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### Choosing to remember beauty: Storytelling and intergenerational memory in *The Mountains Sing*

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**Choosing to remember beauty:**

**Storytelling and intergenerational memory in *The Mountains Sing***

Matthew Tran

ASIA 096: Thesis

Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai's *The Mountains Sing* tells the story of a young Vietnamese girl, Hương, and her family growing up and surviving among the disasters and tribulations in twentieth century Vietnam. The tale traces the matrilineal line of Hương's family, at times transporting the readers and Hương herself all the way back to when her grandmother, Trần Diệu Lan, was a child. In the story, Hương comes face to face with the violence and loss in the war that plagued twentieth century Southeast Asia while inheriting the stories and memories of her displaced family members as they struggle to find home again. The multitude of stories that Hương hears and reads, especially the grand tale of her grandmother's life and the history of their Trần family, shape Hương's understanding of the histories of Vietnam, violence, the enemy, and the resolute hope for restoration and peace.

Hương's story begins in Hà Nội in the early 1970s where she and her grandmother are struggling to evade the relentless bomb raids on the city, which eventually force them to evacuate, only returning a few years later to a land of rubble from which they must piece back together their lives. As they face this destruction and tackle the task of restoring their home and community, Diệu Lan begins to tell her own story, having survived the French occupation, Japanese invasion, the Great Hunger, and the Land Reform movement in the first half of the twentieth century in Vietnam. As the war ends on paper and Hương is reunited with more and more of her family members when they return to Hà Nội or through other means, their own experiences and perspectives coalesce into a mountain of histories that Hương and her family must reckon with in an attempt to reach any sort of reconciliation, closure, and healing. The various forms of storytelling; Hương's books, Diệu Lan's oral narrative, Hương's mother Ngọc's diary, and various letters, enrich their understanding of each other and point the way to the

peaceful futures that they desire as they figure out how to honor the past and those whom they have lost.

Huong relies on reading fantastical tales and other published books to distract herself from the gore and hardship surrounding her, illustrating the first aspect of storytelling, the ability to create realities and transport the reader into them. As Huong and her grandmother are forced to flee their home in Hà Nội, Huong instinctively tries to bring her collection of books along with her on the forty-kilometer trek to Hoà Bình Village, finally settling on taking only Đoàn Giỏi's *The Southern Land and Forests* at her grandma's insistence. The story, a children's tale set in 1945 introducing the southern region of Vietnam through the eyes of a traveling young boy, An, who is displaced by war, shows Huong a part of the nation wholly isolated from her by the abstractly determined partition of Vietnam into North and South. And yet, she states how "before my eyes, the South appeared so lush, the people happy and generous," traveling with An in the story as Huong herself makes a journey away from her home (Nguyễn 2020, 11). The parallel dimensions of Huong and An's displacement and exploration draw her into a history so vivid and similar that it is as if Huong enters An's reality. She describes her reading experience at one point by saying "I told him not to, but [An] had already jumped into a sampan, rowing away, disappearing into the white space that expanded after the novel's last word" (Nguyễn 2020, 14). Her explanation illustrates the alternate reality that Huong has become a part of, a reality that extends beyond the book's last page. Stories that spirit Huong away like this become one of Huong's survival mechanisms, which becomes evident when she states "to chase away fear, I buried myself in my book" (Nguyễn 2020, 12). Looking closely, Huong does not state that she is running away from fear, because she is in fact expelling it through this similar reality. Huong losing herself in An's story does not entail a rejection of her own reality. Rather, this alternate

reality allows her to better understand the violence and hardship that people everywhere in Southeast Asia faced in this period of time, presenting to her vivid possibilities of the future that let her understand things can get better, thus chasing away her fear. Reading thus becomes a safe and controlled space for Hương to process her own reality and the accompanying emotions through similar and familiar realities.

Hương also utilizes books to try to learn more about the realities of her loved ones, seeking to maintain a connection with her parents specifically even if she cannot experience those realities with them personally. The fact that her father, having enlisted in the army, and her mother, who volunteered later on as an army doctor to try to find him, have both traveled to the battlefields in the south influences Hương's decision to choose *The Southern Land and Forests*. In Hương's words, she "had to know more about their destination - cut away from us by the French" (Nguyễn 2020, 10). She can only access her parents and their unknown lives faraway through storytelling and the world depicted by the words on the page. The knowledge she gains from the stories became a source of reassurance for her, like when she states "Food seemed to be abundant in the South. Such food would help my parents survive if they made it to their destination" (Nguyễn 2020, 13). Hương seeks information about the South she has never been to because it chips away at her fears, which are rooted in the unknown of what will happen to her, her family, and her country. Instead of helplessly worrying about her parents' well being and dwelling on her powerlessness to help them, Hương tries to exert the small sense of agency she possesses by finding out and understanding what she can, and she does so by experiencing the various realities of the South through text.

