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Philip Huynh's *The Forbidden Purple City*: New Canadian Refugee Narratives and the Borders of the Socio-Political Community

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Abstract: This paper examines Philip Huynh's short story collection *The Forbidden Purple City* in relation to its engagement with the nativity–territory–citizenship triad on which Western socio-political communities found the principles of affiliation of their members. First, the Canadian reaffirmation of a discourse of national benevolence is contextualised to later draw on how the collection is nurtured by boundary-crossing ethics that interrogates any sequential relation between past and present, Vietnam and Canada, which usually structures refugee narratives. It is argued then that disruptive and productive time/space interconnections delegitimize any simplistic representations of easily assimilated grateful refugees, fracturing the convenient narration of Canada as a benefactor concerned with old and new international humanitarian causes. The newness of Huynh's stories relies on their mobilisation of the discourse of state citizenship through exceptional migrancy and its disruptive border nature. In contrast to premises of birth and geographical territory, which lose ground as backbones of any affiliation, citizenship appears incomplete and processual. The stories use the precarious performativity of collective homogeneity expected of a former settler colony, like Canada, to launch agency and resistance to state homogenisation, and *de-institutionalise* the refugee subject to critically intervene sovereignty and political subjectivity. Finally, the stories evince that Canada's social spectrum is ideal to explore the threshold opened by the adjacency of sameness and otherness embodied by Huynh's protagonists. Their condition as diasporic refugee subjects augments the transformative potential of *new* refugee narratives, in which literal and metaphorical polymorphous borders unveil the bases of the contemporary Canadian socio-political community.



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I will come back to this movement toward the beyond that inhabits the foreigner, [...] a being with no fixed identity, whose only homeland is the voyage.

“Strangers to Ourselves” Julia Kristeva (2019)

1. Introduction

In Canada, the cultural production on and by refugees increasingly nuances the intersection of migrancy, citizenship, and sovereignty, with special attention paid to nation-state discourses of difference contention (Fleischmann and van Styvendale 2011; Coleman et al. 2012; Sarkowsky 2018)¹. Refugees' vulnerability pairs the challenges they have brought for the solidification of the ideological apparatuses of the nation-state.² Not in vain, in light of a presumed decline of the nation-state, they are “the only category in which one may see [...] the forms and limits of a coming political community” (Agamben 2008, p. 90).

This paper examines Philip Huynh's short story collection *The Forbidden Purple City* (Huynh 2019) in relation to its engagement with the nativity–territory–citizenship triad on which Western socio-political communities found the principles of affiliation of their members (Agamben 2008). First, the Canadian reaffirmation of a discourse of national

benevolence is contextualised to later draw on how the collection is nurtured by boundary-crossing ethics that interrogate any sequential relation between past and present, Vietnam and Canada, which usually structures refugee narratives. It is argued then that disruptive and productive time/space interconnections delegitimize any simplistic representations of easily assimilated grateful refugees, thus fracturing the convenient narration of Canada as a benefactor concerned with old and new international humanitarian causes.

Huynh's stories mobilise the discourse of state citizenship through exceptional migrancy and its disruptive border nature. Consequently, citizenship appears incomplete, hampered by inequality and heterogeneity. The stories use the precarious performativity of collective unity expected of a former settler colony, like Canada, to launch agency and resistance to state homogenisation, and *de-institutionalise* the refugee subject. The border perviousness that characterises the stories demands an analysis through the interlacing frames of diaspora and critical refugee studies, one which may unveil its indebtedness to Canadian colonialist and (neo)imperialist impulses. The stories may then be seen as incorporating polymorphous borders that interrogate "the boundaries of sovereign accounts of the political" (Nyers 2006, p. x). Huynh's protagonists' condition as diasporic refugees augments the transformative potential of these narratives: their newness relies on being situated between past and present, where their demythologisation of nostalgia goes hand in hand with their refusal of any presentism in the guise of the requested assimilation.

2. Benevolent Nation Narration and Cultural Correctives to Citizenship

The peak of Canadian nationalism coincided with the Vietnam War (1964–1975). However, the strategies implemented by that nationalist concern appear rather contradictory, since the country pursued a sharpened political, economic, and cultural independence from its southern neighbour, on the one hand, but, on the other, it joined in the war effort in diverse ways, not all of them peaceful³. The Canadian literature of the time exploited how writers came to terms with humanitarian impulses to shelter civilians from Vietnam, on the one hand, and the war and prospect of a clearly *bordered* Canadian identity, on the other (McGill 2017, pp. 3–4). As subsequent interventions in Iraq or Afghanistan have evinced, Vietnam was also a keystone of a "Canadian nationalism [...] defined by war" (McCutcheon quoted in Razack 2009, p. 816)⁴. However, it also showed that the nationalist discourse handled this international intervention to solidify a global aura of a potent benefactor of humanitarian causes, while it displaced onto a secondary position the military or economic constituents. At home, Canadians saw in that aura the means to strengthen a distinctive trait that could help in the shaping of their identity.

Vietnam helped reinforce Canada's "mythology of innocence" (Ngo 2016, p. 77), sturdily pillared on the exceptional refuge into which the territory turned for Vietnamese and other East Asians either during the conflict up to 1976 or in its aftermath. Currently, just one percent of the total population is of Vietnamese origin, and many of the East Asian inhabitants of present-day Canada descend from Laotians, Cambodians, and Chinese Vietnamese: the Hoa minority (Ty 2016, p. 565). Only the late refugees, 60,000 according to estimates based on the so-called *boat people*, those who precariously crossed the Pacific in 1979–1980, were "admitted in the special immigration partnerships between the government and the public" (Ngo 2016, p. 63). Their exceptional arrival differentiated them from their predecessors and provided a new juncture to the nationalist concern, one which more directly placed the emphasis on rapid assimilation and economic prosperity as a fair payment for their hosting.

