Rewriting Narratives: Ghosts, Trauma, and Memory in Contemporary Anglophone Vietnamese Novels

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Abstract

This study analyses the representation of different ghosts in Anglophone novels taking place during Vietnam's twentieth-century history and how the novels and ghosts challenge the dominant cultural narratives. Within this thesis, I argue that these ghosts are presented in different manners depending on how the novel challenges the dominant narrative and memory, whether the ghosts and characters in the novel enact the cultural norms in the United States or Vietnam, and which kind of haunting is observable in the novel. Regardless of these factors, the ghosts challenge the dominant collective narrative in a specific imagined community, a collection of communities as a whole, such as the dominant collective memory prevalent in the United States or Vietnam, or on a worldwide scale. The thesis focuses on the following three novels. The first of these novels is *She Weeps Each Time You're Born* (Barry 2014), where ghosts are present as metaphysical entities that try to pass on into the afterlife through recounting their deaths whilst simultaneously introducing formerly silenced information and ghosts as unobservable entities where trauma and grief haunt the living. The second novel analysed is *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (Vuong 2020), which presents the intertextual ghosts that serve as metaphors as trauma influences the character's everyday lives and the family becomes similar to a ghost due to their invisible existence in the United States after immigrating. The third novel is *The Mountains Sing* (Phan Quế Mai 2020), where a character nicknamed Wicked Ghost is similar to a metaphysical ghost and haunts the neighbourhood and protagonist's family. Alongside the character nicknamed Wicked Ghost are the unobservable ghosts of trauma and grief which haunt the protagonist and her family, as well as the ghost as a metaphor for the absent presence of historical events institutionally forgotten. These novels discuss events before, during, and after the Vietnam War from the perspective of a Vietnamese author and Vietnamese characters, and all three novels include a variety of ghosts that are either metaphysical or intertextual. Thus far, little research has been

done on such novels, as their increased representation is recent. This study then serves as a starting point for other academic research that might surround ghosts' function in Anglophone literature on conflicts in Vietnam.

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Introduction

Contemporary Anglophone Vietnamese novels, which narrativise the hardships endured by inhabitants during Vietnam's turbulent twentieth-century history, have become popular in world literature, where works introduce new perceptions of the world based on culture and beliefs (Moretti 217-218). The novels are written in a language accessible to many, meaning the novels can be read globally (Brouilette 1). These global accounts can contribute towards a readership's collective memory and potentially introduce new conflicts the reader was unaware of, turning the literary market into an agent for memory. Amongst such novels are the works *She Weeps Each Time You're Born* (Barry 2014), *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (Vuong 2020), and *The Mountains Sing* (Phan Quế Mai 2021). These novels focus on conflicts experienced in Vietnam and the following reunification and how both affected Vietnam's inhabitants. The representation of such historical events is relevant for readers worldwide as the collective memory of these conflicts differs depending on if a reader's prior knowledge of the historical event is created through the memorialisation by the community in Vietnam or the United States. The contemporary novels written about these events become the cultural memory constructed by the characters in the novel through the author. Alongside the conflicts in these novels is the presence of different kinds of ghosts. The question which arises is: how can these ghosts represent memory in a way that rewrites dominant cultural narratives about the violent twentieth-century history of Vietnam? This thesis elaborates on the statement that all three novels use ghosts to challenge the dominant collective memory of Vietnam's twentieth century in three different ways; the first is the presence of ghosts as souls of the deceased who linger and share their accounts, the second is the ghost of war which refers to the lasting effects after the war, and the third form of the ghost is metaphorical for the absent presence where events and people who are forgotten remain present for some which can affect both the dead and the living.

This thesis utilises theories surrounding trauma, memory, and hauntology to analyse the novels and answer the research question. Such terminology and secondary literature are predominantly Eurocentric theories due to the limitedness of Vietnam-centred research, which is significant as Vietnam itself is not a Western country resulting in the potential that theories do not align with the dominant cultures and ideologies in Vietnam. For this thesis, the concepts of individual and cultural trauma are crucial as they apply to both the survivors of the war and the generations following. Individual trauma is trauma at its foundational level, where an event influences one person; this event is incomprehensible to the victim, which disrupts a person's functioning (Garland 9-11). Alongside individual trauma is the notion of cultural trauma. Compared to individual trauma, cultural trauma affects a larger group in society with "a loss of identity and meaning" due to a disruptive event (Eyerman 160). Both kinds of trauma are relevant to this thesis, but where individual trauma is more personal, cultural trauma is pervasive in a larger community.

Alongside cultural and individual trauma is collective and cultural memory. Collective memory is the story of a shared past as it is remembered by a group in the present where stories are passed on to new generations and those outside the group are silenced (Mcmahon 162). The memory is shared on the terms of an imagined community, whilst the memory itself also creates this community (Anderson 6). Regarding the Vietnam War, an imagined community collectively called Vietnam adheres to the dominant collective memory of the war in Vietnam, and the imagined community collectively called the United States bases itself on the dominant collective memory in the United States. A person can move from one community to another if their beliefs change, as the groups themselves are based on nationalism, identity, and a sense of belonging (Anderson 7). Collective memory can be divided into different forms, including cultural memory, defined as the remembrance of the past by a group using artefacts, also known as memory sites (Erll and Rigney 2). The novels

analysed in this thesis become forms of emergent memory sites where a past event is remembered in recently published novels. Alongside collective memory is collective amnesia, a term for the events not remembered by this group, which results in forgetting (Ricœur 413-414). A country's powerful institutions can stimulate collective amnesia if they purposefully influence the act of forgetting (Kundera 218).

These concepts of trauma in a cultural and individual sense and the collective and cultural memories retained and forgotten link to ghosts in literature where they are defined as beings that can create a link between the past and the present (Kim 243). In Vietnam, ghosts are relevant as they bear political, moral, and religious significance as ghosts "remain a robust resource for expressing political as well as spiritual sentiments" (Lincoln and Lincoln 192, 197). These ghosts can present themselves through either primary or secondary haunting, which is expanded upon in the literature review. These concepts and theories are applied to the three novels analysed in this thesis, all written in the past ten years, where the story takes place in different periods before, during, and after the Vietnam War and where ghosts are present implicitly and explicitly.

She Weeps Each Time You're Born (Barry 2014) is the oldest novel of the three and is less well-known than the others. The novel draws on magical realism, folklore, and the presence of supernatural powers to elaborate on Vietnam's history. The story follows a girl named Rabbit who is born amid the Vietnam War with a gift allowing her to hear and communicate with those who have succumbed. Through this character and the people she has become acquainted with, the reader follows the narrative of the protagonist as she tries to survive during the most violent years of the Vietnam War (1972-1975), the Sino-Vietnamese War (1979), the process of reunification, and the years following the reunification. The reader follows Rabbit as her thoughts, feelings, and experiences are presented, creating an account of how she, her family, and the people she encounters during her journey attempt to survive and

heal. During this journey, Rabbit comes across different ghosts and types of haunting, which adhere to both primary and secondary haunting. Primary haunting can be observed through the metaphysical ghosts who attempt to pass on into the afterlife via communications with Rabbit. Through their recounts, the novel provides a voice to those who are voiceless, allowing them to re-enter the narrative. Secondary haunting is presented through the trauma and grief suffered by those who survived the conflicts. Additionally, secondary haunting can be observed through the earlier-named lingering ghosts, where the ghosts' recollections introduce information that would remain unknown had these communications not existed. Thus, the novel presents metaphysical ghosts and intertextual entities that challenge the dominant collective memory through their existence and narrated memories, allowing for the rewriting of the dominant narrative.

The novel which influenced the increased interest in Anglophone narratives on the Vietnam War is Ocean Vuong's bestseller *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2020). The novel is a letter from a son nicknamed Little Dog to his mother, who cannot read. In this letter, Little Dog recounts his memories of his youth in the United States after his family fled from the Vietnam War. Through these accounts, the reader learns about his experiences as someone whose family endured traumatic events and as a Vietnamese immigrant growing up in the United States. Throughout the novel, Little Dog is bullied and attacked by those around him, including his own family, due to the trauma endured by his mother and the increased racism towards Vietnamese people. The two ghosts in this novel are implicit as the protagonist attempts to come to terms with his ethnicity, past, and divergence from the Vietnamese culture through secondary haunting. One of the ghosts is the trauma experienced by Little Dog's mother, which directly affects him. The second ghost is metaphorical for the family as they become similar to ghosts in this new country, where they do not live by the cultural norms in the United States' imagined communities. Due to their experiences and

memories, they attempt to belong to the communities of the United States whilst also belonging to the communities in Vietnam. The ghosts are both implicit remnants of a past but also the family and their existence, as they do not have a sense of belonging in this new country.

The most recently published novel analysed in this thesis is *The Mountains Sing* by Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai (2021). The novel focuses on two generations, resulting in two stories within one novel. The main story follows Hương as she grows up during the Vietnam War and the reunification. Simultaneously, the reader learns about Hương's grandmother, Trần Diệu Lan, who lost multiple family members during conflicts preceding the Vietnam War, namely the Japanese occupation (1940-1945), the Great Hunger (1944-1945), and the Land Reform (1954-1956) which forced her to flee to the city with her five children. The past is presented through storytelling, where Diệu Lan recounts her memories and attempts to preserve the past, including the events not documented in Vietnam's history books. Additionally, the reader learns about Hương's experiences as she longs for her family to reunite after the war and attempts to grow up in a family torn apart by trauma. In this novel, three ghosts present themselves, aligning with primary and secondary haunting. Here, the primary haunting is evident in a character nicknamed the Wicked Ghost, who embodies the characteristics of a ghost and symbolises the violence between a country's inhabitants during conflict. However, the predominant haunting in this novel is secondary haunting, where the trauma remaining in Hương's family members who fought in the war continues to affect their daily life, specifically, the PTSD presented in the character of Ngọc. Closely linked with trauma is the secondary haunting which presents itself through the grief and longing felt by the family members at home who wait for their loved ones to return. Lastly, another way through which secondary haunting can be observed is through the ghost representing a metaphor for collective amnesia. The Vietnamese regime's lack of memorialising events,

which are deemed disadvantageous to their ideology, leads to the forgetting of people and conflicts even though they did exist, resulting in the similarity with a ghost's invisibility.

In these novels, there is a crucial focus on Vietnam's twentieth-century history. This was a century filled with conflict where inhabitants had their families torn apart by war. Even though there were multiple conflicts in Vietnam during the twentieth century, this thesis focuses on the Vietnam War (1955-1975) and the reunification of Vietnam from 1976 onwards. The reason for this is that the Vietnam War is one of the most contested conflicts in both Vietnam's communities and the communities of the United States, resulting in a divided collective memory. In the West and to some extent worldwide, the dominant memory is that of the United States, as "the memories of the wealthy and powerful exert more influence because they own the means of production" (Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* 142). This memory focuses on the United States' involvement in the war and excludes as many unfavourable events executed by the United States as possible. In Vietnam, this cultural memory is influenced by the communist regime, which controls the documentation of war crimes and excludes events which are disadvantageous to the regime's political ideology. However, the increase in Anglophone narratives allows for a global audience where authors can challenge the dominant memory previously prevalent. Following the war was the reunification of Vietnam, which was not automatically a period of peace for Vietnam's inhabitants as the trauma of the war started to present itself and because of Vietnam's totalitarian regime, which affected the collective memory created. A more detailed account of these events is presented in Chapter One.