In her search for knowledge, Hương also ends up learning about the realities of the people of the other side, America, which briefly touches upon the relationship between story and

peace. In one of her uncle Đạt’s recollections about his time as a soldier, he brings up a scene where he and his fellow soldiers discover a group of young American soldiers playing around in a stream. He explains how this peaceful sight is shattered by rounds of gunfire, and how he started to think about the enemy soldiers’ mothers and sisters and then his own mother and family. He goes on to say “I had hated the Americans and their allies so much before that day... But from that day, I hated the war” (Nguyễn 2020, 161). For Đạt, the horrific experience of watching a peaceful scene not so different from how he and his comrades played around suddenly twisting into a scene of horror made him realize the real enemy is not the soldier who has a family waiting for him back at home just like Đạt has. In other words, the trauma of witnessing senseless violence forced him to change his perspective. In this same scene where Đạt is telling his story, Hương confesses how she “had resented America, too. But by reading their books, I saw the other side of them - their humanity” (Nguyễn 2020, 161). While Nguyễn narrates the striking reality of the emotional trauma and turmoil so many soldiers faced, in the same breath, she illustrates how mutual understanding might be achieved without requiring graphic acts of violence and trauma by highlighting Hương’s journey of understanding the war and the other parties involved. Hương goes on to declare that she “was sure that if people were willing to read each other, and see the light of other cultures, there would be no war on earth,” thus introducing the connection between the power of reading in helping understand other realities or cultures and the possibility of ending the violence that people, including her family, are facing everywhere (Nguyễn 2020, 161). Some might view this belief as naive, but the harrowing description of Đạt’s experience clearly points to the necessity for someone to find a path to peace without violence so that more people do not have to suffer like Đạt and others

affected by war everywhere. Hương's journey to reconcile the hatred and resentment in her hearts simply proposes one option toward that goal.

The relationship between understanding and peace presents itself not just in violent America-Vietnam relations but also in the fragmented relationships Hương has with her family members who have been separated from her for so long. Hương's desire to learn and understand also prompts an emotionally charged tipping point in her relationship with her mother Ngọc, who she feels might not love her anymore possibly because of something that happened while Ngọc was deployed on the warfront. Hương's mother is actually the first of Diệu Lan's children to come home, but she remains emotionally distant, screaming in her sleep and sometimes sobbing abruptly. Hương describes her mother's change as "the war had swallowed my mother into its stomach, churning her into someone different before spitting her out" (Nguyễn 2020, 74). No matter how much Hương tries talking to her, expecting to somehow bring back the mom in her memory, Ngọc remains silent, only confiding slightly in Hương's father's sister, Auntie Duyên, and writing in her diary. Hương begins to obsess over this diary, believing that even if her mother will not tell her anything, everything will be revealed if she can find an opportunity to read it. In other words, Hương "was tired of not knowing," and text, the personal story that Ngọc is writing, becomes the key to "knowing" (Nguyễn 2020, 207). Hương had spent years not knowing anything about her family members' situations, whether or not they were even alive, and thus "knowing" becomes key to resisting the unknowns that war has brought. After the climactic scene where Ngọc discovers Hương reading her diary and gets upset, the two reconcile, and Hương says "'Mama, I need to understand. I want you to get better, so that we can be a family again'" (Nguyễn 2020, 218). To Hương, the foundation of repairing her relationship with her mother is understanding, and the path to understanding started with the story that her mother had

written down but could not speak about. For Hương, having been left essentially alone for so long, stories have always been the solution.