As Homi K. Bhabha (1990) holds in a wider postcolonial context, the *narration of the nation* stems from the disjunctive space between the pedagogical and performative nation-building axes. For its former settler-colony status, the Canadian pedagogical axis is complicated by how neither geography nor history provides firm signifying foundations for a social spirit of community: the territory hosts a multitude of national histories of scarce commonality beyond the temporal and spatial coincidence within the state boundaries. Those boundaries have been posted on the continuous displacement of the First Nations

and the hostility of local geography. The “symbolic denominator” provided by “the interweaving of history and geography” does not quite succeed in sustaining an ethos of community (Kristeva 1990, p. 188), which may reproduce it as *imagined* (Anderson 1983). The disparity of social groups within the Canadian national formation “produces a continual slippage into analogous, even metonymic categories, like the people, minorities, or ‘cultural difference’ that continually overlap in the act of writing the nation” (Bhabha 1990, p. 292).

The performative axis also augments the Canadian intricacy: individuals are not the *object* but the *subject* of the national peoplehood, and therefore need to be interpellated for its perpetuation. When Canada turned from a bicultural official site into a multicultural one in 1988, the acceptance of the other within the nation-state continuum was marketed as an icon of identity, one to pair anthems or flags that emblematised national reproductivity. Diversity was then brandished as a distinguishing trait of the national kaleidoscope. However, this governmental concern “fails in articulating a poetry of the nation” (Keohane 1997, p. 4) for halting the proliferation of difference. The fossilisation of otherness that it attempts veils an excessive surveillance only accountable for the fear of disidentification.

Twenty years earlier, with the Vietnam War as ground, the narration of the Canadian nation-state had already produced a timely effort of differentiation from the United States: if the southern neighbour triggered a bellicose intervention of multifarious collateral damages, Canada hosted US dodgers and draft dodgers who escaped recruitment. Meanwhile, the country was a refuge for the otherness of displaced East Asians, who embodied “the desirable neoliberal immigrant” (Ngo 2016, p. 67). As Ngo holds, they deferred “the political claims of Indigenous peoples and nonconforming racialized others” (Ngo 2016, p. 67; Coleman et al. 2012). Vietnamese in Canada were henceforth “enshakkled (sic) in an endless debt-payment relationship to the state and its imperial logics” (Nguyen 2013, p. 18). Their gratitude for being granted rebirth in a new land, free from communism, nurtures their desirability as refugees in a controlled monitoring of difference.

Making East Asians *exceptional* citizens imposed a predetermined state narrative on newcomers and rendered exceptionalism a lubricating mechanics of the sovereign state (Agamben 2008). That functioning is able to suspend the juridical apparatus to soften state borders, when conveniently necessary for its reaffirmation, and to grant participative citizenship within its implementation of sovereignty, which, as Nyers holds, is a “borderline concept” capable of determining what is (ab)normal (Nyers 2006, p. xii). Refugee subjectivity is in this form exposed to the limits of sovereignty and visible in the light of exceptionalism. In that light, Ngo proposes reading the passing of Bill S-219 on 30 April, 2015, the inclusive exclusion in political participation of Vietnamese refugees as “bare lives” (Agamben 1998, p. 18), or, considered only for their human condition. The so-called Journey to Freedom Day defended the need to celebrate the liberty of the Vietnamese in Canada and paid homage to those who either remained back home under the Communist regime, perished during the war, or were forced into an international diaspora. Conversely, Ngo says, Bill S-219 “constructs the Vietnamese subject as a political subject in tension with those that identify otherwise” (Ngo 2016, p. 62) and creates a fracture between nativity, territory, and political subjectivity, or state sovereignty, as that granted only by citizenship.

Bill S-219 sparked conflictual views among Vietnamese Canadians in favour of, and against, communism. For example, it “erase[d] the Vietnam War with a refocus on celebrating freedom” and, therefore, blurred “Canada’s participation and complicity in the War” (Ngo 2016, p. 62) to enhance its image as an international peacekeeper (Jefferess 2009). As well, it constructed refugees as focused on their assimilation, “centred”, as Ngo says (Ngo 2016, p. 70), in a linear progress to social and economic thrift and grateful to the state. No less important, the effort made at differentiation from the Southern ally imitated a strategy in use in the United States. There, Yen Le Espiritu claims, “public deliberations refuse to remember Vietnam as a historical site”; Vietnamese are deprived of their status as “genuine subjects” and the war of “its integrity” (2008, p. 1700). However, Vietnamese refugees are

granted “visibility” and “intelligibility” when fully integrated into the US multicultural melting pot (Espiritu 2008, p. 1702).

As Gotlib suggests, “refugees are often forced to enact and embody others’ versions of who they are, ‘assimilate’ not only externally to their new location, but also internally” (Gotlib 2019, p. 239). That implies “submitting to identity-constituting narratives about themselves in which their participation is minimal at best” (Gotlib 2019, p. 239). As the East Asian refuge attests, the Canadian nation-state identitarian effort required a screened version of difference to back up its full performance as benevolent and humanitarian, one which grants exceptional citizenship in turn for easy assimilation and gratitude. This also reflects the “paradox of sovereignty”: presumed inner-state order versus external chaos (Nyers 2006, p. xi), which further enabled the institutionalisation of East Asians.