As mentioned before, the concepts used in this thesis are predominantly linked to trauma theory, memory theory, and hauntology. Over the years, trauma and memory theories have been extensively researched from Euro-American cultural perspectives. However, thus far, there has been limited Anglophone research on Vietnamese literature and trauma in

Vietnam, as the focus has been placed on how imagined communities from the United States participated in these conflicts alongside their experiences. Overall, this results in a lack of research on narratives by Vietnamese authors and their perspectives on the events, leaving few country-specific frameworks to employ in this research. Consequently, the concepts and studies used in this thesis are Eurocentric, as the few alternatives are authored in Vietnamese, resulting in inaccessibility due to the language barrier. Additionally, plenty of articles have been written on the Vietnam conflict; however, these articles are frequently reported from the perspective of the United States, limiting the potential understanding of the narrations by the inhabitants of Vietnam. Compared to this, Anglophone research on Vietnamese culture has been extensive, allowing for multiple definitions of ghosts and cultural rituals. This comprehensive research allows a precise understanding of the ghost's role in the imagined community.

Thus far, Euro-American institutions have paid little attention to Anglophone Vietnamese novels even though the interest in such novels has increased, as is also evident in the Women's Prize for Fiction 2023, where Cecile Pin's novel *Wandering Souls* (2023) about the Vietnamese boat crisis made the longlist. However, the lack of research can be accounted for by the time necessary to research such recently published novels on an event in a deeper historical time and for such research to undergo peer review, indicating it might still take a while for research to be published. Nevertheless, Vietnam remains a country with relevant topics for research and world literature, as the topics and perspectives presented in these novels have not yet been elaborated on in the world literature market (Walkowitz 22). With this thesis, I create a starting point for such research so a more global research database can eventually be generated.

Following this introduction is a literature review discussing studies done thus far on memory, hauntology, and trauma theory. After this, Chapter One discusses Vietnam's

twentieth-century history, specifically focusing on the conflicts in the three novels to create a general understanding of this history. Following this historical context, the thesis discusses each novel individually in analysis chapters. This discussion is ordered according to the publication dates of the novels, starting with Chapter Two, *She Weeps Each Time You're Born*. This chapter analyses how the ghosts with whom Rabbit can communicate alter and contribute towards the already established collective memory, how the ghosts of war affect Rabbit and her family, and the absent presence where events remain undocumented. After this is Chapter Three, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. This chapter analyses the implicit ghosts, a constant reminder of the trauma and collective memory remaining in Little Dog's family, even though this memory differs from the dominant memory in the United States and Vietnam. Lastly, there is Chapter Four, the analysis of *The Mountains Sing*, where a character is nicknamed Wicked Ghost as he symbolises the possibility of a country turning against their own people and the implicit ghosts of war with whom the characters live and who shape their memory of the past. Additionally, the absent presence is discussed as undocumented and forgotten conflicts are brought to light. Finalising the thesis is a conclusion concerning the findings and potential differences between the three novels and how future research can expand on these findings.

Literature Review

Thus far, research on Anglophone novels which challenge the dominant collective memory of the Vietnam War through haunting is limited. The reasoning for this can be found in the lack of representation of Vietnamese authors over the past ten years, which has only started to increase in the last few years. Because of this recent increase, academic research has not yet analysed such novels in the light of trauma theory, memory theory, and hauntology. Due to this, the combination of these three elements when analysing a novel is non-existent in the available research. However, separately, trauma theory, memory theory, and hauntology have been researched extensively from a Eurocentric perspective, where the concepts have precise definitions, findings, and links to literature. Additionally, thus far, there has been limited research into Asian countries and their experiences with memory and trauma, which are crucial sources for creating a less Western-centric perspective as these novels are based on Vietnam's culture and beliefs. This chapter explores the existing sources used in this thesis and how these specific sources are relevant.

Various sources are available to prepare for this thesis and understand more about Vietnam's history. The most crucial source is the non-fiction book *Nothing Ever Dies* by Viet Thanh Nguyen (2016), which explores how the Vietnam War is remembered by the government and imagined communities in both the United States and Vietnam. This book aims to take on a neutral standpoint and inform others about how the war affected both countries. Specifically, the book shows how complex the Vietnam War was and how the aftermath of remembrance is even more complicated. It does so by providing arguments as to how the war is still contested alongside images and explanations on how the war is remembered by the imagined communities in both countries. This shows both countries struggling with the need to remember, but also with their approach as North Vietnam's leaders censor information and memories of those opposed to them, and the United States

ruling officials present themselves in the best light possible by focusing on the fallen soldiers through monuments and movies (Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* 25). Since this thesis focuses on the struggle to remember, this book provides the necessary information on how complex this is when a war is as contested as the Vietnam War.

Memory theory is crucial for this thesis when analysing how the dominant memory is challenged through the chosen narratives. Thus far, extensive research has been done into how memory can be shaped and altered. An essential source for this thesis is Paul Ricœur's book *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), which bases itself on the research done by scholars before him. Because of this inclusiveness, Ricœur's book has become one of the cornerstones in memory theory. Essential for this thesis is that memory happens in the present as knowledge of the past is brought back into the conscious (Ricœur 100). Because the memory is formed in the present, it is not the same as a historical fact. It will inherently remain subject to the beliefs of an imagined community and can change over time (Ricœur 34). Additionally, Ricœur expanded on the existence of the earlier coined term collective memory, which states that memory does not belong to an individual but that individuals are connected through the imagined community and influenced by social constructs (93-94). The first person to have the memory is unknown as they are passed down through generations and can alter as society changes over time (Ricœur 93-94; Anderson 6). Individuals or entire communities can use these memories to reconstruct the past. In this framework, having an individual memory can challenge a collective memory and imagined community, due to which a divergence can be created (Ricœur 95). These definitions of memory by Ricœur are at the foundation of this thesis, as the novels include their own communities with differentiating collective memories. Additionally, the novels challenge the dominant collective memory prevalent in the communities of the United States and Vietnam through their narrativised reconstructions of the past.

However, remembering is impossible without forgetting. Consequently, Ricœur also turned to amnesia in his book, when entire events and people can eventually be left out of the collective memory. Amnesia can come in different variations due to social influences. Forgetting on its own is the element of memory which attempts to threaten the reliability of reconstructions of the past as it is inevitable that something slips away (Ricœur 413-414). However, forgetting can also be used by powerful institutions or people who abuse memory to achieve a specific goal, known as institutionalised forgetting. This institutionalised forgetting was specifically prominent after a conflict when those who supported the losing side were forced to reshape memory so that they believed the created memory of the victor's side (Ricœur 448). As a result, the dominant collective memory will become the one that was manipulated by those ruling the country or community (Ricœur 448). In the novels, this influence of the ruling society on remembering events is prevalent as the rulers of Vietnam attempted to manipulate what is remembered and what is forgotten about the Vietnam War, which turns memory into a tool of power (Ricœur 80). These concepts of memory and amnesia are at the heart of this thesis, as the act of remembering and forgetting, either accidentally or forcefully, influences how the novels challenge the dominant collective memory.

Another critical source for discussing memory is *Cultural Memory Studies* by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (2010), a collection of articles on the most significant findings of cultural memory which has become a keystone in the field of cultural memory. Of specific relevance is the introduction of the term cultural memory, which expands the notion of collective memory to include more facets of human life and memory (Erll and Nünning 5). Cultural memory differs from collective memory in its inclusion of the link between culture and memory, where the past affects the present in sociocultural contexts and which concerns itself with the social, medial, and cognitive processes of memory and where artefacts serve as

reminders of this past (Erll and Nünning 2, 6). The novels themselves are such artefacts allowing them to reconstruct the past and serve as a reminder of the harrowing events.

The different definitions of ghosts and haunting are crucial to understanding how the ghosts challenge collective memory. To then analyse these ghosts and their hauntings, there needs to be a clear division between the different types of haunting. The key source for the typology of the different kinds is "Toward a Critical Hauntology: Bare Afterlife and the Ghosts in Ba Chúc" by Martha Lincoln and Bruce Lincoln (2015). This article categorises haunting into primary and secondary haunting (Lincoln and Lincoln 200). For them, primary and secondary haunting differ in five crucial aspects. The first difference is that ghosts of primary haunting are metaphysical entities, whereas secondary haunting is the existence of entities that serve as tropes for "intrapsychic states and experiences" (Lincoln and Lincoln 200). The second key difference is that primary haunting is aimed at specific people, and secondary haunting is aimed at a larger group or society as a whole (Lincoln and Lincoln 200). Thirdly, the hauntings in primary haunting are immediate and intense for both the spirit and the person experiencing the haunting, whereas secondary haunting "is mediated by the researcher/author" who "tell the story of sufferings past" (Lincoln and Lincoln 201). The fourth difference is that ghosts of primary haunting aim to repair something so that they can enjoy the afterlife. In contrast, secondary haunting focuses on a broader repair where society is forced to remember "atrocities they might prefer to forget, while accepting responsibility for them and preventing their recurrence" (Lincoln and Lincoln 201). Lastly, the entities of primary haunting are portrayed as "terrifying creatures" that can cause fear in those they haunt, but secondary haunting presents fear in "the form of horror at the atrocities others inflicted on the dead" (Lincoln and Lincoln 201). Both primary and secondary haunting are present in the novels analysed in this thesis. This typology of the two kinds of haunting is crucial in defining the motivation behind the ghost's presence.

The fundamental explanation and exploration of hauntology found in *Specters of Marx* (Derrida 1993) and *Ghostly Matter* (Gordon 2008) are necessary to understanding haunting. The term hauntology was coined in 1993 by Jacques Derrida to describe the lingering effects of Marxism in Europe after its fall (Derrida 10). In Derrida's theory, hauntology refers to the presence of ghosts, called specters, which are neither absent nor present and create a link between the past and the present resulting in a haunting (Derrida 63). These specters are not literal ghosts but metaphorical, where there is a reason for their existence which is often to present the "emotional residue of social injustice" (Hollan 452). Derrida's theory was expanded upon in Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* (2008), which links the presence and existence of Derrida's ghosts to sociology, where she analyses the haunting in light of social constructs (Gordon 7). She states that the ghost is the sign that a haunting is occurring, not as someone dead or missing but as a figure where history and social constructs collide (Gordon 8). Her focus is on how "exclusions", "invisibilities", and the injustices of the past continue to affect the present through the haunting (Gordon 11, 17). For Gordon, these ghosts are similar to Derrida's specters in that they are a metaphor for what still lingers in the present. Contrastively, Gordon does place a more significant focus on the social injustices and the consequent haunting that takes place, which is crucial for this thesis as social injustices are at the heart of the Vietnam War and the following reunification. Because of this political focus, Gordon's definition of haunting and ghosts aligns with the ghosts presented as secondary haunting in the novels.

Thus far, trauma theory has predominantly been developed according to a Eurocentric perspective, influenced by the cultural concepts and religious beliefs in these Eurocentric countries. Therefore, little Anglophone research has focused on trauma in countries such as Vietnam, where the culture and spirituality differ from those in the West. However, since the authors live in the United States, they are aware of these Eurocentric concepts and could

choose to follow them rather than the Asian trauma concepts. The key Eurocentric source for this thesis is Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) which specifically focuses on the presentation of trauma in literature. In her book, Caruth researches how language is intertwined with a person's trauma, a crucial notion for this thesis, as the novels themselves can be perceived as mediums through which someone can come to terms with their past (Caruth 23-24). At the foundation of this analysis is Caruth's claim that trauma does not immediately form as the event is taking place but instead follows in the aftermath once the victim is able to reflect on the event and realise that they cannot comprehend what happened (Caruth 6-7). This aligns with cultural memory, where the memory is also created in the present rather than during the event. According to Caruth, this incomprehensibility lies at the foundation of a character's trauma and results in "repeated possession", where the victim reexperiences parts of the traumatic event (Caruth 136). Her definition of how trauma is formed and how trauma affects the victims aligns with what is presented in the chosen novels, as the trauma does not arise until after the war has finished. The repeated possession would present itself through the haunting experienced by the protagonists of the three novels. Furthermore, her discussion of narrativising one's trauma to come to terms with it is crucial in analysing the primary and secondary hauntings in the novels (Caruth 20). Caruth states that to fill this gap made in the memory due to incomprehensibility, one needs to let the whole event resurface through storytelling (7). This is because "trauma is suffered in the psyche precisely […] because it is not directly available to experience" (Caruth 61). It is not until this trauma is articulated that the victim can acknowledge and accept what has happened to them. The concept of narrativisation and its healing effects appear in the novels in varying degrees and is therefore necessary for discussing primary and secondary haunting.