While Hương did invade Ngọc's privacy and essentially force her mother to share her trauma, her actions seem more morally questionable than outright condemnable. The scene brings up the question of whether or not Ngọc would ever reveal her story, and the role of silence and secrets in healing from trauma. Ngọc closes herself off partly because she cannot forgive herself of the "guilt" of being raped by enemy soldiers and aborting the child conceived from that violence, confessing that "sometimes I think your father doesn't come back because he knows" (Nguyễn 2020, 219). Ngọc's sense of shame has rendered her silent, a sort of fragile "peace" that maintains the status quo and does not confront any of the pain or trauma that she tries desperately to keep to herself. However, that "peace" and silence, rooted in her fear of not knowing what will happen if her family members, especially her husband and daughter, find out what happened to her, freeze Ngọc in a continuous loop of self-deprecation that prevents her from moving through the process of healing.

Ngọc's guilt and self-hatred spiral into a vicious cycle of self-perpetuating misunderstandings, and Hương, in her desire to understand her mother and the changes in the way that her mother treats her, takes the first step to break this cycle through a morally dubious act. In her writing about the relationship between genocide and rape-shame logic, Debra Bergoffen references Lisa Price's description of violence's role in the relation between self and other when she writes "'you' are not immediately identified as someone who must be destroyed, but that 'you' become someone who deserves to be destroyed through a process where 'you' are identified as a vile sub-human object" (Bergoffen 2019, 19). Shame and sexual violence have caused Ngọc to believe to some extent that she does not deserve to return to her happy life or her



home because she has been “defiled”. This relationship between rape-shame-degradation-whore logic and genocidal logic has plagued and continues to plague so many throughout history, where “humiliated and shamed, the women’s and their community’s vitality are sapped. Their social death facilitates their extermination” (17). In this understanding of how violence changes the self and its relation to the other, Hương could be considered a party involved in the harmful logic of shame, and recognizing her social obligation as a member of the “other”, tries to forcefully disrupt Ngọc’s self de-humanizing thought process. To disrupt shame, a phenomenon centered around the idea of being perceived, by forcing someone to open up and thus be perceived intimately might seem counterintuitive, but Bergoffen explains how perception does not necessarily have to entail shame through Sartre’s definition. She states that “Sartre indicates that it is the context of being perceived that determines whether or not visibility will be experienced as shameful... Key to the absence of shame in this scene is that neither person is permanently reduced to being an object in the other’s world” (Bergoffen 2019, 23). Initially, Ngọc’s initial response to Hương reading her diary is horror, and she reacts violently, making Hương run away. If the scene were to end at this point, Hương’s invasion of her mother’s privacy would indeed exacerbate Ngọc’s shame, but Ngọc immediately chases after her, saying ““You’ve discovered the root of my sorrow, yet it’s only half of the truth. Please ... give me the chance to explain”” (Nguyễn 2020, 216). For the first time, Ngọc chooses to confront her fear of sharing her secrets and shame with someone, and perhaps she can gather the courage to do so because of her love for her young and relatively innocent child Hương. Ngọc then goes on to open her heart and tell her story to her own mother, Diêu Lan, and she allows herself to rejoin her community, a process catalyzed by Hương’s desire to learn about her mother’s story.

In addition to the aspects of peace and silence, this scene between Huong and her mother illuminates the burden of knowledge, specifically the realities of trauma and grief. When Huong begins to read her mother's diary, she realizes the gravity of the secrets that Ngọc has written down, stating that "sometimes something is so terrible that you need to pretend it doesn't exist" (Nguyễn 2020, 207). This thought process probably aligns with Ngọc's decision to stay silent to protect her daughter from violent understandings that Ngọc thinks Huong doesn't need to know. And yet, Huong continues reading because her "world had already been shattered, ignorance couldn't save it now" (Nguyễn 2020, 208). One interpretation of this line might claim that Huong's world was shattered when she opened the diary, but one could also argue that Huong's world shattered when her parents left. Ngọc's intention to keep Huong ignorant and innocent stands in opposition to the reality that Huong has not been ignorant for a very long time. She has witnessed violence herself and has noticed the ways the war has broken her family and loved ones, and this diary serves as one step in the path to understanding which Huong deserved the moment her life was disrupted by war and tragedy.