The stories in *The Forbidden Purple City* counter the centripetal impulse of citizenship, opening a contact line between pre- and post-migration spaces, past and present times, to invalidate simplistic representations of easily assimilated grateful refugees. In this form, they fracture the convenient narration of Canada as a benefactor and formulate what, in a wider context of diasporic literature, Cho calls a “cultural corrective to citizenship” (Cho 2016, p. 530). Drawing on Etienne Balibar’s conceptualisation of the subject-citizen, Cho notices that the English term *subject* does not reflect the connotations that the original Latin conveyed, being able to split between the noun *subjectum*, “the representation of the people”, and the adjective *subjectus*, “those subject to”, (Cho 2016, p. 535). Modern citizenship, she states, stems from “a form of subjectivity that is clearly *subjectus*, [...] subject to a sovereign power” (Cho 2016, p. 535). For those involved in diasporic processes, citizenship is always incomplete and likely to be deformed since their vital displacement fractures its consolidation. As long as equality is unachieved, citizenship remains interrupted by “the tensions of inequality” (Cho 2016, p. 533).

Huynh’s diasporic refugees dwell in a liminal space between Canadian exceptional citizenship, with its narrative of imposed grateful assimilation, and the nation-state left behind. Their heterogeneity photographs the nation on the move and adumbrates plentiful adaptation processes (August 2021), while their diverse diasporic subjectivities inform and deform the Canadian citizenship allocated. As Cho observes, “[...] citizenship needs diaspora as much as diaspora needs citizenship” (Cho 2016, p. 536). Huynh abounds then in that cultural corrective to citizenship and critically approaches the Canadian image at home and away (Moss et al. 2017, n.p.). Hence, the narratives deploy “multiple times and places” reminiscent of “nostalgia and dread” (Flieger 2019, n.p.; New 2019) to only envision “home” as “a state of mind” (Chau 2019). A productive juxtaposition of local, urban spaces, transnational or digital, dislocates the collection and Canadian citizenship. Far from being excised to favour a new Canadian-only existence, the stories underline their “elsewhereness” (Kambourelli 2007, p. x) and defy state-centred citizenship and sovereignty as built on nativity and territory (Agamben 1995).

In contrast to fictional accounts that incorporate the easy assimilation–success–gratitude triad to reinforce state benevolence, or highlight war or political persecution as a part of the process of official asylum, Huynh’s new refugee narratives *de-institutionalise* the Vietnamese Canadian by minimising the centripetal impetus of the state.⁵ The refugees presented nuance their own condition and are “neither natural kinds [...] nor mysterious ‘others’ who must be classified and controlled from the outside” (Gotlib 2019, pp. 248–49); neither are they an “object of knowledge” but rather similar to those who “take up, work with, challenge, and transform state directives and agendas”, Nguyen and Phu say, thus “asserting their subjectivities variously in opposition to and in parallel with other categories and subject positions, as well as carving out ways of living and being with others” (Nguyen and Phu 2021, p. 5).

3. Borders and Thresholds of Resistance in *The Forbidden Purple City*

The Forbidden Purple City is the first short story collection by Vietnamese Canadian-born Philip Huynh (Vancouver, 1975–present), the 2016 winner of the Emerging Writers

Award. Chronologically set from the late 1970s to the present, most of the stories draw on the experiences of a varied range of Vietnamese individuals in Canada, the United States, and Korea, and they have in common the articulation of that identity across generations, frontiers, and times, usually presenting conflictual views between Canadian-born characters, for example, and their ancestors hosted during or after the war. Huynh's narratives are not "resolutionary" but "revolutionary" (Zacharias 2011, p. 14), circumscribed within a production of agency and resistance, which does not leave citizenship untouched in a simple search for inscription. In compliance with diaspora and critical refugee studies, these new narratives manufacture "sovereignities beyond nationhood" (Nguyen and Phu 2021, p. 6), and thus open thresholds of incompleteness or subversion that can hardly obviate the Canadian history of imperialism and settler colonialism. Infiltrated by refugees' "worldmaking", as Y-Dang Troeung believes, these stories are "underpinned by "inter-linked structures of imperial, racist, and gendered violence", but at the same time, they are "creative acts of repairing that refugees deploy to reconstruct their worlds" (Troeung 2021, p. 14). While all the stories criss-cross and juxtapose literal and metaphorical borders, "Turkey Day" and "The Abalone Diver" present the multilayered oppressive realities of women on arranged matches to escape Vietnam; "The Tale of Jude", for example, blends racist premises and gender assumptions to offer a cartography of present-day Vietnamese Canadians and the social relations that still wall them off. As we shall see, nostalgia is usually a mechanism to dramatise the impossibility to return, as it appears in "The Fig Tree off Knight Street", or more widely in "The Forbidden Purple City", but it is also a way to resist the mandatory oblivion of personal stories rooted in Vietnam. In parallel, "Toad Poem" and "Gulliver's Wife" delve into the obligatory assimilation intended by the Canadian state and its strategies of border permeability for ideal refugees. "Mayfly", in turn, exploits the realities of those abusing their exceptional status to make illegal business and questions the ideal refugee stereotype.

However, it is in the first story in the collection, "The Investment on Dumfries Street", where the unnamed narrator refuses categorically his Canadian location together with his filial bond and the conditioning influence of the past at once: "I never saw my father again after leaving Vancouver five years ago" (Huynh 2019, p. 11), he says, thus rapidly situating the time of the story. Dissent with assimilationist parameters is presented as intergenerational conflict, as the son objects to the father's obsession with tackling dubious business endeavours that allow him to socially ascend and repay Canadian exceptional citizenship. The father's entrepreneurial errors reach a limit when he joins the "truly ghetto" (Huynh 2019, p. 17) Vietnamese Canadian-born Sonny Ngo, who talks him into purchasing a house on Vancouver Dumfries Street with the aim of tenancy. However, the property, used as a weed greenhouse, is detected by the police. Although Sonny is arrested, the unaware, conned father is discharged—as he was not in the property documents—demonstrating further proof of his futile ascent. The situation becomes unbearable for his son, who is more concerned with pursuing his acting career, on the day he plays the protagonist of "Burn This" on the school stage, a timely encouragement to break with any repayment of gratitude and to create distance from his father's capitalist ends.