Another Eurocentric concept is the presence and existence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in survivors of severely disturbing experiences, a term which was coined

based on the cultural values found in the United States (Leys 2; Barak 130). The predominant source which is of relevance for the exploration of PTSD in the characters of the novels is "PTSD: A Disorder of Recovery?" by Arieh Y. Shalev (2007). Specifically, how PTSD is created and manifests in the victim's daily life is essential to the scope of this thesis, as many of the characters are haunted by such lingering trauma. To analyse these characters, Shalev's definition of PTSD is foundational, as "PTSD is the result of threatening events that are also horrible and grotesque" (211). Since PTSD is a Eurocentric concept and the novels base themselves on a non-Eurocentric country, it is crucial to expand the used secondary literature to include the article "No PTSD in Vietnam" by Narquis Barak (2021), who interviewed psychiatrists and survivors who would be expected to have developed PTSD according to a Eurocentric perspective but have not done so (Barak 130). Instead, the survivors of the Vietnam War did not develop PTSD and claim that this is only a cultural product created by the United States and that the basis of diagnosis, as well as treatment, are founded in the United States' long history of society, religion, and political thought where the Christian idea of confession of one's sin is crucial (Barak 133). However, Vietnam is not built on these principles and religion, due to which their definition of trauma states:

> Any events, experiences, conflicts, or situations resulting in an overabundance of negative and sometimes even positive emotions, such as love, could fall under the rubric of 'psychological trauma.' Rather than fear or terror, medical biographies in patient records more often noted that the psychological trauma induced feelings of grief, sadness, shame, and loss. (Barker 139-140)

This difference in defining trauma subsequently results in a difference in treatment where a focus is placed on the family's involvement in a person's treatment, religion, honouring the dead, and resting (Barker 148-150). Both the Eurocentric and the Vietnamese analyses of PTSD are relevant in this thesis as the novels are written by authors familiar with the

Eurocentric perspectives but who might have turned to the Vietnamese response to trauma so that the representation is as authentic as possible.

Overall, the existing literature is more extensive in some fields than others. The research on memory theory and hauntology are relatively recent theoretical approaches, due to which recent research is elaborate. Due to the newness of these approaches, the scope of research was already broadened to include countries outside the Eurocentric sphere, as the research also focuses on different spiritualities and cultures outside the Western world. Trauma theory, however, has little Anglophone research in non-Eurocentric countries, which does result in a limitation where I turn to Eurocentric concepts as no alternative is available to me. Nevertheless, the predominant focus is placed on the limited research on non-Eurocentric trauma theory to create a complex analysis that stays as close to the sources and reality in Vietnam as possible.

1. Vietnam's Twentieth-Century History

Vietnam has been a communist country since its reunification in 1979 when the communist North started to rule after winning the war. In the twentieth century, Vietnam's inhabitants endured many conflicts and wars preceding the reunification. These tumultuous times included the major historical events of the Vietnam War and the reunification of the North and South. The war and its following reunification are events experienced by the characters in all three novels, whether implicit through the remaining trauma or explicit through characters experiencing the events in the novel's action. In the following sections, I elaborate on the crucial information about the Vietnam War and its contested status. Following this is a section discussing the reunification and how the end of the war did not result in a return to life before the war. Additionally, both sections elaborate on how these events are presented in the three books and how ghosts are used to rewrite this collective memory.

1.1 The Vietnam War 1955-1975

A worldwide contested conflict in the twentieth century was the Vietnam War, which lasted from 1955 until 1975. It was contested in its violence and the collective memory shaped after the war ended. In this war, the communist North of Vietnam was fighting against South Vietnam. In the North, the people supporting the communist government fought alongside their pro-communist allies to spread communism to Vietnam. In the South, the government was anti-communist and fought alongside allies who supported their stance, the most crucial ally being the United States. Initially, the conflict started through small-scale selective acts of violence. However, from 1959 onwards, this became a more extensive conflict as the victims would not be limited to those in the government ("Vietnam War"). Starting in 1965, the major operations between the North and the South began with the South

attempting to neutralise the North with the help of their allies; the United States actively partook in these operations ("Vietnam War"). The United States signed a peace treaty with North Vietnam in 1973, but the South continued to fight until 1975. The war ended when the North captured Saigon, and the South's loss was inevitable. By then, the conflict had taken the lives of an estimated two million Vietnamese and wounded approximately three million whilst also damaging Vietnam's cities. Alongside the physical damage, most civilians have suffered some form of trauma due to the perceived violence and loss of loved ones (Nguyen, "War and Diaspora" 707).

The Vietnam War is the most crucial conflict for this thesis, as all three novels occur partly before, during, or after the Vietnam War. Additionally, the Vietnam War is one of the most contested conflicts in Vietnam's history, making it relevant from the perspective of collective memory. These memories differ depending on whether someone is raised in a country that follows the community's dominant collective memory in the United States or Vietnam, resulting in different narratives of history (Ha 463-464). In the narratives provided by the United States, the predominant focus of this war is placed on Vietnam's role in world history and the United States' loss (Wilcox 1). In Vietnam, the stories related to these memories "de-emphasize Vietnam's international interactions entirely in favour of understanding Vietnam 'autonomously'" (Wilcox 1).

The lingering effects of the war and its contested status are prevalent in the three novels analysed in this thesis. In *She Weeps Each Time You're Born*, the suffering after the war is present in the ghosts Rabbit meets. These ghosts require someone to listen to their recount of suffering before they can pass on into the afterlife, making them literal ghosts and the remnants of war. Additionally, the ghosts of war are present through trauma or grief in the survivors whose loved ones' whereabouts are uncertain. These characters seek Rabbit to find a form of solace in the passing of their loved ones as they were living in uncertainty up to that

point. In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the protagonist does not directly experience the war. However, the lingering trauma still affects his life as his mother struggles to live with the memories of their past, which consequently affects Little Dog. Additionally, the novel elaborates on the perception and racism aimed towards Vietnamese people in the United States after the war (Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* 89-90). *The Mountains Sing* includes the mental remnants of the past. Here, the ghosts of war resemble the trauma after the harrowing events of those who went to fight for their county and the grief felt by those who are uncertain if their loved ones are alive. The remnants of the Vietnam War thus continue to haunt the characters in the novels, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly. Regardless, they form a direct link to the past, where there was violence and loss.

1.2 The Reunification of Vietnam

After the North captured and renamed the city of Saigon, the two halves became unified in 1976 as the Social Republic of Vietnam. Vietnam was now under communist rule and still is to this day. From post-unification onwards, Vietnam's government and its influential institutions have been in totalitarian control over the country, including how historical events will be remembered by its inhabitants (Mälksoo 11-12). The way through which this memorialisation was done was by selectively deciding which events would be taught in school curriculums, but also through re-education camps where memories of those against the North were manipulated to support the North (Mälksoo 12-13; Ricœur 448). Because of this, specific events and groups of people have either been erased from the inhabitant's knowledge or made more prominent, directly influencing the collective memory and amnesia (Ricœur 448).

With the reunification came the North's belief that it was necessary to re-educate the opponents of communism and those who fought against the North (Nguyen, "Vietnam's Re-

education Camps" 157). Because new rulers from the North decided that this was a necessity, re-education camps, also known as forced labour camps, were created to dissolve any remaining resistance, take revenge on the enemy, and force the North's created memory of the Vietnam War onto those who fought against them ("Re-education camps"; Ricœur 413-414). The activities in the re-education camps were inhumane methods where prisoners were fed little to nothing and expected to perform intense labour and self-criticism sessions whilst enduring abuse and the deaths of their fellow inmates with the goal that everyone would share similar memories in support of the North once they were released (Nguyen, "Vietnam's Re-education Camps" 158).

Like the war, these re-education camps left their marks on the survivors eventually returning home. Simultaneously, the released detainees would have a newly manipulated memory of the Vietnam War, due to which only one memory became prevalent throughout the communities of Vietnam. This memory supported the North and criticised the South, eliminating many victims and conflicts from the narrative. The novels *She Weeps Each Time You're Born* and *The Mountains Sing* refer to these ghosts of war that eventually arose after the war had ended. In the case of *She Weeps Each Time You're Born*, the protagonist Rabbit is placed in a re-education camp allowing for her perspectives on the camps as Rabbit reflects on her experiences and remarks Tu's efforts to smile when recalling the cruel events (Barry 244). In *The Mountains Sing*, there are explanations of the events in these camps as Hương's oldest uncle Minh, who fought alongside the South, recalls his experiences of labour and torture in the camp and how these events affected his health (Phan Quế Mai 316-317). Both characters in these novels remark on the necessity of re-imagining their experiences so that an altered memory would be the final result, even though none of these characters believed the North's manipulated memory.

Alongside the cruelties of the re-education camps is the totalitarian government's power over its inhabitants' collective memory. Because of the communist nature of the reunified Vietnam, the government had power over the publication of war crimes and the school curriculum (Nguyen, "Vietnam's Re-education Camps" 161). This power meant the government could decide to keep inhabitants in the dark regarding certain atrocities. This meant that years following the war, multiple war crimes were unknown, including the violence in the re-education camps and the violence carried out against landowners at the beginning of the Vietnam War. The power to exclude specific atrocities and documents from the public domain directly links to the ability to influence a country's collective memory (Ricœur 80). Because not all crimes were known by the inhabitants, except if they had their own recollection of the events, the eventual collective memory which would be generated was incomplete. These unknown conflicts and the victims who either suffered or succumbed to this violence are like ghosts in their invisible existence.

The altering of collective memory and the ghosts symbolising the absent presence is relevant in *She Weeps Each Time You're Born* and *The Mountains Sing*. These novels both present the experiences of undocumented war crimes to the reader. In *She Weeps Each Time You're Born*, this focus is placed on a massacre at a children's school where the succumbed ghosts tell the protagonist Rabbit about the violence they endured. As Rabbit decides to reveal this information, she is sent away as an exile so that the inhabitants of Vietnam remain unaware of this event (Barry 259-260). In *The Mountains Sing*, Diệu Lan focuses on conveying the stories the Vietnamese government did not document so that the following generations will not forget about their ancestors and the events that took place (Phan Quế Mai 166). To do so, Diệu Lan tells her granddaughter about the Great Hunger and the Land Reform as she recounts her feelings, experiences, and memories of the people who suffered and perished. Both novels highlight the importance of remembering events hidden by the

government. In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, there is a focus on the absent presence, but this is not linked to war crimes. Instead, the novel's characters have immigrated to the United States and have their recollections of the Vietnam War and recollections produced in the United States. Because these communities created different collective memories, the characters live without acknowledgement towards their memories of the war. Due to this, the characters in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* live with the absent presence of their own memories in the United States whilst also lacking the memories known by the inhabitants of Vietnam, which forces them to be outsiders in both countries based on their knowledge and heritage. Here, the ghost, which is created due to immigration, is the family.

All three novels then deal with the reunification of Vietnam to differing extents. In *She Weeps Each Time You're Born* and *The Mountains Sing*, characters experience the re-education camps, which left marks on the people forced to go there. Alongside these re-education camps is the absent presence, which focuses on the memories remaining after the war as the North of Vietnam used memory as a tool of power. In *She Weeps Each Time You're Born*, this predominantly relates to war crimes committed by the North which are not reported in Vietnam even though the protagonist knows they occurred. In *The Mountains Sing*, the focus is placed on silenced events before the Vietnam War, which are now passed on through storytelling so that the past and its victims are not forgotten. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a novel that takes a different approach and instead focuses on the differing memories of an immigrant family who remembers the Vietnam War but not its reunification and now live in the United States where perceptions of the war are different. Here the absent presence is the family and their memories, who become similar to a ghost in this new country where they do not fit into any communities.