Huong's experience reading her mother's diary also exemplifies how this path to understanding never ends because tragedy and violence cannot be captured comprehensively through text or even speech. To be clear though, that fact does not render attempts to understand meaningless. In one passage in the middle of her diary, Ngọc tries to describe the time when she was captured by enemy soldiers and assaulted, only managing to share that "perhaps they've taken my soul, so that now I'm just an empty shell" (Nguyễn 2020, 212). Ngọc cannot explain the traumatic memory in any detail, perhaps in fear of reliving it. The victim herself struggles to process the immense horror she personally experienced, and that difficulty becomes even more apparent for Huong, the bystander reading Ngọc's account. As a reader, Huong explains how she

“tried to imagine the horror she’d had to face, but it was even worse than that” (Nguyễn 2020, 212). The indescribable violence Ngọc faced is acknowledged but resists any sort of sensible complete comprehension, and yet the simple recognition of that fact suffices for Hương. After briefly learning about it, she even states that she “couldn’t wait to tell her how proud I was to be her daughter” (Nguyễn 2020, 212). In this moment between mother and daughter, Hương’s feeling of pride for her mother’s courage and resilience disrupts the cycle of shame that Ngọc has sheltered herself within. Rather than the need to comprehend the violence that scarred Ngọc, Hương’s journey of bonding with her mother once again begins with the ability to simply recognize and acknowledge violence, a violence that can barely be written about, let alone spoken.

The idea of messages and stories that cannot be spoken about and only written presents itself literally in the form of the letters that Hương and her family receive. Throughout the war, Hương and her grandmother can do nothing but wait for their loved ones to send news through colleagues or return home. Letters thus become the only way that Hương’s family members can convey their stories to those back at home since they cannot return while still active on duty. The first family member they hear back from is Hương’s uncle Thuận, who they found out unfortunately died in battle. For Thuận, who couldn’t share his story, one, because he was stationed in the South, and, two, because he passed away, the letters that Thuận’s comrades eventually deliver to Hương and her grandmother represent his everything; the hardships, joys, and other memories he experienced while away from home. Hương memorizes these letters by heart, reading them and trying to experience reality with her uncle in the same way she reads tales like *The Southern Land and Forests*. She explains how she “only needed to close my eyes for his words to appear before me, leading me into Trùng Sơn jungles where he journeyed

under tall trees... where his laughter rose as he caught fish from streams and picked *tàu bay* plants to eat” (Nguyễn 2020, 52). As a form of storytelling that can open a new reality, specifically the one Thuận experienced in the South, letters like these parallel the books Hương has read and even Ngọc’s diary, but more importantly, these texts allow those who could not make it back to communicate with their loved ones. While most never explicitly express all of the emotions and struggles the writers had to face, the reality that opens up in the writing allows the readers to understand even the messages which are not written down directly.

These letters tell stories that become intertwined with the processes of mourning and remembering, allowing those who received them to eventually make their way to peace with their loss. Many families sent their children, young kids essentially, and loved ones off to war, never to hear from them or about them again. For Hương’s family, Thuận’s letters, in tandem with the news of his passing, provided them the bare minimum that every family deserved but unfortunately did not receive, a beginning to closure and an avenue for grief. Hương describes how in Thuận’s letters “there was no fear, no fighting, no death in his letters. Only hope, love of life, and the longing for home” (Nguyễn 2020, 52). To a young child like Hương or even to a mother who had to send her children off to war and spends every day worrying about those who have not returned like Diệu Lan, the letters help them imagine the beauty of the life Thuận lived. Though their worries and anxieties might have painted a journey of immeasurable hardship, the story that Thuận chose to tell and write helps them to celebrate his life and not solely mourn his pain. Hương goes on to say that she “sensed Uncle Thuận was up there with my ancestors, watching over us” (Nguyễn 2020, 52). Nguyễn captures the bright ambition and love that young Vietnamese soldiers like Thuận held and illustrates how that brightness becomes a source of reassurance and comfort for those waiting at home worrying. While nothing would have been

more ideal than everyone safely returning home, the countless number of people who could not do so chose to write down their stories in hopes of their loved ones one day being able to read them.

The act of waiting for letters or for people highlights the reality of “wartime” to those affected, namely the never-ending legacy and impact of such violence and disruption. For those not affected or not personally acquainted with this war, they might have learned that this war “ended” with the fall of Saigon in 1975. The quotation marks around the word “end” emphasize the war’s irreversible aftermath on the lives of millions of people. When Hương’s grandmother states “the war will only end once all of our loved ones are home,” she directly references the fact that just because the war ended on April 30, 1975 in history textbooks and on paper, as long as their family is still separated, they are forced to continue surviving and yearning for their loved ones in the same ways as they had to while the war was still “officially” happening (Nguyễn 2020, 45). For them, the war extends for years beyond 1975 as they desperately await news, or better yet, someone’s return.