Huynh's individuals unveil margins and boundaries as sites of potentiality from which to reproduce or contest the discourse that dictates their assimilation or liminality, breaking in parallel any expected stereotyping. As Fleischmann and van Styvendale suggest, "the individual may learn points of resistance to the sovereign by transgressing normative relations with the nation-state" (Fleischmann and van Styvendale 2011, p. xxxi). "The Abalone Diver" is set on Jeju Island, home to a Vietnamese woman ferried to that South Korean location in a web-arranged match. With her mother, the protagonist, Thuy, used to watch the romantic soap opera *Winter Nocturne*, situated in Jeju and exported to Vietnam, whose script her loveless marriage contradicts. However, such a marriage provides her with an escape door: "They used to live in a larger house on their own farm until the Communist government seized the land for a multiplex development. [...] Thuy's father shot the local cadre member [...] and then shot himself" (Huynh 2019, p. 219). Her

lack of vital opportunities led Thuy to the matchmaking website VietSeoul in partnership with a “finishing school” where “Vietnamese girls” could learn “how to be good Korean wives” (Huynh 2019, p. 221). As we shall see, Thuy rejects the confluence of her new Korean citizenship and patriarchal social designs implemented publicly and at home by her husband Jun.

The contrapuntal side of Thuy’s personal spectrum is provided by the women collectors of the *alga abalone*. The oldest *haen jeo*, Yuri, turns into a balsam for Jun’s authoritative rule, while the community of Vietnamese wives on the island offers little comfort to Thuy. One of her co-nationals equates them to “Vietnam expatriates of old [...] who rallied the Vietnamese against the French colonisation from outside” (Huynh 2019, p. 243). They went home eventually, unlike Thuy and her fellow wives, who are “here to stay, and if one of us runs home, it is because she has been defeated by Korea” (Huynh 2019, p. 243). For these women, life on Jeju is a limbo, which Thuy strategically benefits from until the moment in which they get pregnant and when “life becomes real”, passing from the “purgatory” of before to heaven or hell (Huynh 2019, p. 242). However, Thuy decides to go on the pill (Huynh 2019, p. 237), thus reclaiming her rights regarding reproductivity away from the discourse of belonging, placing herself on the boundary of the community and siding with the outcast divers. Once Thuy is sponsored by Yuri for admission into the group’s diving cooperative, her incapacity to help on Jun’s farm brings about the hiring of a worker, which averts Thuy’s regular cheque to her mother (Huynh 2019, p. 247). “She has made it through purgatory,” (Huynh 2019, p. 258) the narrator says on Thuy, endowed with some economic independence. Yet she is aware of her liminal space between Vietnam and Korea—Communist evils at home and a precarious capitalist life in her host country, somewhere between an attempted territorialisation by Korean citizenship and Jun’s patriarchal modes. That is why “her only escape from this land is beneath the sea” (Huynh 2019, p. 259), where the illusionary liberty of the ocean provides a scarce social alternative to the allotted version of the refugee, one whose status relies on reproductivity and marital submission.

“Mayfly” provides further nuance to the refugee stereotype in the collection and sets aside the ideal Vietnamese individual to rather focus on the path that has led Brother Number 1 and his daughter My Linh from rags to riches. They escaped from war-ravaged Vietnam to a refugee camp in Hong Kong before resettling in Canada: “She was eight, and it was just her and Brother Number 1 among hundreds in a warehouse. My Linh slept on top of her father in a table space” (Huynh 2019, p. 209). The camp replicates the Agambenian space of exception, with its limitation of essential citizen rights, and creates a powerful contrast with the Canadian citizenship they now hold and abuse. The father’s revenues from weed trafficking and extortion have afforded his daughter an engineered tree house, significantly, among the numerous maple trees shading the place (Huynh 2019, p. 204). As the gang grants the anonymous Scottish Canadian protagonist serious business like “muling” and plaguing East Vancouver with weed greenhouses, he imprints his loyalty and love for My Linh in a tattoo, presenting, “The Canadian flag entwined with the red banner and yellow star of Vietnam”. Yet he is mixed up and reproduces the wrong, northern icon: “you got your victors and vanquished all mixed up” (Huynh 2019, p. 201), My Linh reproaches him.

However, when the protagonist realizes how the gang extorts business retailers, he breaks up with a revengeful My Linh, who asks his *homies* to desert him while inspecting a new greenhouse, having previously called the police. His arrest and subsequent charges account for the authorial and distanced tone of the narrator while addressing him, the tone of a probation officer’s reading of crimes. As a young offender, his citizenship is curtailed, unlike that of his Vietnamese Canadian peers, who are free to continue their lives aside from the state’s discipline. The story undermines any parallel between easy assimilation and social ascent via hard work, and, in the process, it also questions the existence of archetypal Vietnamese refugees in perennial gratefulness to the benevolent state.

In “Turkey Day”, the law firm Chau works for has provided him Nga’s case based on his presumed command of Vietnamese, which barricades their relation from start to

end. Nga's asylum petition relies on the exceptional reason of being a "battered wife" (Huynh 2019, p. 98) once her marriage is broken. Chau's reasoning behind her affidavit will use the principle that "an alien could still maintain permanent residency in the US if she could show that she had entered into a genuine marriage" (Huynh 2019, p. 99). In that case, the border of citizenship would be permeable for her and the expectations of Americanness certain, but deportation looms large unless that *genuine* character is evinced. The Vietnamese Canadian lawyer is tackling such a task amid his preparations for Canadian Thanksgiving and difficulties finding a turkey in early October more than a month ahead of its US counterpart on the last Thursday of November. To make things worse, his girlfriend, Haejin, has refused his marriage proposal as her parents are "traditional" (Huynh 2019, p. 109), and she fears they will not welcome him, being a Namer-Vietnamese Confucian and, therefore, of Chinese origin (Huynh 2019, p. 111). "Maybe your people and mine don't mix" (Huynh 2019, p. 110), the girl says in a clear reference to the animosity still present against Chinese colonialist ends. The story, therefore, deploys a multiplication of national and state borders that impede the circulation of its characters who are sometimes gatekeepers themselves. Paradoxically, as Chau knows when he accompanies Nga to her studio, her lacquer paintings do circulate and are exhibited for sale, which "arrived in New York before I did" (Huynh 2019, 105), she says.