2. *She Weeps Each Time You're Born*

She Weeps Each Time You're Born by Quan Barry (2014) is the oldest novel analysed in this thesis. The novel discusses multiple events in Vietnam's twentieth-century history, but the focus is on the Vietnam War and the following years. The war and reunification are experienced by the protagonist Rabbit, who is given her name after she is born to her murdered mother under the full Rabbit moon (Barry 44). Rabbit is born with the gift to hear and communicate with the dead, specifically those murdered in Vietnam's turbulent history. Three different ghosts can be observed in the novel. The first one is present through primary haunting by the remaining spirit of a murdered person who cannot pass on into the afterlife until their story is heard by someone, in this case, Rabbit and the reader of the novel. The other ghosts belong to what is defined as secondary hauntings (Lincoln and Lincoln 200-201). In the novel, these ghosts are evident when one looks at the lingering trauma and grief following Vietnam's violent conflicts haunting those who survived. The third ghost present in this novel is a metaphor for events and victims forgotten who did take place and exist. Here, the literal ghost and the metaphorical ghost work together as the metaphysical ghost introduces unknown information, providing Rabbit and the reader with knowledge of those forgotten and silenced events. The following sections analyse and discuss what these ghosts represent in the narrative and how they challenge the dominant collective memory.

2.1 The Victim's Lingering Spirit

She Weeps Each Time You're Born includes the spirits of people murdered in the conflicts which occurred in Vietnam. These ghosts belong to primary hauntings, where a metaphysical entity lingers in the present, unable to continue into the afterlife (Lincoln and Lincoln 200-201). Through these ghosts, Rabbit and the reader are introduced to the ghost's

experiences, where the entities themselves communicate their suffering. Through these accounts, the ghosts are given the space to narrativise their traumatic experience from their perspective, as they cannot pass into the afterlife without this acceptance (Caruth 6). The ghosts use the possibility of communication to process their trauma, but their existence and accounts also allow them to re-enter the narrative where their side of the story is usually unheard or filled in through the living's ideas and beliefs. Because of these communications, Rabbit can become a spokesperson for the ghosts as she can decide to reveal the unknown narratives to the public, subsequently challenging the dominant collective memory.

Many victims who succumbed as a result of the conflicts in Vietnam are still unfound, buried somewhere across the country (Uhl 575), as the novel also addresses, "The world was full of them. Everywhere we went. In the paddies. In the rivers. A nation of people who have been dying from war for over a thousand years. Everywhere their faces buried in the road" (Barry 178). In the novel, these ghosts communicate with Rabbit when she is close to their buried bodies. The ghosts with whom Rabbit communicates are traumatised beings, often plucked from life unexpectedly and violently, where they are forgotten as individuals as they belong to a larger group of victims. The ghosts are stuck in their place of death because "a history of tragic death binds the soul of the dead to the mortal drama of death and captivates it to the place of death, thus engendering a negative condition in the afterlife. The tragic or violent transition to death turns into an environment of confinement" (Kwŏn 128). Alongside their confinement is their transformation into unquiet ghosts disconnected from their loved ones, as explained by Lincoln and Lincoln:

> For when an individual suffers what is culturally defined as a 'bad death' or 'death in the street' (chêt âuáng) - an abrupt or unexpected death, away from home and family, when one is young and childless, and/or dying in such a way that the body is mutilated or incomplete - the funerary rituals cannot be performed that would ordinarily

> transform the deceased into an ancestor (tô tiên) with whom the survivors could then maintain respectful and mutually beneficial relations. Lost and disconnected, the spirits of those who have not received such treatment become unquiet, angry ghosts (con ma), leading what can best be described as a 'bare afterlife'. (198)

This violent transition and disconnection from loved ones, alongside the idea that "not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence had not yet been fully known" by the victims, makes it impossible to comprehend and accept what happened to those still lingering (Caruth 6). This lack of understanding is at the heart of the trauma of these ghosts and prevents their transition into the afterlife, instead forcing them to remain in their confinement. According to Kwŏn, "The grievous memory of the dead comes to lose its traumatic effect only when it is acknowledged by and shared with the living" (129), which would be the elements necessary for acceptance and transition into the afterlife. This necessity for acknowledgement is supported throughout the novel as Rabbit describes, "They call to me and they tell me things and I say, I hear you. The simple act of someone hearing them, an acknowledgement, and then they can go wherever it is they go" (Barry 178). "I hear you" (Barry 168) is the persistent sentence in every communication with the dead, as Rabbit always finishes the moments of contact with an acknowledgement, supporting the idea that this recognition by the living is a necessity for the traumatised spirits (Kwŏn 129).

Alongside Rabbit's contribution towards the ghost's healing process is the voice provided to the marginalised group of victims who would otherwise be unable to communicate and instead be spoken for by the people ruling Vietnam (Nguyen, "War and Diaspora" 698). Here, the reader and Rabbit are provided with accounts that do not conceal details and instead tell the story through the ghost's memories. Even though ghosts recreated by an author come with the dangers of confronting the fatal circumstances that made them and exploiting the voices to share one's beliefs, Quan Barry nevertheless includes them in the

narrative (Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* 248). This adheres to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory which focuses on people belonging to minority groups during postcolonial times, that the other, in *She Weeps Each Time You're Born*, the victims of war, must be reintroduced into a more inclusive representative narrative as they will not regain their voice otherwise (82-83, 90, 104). Since the author's reasoning for including these ghosts is unknown, it is also uncertain what beliefs the ghosts are based on, making their stories subject to the author as those who know the truth are not around to share it (Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* 281). Nevertheless, including these voices allows the otherwise silenced stories to be brought to light and re-enter the narrative, even if they are based on Barry's knowledge and beliefs. This highlights the existence of all victims, even if they belong to groups whose stories the rulers of Vietnam did not want to bring into the world (Barry 207). Their re-entering directly challenges the dominant collective memory of the community in Vietnam as well as the collective memory of the reader by introducing memories which otherwise belong to the collective amnesia.

The ghost's role in the narrative emerges when ghosts belonging to a minority group are stuck in their place of death in the trenches of Anne-Marie, a location in Vietnam. As the novel explains, the Black Tai, "ethnic minorities who lived along the Black River and had sided with the French", were unexpectedly shot by the French (Barry 196). The voices heard by Rabbit are filled with terror as the ghosts recall that the fight between the French and Vietnamese "wasn't our fight" (Barry 196). As a means of persuasion, the French killed fifteen Black Tai in the hopes that they would help attack the Vietnamese as revenge (Barry 196). The reason for the lingering ghosts in the novel can be found in their incomprehensibility, as they cannot understand what occurred to them and are desperate to be heard one last time so that their experience can be reconstructed (Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* 204). This act of reconstructing the traumatic event and retelling how one felt

during this time links in with narrativisation, which can be a vital element in processing trauma as it allows the victim to make sense of the incomprehensible through storytelling (Caruth 6-7). Alongside the reconstruction of the event is Rabbit's acknowledgement of the victim, which contributes towards accepting and processing one's trauma and provides them with the ability to move on into the afterlife (Kwŏn 129). This recognition is especially relevant in the case of the ghosts as there is usually no way to contact anyone and reconstruct one's trauma to reach acceptance, as communications between the dead and the living are often perceived as speculative. However, since the novel includes Rabbit with her unique ability, the ghosts have someone who listens to their narrative and acknowledges their story, bringing them back into the narrative where they would otherwise be unheard. Forgotten conflicts and victims, including those of the Black Thai community, are re-introduced to the narrative so their stories will not be forgotten. Subsequently, their re-introduction challenges the prevalent collective memory as history books in Vietnam and the United States omit these events as they are deemed less relevant. Alongside this, the ghosts go "wherever it is they go" after narrativising their story, indicating that acceptance has been reached as the need for lingering is no longer evident (Barry 178).

In *She Weeps Each Time You're Born*, the literal ghosts who linger are symbols of trauma: due to their lack of understanding about their murder they are stuck in confinement in their place of death. The ghosts use narrativisation to reconstruct their trauma and process what happened to them based on their memories. Simultaneously, Rabbit provides them with the acknowledgement that a living person has listened to their account, allowing them to move on. Whilst the ghosts find acceptance in their violent deaths, they provide Rabbit with previously unknown information, where the novel provides a voice for entities who are otherwise unable to communicate due to their deaths or the censorship in Vietnam. The ghosts

then fulfil two functions as victims stuck in their confinement and informants through which the collective memory in Vietnam's community is challenged.

2.2 Haunting the Present

After the war, the violent past of Vietnam continues to affect the survivors in the present (Boyle and Lim 1). This continuous haunting is done invisibly through trauma, grief, and regret formed after horrific events such as the Vietnam War (Lincoln and Lincoln 200-201). These ghosts are presented in *She Weeps Each Time You're Born* through secondary characters and Rabbit, as they all try to cope with the knowledge of atrocities inflicted on those who succumbed. The haunting of this past in the present is barely presented, which is surprising from a Eurocentric perspective on trauma (Barak 130, 132). However, based on the Anglophone knowledge of Asian trauma studies, this inwardness concerning trauma is normal because Vietnamese psychologists do not recognise PTSD in their survivors (Barak 133). Instead, trauma victims are encouraged to return to their everyday lives and partake in strenuous activities rather than think about the events they have witnessed or participated in (Hinton 441). However, closely linked with trauma is the haunting of grief, which is evident when one focuses on the people who survived the conflicts and are now attempting to come to terms with the loss of their loved ones. Both the trauma that continues to haunt the survivors and the grief following surviving loved ones wherever they go are discussed in this subchapter.

After horrific events in which a person's emotional or physical well-being is threatened, trauma can be formed as the victim cannot comprehend what happened to them (Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* 47). After the Vietnam War, where such a threat was inevitable due to the violence of the war, trauma was formed in many survivors (Micale and

Pols 2). Since trauma is a personal and cultural notion, this presents itself in varying degrees and ways. It can also be perceived in Rabbit and her father Tu, who vividly remember the Vietnam War and were sent to the re-education camps. However, as mentioned in the literature review, the presentation of trauma in survivors from Asian countries differs from those in Eurocentric countries. The novel also presents this through the character's limitation of outwardly expressing their suffering. Even though Rabbit has experienced the conflicts herself and is frequently in contact with the dead's traumatic pasts, she barely shows how this affects her. She only portrays these effects through her physical exhaustion, where "every time she listened, she became less herself, the dead filling her with their own stories" (Barry 206). However, aside from such exhaustion, the novel does not elaborate on Rabbit's trauma which could have formed due to her experiences. Instead, Rabbit continues her everyday life, which is how people in Asia were encouraged to cope after traumatic events (Hinton 441). A similar approach is presented by her father, Tu, who fought in the army, was sent to re-education camps, and had to spend multiple years in a refugee camp. Even though it is hinted that he has suffered hardships, he never outwardly expresses that this still affects his present. Instead, whenever he recounts his events to Rabbit, he keeps the information he shares limited to vital elements such as his wife and daughter passing away in a re-education camp (Barry 244-245). This restriction in Tu's expression of trauma can be linked to the idea that it is better not to remember or reminisce on the people and events that cause pain (Hinton 440). Even though both Rabbit and Tu have suffered hardship, they do not express this or show signs which would align with PTSD. The events do affect their lives as there are still traumatised ghosts who require help, and Tu has to continue his life without the people he cared for, but the presentation of this ghost is only to the limited extent where the reader is informed on vital elements but not the emotions paired with these due to which the ghost of

trauma is kept to oneself. The novel thus follows a more Asian perspective on the manifestation of trauma than Eurocentric trauma theory.