Hương’s family’s reunion with Minh, the eldest of Diêu Lan’s children illustrates this ongoing temporality of war. Minh was separated from Diêu Lan and the rest of his siblings during the Land Reform movement, during which officials of the new government instigated farmers and other residents to forcefully and violently take land away from anyone who owned any, including the Trần family. During the violent riots where Diêu Lan’s family lost everything, Minh was taken away separately, and Diêu Lan never had the opportunity to find him again. At first, she was busy trying to survive and support the rest of her kids, and by the time she accomplished that, strife and tension prevented her from traveling, specifically to the South where Minh ended up. Only after twenty-four years of desperately asking around and searching,

four years after the war “ended” did their family finally find any news of Minh’s whereabouts. When they traveled to Nha Trang, hundreds of kilometers from Hà Nội, they reunited with Minh, only to find him dying alone of cancer in a shack. The family is there to witness his last few days, and he finally passes away after hearing their stories and telling his. Hương talks about him “as an uncle I’d been robbed of, who was a leaf pushed away from its tree, but at its last moment still struggled to fall back to its roots” (Nguyễn 2020, 324). The possibilities and futures that were robbed from them by the war have left vacuums of loss that Hương’s family and many others have only started to reconcile with years after the war. Stories like that of Minh’s are only painfully uncovered after years of effort during and after the war “ends,” exemplifying Diêu Lan’s statement about the war not ending for most in April 1975.

Minh’s story also illustrates another dimension of storytelling through letters, the decision to write because of the inability to speak about a story not because of indescribably violence but because of shame and guilt tied to the nation-state. After the war ended, those who served in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) were persecuted as *Mĩ ngụy*, people of Vietnamese descent who cooperated with the American military (Le 2022). They were sent to re-education camps where many died, lived for years under strict government surveillance even after being released, and their families were discriminated against socially and culturally. Minh chose to serve in the ARVN and thus suffered through all of this after the war, thus bearing a complex and tense relationship with all of his family who fought for the North Vietnamese Army. Hương’s aunt Hạnh makes the decision to leave her dying brother’s side because her husband, a member of the Communist Party, is under surveillance and “if they find out my brother is a *Ngụy*, there’ll be serious implications” (Nguyễn 2020, 321). While Hương’s moment with her Uncle Dật explored the realization that the true enemies were not the fellow brethren facing them on the

other side of the battlefield or the American soldiers but the instigators of the war themselves, in reality the veterans of the ARVN were viewed as enemy traitors and held in vicious contempt, and association with any of them held serious political and societal repercussions. In this complicated dynamic between North and South and family, Minh writes a letter but cannot gather the courage to send it to his family. As Hương reads it during their fortuitous reunion, she learns about the multi-layered shame and resolution in her uncle's decision to serve in the ARVN, illustrated when he writes "Please forgive me, for I haven't been there for you. Please forgive me, for I have fought in the war. But I didn't fight against you, I fought for my right to freedom" (Nguyễn 2020, 319). Minh needs to tell his story in hopes of having his family understand the choices he made and not just judge him based on the fact he fought for the ARVN. He never knew if he would reunite with them, and even when they did reunite, he couldn't share it verbally because, one, he was on his deathbed in and out of consciousness, and two, his story felt too heavy with societal guilt to convey directly. Hương's access to understanding an uncle she was robbed of thus once again manifests in the written letter, revealing to her a coherent and extensive history that complicates the stories of her other uncles and aunts that she has already embraced and started to reflect on.

Letters, diary, and books all possess the power to help Hương understand because of the innate qualities of storytelling that Hương seeks: clarity and honesty. To only speak about stories in the context of shame and violence would be reductive of the endless possibilities for something beyond pain that a story's honesty can engender. Aside from healing in the context of trauma or broken relationships, Nguyễn also illustrates how writing creates new relationships and fosters love through understanding and honesty through the development of Hương and Tâm's romantic relationship. Tâm joins Hương's class after the climactic scene between Hương

