A String of Specters: Reflections on the Haunting in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Refugees*

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Looking back, however, I could see that we had passed our youth in a haunted country.
Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Refugees*

1975. The ghostwriter in *Black-Eyed Women*, who was not yet a ghostwriter but a little girl, had just barely escaped from her war-torn hometown on a boat, when she found their vessel under attack by pirates. Her brother sacrificed himself to save her life. Years later, she would write for people wanting autobiographies; most of whom are, like herself, survivors of great tragedies, and are unable to verbalize their own bottomless grief. She would be visited by the ghost of her dead brother, who, wet, bloated, and smelled of brine, swam all the way across the Pacific just to see her again, all these years later.

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We leave people behind as we voyage across the oceans of time and space. Sometimes, the journey seems easy, the way clear. But sometimes, extraordinary events happen that seem to defy time as we perceive it; moments so traumatic that time seems to stand still or go on a never-ending loop. When we are forced to return, we see specters of our past. When we think of what could have been, ghosts of alternate timelines visit us, showing us what could have been. When we look to the horizon, we see the phantoms of an unknown tomorrow. Bliss Cua Lim says that

"ghosts call our calendars into question" (Lim 2011, 149). Refugees and other survivors of collective trauma are more susceptible to such hauntings, having been uprooted from their histories, forced to inhabit liminal spaces in time. They are haunted by the past, present, and future.

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It was 1999 when my mother left us. It was also when the man who followed me disappeared. I first saw him, like a lizard, perched in our old house in the province, in the plantation town of Silay in the province of Negros Occidental, Philippines (around 616 kilometers from Manila). When we moved to the suburbs of the capital, Manila, the man followed us and took residence in the neighboring *balete* tree. One early morning, around 3 AM, the whole tree fell and crashed onto the side of our house, damaging parts of our roof, and breaking a few windows. Not long after, our mother left us for the US. We would not see each other again for almost eight years. The next time I saw her, in Seattle in 2007, I saw the man beside her who took her away to this strange, foreign land. I was a fool to be enticed as well.

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We never really leave a place when we voyage to another. Therefore, we are never truly disconnected from our past. We gather memories, string them together. We tie our story islands together with the same string.

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2018. After the success of his novel, *The Sympathizer*, Viet Thanh Nguyen published a series of stories about refugees, perhaps to demonstrate what he himself calls an ethics of memory: an attempt to remember not just one's own memory but also others' within "the life cycle of memories and their industrial production, how they are fashioned and forgotten,

how they evolve and change" (Nguyen 2016, 12). Perhaps for him, it is important to commemorate the different sides, places, and people who have been touched by the conflict: the children of refugees, a war veteran, an organ transplant recipient, and a family who stayed behind in unified Vietnam. He ties these stories together, shows how deeply connected they are. We see then that trauma is at once both individual and collective, real and imagined, history and fiction. We become part of this string of ghost stories, a rosary of islands floating on the sea of memory; each specter as translucent as the *capiz* shells that adorned the windows of our old house in Silay.

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Ghostly mirages become real and opaque for those that see what could have been. In "War Years," Mrs. Hoa organizes a fundraising campaign in her new community in the US to help supply a guerrilla army of former South Vietnamese soldiers training in the jungles of Thailand. She refuses to believe that her husband and son are dead. For her, they are merely lost in the jungle, waiting to reunite with the rest of the troops, preparing to restore the Southern Vietnamese timeline. The narrator's mother, who believes that the war is over, is forced to come to terms with this fantasy, wondering if two alternate timelines can co-exist at all. In "I'd Love You to Want Me," Mrs. Khanh faces a similar conundrum when her husband, suffering from dementia and memory loss, mistakenly calls her Yen. As his memory slowly degrades, he increasingly misidentifies Mrs. Khanh as his phantom lover. This other woman persistently haunts her as she struggles to remain by her husband's side during his last days.

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Memory is a tricky thing. It is more malleable than we think. It is dynamic, it can be lost. Ghosts are there to remind us of what we lost, and what we were forced to lose.

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2018. After having escaped my mother, I found myself crossing the ocean once more, back to the Philippines, stopping midway to take my PhD in History at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, focusing on Southeast Asian histories of migration. I moved here not realizing how interesting Hawai'i is to study this topic. A former sovereign nation that has been taken over by the US, it feels like the Philippines' alternate universe, one where Americans never left. Indeed, with the muggy air and the old 70s style bungalows and buildings, it is easy to let the "specter of comparison" take over and imagine I am back in Manila, my hometown. But they have their own ghosts here too: the "Night Marchers," ghosts of fallen Hawaiian soldiers, defeated by disease, capitalism, and the American occupation. Is this what we—the Philippines, Vietnam, and Hawai'i—all share, the phantom of colonialism that continues to haunt us to this day?

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Claire has no Vietnamese heritage, except that of her father's actions during the war. In "The Americans," she shows how the next generation can atone for the misdeeds of the previous one. Claire's heritage is that of violence and trauma which she attempts to heal from the ground up. By learning alongside her students and all the people she worked with, she shows how Americans can imagine, perhaps even reproduce, this history that many have already forgotten. Perhaps this is where healing starts, when, amidst the violence, alienation, and self-hatred, we, like Thomas and Sam in "Someone Else Besides You," pause, look at each other, and decide to forge and write the future together, even if we absolutely have no idea how.

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Laurie Sears said that "traumatic narratives are created in their telling.... Those who listen and record stories reshape memories and leave their traces on them in the process of documenting them" (Sears 2007, 20). I have seen this at work in Nguyen's book. Through his characters—refugee, ghost writer, historian, Nguyen asserts that these are not just ghost stories, but "historical accounts from reliable sources" (Nguyen 2018, 6). Missing their physical and historical bodies, he exhumes his characters in his fiction. These specters assert their reality, telling us what happened, how they felt, what they had to do to keep their stories going. Most importantly, they challenge us readers to take part in the reshaping of memory and documentation of history. Thus, in reading as well as writing about *The Refugees*, we enrich the dialogue on a topic that has sadly been reduced to jingoism and xenophobia. Nguyen shows the human in the specter, reminding us that in these seemingly ambiguous and terrifying times, we can still change the trajectory of history to heal the wounds of trauma, so that we can honor them with a proper secondary burial and give them the peace that they may not have attained in their own lifetimes.

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2019. It was already dark when I finished reading *The Refugees*. I decided to take a walk. Outside my apartment, across the street in a tiny green bungalow surrounded by an overgrown vegetable garden, my Vietnamese neighbors were watching a Vietnamese TV show. I wonder if they brought their own ghosts with them, and what stories they can tell. I reflect on my responsibility as a scholar of history, and my own position as a diasporic Filipino currently residing in occupied Hawai'i. As I cross the bridge to Waikiki, I wonder if, like Nguyen, I can also help re-string the stories of our lands together through a more archipelagic perspective of history. I arrive to the shore of this tiny island in the middle of the Pacific,

a body of water so vast, its volume "equaled the moon's" (Nguyen 2018, 101). In the distance, barely lit by the waning moon, I see the glimmer of a ghost, wet, bloated, smelled of brine, swimming eastward to see his little sister again one last time.

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