Alongside lingering trauma is the grief felt by inhabitants who lost loved ones as survivors are forced to find a way to live with their loss and the accompanying hurt. Losing a loved one is never easy to accept, and in instances of war where bodies may never be recovered, survivors are left without a sense of closure, causing the present to be filled with grief. In this sense, the closure desired follows Jody Lyneé Madeira's definition, where the survivors attempt to make sense of what happened through which acceptance and suffering in light of the survivor's memories can be achieved (xxiii-xxv). The search for closure, however, is difficult in the circumstances of a post-war country. Especially since this search where one attempts to process their grief often comes with questions, due to which closure can sometimes not be achieved; instead, acceptance of the past is the result (Madeira xxiii-xxv). In this act of grieving and seeking closure with one's feelings, secondary haunting can be observed as the grief continues to affect the survivors' daily lives (Lincoln and Lincoln 200). This haunting by the memories of those who are no longer present is evident in *She Weeps Each Time You're Born*, where Rabbit's unusual power contributes towards the processing of grief as the inhabitants bring her "gifts and offerings in the hopes that the two of them [Rabbit and her makeshift mother Qui] might console the newly dead and ease their passing" (Barry 188). Even though these conversations are not elaborated on in detail, it is said that groups of people line up once every year, the day after Tet, so that people from all over the country can attempt to contact their lost loved ones one last time (Barry 212). These moments of contact predominantly focus on helping the dead in their passing. Still, those left behind are provided comfort and security as Rabbit can assure that contact was made (Barry 210). Whether the conversations are for the dead or those left behind, both parties benefit as the dead can pass with greater ease, whereas the living are ensured of their proper passing. Since the proper

passing of a deceased person is of significance in Vietnam's culture, this knowledge of a safe passing is enough to provide the living with a sense of comfort as they can let go of their worries which might arise in fear that the spirit of their loved one becomes stuck (Kwŏn 10). Overall, Rabbit can provide the comfort and security for those left behind so that they can accept the event and attempt to move on with life (Madeira xxiii-xxv).

Both ghosts presented through secondary haunting thus affect the living after the war has ended. Such accounts of haunting where people in Vietnam struggle with their memories of the past or with lost loved ones are narratives often overlooked in the memories of the communities in the United States or limited to those the ruling institutions deem worthy of remembering and grieving. The ghosts in the novel thus provide the reader with a new perspective that in Vietnam, the cultural norms assist the survivors in healing the past trauma. Simultaneously, the ghosts introduce the idea that more people still suffer from the war than presented in the dominant collective memory of the United States, which predominantly focuses on the fallen soldiers from their army. The ghosts also challenge the dominant collective memory in Vietnam, where soldiers who fought along the South have not received the same respect and remembrance as those who fought along the North (Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* 33-35). Thus challenging both memories on different levels.

2.3 Collective Amnesia and Ghosts

Collective memory is a powerful part of a human's knowledge about the past. However, in a country such as Vietnam, where the government influences this collective memory, collective amnesia is just as relevant for discussion. In *She Weeps Each Time You're Born*, the communication between metaphysical ghosts and Rabbit allows Rabbit to learn about specific details or events not documented by Vietnam's officials, but it also allows her to learn about violent acts carried out by the people she travels with. These ghosts thus

provide a more detailed account of their violent deaths at the hands of the soldiers or Vietnam's inhabitants than the memories known by Rabbit, which challenges the dominant collective memory of Vietnam. In this sense, the ghosts belong to what is known as secondary haunting, where the entities attempt to reach a wider audience so that amnesia can be partially resolved (Lincoln and Lincoln 200-201).

The first instance through which ghosts provide information unknown to Rabbit is when she and her makeshift family attempt to escape from Vietnam during the Autumn Moon Festival of 1979. During this time, there was a short war between Vietnam and China from February 1979 until March 1979. Alongside this war was the continuing re-education of people who supported the South, which made many of Vietnam's inhabitants attempt to flee on overpacked boats (Wain 163-164). This journey was difficult because of the lack of boats that could be used and dangerous due to bombs planted in the ocean and pirates roaming the waters (Wain 164). Rabbit and the group with whom she escapes manage to obtain a boat, but once Rabbit enters the pilothouse, her head is filled with the voice of a "spirit desperate to be heard" as she can hear the spirit proclaim "[t]ake whatever you want, then the sound of a fishing knife punching two holes in the side of the throat, the air hissing out red." (Barry 139-140). This encounter with the victim allows Rabbit to learn that someone had died and how they died, which counters the account provided by those onboard as they claim that the doctor with whom they are travelling bought it, which has become the collective memory shared by those on board (Barry 154). The recount provided by the ghost allows Rabbit to question how the boat was acquired as she notices that "there was something almost surgical in the way the knife punctured the throat" (Barry 154). Through Rabbit's abilities, she can reconstruct the past through the spirit's accounts. As is evident in this segment, the knowledge provided by the ghost allows for an understanding of the greater image which was otherwise kept hidden. In turn, this understanding contributes towards the collective memory created by the imagined

community of those escaping as they have now been introduced to the truth, changing the story they will remember later on in life when they reflect on their attempt to escape.

In the previous segment, the ghost challenges the dominant collective memory of the community on a small scale. However, the ghosts in the novel also challenge the large community of Vietnam, which follows the dominant collective memory imposed by the North rulers. On its most significant scale, this is done by introducing Rabbit to a massacre in My Kan, a hamlet nearby Hanoi (Barry 231). A massacre which closely resembles the one found in My Lai and hints towards the usage of traumatic realism. A concept introduced by Michael Rothberg where fiction is utilised to make the incomprehensible easier to understand after all the experiences of the victims have been lost, as has been the case with the My Lai massacre (Rothberg 130). Upon arrival, Rabbit remarks on the remains of a catholic church, the distant voices she hears, and the presence of the ghost of a young girl near the altar. The ghost starts to communicate with Rabbit elaborating on how the massacre started and that the soldiers who attacked the hamlet were Northern Vietnamese soldiers. Like most children, the ghost child focuses her story on the most important people in her life and the most impactful events: her family and the lies of the soldiers. As the ghost recounts that “They said they wouldn’t hurt us. They said they’d just send the bad ones among us to reeducation camps and then we would all be brothers and sisters”, followed by her memory of a soldier shooting her father through his neck (Barry 232-234). The ghost leads Rabbit to a field where she learns how gruesome the massacre was whilst the narrator also remarks on the lack of remembrance, which is stimulated by the government in Hanoi:

> One could walk right over the spot and think nothing of it. In this tiny hamlet of My Kan, the number of people killed is three times the number of people who lived there, four hundred and twenty-eight dead, and they’re all right here where Rabbit is standing, though the government in Hanoi would deny it. (Barry 234)

Whilst standing on the field, Rabbit continues to hear voices recounting how they were murdered (Barry 234). This encounter introduces Rabbit to the secrets of the war whilst also providing the realisation that she is not safe now that she has acquired this knowledge. By including this massacre in the novel, the reader is informed about the violence of the war and the censorship present in Vietnam, due to which the dominant collective memory in the community of Vietnam is challenged.

As a result of this counter-memory, Rabbit and her family attempt to escape Vietnam once more as "It would only be a matter of time before word spread of what she'd found in My Kan […] The government would put her under house arrest as they had done to a local poet who had penned a song about the southern dead" (Barry 246). This revelation presented to Rabbit through her abilities carries the power to create a more inclusive memory where both sides of the war are remembered for what they did, a notion mentioned by Viet Thanh Nguyen as essential for an ethical memory, which is the only way through which forgiveness can one day be achieved (34). However, such an ethical memory can only be achieved when a country and its inhabitants are willing to see both the enemy's and their own humaneness and inhumaneness (Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* 96). Until this can be achieved, the victors engage in what is known as disremembering, where "forgetting is not accidental but deliberate, strategic, even malicious" (Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* 59). In the case of Vietnam, the country is not yet ready to accept and present its own inhumanity to its inhabitants. Instead, it attempts to keep others from doing this for them through censorship (Cain 87). This censorship leads to collective amnesia, as is the case with the novel's segment, as Rabbit is not allowed to document her findings and is in danger of being put under house arrest, indicating the measurements that will be taken when someone becomes a danger to the cause of the totalitarian government (Pierre 77). The ghosts she encounters on her trip directly

challenge the dominant memory in Vietnam's imagined community, introducing a new perspective on the war, including those who were victorious and those who lost.

In the novel, the ghosts provide Rabbit with the reality of the conflicts rather than the idealised image presented to maintain the victor's humaneness. These accounts immediately affect the collective memory known by Rabbit as she is predominantly exposed to what the people in power decide is worth remembering and idealises the North's ideology (Ricœur 80-81). On a small scale, this challenging of memory and events is the doctor and the owner of the boat, but on a country-wide scale, this includes atrocities carried out by the North (Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* 22-23). The ghosts then challenge the dominant memory while simultaneously fighting the existing amnesia by introducing a new narrative.

3. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

The novel which has stimulated increased interest in Anglophone novels on the Vietnam War from a Vietnamese perspective is Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). The novel is a letter from a son, Little Dog, to his illiterate mother. The author of the letter recounts his memories from his life as a child growing up in the United States with a Vietnamese heritage. In this letter of memories, multiple ghosts present themselves. These ghosts all belong to the notion of secondary haunting, where no observable entities are mentioned; instead, everything is related to the interpsychic states of the characters. Two ghosts specifically can be observed. The first is the haunting of trauma rooted in Little Dog's mother, directly affecting Little Dog even if he did not experience the war. The second ghost can be perceived as a metaphor for Little Dog and the family as a whole as a result of the Vietnamese diaspora, which led them to flee an unsafe country to a new one where they have no connection to others due to which they become similar to ghosts in their invisibility. The following subchapters discuss these two ghosts and how they help rewrite the dominant collective memory.

3.1 Unresolved Trauma Returns

In the novel, only two characters can remember the Vietnam War: Little Dog's mother and grandmother, since Little Dog himself was too young to recall life before immigration. Because of this, Little Dog has no memories of the war, but his mother suffers from the trauma left behind. His grandmother does present episodes of PTSD, but these episodes are limited compared to his mother. Consequently, Little Dog is confronted with these memories and the harm they have done as he grows up with his mother in a small house and is thus victim to the reactions his mother gives to triggers, including violent behaviour towards him.

This section goes into depth on how the trauma caused by the war follows this family overseas and affects Little Dog.

A parent's trauma can have significant implications for the psychological state of a child as the trauma can be passed down through storytelling, or the implications of existing alongside a traumatised parent can cause the child to become trapped in their parent's trauma (Lambert, Holzer, and Hasbun 9). In Little Dog's family, PTSD is observable in his grandmother and mother, who have experienced the Vietnam War. However, especially his mother's trauma affects him as the effects of PTSD on his grandmother are limited to physical remnants and the trigger of fireworks which causes her to hide (Vuong 19). On the other hand, his mother's PTSD manifests in various ways, including abuse endured by Little Dog, which is intertwined with his other memories of his youth. The abuse is physical and recurrent; Little Dog recalls, "The first time you [mother] hit me, I must have been four. […] Then the time with the remote control. A bruised welt on my forearm I would lie about to my teachers. […] The time you threw the box of Legos at my head" (Vuong 5-6). The abuse would afterwards be followed with an apology, food, and a form of reasoning stating, "You [Little Dog] have to get bigger and stronger, okay?" (Vuong 6). Research has found that the risks of such child abuse by a parent of a refugee family are increased if this parent has also endured traumatic experiences (Timshel, Montgomery, and Dalgaard 315-316), making the abuse endured by Little Dog a potential consequence of his mother's PTSD as Little Dog remarks that he "read that parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children. Perhaps there is a monstrous origin to it, after all. Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war." (Vuong 13). The abuse continues until "[t]he time, at thirteen, when I finally said stop. Your hand in the air, my cheek bone stinging from the first blow. […] we both knew you'd never hit me again" (Vuong 11-12). Abuse from a traumatised parent to a child is rarely discussed in light of the Vietnam War, even though this war left many

inhabitants with some form of lingering trauma, which could mean that similar abuse occurred in different households. In the case of Little Dog's family, the trauma his mother tries to live with directly affects Little Dog as she is violent towards him until he can finally tell her to stop. Whether this violence is a result of only the Vietnam War is unknown. However, since child abuse increases if a parent has endured a traumatic experience alongside immigrating out of necessity, it is not unlikely that this is the predominant cause for his mother's violent surges (Timshel et al. 315-316). The trauma of the war thus directly haunts Little Dog in the form of his mother as she turns into something similar to a "monster […] a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once" (Vuong 13), making her similar to a ghost, someone almost unknown to him who haunts him through fear.