and her mother, and their homeroom teacher asks her to give him a tour of the school and neighborhood. Having come from Hà Tĩnh Province, a rural area near Hương's family's home village, Tâm stands out a little, and Hương feels apprehensive about getting too close to him. To no surprise, the topic that helps them bond is their love of books, and during the introduction tour Hương says "I have a few books and could lend you some" (Nguyễn 2020, 226). This offer initiates their continued interactions, and throughout the development of their relationship, they continue to communicate by sharing and talking about books with each other, like when Hương offers some poems by Xuân Quỳnh and Nguyễn Bính, and Tâm says "I like poetry, really. Love poems suit my mood for now" (Nguyễn 2020, 268). Books again serve as a source of intimacy, except this time the intimacy kindles a non-familial and non-traumatic related romance between the hesitant Hương and her first love Tâm. When Hương's grandmother asks about the boy she has been hanging out with recently, the first thing that Hương says is "You may not know him, but he's an avid reader" (Nguyễn 2020, 267). Evidently, to Hương, their shared interest in books is a redeemable quality that might garner her grandmother's approval of Tâm, and it definitely helps Hương overcome her hesitation to grow closer to him. As they grow closer, Hương eventually ends up learning more about Tâm's family history, and then an unexpected discovery causes her to reflect on the responsibilities of bearing painful and traumatic generational history.

Hương's relationship with Tâm illuminates the tension between the past and the future, forcing Hương to consider what she should do with all the personal histories and realities she has read and learned about from her family members. As Hương and Tâm's relationship grows serious, Hương's family decides to take a trip to visit Tâm's family and also go back to their own hometown nearby, which they haven't returned to since they fled during the uprising in the Land Reform movement. When they meet Tâm's family, they discover that Tâm's estranged



grandfather, who has isolated himself but is still dependent on their care, is Wicked Ghost, the man in Hương's grandmother's village who harassed their family and beat Hương's great-grandmother to death for trying to take some corn from his fields during the Great Hunger. At that moment, Hương runs away, exclaiming that "I could no longer love him. He was the flesh and blood of Grandma's worst enemy" (Nguyễn 2020, 335). She is torn by the revelation that the love of her life is the descendant of the agent of so much of her family's suffering. The weight of the histories passed down through the generations which she has chosen to learn and inherit manifests itself in her life and future. She is conflicted in where and how her obligation to her family's legacy and stories lie in relation to her own story and if those two sets of stories can even be reconciled.

This conflict and the question of what one should do with history also comes up for Hương's grandmother when the family returns to their old home, and in Diêu Lan's answer, Hương finds a resolution to her own conflict. Hương and her family arrive at their ancestral home only to find it run down and occupied by seven families. They run into an blind elderly woman crawling across the floor, who turns out to be the butcher-woman, someone whom Hương's family had helped during the Great Hunger but had later actively led the riot against them during the Land Reform movement. Diêu Lan recognizes her but still offers to help her to the toilet, practicing the advice she gave to Hương's mother when they got to the village, "if you bear grudges, you're the one who'll have to bear the burden of sorrow" (Nguyễn 2020, 329). Diêu Lan distinguishes the act of remembering history from that of remembering the hatred and anger in history because she believes holding onto that pain will only hurt oneself, especially in most cases when the perpetrator has already forgotten about the suffering they inflicted. In that belief, Diêu Lan has found her own peace as a victim, and shortly after the meeting of the

families after Wicked Ghost passes away, she sits Hường down to share that wisdom. She tells Hường that “I used to believe that blood will tell, but blood evolves and can change, too. Young people can’t be blamed for what their ancestors did” (Nguyễn 2020, 337). In doing so, Diêu Lan clarifies that, in sharing her story, she never intended for Hường to live in that past. Hường’s thoughts of living according to the pain and anger in that past and thus denying herself true love would give too much credit and power to Wicked Ghost. Hatred and grudges allow perpetrators of violence to control victims’ lives even if they are not physically present, and Diêu Lan does not want Hường or anyone else to allow Wicked Ghost, even after his death, to dictate their decisions or prevent them from finding happiness.