"Turkey Day" underlines the undecidability of several cultural signifiers once territorialisation is unlikely, in spite of Chau's attempts at dragging the most famous American celebration across the border. As he indicates, he wanted the turkey for "*our* Thanksgiving. A bunch of *us expats* had committed ourselves to getting together [...] for a real *home-made* cooked meal" (Huynh 2019, p. 111. *Emphasis added*). Ambivalence also affects spatial coordinates: when Nga's furious husband turns up at Chau's door to enquire about his wife's whereabouts, he reproaches Chau for being "a northerner" [...]. You have that high nose" (Huynh 2019, p. 115). Yet, is that predicated on Northern Vietnamese who supported the Communists, or on Canadians who presumably had a very little participation in the conflict except as a refuge, as state propaganda spread? The open end of the story does not reveal whether Nga is given a permanent visa away from her husband; whether she is a victim of trafficking or willingly participated to boost her career as an artist and is now eager to get rid of her husband, the vehicle to a more stable position within US immigration policy.

In "Toad Poem", Diem undoes Nga's east-west itinerary and returns to Vietnam after 45 years in Canada to honour his dead parents. The impossible crystallisation of a flat representation of the country resists nostalgic otherness and challenges the view that "migrants are fluid and flexible, and the homeland state and society are fixed" (Wah Chan and Thu Tran 2011, p. 1101). Diem's unresolved mourning, as Diehl states (Diehl 2021, p. 4), complicates the viability of a closed past from which to move forth. Likewise, the duality between a thriving present in Canada versus the suffering past left behind is dismantled as his trip progresses, and his Canadian life is far from the prosperity he intends to represent. His construction of Vietnam relies on the discursive silence of the Vietnamese war victims. However, those invisible to Western ethnocentric principles ingrained in the Cold War (Espiritu 2008, p. 1702) do speak in the story and undermine Diem's views. Against his perception of Vietnamese as "train[ed]" by the government (Huynh 2019, p. 132) and resentful for the war, some remind him that their parents "carried shovels instead of guns" and were responsible for "fixing the roads that the Americans bombed" (Huynh 2019, p. 132).

On the way to his parents' village, Diem stops at the Nguyens' tailor shop, now in the hands of the former owner's daughter. She is the child he remembers from the 1960s, when her father sheltered him as a "common refugee" (Huynh 2019, p. 140) after deserting his squad, not to return. And like his period at the Nguyens' place, Diem's family's plantation life is also romantically ossified as part of an irrecoverable moment that the Communists erased. The nostalgia he has hoarded is based on the materiality of the country as immutable, which is hardly tenable: immune to time, economic realities, and the pressures of global capitalist trends. Time, economic, and global pressures are incompatible with the fossilised gratitude that Diem has preserved in turn for his full citizenship in

Canada. However, his trip has crossed the Pacific divide in parallel to the distance between reflective and restorative nostalgia. As Gotlib puts it, truth is interrogated by the former and protected by the latter; the former favours ambiguities and confusing views to adumbrate “a new kind of self that is reflective of its own fragility, strangeness, and contingency” (Gotlib 2019, p. 250). The account of Diem’s return manufactures, therefore, “a space of resistance”, where reflective nostalgia poses identities unmoored from territoriality and fixed premises of culture and nation to eventually advocate an enclave of “self-redefinition” (Gotlib 2019, p. 251).

Two other stories delve into the power of nostalgia to problematize it and pose the mandatory recovery of the pre-diaspora period, which in turn hardens easy assimilation in Canada. “The Fig Tree off Knight Street” brings about impossible nostalgia, as the Vietnamese Canadian-born child protagonists have no memories of their parents’ homeland except through their evasive and traumatised accounts. “The Forbidden Purple City”, in turn, offers an instance of a metafictional research on memory reconstruction, and its narrative acts in parallel to the reconstruction of Hue’s Purple City, both at the time of the conflict and in the present of the UNESCO-funded project. In “The Fig Tree off Knight Street”, Thang, who is “fresh to Vancouver and had spent his life in a Communist Vietnamese re-education camp” (Huynh 2019, p. 82), is the vehicle to the past that the kids intend to decode. However, that connection is mediated, and much of what surrounds the newcomer is questionable. The child mediator himself is a living interrogation of any direct access to the origin that the kids hanker after, being a hybrid of “violet eyes”: Thang’s father “was some American GI whom Thang had never met” (Huynh 2019, p. 82). Behind his mother’s decision to resettle in Canada lies her resentment of the US for the conflict and the view of Canada as a peaceful host. Yet ideal benevolence is hampered by everyday reality: Thang is linguistically challenged at school and a target for bullies. His visible precarity, on the other hand, is the reason why his Canadian Vietnamese chums approach him: “We pitied him, for each of his rubber sandals, neither of which was shaped particularly for the right or left foot; for his uneven matted bangs that stuck to his forehead,” one of the children says, “and for a ghostly odour that trailed him, provoking us to offer him our fresh socks or T-shirts” (Huynh 2019, p. 83).