Alongside the trauma that manifests through the abuse of Little Dog are the more commonly presented symptoms of PTSD, such as nightmares and various forms of reexperiencing the traumatic event (Leys 2). In Little Dog's family, this trauma is deeply embedded in his mother, and war-like symbols or remembrances are occasionally compared to present-day life in the United States. These symbols are significant in the link to the past and the episodes where her PTSD flares up. One moment PTSD is not specifically triggered, but when a reference to the traumatic past is created is when Little Dog's mother points at a roasted pig stating that "the ribs are just like a person's after they're burned" (Vuong 8). Such memories resurfacing when viewing mundane parts of life presents the deep-rooted traumatic memories harboured by his mother. However, the memories and the linked trauma also manifest in hallucination and terror as Little Dog recalls shouting, "Boom!" to prank his mother whilst she instead screamed and "clutched your chest as you leaned against the door, gasping" (Vuong 4). Alternatively, the moments when his mother locked herself in the closet listening to Chopin in the middle of the night as Little Dog asks her to return to him (Vuong 12). The request to his mother, begging her to return to him, is similar to the grief experienced

after a loved one's death as those who stay behind beg them to return. The symbols of war also return when his grandmother attempts to help Little Dog's mother return to the car by stating, "come back, come back in the helicopter", as her daughter is stuck in the middle of a hallucination, again showing the similarity with begging a dead person to return (Vuong 70). Even though Little Dog thus did not experience the horrors of war, he grew up alongside his heavily traumatised mother. His mother especially suffered from trauma-induced episodes where she became more like a ghost than herself as she was far away from those around her. Whilst the trauma haunted his mother, it directly affected Little Dog as the exposure to such horrors in a person who is supposed to indicate safety is traumatising to the child and can result in trauma being passed on (Sangalang and Vang 745).

Through the letter presented in the novel, Little Dog can narrate his experiences, including the trauma he endured due to his mother's ghosts (Caruth 6). As Little Dog states at the beginning of the letter, "I wasn't trying to make a sentence – I was trying to break free" (Vuong 4), establishing that this letter recounts everything he is trying to break free from, which includes the trauma he experienced directly and indirectly through his mother. The letter is his way of rewriting his family's narrative, breaking free from the cycle of trauma and growing into someone new (Caruth 6). This follows the idea that narrativising one's trauma can allow one to process and move past what has been haunting them (Caruth 23-24). Additionally, the novel serves as a memory site for all the hurt experienced by those who witnessed the atrocities of war and the generations which follow and carry the generational trauma until someone can break the trauma cycle. The novel challenges the dominant collective memory prevalent in both the United States and Vietnam that the war, even if it happened forty-eight years ago, still holds a firm grip on many families. It serves as a harsh reminder that trauma is still carried today and could continue to do so until the victims break free from the firm grip of the war.

3.2 Diaspora and the Lack of Connection

As mentioned in the introduction, imagined communities are essential in creating collective memory. However, it also creates a space where people feel connected, an imagined group whose identity aligns with those around them (Anderson 7). This belonging to a community is a vital element of human life as people seek those similar to their ideas and ethnicity so that they are not isolated. Such connection is essential for people to acclimatise to a new country as the chances are that they have little to no relationships in their new environment, especially when fleeing from traumatic events (Nguyen, "War and Diaspora" 698-699). This necessity and lack of connection is a vital element in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, as the characters belong to the Vietnamese diaspora, where many fled from Vietnam to avoid the violence of the war and the newly imposed rulers (Vu and Satzewich 7-8). Many of those who fled struggled to reintegrate into imagined communities as racism and hatred were prevalent after the war (Vu and Satzewich 10). This led to many people floating around in a country where they did not feel like they belonged to the new country, but also not to their country of origin since the war changed everything inhabitants deemed normal before. This is the case for Little Dog and his family as they endure racism and a lack of connection to anyone other than themselves. Because of this, the family's existence becomes similar to that of ghosts as they live without any particular connections or sense of belonging to their country and those around them. The following sections analyse how this manifests in the novel as the characters attempt to integrate and the hardships they endure due to not fitting in with other communities.

Since the family immigrated from Vietnam in times of conflict, they could not learn English before coming to the United States (Hoang 32). Automatically, this forms a problem with connecting oneself to an imagined community as they are built from various cultural

markers such as language, beliefs, memories, and more (Anderson 6-7). The incapability to communicate with the other inhabitants forms a barrier between Little Dog's family and those around them. This barrier was strengthened by the increased racism towards Asian people after the Vietnam War, which led to hatred and violence aimed at those who fled (Vu and Satzewich 10). Little Dog also experienced such physical attacks from his classmates, who were influenced by their fathers and felt like losing the war was a loss of identity (Vuong 24). This violence would be focused on his country of origin and inability to speak English as they push Little Dog's face against the glass, force him to look at them and to "speak English", dominating the person inferior in this situation as the "boy with the yellow bowl cut" has his imagined community to support him in this act of discrimination and violence (Anderson 149-150; Vuong 24). Consequently, those in the imagined community interpret the situation as a moment to show their power, and more children join the possibility of exerting dominance over someone (Vuong 24-25). The already-formed hatred towards Asian people, and especially Vietnamese people, combined with the lack of connection to any of the imagined communities due to a lack of communication, turns Little Dog into an outsider whose only solution is to learn the elements crucial to the imagined communities in the United States, among which is the English language as his mother tells him that he needs to "have a bellyful of English" so he can survive among these groups (Vuong 26). Until Little Dog can use this language, he cannot express himself, which also means he cannot challenge the dominant collective memory created by these communities as he does not have the words to do so. Similarly, his mother is just as far from these communities as Little Dog since she cannot speak English either. Instead, she attempts to make herself understood by physically representing what she seeks, such as waggling her finger against her lower back to indicate an oxtail (Vuong 30-31). This desperate attempt at communication only works counterproductive as those in the store mock her and refrain from helping her or Little Dog. Due to the inability

to speak English, no form of communication can be achieved, and the division between Little Dog's family and those who have lived in the United States for a long duration is strengthened as the family is invisible and unimportant for communities who have already found one another. Because of this, the family is similar to ghosts as their existence is just as lonesome and invisible.

It is not until Little Dog learns the English language that he can re-enter the narrative and challenge the dominant collective memory in the United States. This choice to learn a new language is found solely in the hopelessness experienced by him and his family as he:

> Promised myself I'd never be wordless when you needed me to speak for you. So I began my career as our family's official interpreter. From then on, I would fill in our blanks, our silences, stutters, whenever I could. I code switched. I took off our language and wore my English, like a mask, so that others would see my face, and therefore yours. (Vuong 32)

Once Little Dog starts to learn the language, the hardships surrounding his lack of English disappear, and he can connect more with those around him as he becomes less of an outsider to those who have already rooted themselves in the United States. His mother and grandmother, however, do not learn the language and continue to communicate with their limited Vietnamese as the war's violence included the bombing of schools, ensnaring the inhabitants in their level of Vietnamese at the moment of destruction (Vuong 31; Hoang 32). Because of this, Little Dog will continue to be the only link between the imagined communities in the United States and his family, due to which he partially belongs to the imagined communities in the United States but also to communities in Vietnam due to his heritage. However, it is not until Little Dog returns to Vietnam to bury his grandmother that he realises that he was "already Vietnamese" all along and that even though he grew up amidst different imagined communities, he still partially belonged to the community in

Vietnam (Vuong 229-230). In Vietnam, even though his mother has different memories of the war, she can fit in better as she knows the language and customs, so she is accepted readily. Ultimately, Little Dog will continue to be between different imagined communities where he does not explicitly belong, as he attempts to belong in the United States after the Vietnam War. On the other hand, his mother and grandmother continue to be ghosts in the United States as their lack of communication barriers them from communities, whereas they are accepted readily in Vietnam.

It is thus possible to overcome this position as a metaphorical ghost in a new country, but this requires adapting oneself to fit in with the imagined communities. Most importantly, learning the language so that communication can be the first form of connection. Through this knowledge of English, Little Dog can eventually challenge the dominant collective memory prevalent in the communities of the United States through the letter serving as the novel's story. As the letter itself is a direct result of the acclimation process, it focuses on these lonely times endured until the author of the letter learns the language and finds connections with some of his peers. Alongside his experiences as an immigrant growing up in the United States, the letter also recounts the trauma endured by his family as a result of the war. Learning the language allows Little Dog to find connections to those around him and enter imagined communities of the United States while remaining a link between these communities and his family. Simultaneously, the language allows Little Dog to speak up about his experiences through the letter presented in the novel, where he challenges the dominant collective memory by introducing his part of the story for which he previously did not have the words.

4. *The Mountains Sing*

The Mountains Sing by Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai (2020) is the most recently published novel and has gained popularity through social media. The novel spans multiple generations and predominantly focuses on a young girl named Hương, who grows up amidst the Vietnam War. The story also returns to Vietnam's past with the violent events of Japanese oppression, the Great Hunger, and Land Reform through Trần Diệu Lan, Hương's grandmother, who passes on her stories to preserve the past. As Hương grows up alongside her grandmother's stories and the start of the reunification, other family members enter the narrative once they return from the war or when their fellow soldiers bring their clothes home. Throughout the novel, various ghosts can be observed who haunt the protagonist and her family. Primary haunting is predominantly linked to one character who is not dead but is given the nickname of Wicked Ghost. This character embodies the violence that can arise between neighbours and is someone who inflicted trauma on Hương's family. However, the majority of the haunting in this novel can be perceived as secondary haunting as Hương's family returns from the war with physical and mental scars which they must learn to live with. This trauma especially haunts Hương's mother, Ngọc, who worked as a doctor on the battlefield. Furthermore, the haunting is prevalent in the family through grief and longing for their missing family members. The last ghost presented in the novel is the metaphor for the absent presence as victims and events are not included in the collective memory shaped by Vietnam's rulers. The following sections discuss how the novel presents these ghosts and how they help challenge the dominant collective memory.

4.1 Wicked Ghost

The character nicknamed Wicked Ghost is a violent tax collector who supports the French colonisers. Even though this character is alive throughout the novel, his appearance

and behaviour are similar to the ghosts present in primary haunting. Such ghosts are described as metaphysical, intense, terrifying, and appear to have an aim for why they haunt (Lincoln and Lincoln 200-201). These characterisations align with Diệu Lan's observation of a man with a "meaty face, narrow eyes and a bald, shiny head" as the village people "all dreaded the sight of him and his whip" (Phan Quế Mai 31). In the case of Wicked Ghost, the reason for haunting the other characters is the greed and jealousy which arises when a country is torn between political divisions, as his primary focus is taking care of himself whilst profiting from the tax collections of others. If the people did not have his money, he would resort to whipping them instead (Phan Quế Mai 31). Such an instance where neighbours turned against one another to survive happens more frequently during internal wars, which is how the Vietnam War started (Dror 3). However, Wicked Ghost's true nature of violence and self-centredness comes to a climax when Diệu Lan and her mother accidentally stumble upon his luscious fields of corn whilst the village is succumbing to the Great Hunger, which resulted in a population decrease of 15% in Vietnam (MacLean 188). Rather than being given any food, Diệu Lan and her mother are abused at the hands of Wicked Ghost (Phan Quế Mai 88-89). This abuse resulted in Diệu Lan's mother passing away due to the violence inflicted on her whilst Diệu Lan was still held captive (Phan Quế Mai 89-90). During the abuse, the family heirloom carried by Diệu Lan's mother, a gold and ruby necklace, was also taken by Wicked Ghost (Phan Quế Mai 336). The suffering of this event stays with Diệu Lan even when she sees Wicked Ghost again, who turns out to be Hương's fiancée's grandfather (Phan Quế Mai 334). The realisation that the grandfather is Wicked Ghost results in Diệu Lan collapsing and Hương breaking the engagement as she "could no longer love him. He was the flesh and blood of Grandma's worst enemy" (Phan Quế Mai 335). The haunting of Wicked Ghost and the subsequent trauma following Diệu Lan and her family is not resolved until after Wicked Ghost has passed away and the necklace is returned. His death allows the haunting to end as

the one inflicting the trauma seizes to exist even if "it's impossible to undo his sins" (Phan Quế Mai 337). Reconciliations and acceptance are achieved as the family heirloom is returned to Diệu Lan due to Wicked Ghost's daughter's intentions to repair the bonds broken and damaged by her father (Phan Quế Mai 337). It is not until this point that the healing of past trauma can be done as Diệu Lan recommends her granddaughter to marry the one she loves as "blood evolves and can change", a vision she did not harbour before the return of the necklace (Phan Quế Mai 337).

