to shelter them from her suffering (Vo 2022, 16). However, to contrast this interpretation, Stella Mililli suggests that, by sharing at least some part of her story, Hà's mother still transmits familial and historical knowledge and, "by doing so, she creates the premises for alliance and solidarity with her daughter based on sharing of emotions and personal history" (Mililli 2022, 71). Mililli continues as she explains how, through this act of sharing stories, even though she is partly silenced by sorrow and grief, Hà's mother is responsible for deconstructing "narratives of national and international displacement" (2022, 72). I would argue that this is exactly what Lai and Thúy do as well, as they share their stories through their writing.

Indeed, Thúy's novel also demonstrates how intergenerational the impacts of war can be on motherhood (Vo 2022, 16) as Nguyễn describes the different hardships she has had to endure throughout her life, from her mother preparing them for the "fall" (Thúy, 2009, 23) to the fact that, for a long time, she chose to date married men to avoid the possibility of being abandoned or hurt (2009, 104). In one of *Ru*'s last vignettes, Nguyễn explains how she feels comfortable opening up to some people on a certain red couch, she shares stories "comme si elles étaient des historiettes, des numéros d'humoriste ou des contes cocasses de pays lointains aux décors exotiques, aux sons insolites, aux personnages parodiques" (2009, 135). Despite her saying, a few sentences later, that her "mémoire émotive… se perd, se dissout, s'embrouille avec le recul" (2009, 135), her childhood trauma has left long-term effects on her, and healing from these emotional wounds is a

lifelong journey. Nevertheless, through her role as a mother, she can enjoy some healing moments, such as cooking *thịt chà bông* for her sons as a caring gesture meant to replicate the love shown by women as they cooked these meals for family in re-education camps (2009, 43). These excerpts exemplify the healing aspect of what Jocelyn Frelier describes as "maternal time travel" (2022, 146), discussed above. In addition, through a process of self-exploration, *Rư*'s narrative allows Thúy to revisit impactful moments in her life and reconceptualize what these moments might mean to her now, as a mother (2022, 139).

In *Displaced Mothers and the Borders They Must Cros*s, the introduction to *Reclaiming Migrant Motherhood*, Maria D. Lombard establishes how refugee and migrant mothers are "sites of knowledge and cultural production, engendering identity and belonging as they move though unfamiliar and transitory spaces" (Lombard 2022, 1). She also notes how critical refugee scholars have recently moved away from considering these women as victims to be rescued (which had been the case for a while), to instead look at how displacement affects how these women and their families reconfigure their identities into lived experience (2022, 1). Additionally, she asserts how these women's identities are deeply tied to the lives of their children, as well as their roles as mothers, which can sometimes be isolating. To Lombard, this is why it is so important to give space to these stories like Lai and Thúy's; by unpacking and giving voices to these mothers, it "gives renewed hope that these lives and experiences are meaningful" (2022, 3). It also empowers displaced mothers to reconcile their identity outside of their homeland and recognize how "this displacement continues to impact the lives, identities, and homes of the next generation of women" (2022, 8). Most importantly, it allows for the building of a collective memory and history that confronts mainstream, misconstrued ideas of who refugees actually are. Performing a comparative analysis of these stories, despite them being written for different readerships, is important because it shows how being a refugee, immigrant, or otherwise displaced mother is hard to categorize in simple terms. Even if both these women fled Vietnam with their families around the same age and in similar

circumstances (they both left around the time of the fall of Saigon and were sponsored by North American families), they had vastly different experiences that determined how they adapted to their new homes. It is also crucial to analyze such stories within the field of postcolonial studies in order to recognize that the responsibility of scholars "does not stop at the door of privileged forms of migration," and so it is important to distinguish between, and give space to, diasporic, exilic, as well as refugee literatures (Gallien 2018, 723). Of course, there is no easy way to reconcile with the trauma of displacement and growing up in such precarious conditions, but re-storying and using writing as a therapeutic tool of resistance is one of the ways to work on individual and collective healing.

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