Thang’s mysterious aura increases when one of the girls, Yen, who up to that moment is unable to speak, is cured. When chased by a dog, Yen takes refuge in the proximity of Thang’s house, and he helps her. The place itself is an emblem of a different world: Situated at the end of an alley that leads to Knight Street, its access is through a flame-shaped hole in the wire fence that opens under a shady fig tree next to which Thang and his mother dwell in a ramshackle house: “We felt as if we had stepped into the wilderness” (Huynh 2019, p. 85), the kids explain, relieved from the noises that come from a nearby butcher’s. Thang explains that he “knew something of [the children’s] pasts, which was for [them] something more elusive” (Huynh 2019, p. 88). However, for the children’s parents, Thang’s stories and that of her mother are delusive: “They were too busy working double shifts, making us dinner, or scratching lottery tickets to replace these stories with their own” (Huynh 2019, p. 90), subsumed within the narrative of gratitude to the state. The group’s parents delegitimise the stories by the newcomer and attribute them to the mental insanity that Thang has inherited from his mother “half in this world, half in another” (Huynh 2019, p. 95). Somewhere between sanity and illness, the unnamed mother is a dweller of the liminal threshold, the site to threaten the power of the absorbing narrative of citizenship and its requisite to leave the past on the other side of the Pacific.

In “The Forbidden Purple City”, it is the Vietnamese Vong Co music that is a part of the ossification of culture that the story is based on, thanks to the Vietnamese cultural society in Vancouver that Bac Gia and Tiet Linh coordinate. Vong Co will then be a part of the New Year festivities that uproot and reroute Vietnamese culture in Vancouver. Bac Gia, a former art historian in Vietnam, narrates how the war first interrupted his life and that of literature student Tiet Linh, and then that of their respective spouses (the dentist Anh Bin and the nurse Ngoc), both of whom are already dead. His reconstruction is set face to face

with that of the Purple City, in which he was involved when the communists took upon themselves the reconstruction of Hue and now witnesses via YouTube as UNESCO oversees the present restoration. The story is in continuous transit from the 2000s to 1968, when the Northern Vietnamese invaded Hue, and Tiet Linh and Bac Gia were forced to escape to the countryside because “the communists were looking for people like [them], the intellectuals and the Catholics”, people who discussed Sartre and colonialism, “whether the French treated the Vietnamese worse than the Vietnamese treated its Cham minority” (Huynh 2019, p. 155). Bac Gia’s following of the present-day reconstruction of the city is deprived of any nostalgic component, he contends, and he does not understand why he still can imagine the ruins in his mind but is unable to recall much of his past in Hue: “I’ve tried to locate my quiet neighbourhood on Google Street View, but it has completely changed, and in its place are gleaming motorbikes parked beside bustling storefronts” (Huynh 2019, p. 159).

In 1978, Anh Bin left the country, and as Bac Gia remembers, “Tiet Linh kept mum about his whereabouts” (Huynh 2019, p. 156). Later, he “re-emerged on the other side of the ocean, in Vancouver” (Huynh 2019, p. 156), part and parcel of what the narrative of belonging demands from Vietnamese exceptional refugees: a full resurrection leaving behind the other space. Tiet Linh went to Canada in 1979, and Bac Gia was sponsored as Anh Bin’s fake brother: “We shared the same last name, Nguyen, and never mind that half of Vietnamese shared this surname: his scheme worked” (Huynh 2019, p. 171). However, Ngoc preferred to stay in Vietnam and died in 1980. As he remembers now, “I left by boat with an uneasy feeling in my stomach,” he says, “one that didn’t go away during the five months I spent at a refugee camp in Hong Kong, nor when I finally arrived in Vancouver.” (Huynh 2019, p. 156).

The gift of the Vong Co melancholic music has presented Bac Gia with the sad reality that no picture of his wife remains, and he cannot remember her face. In contrast, the minute details of the Purple City remain in his recollections. Additionally, the place is now open for visitors and marketed as a must-see attraction of Hue, willingly recorded to be posted on the web. “With the chaotic occurrences in YouTube,” Bac Gia states, “I can’t tell what is a documentary of the reconstruction and what is a historical melodrama” (Huynh 2019, p. 172), as visitors can disguise themselves as the emperor while surrounded by actors for videos and picture-taking. Such an image makes him conclude that “it is as if the war never happened”, and, therefore, “there was never any reason for us to leave the country” (Huynh 2019, p. 172).

“Gulliver’s Wife” and “The Tale of Jude”, the second and third stories in the collection, hardly include issues of nostalgia for Vietnam or return trips. They are, rather, focused on the hardships of those arriving (thus abounding in inequality and, therefore, incomplete citizenship) and the spaces of agency and resistance open. In both, the discourse of communal homogeneity, in any of the two collectives confronted, demands a critical spotlight. “Gulliver’s Wife” criticises the bilingual Canadian model from the perspective of Josephine, a Catholic Vietnamese teacher of French in Saigon, who is convinced by her husband Thuong to resettle in Vancouver with their child: “When her husband Thuong told Josephine that Vancouver [. . .] was just as French as it was English [. . .], she believed him. There was no need to go to Montreal, where some of her friends ended up” (Huynh 2019, p. 19). Upon arrival, she finds a different reality that worsens her dislocation as “the only thing French about Vancouver was the bilingual grocery labels, although Quebecois French sounds foreign” (Huynh 2019, p. 20). She regrets that the French culture in which she was raised has been suppressed by the new regime, and her former students will never read Albert Camus’s *L’Étranger* (1942). Significantly, Josephine misses the school system with which the French indoctrinated generations of Vietnamese and turns out a colonialist replica in Canada, one that defends the *original* French in opposition to the one spoken in Quebec.