The haunting presented through this character is in line with the descriptors of primary haunting, even though the one doing the haunting is not dead. The character's symbolic meaning is prevalent as it becomes evident that not all harm inflicted on the Vietnamese inhabitants came from outside of Vietnam or even their own villages. Instead, it shows the vengefulness and selfishness that can arise when a country is experiencing violent conflicts, especially during a war when inhabitants are expected to side with one of the armies (Dror 3). The suffering of the survivors does not end until the family heirloom is returned and the ghost has left. The gold and ruby necklace indicates the growth and reconnection that can occur after hate and violence take control over relationships throughout a country. Just like the family, now that all conflicts have ended, Vietnam's government and institutions will have to repair the damaged country and help trauma-ridden inhabitants so that growth and healing can occur.

4.2 Ngọc's PTSD

In *The Mountains Sing*, the characters who went to war and are explored in depth are Hương's close family members, among which her mother, who returns with both physical and mental scars she has to live with. The damage left behind by the events she went through

continues to affect her daily life even after her return home. The memories of the war continue to haunt her in her waking hours and sleep as "it took away a piece of their [soldiers] souls, so they could never be whole again" (Phan Quế Mai 199). The haunting referred to is secondary haunting, where the past continues to affect the present (Lincoln and Lincoln 201). This section discusses how deep the ghosts of war can be rooted in a survivor, in this case, Ngọc, and how this can affect her life even after her return home.

Ngọc returns from the war as a changed woman as she could not retrieve her husband and suffered through events that resurface as trauma after her return (Caruth 6-7). Ngọc's trauma aligns with what psychiatrists in the United States coined as PTSD, where the victim reexperiences the event in their mind or imagines that they are back at the place and time of the event (Shalev 207). Symptoms prevalent in people with PTSD are "flashbacks, nightmares, and other reexperiences, emotional numbing, depression, guilt, autonomic arousal, explosive violence or tendency to hypervigilance" (Leys 2). These symptoms are intrusive and bothersome for the victim, whose daily life is influenced by the formed trauma and the consequent reactions to potential triggers (Leys 2). With PTSD, the symptoms are supposed to decrease as a person processes the event and comes to terms with what has happened (Shalev 212).

Ngọc exhibits many of these symptoms once she has returned home. Especially nightmares, depression, emotional numbing, and guilt are prevalent now that she has left the environment where her trauma was formed. As was remarked by Hương, "I couldn't understand how she could scream so loud in her sleep, about bullets, shooting, running, and death" as her mother only made sounds "during the night, when she slept, her body shaking with nightmares" (Phan Quế Mai 74). Alongside the nightmares is the intrusive depression, which profoundly affects Ngọc and those around her. After her return, "there was no laughter, no talk as I'd [Hương] hoped for" (Phan Quế Mai 75). Instead, Ngọc remains in bed and

avoids conversation with anyone who attempts, forming a wall between herself and the outside world, including her family (Phan Quế Mai 74, 98). Regardless of Hương's efforts or the efforts of old friends visiting, Ngọc refrains from sharing the memories of events that led to her trauma and instead keeps it all to herself, which means healing cannot occur yet (Herman, *Recovery from Psychological Trauma* 145). However, at the heart of the trauma reexperienced by Ngọc is the grief and guilt she carries towards her family members. This deep-rooted trauma is revealed once Hương finds her mother's notebook in which she recounts her feelings and actions during and after the war. In these journal entries, Ngọc recounts the earlier named nightmares from her perspective and her belief that she does not deserve the love others want to provide her with (Phan Quế Mai 210-213). However, the journal also mentions a dead baby and the guilt carried by Ngọc as she could not bring back her husband and is unsure whether he is still alive (Phan Quế Mai 207-208). The mentioned baby was a boy whom Ngọc aborted as it came into existence through rape by the enemy (Phan Quế Mai 215), a physical intrusion which frequently happened during the war and was a topic silenced afterwards (Weaver Yount xi). Her becoming pregnant with the enemy, even if it was by no means voluntarily, results in the deep-rooted fear and guilt that she is not worthy of her family anymore as she has become fouled (Phan Quế Mai 100, 207), which is a perspective found to be recurrent in rape victims during the war (Weaver Yount 19). When Ngọc eventually does start to talk about the trauma she endured in the war, she keeps the baby her secret as the guilt is too intense, still isolating herself from her loved ones, due to which healing is impossible (Herman, *Recovery from Psychological Trauma* 145). It is not until Hương reads the segment on this baby in her mother's journal that Ngọc is forced to reconnect with her community as she has to tell the story as "you've [Hương] discovered the root of my sorrow, yet it's only half of the truth" (Phan Quế Mai 216).

To overcome PTSD, one critical process is facing fears experienced by the person and talking about these experiences, as trauma and language are closely linked (Shalev 220; Caruth 6). In Ngọc's case, part of her fear was her family discovering her secret; however, now that this is done, she can face her family's reactions and start the reconnection process, a vital element in healing from trauma (Herman, *Recovery from Psychological Trauma* 145). Because of this, the healing process of Ngọc's trauma starts as she narrativises her story with her daughter and mother, who can now support her with oil lamps beside her bed (Phan Quế Mai 220; Herman, *Recovery from Psychological Trauma* 145). Ngọc also faces her other fears of returning to medicine as Ngọc herself expresses that "she had to conquer her demons" (Phan Quế Mai 220). Even though the nightmares continue to haunt her during her sleep, her waking hours are no longer riddled with the ghost of war. (Phan Quế Mai 220). This is in line with what was researched by Arieh Y. Shalev, as PTSD symptoms are supposed to decrease as time passes if the victim can start the process of healing (Shalev 212).

Ngọc thus returns from the war a changed woman. Instead of returning as a mother glad to be reunited with her family, she is haunted by the ghost of war through PTSD, which keeps her from functioning as usual. It is not until Ngọc starts to share the root of her trauma and face her fears that healing can occur. The narrativisation of her trauma has been the key, allowing her to make sense of her story and grow (Caruth 7, 61). Thus, PTSD initially haunts Ngọc through secondary haunting, where the past trauma affects the victim in the present but is eventually resolved as the trauma is processed. Such lingering trauma in survivors is often overlooked or ignored, especially by the communities in the United States who do not want to remember the atrocities they committed and the effects this might have had on the Vietnamese inhabitants. The secondary haunting thus also challenges the dominant collective memory that the actions partaken during the war affected the inhabitants severely.

4.3 Grief and Longing

Closely linked to trauma are the ghosts of grief and longing. Its close link is observable in the preceding subchapter, where Ngọc's PTSD is also prevalent through her grief. Grief and longing are a way secondary haunting presents itself alongside trauma, as missing loved ones can affect a person's daily life. Especially in a war when a family might never bury the body of their lost ones properly, the grief is immense (Espiritu 19-20). In a country such as Vietnam, where cultural burial norms are vital to a person's passing into the afterlife, this grief is founded on cultural norms and the personal loss endured (Kwŏn 10). In *The Mountains Sing*, many characters endure such haunting through grief as most have lost someone or are unsure of their whereabouts. This subchapter discusses how this grief and longing haunt these characters.

The spirit of Diệu Lan, Hương, and other Vietnamese inhabitants waiting for their loved ones to return is captured by Diệu Lan, who states, "The war will only end once all of our loved ones are home" (Phan Quế Mai 45). In the case of Hương's family, both her parents and three of her uncles went to fight alongside the Northern Army and during their time enlisted, they received little to no news. The first uncle of whom news reached Diệu Lan and Hương is Thuận as two soldiers turn up on their doorstep shortly after the end of the war is announced (Phan Quế Mai 48). These soldiers have come to perform the custom for soldiers who passed away on the battlefield and hand over Thuận's uniform and belongings (Phan Quế Mai 50). The news is immediately met with intense grief on Diệu Lan's part, who wails his name, "asking him to come back to her" (Phan Quế Mai 51). However, as is the norm in Vietnam's burial culture, Hương and her grandmother immediately erect an altar with his remaining items alongside incense so that his ghost can find its way home and rest peacefully (Kwŏn 17, 20-21; Phan Quế Mai 52). The grief felt for Thuận is nevertheless prevalent as Diệu Lan stays up three nights praying "for his soul to reach Heaven", and it is not until they

sense that Thuận has reached heaven and has reunited with their ancestors that their daily lives can continue (Phan Quế Mai 52). This grief and acceptance of the death is a process all family members returning from war need to go through; even Ngọc and her brothers Đạt and Sáng experience this process of grieving and praying for their lost brother at his altar. Through the cultural practices of burial, the family can come to terms with the loss, even if the grief impacted their daily lives for a certain number of days, and the altar remains a constant reminder of those they have lost (Kwŏn 20-21).

Alongside those who succumbed to the war are those whose condition remained unknown for multiple years or forever (Espiritu 19-20). This group comprises people killed whose remains were either unrecognisable, ignored as they were on the enemy's side, or not found for such a prolonged duration that they no longer exist as a body. Hương's father belongs to this group whose whereabouts are unknown; this significantly impacts Hương's life daily as she longs for his return. The fear of losing Hương's father was already given earlier in the novel as Hương's mother's principal reason for going to fight in the war was to return her husband home even if it endangered her own life (Phan Quế Mai 16-17). However, the strength of Hương's emotions is only revealed when Hương mistakes her returned uncle for her father. These emotions were of such power that Hương lost consciousness, resulting in deep grief and sadness after she realised it was not her father returning (Phan Quế Mai 124-125). The longing continues through her teenage years as she holds a final gift from her father near her at all times and attempts to learn as much as possible about his whereabouts from those who last saw him (Phan Quế Mai 126-127). Even though hope slowly extinguished over the years, Hương continues to have faith in her father until her mother decides it might be time to call his soul back home, as this would not be possible without incense (Kwŏn 17). He would instead wander the earth forever, which would be an offence to the dead loved one (Kwŏn 17). Even though Hương tries to convince her mother he must be alive, she eventually

gives in after her uncle shares that he came across Hương's father and that the area they last saw one another was heavily bombed, making her father's survival unlikely (Phan Quế Mai 278-279). The only reason he had not told her before is that "hope helps to keep us alive", but after eight years and sixty-five days, the only consolation for Hương and her family is the knowledge that her father will live on in her and the future generations (Phan Quế Mai 279-280).

Grief and longing for someone can hold a firm grip on those still alive, even if they know someone gone for many years will likely not return. The principal reason for this grief is the intense emotions of love and hope, as no one wants to admit the potential truth until proven otherwise. Until such certainty is achieved, the family cannot accept the truth, as hope fuels their fighting spirit. Once such a sign of certainty is given, the grief and longing do not automatically stop. However, through the cultural customs of an altar and honouring those who have passed, the family can find acceptance in the knowledge that their loved one's spirit has been guided home and put to rest (Kracke 220). This ghost, presented through grief and longing, introduces the reader to the reality of Vietnam's communities, where there are still people holding out hope nowadays and others ensuring that the altar is always clean. Love and hope are emotions which are not taken away easily, and this prevalence, even nowadays, counters the dominant belief that the war is over as the reality shows the many people still suffering through their missing or dead loved ones.