In this intentional process of learning and remembering, Diêu Lan and Hường make sense of how the weight of history, even traumatic histories, can become a foundation for peace moving forward rather than a burden holding one down. To constantly remember all of the pain and suffering Hường’s loved ones have survived would mean reliving the past endlessly. Instead of relentlessly torturing themselves by remembering what violence they have experienced, Hường’s family chooses to recognize and understand how violence has affected them and how they can heal while taking that trauma into account. When Hường’s family reunites with Mr. Hải, someone who helped save their lives when they fled the village, Mr. Hải cannot stop apologizing for not doing more to rescue everyone. Hường recognizes that “the turbulent events of our history had not just ripped people apart, they’d imprinted on them a sense of guilt about things over which they had no control” (Nguyễn 2020, 326). Regret and guilt, just like Hường’s mother’s shame, have trapped a part of Mr. Hải in the traumatic events of that day during the Land Reform movement, and Hường’s grandmother tries to release him from that self-torture by reassuring him, saying that ““Uncle, you did your best. One day, Minh’s wife and children will

return. They'll come here to thank you'" (Nguyễn 2020, 326). Diêu Lan points Mr. Hải to gratitude and the future rather than misfortune and the past because Hương's family has never felt anything but indebtedness to him for risking his own life to help them escape. To Diêu Lan, hate for the self, like in Mr. Hải's case, or for the other, like Wicked Ghost's case, has no constructive purpose in remembering because it taints the positive emotions of gratitude and love that everyone deserves to feel.

Diêu Lan and Hương apply this same mindset to their own personal process of grieving and remembering the people they have lost. Diêu Lan eventually finds out that Auntie Tú, the woman who raised her and her children was found hanging from a tree in an apparent "suicide," and in the latter stages of her grieving, she shares her way of remembering Auntie Tú with Hương. After setting up an altar for her, she tells Hương, "I'll never forget her love and her generosity, Guava. Till this day, if you happen to listen to my heartbeat, you might hear the singing voice of my Auntie Tú. She nurtured my soul with songs so that I can sing on" (Nguyễn 2020, 292). She first mentions what she chooses to remember about Auntie Tú. Rather than blaming herself for fleeing without Auntie Tú like how Mr. Hải criticizes himself or plotting revenge on the people who most likely brought her to her unjust death like how Hương initially feels toward Wicked Ghost, she decides to remember her love and generosity. In cherishing those memories of Auntie Tú caring for her and all of her family members, Diêu Lan thus feels close to her, maintaining a connection that lives on within her heart. Additionally, she recognizes the influence that Auntie Tú still has on her, filling her with songs so that she can "sing on" and move forward in her life. Hương reflects on her grandmother's philosophy as she watches Uncle Minh, the sick uncle she has never met before. She realizes that "Human lives were short and fragile... But it didn't matter how long or short we lived. It mattered more how much light we

were able to shed on those we loved and how many people we touched with our compassion” (Nguyễn 2020, 299). Guided by her grandmother’s words, Hương finds her own way of processing loss in this moment. Hương accesses mourning and memory through the legacy that someone leaves behind for their loved ones, which she believes is how people would want to be remembered. In an era filled with senseless violence and inexplicable turmoil, choosing to remember how someone lived rather than how someone died honors them in a way that does not center injustice or violence, especially as most of these tragedies have been ignored and purposefully forgotten.

Considering the public and political scene in Vietnam at that time, the act of remembering and writing down stories about events like the undue wrongs committed during the Land Reform movement or the suffering of those sent to the reeducation camps to essentially be degraded and tortured also becomes an act of resistance against censorship and historical erasure. During the transformation of Vietnam in the 19th and 20th century, so many people lost their livelihoods. This turmoil started decades before the war, and most of this history serves as the buried reality of the political propaganda of progress and growth that groups ranging from the French to the communist party aim to construct. In his piece on literary censorship in Vietnam, Richard Quang-Anh Tran states that “since almost all Vietnamese media is technically owned and regulated by the state, the publication or dissemination of anything the authorities deem politically problematic has been and continued to be liable to criminal prosecution” (Tran 2022, 605). The act of sharing a story in and of itself inherently becomes politicized in the context of this censorship. Thus, in addition to the violence of war that renders so many people unidentified corpses and lost spirits, the state itself seeks to erase the stories of the defiant and the suffering through systematic forgetting and silencing. In her journey in trying to understand the war and