Like the protagonist in Camus’s novel, she is challenged in her relationship with the immediate reality and imposes on herself further boundaries. Disappointed by public schools, she eventually finds for her son Christian a French Catholic kindergarten, which

the family's economy will resent: "For dinner, there will be fewer noodles in each bowl of pho" and beef "in thinner slices" (Huynh 2019, p. 21). Not in vain, it is French that "conjures up everything Josephine is fond about Vietnam, [...] French takes her home more than Vietnamese does" (Huynh 2019, p. 21). At the family's Vancouver home, the situation does not move ahead. Thuong, whose arrival in Canada was part of a PhD programme in economics, is unable to end his dissertation. In the tiny basement that the family shares with his mother, a statue of General Tran Hung Dao, a war hero against the Mongols who was rescued from a Saigon temple, is a fetish of his. Next to his desk, it inspires "awe, fear, or devotion", or "all at once" (Huynh 2019, p. 24), but it also distracts him, and he feels useless when he is unable to repay the exceptional treatment provided by the Canadian government.

Thuong's failure leads him to focus his attention on what he considers a special talent: haircutting. While he usually cuts Josephine's as a form of caring for her, he also offers Paul, Christian's teacher, a haircut. The increasing attachment that his wife and Christian feel for the teacher makes Thuong accept his presence as part of the family, too. His far-fetched gratitude is, in this way, materialized: He welcomes the new presence within the boundaries of his family and home and renegotiates the family's tight cultural borders to accommodate them to his Canadian belonging, and his own role, in light of the new reality. In the process, he is able to tolerate how his former relevance diminishes, as he is no longer the only head and centre around which the family members rotate.

Set in Winnipeg, "The Tale of Jude" further examines the relations into which the Vietnamese protagonists enter with their immediate environment to criticise; for example, issues of (self) imposed exoticism and the impossible social ascendancy demanded. Lee is new to a secondary school where he is rapidly attracted to Jude Dunster, *aka* "La Vache" or "the cow", a nickname provided to him for being "tall and big-boned" (Huynh 2019, p. 59): Jude is a blend of "lady and beast" and an "Amelia Earhart" (Huynh 2019, p. 66), bullied by her schoolmates as an atypical beauty. Being an heir to the school benefactor family and, therefore, economically affluent, her peripheral stance is just partial. The periphery of social relations that she and Lee occupy seems then to connect the protagonists in a different way, which is strengthened as both are attracted by mathematics and computer programming. However, their social stratum sets them apart, because, in contrast to Jude's status, Lee lives in a basement with his mother (a waitress for the last seven years) and is used to her various companions whom he associates with their capacity to afford items such as a VHS, his mother's dresses, a gold necklace, a 16' colour TV, and a Passat (Huynh 2019, p. 58). However, for him, his mother seems to be too old for the extremely short skirt that the uniform demands (Huynh 2019, p. 58) and her "pigtails" (Huynh 2019, pp. 65, 77). Now she is dating Anh Bao, "a social worker", she says, who "drives a cab". According to Lee, "going out with a Namer is a change in style for her. She went out with white boys when they first moved here. Some with money" (Huynh 2019, p. 65). Some of those men, Lee explains, "didn't know her real age, that she was older than she said she was. It's because of the pigtails and pink lipstick his mother sometimes wears" (Huynh 2019, p. 65). Lee is in this way aware that his mother has become accustomed to self-exoticizing her appearance to hook the men that regularly drop by.

For him, not only his mother but their physical location in town needs be concealed: "As soon as [Jude] drops him off, he is standing at another bus stop" (Huynh 2019, p. 64) to arrive at his low-class neighbourhood. His Vietnamese community is too closed a circle out of which he tries to move, and his cultural inheritance is not something to negotiate. Thus, when Ahn Bao intends to drag Lee to church, he argues that "I'm really a Buddhist" (Huynh 2019, p. 75). During a conversation with Jude, she mentions "*The tale of Kieu*", to which he responds, "whose tail?" (Huynh 2019, p. 70). She explains that "it is a Vietnamese folk tale" or "a part of your national story" (Huynh 2019, p. 70). Having read it in a French translation brought home by her father, Jude recalls that "it is about a prostitute", later concluding that "it's funny that the greatest Vietnamese epic poem is a hooker's survival tale" (Huynh 2019, p. 71).

The lack of common ground between Jude and Lee announces their worlds apart in both physical and metaphorical terms. When a walk is proposed upon leaving the mother's restaurant, Jude prefers to go home, arguing that it is getting late, and although it seems to be the opposite, she clarifies by saying, "not for around here" (Huynh 2019, p. 78). The area is ethnically marked in her comment, and that trait is associated with the criminality attributed to the Vietnamese, not only by Jude. Lee also splits the boys he has grown up with as those "in jail" and those "still dealing freely" (Huynh 2019, p. 65). As he parts ways with the girl, he drops by the centre for immigrants where Ahn Bao volunteers. The open end of the story does not clear up why. On the contrary, the end restates the beginning with ethnic categories clearly slotted in different areas: those where Jude's "old mansion" (Huynh 2019, p. 72) is versus Lee's vicinity, which hosts *his* community and the various social aids to integrate them, including places for "sleeping bodies" (Huynh 2019, p. 79) and a "women's centre", where he sometimes picked his mother up. Significantly, for all the roaming across neighbourhoods, the story has led Lee inwards to the very nucleus where the sense of community resides and away from assimilation.

4. Conclusions

In *The Forbidden Purple City*, the complexity of Philip Huynh's Vietnamese diasporic refugees fuels the transformative potential of their narratives. Being situated between past and present, these narratives demystify nostalgia, but also presentism and the usual assimilationist emphasis of refugee stories. Huynh's collection places issues of traditional citizenship, via the Canadian state's exceptionalism, at the limit and spotlights the strategies of dissent and resistance that the subjects presented put into practice, ranging from the abundance of spaces of inequality to the opening of realms of literal resistance and the challenge to centripetal homogeneity displayed by the discourse of mandatory assimilation. In addition, and against that homogeneity, the collection diversifies the meaning attributed to the term *refugee* in order to pluralise the connotations provided to the principles of affiliation that it usually brings about.