4.4 Silenced Suffering

Throughout the novel, a prominent focus is placed on the preservation of the past and those who succumbed, as Diệu Lan states:

> In your schoolbooks, you won't find anything about the Land Reform nor about the internal fighting of the Việt Minh. A part of our country's history had been erased, together with the lives of countless people. We're forbidden to talk about events that relate to past mistakes or the wrongdoing of those in power, for they give themselves the right to rewrite history. But you're old enough to know that history will write itself in people's memories, and as long as those memories live on, we can have faith that we can do better. (Phan Quế Mai 166)

In the instances of memory being adapted to fit a specific political cause, there will subsequently be the decision to exclude certain events or murders from the collective memory, also known as organised forgetting (Mälksoo 12) or institutionalised forgetting (Ricœur 80). Similar to ghosts, these events and people are only visible and tangible to those who remember them. However, without anyone remembering them, they will become invisible and dubious.

In the novel, the predominant focus of forgetting is placed on the events of the Great Hunger, Land Reform, and the internal fighting between a village's own people. In the case of the Great Hunger, the impactful event in Vietnam's history is rarely given the attention expected nowadays. Many textbooks provide no more than one paragraph to at most four pages on this tragedy (MacLean 192). Additionally, the Land Reform is a movement leading up to the Vietnam War where the North Vietnamese government decided that a restructuring of wealth would be in place, accompanied by the murder and torture of landowners (Holcombe 151-152). Since the Land Reform movement was created to support the North Vietnamese leaders' beliefs, it included the community's education in light of their party's goals, obscuring specific information from the public and the population (Holcombe 153). Both the Great Hunger and the Land Reform led to deaths and are frequently overlooked when remembering those who succumbed during the Vietnam War, even though these

sufferings were already part of the upheaval in the country. These significant events in Vietnam's history are obscured through stimulated forgetting as the country's officials do not include information that can be perceived as harmful to their image and goals, excluding all those who suffered at their hands (Cain 86-87). Because these events are not discussed, they will eventually belong to the country's collective amnesia as those who remember them have not lived to tell their tale or a counter-memory is created where those remembering events forgotten by others become outsiders in the mainstream collective memory (Foucault 160; Ricœur 413-414). Nevertheless, as is also remarked by Diệu Lan, the memories and those who experienced the events can only be remembered if those carrying the memory put in the active effort to pass on the story (Phan Quế Mai 166). In *The Mountains Sing*, this is precisely what she does as she recalls her memories through storytelling, including the Great Hunger and Land Reform. In these recounts, she does not omit violent events or cruelness she experienced, such as the fatal abuse of her mother or the murder of her brother (Phan Quế Mai 90, 147). Alongside her own memories, Diệu Lan reflects on the village people and how she saw their suffering and death due to food scarcity as "several corpses were scattered in the basin of our dried-up village pond" (Phan Quế Mai 84-85). The recounts of her younger life during these events reflect on the suffering not discussed in the school's curriculum of Vietnam from both her perspective and the memories she harbours of others. Through her storytelling, the memory of these otherwise hidden events continues to exist, which means there will be people who have counter memories from the imagined community of Vietnam as they do remember that which the rulers desperately try to forget.

The Vietnam War and its forgotten victims are also remembered in the novel by Hương's whole family, including family members who fought alongside the North and the South of Vietnam, resulting in both perspectives, of which the South is often forgotten (Tue Tran 34). Especially since the Vietnam War is taught solely from the winner's perspective and

is thus riddled with ignored and forcefully forgotten information regarding the opponent's experiences (Nguyen, "War and Diaspora" 698). However, this previously silenced narrative should be included to forgive someone and live with an ethical memory (Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* 34, 96). Such inclusiveness of memory is achieved when Hương's eldest uncle Minh, who went missing when fleeing the angry villagers who attempted to murder him during the Land Reform, is found (Phan Quế Mai 294-295). Minh is the only one in his family who fought alongside the South and was, therefore, sent to a re-education camp. His perspective and story are introduced through a letter he addressed to his family but never sent. This letter includes his fear of potentially facing his family on the battlefield as well as the re-education camp being a "harsh labor prison" where many died (Phan Quế Mai 315, 316-317). The inclusion of Minh also introduces the dangers of Agent Orange, a chemical sprayed in the forests of Vietnam, as Minh has terminal cancer (Phan Quế Mai 229). Even though Minh was absent for most of the novel, his letter re-introduces the often forgotten or ignored suffering of those who fought alongside the South as a person rather than the ruthless enemy, which was the representation created by the new rulers (Tue Tran 36). This perspective may not be what those supporting the North want to hear, but it does create the ethical memory that those who fought along the opposing side also suffered tremendously.

Through storytelling, Diệu Lan, Minh, and the novel itself attempt to prevent the victims of these events from turning into ghosts as the knowledge of their existence is passed on to new generations and, through the novel, to a worldwide audience. With Diệu Lan, this is done through the passing on of stories which include the Great Hunger and the Land Reform, two rarely discussed events that did take place in the string of suffering. Minh provides the perspective of a Southern soldier, which is not addressed in schools or families, as the victors of the war write their history and decide who would be honoured (Nguyen, "War and Diaspora" 700). Lastly, the novel itself becomes an emergent memory site where all these

forgotten victims are indefinitely remembered through the writing and those who read the story (Erll and Rigney 2). The story presented actively challenges the dominant collective memory in both Vietnam and the world, as knowledge of these events is limited to what the officials of Vietnam deem appropriate to share, ensuring that victims do not become ghosts of a country's history.

Conclusion

As this thesis illustrates, ghosts have a variety of roles in literature and culture, including the power to rewrite dominant narratives about the violent twentieth-century history of Vietnam. The ghosts do so through primary, secondary, and metaphorical haunting and differ depending on the novel's author and whether they live by the cultural customs presented in the United States, Vietnam, or a combination of the two. Because of this, the representation of the ghosts and their function in rewriting the narrative differ for each of the three novels analysed in this thesis, whilst there is still some overlap.

In the novel *She Weeps Each Time You're Born*, the ghosts are the entities that hold the knowledge that challenges and rewrites the collective memory. They are presented in different ways, of which the metaphysical entity is most prominent as the protagonist communicates with the dead so they can pass on peacefully. These conversations include information about events otherwise silenced in the dominant collective memory of the imagined communities in Vietnam, creating the traumatised metaphysical ghost and a ghost as a metaphor for the absent present. Additionally, the novel presents the secondary haunting of the past in the present, where trauma and grief linger and remind someone of the past. Because this novel adheres to the Vietnamese representation and manifestation of trauma, it directly challenges the dominant collective memory harboured by the imagined community of the United States as psychologists are shocked to find that there is little to no PTSD presented in the inhabitants of Vietnam (Barak 130). The ghosts in this novel thus challenge the dominant cultural narrative by introducing the reader to the atrocities committed during the Vietnam War, which were silenced by the government and influential institutions in the United States and Vietnam, as both communities focused on the events that would paint them in a better light. Additionally, the novel introduces the reader to the culture and beliefs in

Vietnam and how they attempt to live alongside the ghosts of secondary haunting, which contrasts with the dominant treatment of trauma in the communities of the United States.

In Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the ghosts presented in the novel are those of secondary haunting and the metaphor of being similar to a ghost when one does not fit in due to diaspora and racism. The ghosts of secondary haunting are prevalent throughout this novel as Little Dog's mother has PTSD. Her trauma results in episodes of PTSD and abuse aimed towards her young son. These secondary ghosts introduce the reader to the grip unresolved trauma can have on a woman as an individual and how this trauma can extend and follow the next generation. This ghost challenges the idea that even though the war finished forty-eight years ago, it does not mean that it has been processed or that those who witnessed it have healed. Instead, this ghost is a harsh reminder that people are still suffering and that this trauma can become generational through abuse and the passing on of stories if a person does not break free. The reader is also introduced to the metaphorical ghost where Little Dog's family becomes similar to ghosts in their invisibility. Because of the increased racism after the Vietnam War and the family's inability to communicate in English, they cannot build new connections. They are isolated in a country where they are bullied and discriminated against. This predominantly challenges the role of the imagined communities in the United States during and after the Vietnamese diaspora, when many sought a new home. Rather than painting the United States as an idealistic safe haven, the letter recounts a youth filled with hardship and hatred. This experience directly counters the collective dominant memory prevalent in the imagined community of the United States.

Lastly, Nguyen Phan Quế Mai's novel *The Mountains Sing* challenges the dominant collective narrative through four ghosts. The first of these ghosts is the character Wicked Ghost who is similar to the primary haunting in his evilness and the fear he inspires in others. This character introduces the reader to the idea that the evil and pain in Vietnam's twentieth-

century history did not always come from outside the borders. The ghost-like character and his relationship with the protagonist's family mirror the processes Vietnam's communities underwent. Namely, the fear, the hurt, the following trauma, and the slow process of forgiveness and growth. Through this character, the collective narrative is challenged as it includes the inhumaneness shown by neighbours, a topic often overlooked during conflict, even if it significantly influenced families' lives. Additionally, the character serves as a reminder of the long road taken by the communities in Vietnam during the twentieth century. The second ghost belongs to secondary haunting and is presented through the character Ngọc who suffers from PTSD. Here, the past continues to haunt the present as Ngọc cannot live her everyday life as episodes keep occurring. Similar to Little Dog's ghost of PTSD, this ghost reminds the reader of the effects of this war and how it should not be forgotten easily, as those who were there are either still suffering or on a long road toward healing. A ghost similar and closely linked to this one is the haunting of grief and longing as the characters in the novel either lose their family members or remain uncertain of their whereabouts. This ghost also shows the war's effects on its survivors, as many are still missing, and families continue to hold out hope. Lastly, there is the ghost, who is a metaphor for the absent presence where conflicts are unrecorded in history books and forgotten as generations pass, due to which victims of these conflicts will eventually be forgotten altogether. The events mentioned in the novel will ensure that these times of conflict and the victims will not be forgotten as they are written down in the memory site that is the novel. Including the silenced conflicts and victims in the novel challenges the forced dominant collective memory created by the community of North Vietnam as it introduces the events they silence. Additionally, it challenges the global collective memory as these conflicts are often overlooked in history books due to institutionalised forgetting in Vietnam.

The ghosts presented in the novels can thus be roughly categorised into three groups which all challenge dominant collective memory and narratives: metaphysical ghosts, ghosts who represent trauma and grief, and the ghost as a metaphor for undocumented events, victims, and characters alike to ghosts. These ghosts, alongside the increased interest in the analysed novels and their being authored in English, allow for a more inclusive understanding of Vietnam's conflicts. Because of this, the novels contribute towards generating a more ethical memory through the presentation of ghosts. This creation of an ethical memory is possible as literature is charged with the power to remember and challenge; it allows readers worldwide to rethink and re-establish their own dominant memory and the dominant broader Eurocentric views and ideologies prevalent. Over time, if these stories and voices are re-introduced, a memory can be created where the previously silenced voices and a reflection of a country's own inhumanity during historical events are included. Especially the increased interest in such narratives, which is evident through the novels being nominated for prizes and turned into movie or series adaptations, indicates the readiness of the literary market for such stories and analysis. Because of the readiness of this literary market and the power of literature to rethink one's beliefs, it is essential to extend this interest into the academic field as more research is still needed since this thesis only creates a starting point. Such similar research can be expanded to include more novels, including those written by Asian authors who are not from Vietnam, as many inhabitants from other Asian countries have untold stories and experiences not understood yet due to the previous lack of representation. This thesis has taken the first step in this process of expanding the interest in contemporary Anglophone literature by Vietnamese authors on Vietnam's history to the academic field.

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