From their multiple locations, Huynh's new refugee narratives articulate a corrective to allow readers to see the state's need for a dynamic renewal of its production of affiliations, one which sets distance from difference contention. The Vietnam War and its aftermath helped the Canadian state to found a narrative of difference to counter the absorbing sameness of the United States and, in parallel, a narrative of benevolence based on the exceptional refuge of East Asian population displaced by the conflict. As seen above, that narrative of permeability within the context of a former settler territory requires an analysis through the interlacing frames of diaspora and critical refugee studies, which situate its imbrication within Canadian colonialist and (neo)imperialist impulses. As a result, it is now possible to see how it reinforces a view of Canada as a magnanimous benefactor of incoming minorities.

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Notes

- ¹ The semantic difference between *refugee* and *immigrant* is still a matter of discussion. A forceful displacement motivated by violence, war, political persecution, and the prospect of asylum are defining traits of the former with an unlikely return to the origin in the horizon, whereas economic reasons seem to mostly underlie the displacement in the latter, which is not dissociated from return (Gotlib 2019, pp. 240–42).
- ² Recent Canadian fiction has extensively drawn on refugee experiences. To mention just a few instances, Madeleine Thien (2011)'s novel *Dogs at the Perimeter*, Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer (2014)'s *All the Broken Things*, Kim Echlin (2009)'s *The Disappeared* and Kim Echlin (2015)'s *Under the Visible Life*, David Bergen (2016)'s *Stranger*, Sharon Bala (2019)'s *The Boat People*, and Omar el Akkad (2017)'s *American War* and Omar el Akkad's (2021) *What Strange Paradise* intertextualise what Boltanski (1999) terms "distant

suffering” and turn it into *proximate*. That closeness helps many of them defy atavistic views of Canadianness, community, and citizenship, but their efforts at decentralisation have been blamed for offering Western readerships experiences of rapid consumption of otherness, and, therefore, for complying with further articulations of violence on the experience narrated (Black 2011; McGregor 2013).

- 3 Between 1954 and 1973, Canada participated in the International Control Commission, where it monitored and balanced the USSR’s and Poland’s interests in Vietnam to protect its own. It was also a regular weapon supplier for the United States, including the Ontario-produced orange agent, with which civilians and crop fields were bombarded (Ngo 2016, p. 78). Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer (2014)’s novel *All the Broken Things* features a Vietnamese family of three sponsored to Canada after the war, whose mother, Thao Ngo, dies due to her exposure to the chemical agent. Her son, Bo, cares for his sister, significantly named Orange, affected by brain damage and numerous body deformations. With no economic means to survive, both end up featuring in an Ontario freak show, where he fights the tamed Bear, and her disfigurements are a spectacle. Not coincidentally, the novel finishes with a parade that crosses the town of Elmira (Kuitenbrouwer 2014, pp. 322–27), home to one of the Canadian orange-production plants (Donaldson 2014). Bo’s image fighting Bear, the refugee and the icon of Canadian wilderness, can be read in terms of the difficult accommodation to the country and raise questions about the ethical responsibility for the hosted Vietnamese. Such queries gain visibility when confronted with Bo’s former teacher, Ann Lily, an ex-worker at the Elmira plant, and a member of the church group that sponsored the Ngos’ resettlement. Her action and Canada’s will to become a refuge are an attempt at mitigating the sense of guilt for the “role in atrocity” (McGill 2017, p. 230).
- 4 Recent fictions, such as Camilla Gibb (2021)’s *The Relatives* or William Kowalski (2013)’s *The One Hundred Hearts*, dramatise the trauma of Vietnam veterans in contrast to that of more recent conflicts like Afghanistan or Iraq, within the frames of the war on terror launched by the United States and seconded by the international coalition after the attacks to New York on 11 September 2001. Other Canadian interventions in the name of international humanitarianism and peace, and deeply ingrained in the performativity of the nation-state and its narrative of benevolence in the eyes of the global order (Härtig and Kamboureli 2009; Kamboureli 2013), have established a tipping balance with domestic security and citizenship in times of terror (Brodie 2009; Jefferess 2009). Some examples worth mentioning, not the least for their unhappy results, are the intervention in Somalia (Razack 2004) and the (non) intervention in Rwanda (Keren 2009), masterfully fictionalized in Gil Courtemanche (2003)’s novel *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*.
- 5 Somewhere between fiction and personal memoir, Kim Thúy (2009)’s novel *Ru*, “the first novel by a self-identified Vietnamese Canadian” (Nguyen 2013, p. 4), is a prototypical tale of success and gratitude. Nguyen Anh Tinh’s narrative of resettlement in Montreal via snapshots of here/there quite complies with the project of neoliberal contention of difference and structured diversity. The narrator is grateful for the possibility of being reborn in Canada, and the materialization of her life in book form, which readers are thanked for: “As for me, it is true all the way to the possibility of this book, to the moment when my words glide across the curve of your lips, to the sheets of white paper that put up with my trail, or rather the trail of those who have walked before me, for me. I moved forward in the trace of their footsteps as in a waking dream where the scent of a newly blown poppy is no longer a perfume but a blossoming: where the deep red of a maple leaf in autumn is no longer a color but a grace; where a country is no longer a place but a lullaby” (Thúy 2009, p. 152). The reception received by *Ru* underlines its palatable otherness, which also enabled Thuy’s success and granted the exploitation of the same narrative paradigm in *Ru*’s sequels. *Man* (2014), the story of a Vietnamese orphan’s arranged match, explores her way to success after a best-seller cooking book in Montreal; *Vi* (2016) narrates the protagonist’s escape from Vietnam with her children, to being hosted in a camp, and their final arrival in Montreal, where she becomes a lawyer committed to the reconstruction of the home country; and finally, *Em* (2021) focuses on Vietnamese rubber commerce and its hardships under the new regime.

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