her family's history, Hương also encounters this idea of censorship. She specifically mentions reading books by writers who had been imprisoned in the *Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm* movement in the 1950s. In this movement, prominent figures like Phùng Quán and Trần Đức Thảo decided to publish two journals, *Nhân Văn* (Humanity) and *Giai Phẩm* (Masterworks) in an attempt to advocate for greater intellectual and artistic freedom. As Richard Quang-Anh Tran explains in his writing, “many of the writers and intellectuals were denounced in the state media and were required to undergo public self-criticism sessions,” illustrating the continuous struggle in trying to voicing one's ideas in an era where only one version of history and one set of beliefs were accepted (Tran 2022, 608). Coincidentally, Hương finds a connection to her grandfather while learning about this history and these writers' ideas, stating how “their work during the mid-1950s called for freedom of speech and human rights, bringing me closer to my grandpa, who lived at the same time and held the same liberal ideas” (Nguyễn 2020, 229). In an era of censorship, the act of sharing and remembering a story constructs both a family history and Hương's own version of a national or societal history. Learning and remembering are thus coded both personally in honor of the grandfather she lost in the Land Reform movement and societally as an act of resistance in solidarity with one's community.

Diệu Lan directly addresses the relationship between censorship and erasure, which essentially entails both a social and physical death for many, as she narrates her own history to Hương. She tells her that “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 has been erased, together with the lives of countless people. We're forbidden to talk about events that relate to past mistakes or the wrongdoings of those in power, for they give themselves the right to rewrite history” (Nguyễn 2020, 166). Diệu Lan's decision to tell a story which those in power are

constantly trying to restrict serves as a politicized gesture of resistance that honors the efforts of those who have been erased from the larger national history. This dynamic again highlights the quality Hương seeks in learning about other people's stories: honesty. When Diêu Lan tells Hương that "you and I have seen enough death and violence to know that there's only one way we can talk about wars: honestly. Only through honesty can we learn about the truth," she hints at the belief that only honesty can elucidate the unknown and the untold realities of their loved ones and community members (Nguyễn 2020, 78). In the face of those in power, Diêu Lan's and other survivor's truths give voice and life to the counter histories of the dead and silenced who cannot speak for themselves. In a way, just like how Diêu Lan chooses to remember Auntie Tú and her songs as a living part of her soul, keeping these stories alive by remembering them also keeps the forgotten alive. As Diêu Lan initially explains before she begins to tell her story to Hương, "if our stories survive, we will not die, even when our bodies are no longer here on this earth" (Nguyễn 2020, 19). Memory immortalizes the legacies and influence left by those lost to violence and chaos and thus protects certain alternative histories from being erased or suppressed. Hương, after processing her grandmother's beliefs, then chooses to immortalize memory itself by writing it down, just like how she has accessed memory and history since she was a child.

In fact, *The Mountains Sing* itself as a novel reveals Hương's intentions to preserve her family's and her community's history forever. The novel begins and ends in the present 21st century, starting with Hương lighting incense at her grandmother's ancestral altar and concluding with Hương, Tâm, and their children Quang and Thanh visiting her grandmother's grave. In the last scene, Hương brings a manuscript, calling it "my family's story, told by Grandma and me," which presumably alludes to *The Mountains Sing* by meta-reference (Nguyễn 2020, 338). As

readers, this scene offers a space to reflect on how we too have become bearers of this history by reading this story, just like how Hương inherited all of her family members' legacies throughout her life. Hương talks about how she “wrote for Grandma, who'd hoped for the fire of war to be extinguished, only for its embers to keep burning her. I wrote for my uncles, my aunt, and my parents, who were helpless in the fight of brother against brother, and whose war went on, regardless of whether they were alive, or dead” (Nguyễn 2020, 324). Her story diverges from the English language literary scene of the war in Vietnam, where primarily memoirs written by American veterans have formed their own canon of war literature. As Gina Marie Weaver explains, “American national culture enabled itself to appropriate the veteran's victimhood. Through the traumatized body of the veteran, national rhetoric and popular memory transformed America's role in Vietnam from a bloody attempt at neo-imperialistic domination to the nation's victimization by its own weak and corrupt leaders” (Weaver 2010, 9). While this type of memoir has its place in reflecting on the stories of American GI soldiers thrown into Vietnam, American society has wrongly asserted it as the only story relevant to the war. Resisting the blatant neglect of alternative stories, Hương writes a testimony to how her people have survived not just the violence of the war but also the other kinds of violence concealed by political bodies; French, Japanese, American, and Vietnamese. Starting with Diệu Lan's mother and flowing through Diệu Lan's and Hương's generations, the stories in this testimony weave a narrative of womens' tales into a mountain of history that keeps the memory of all those who lived before Hương alive.

Through *The Mountains Sing*, Nguyễn encapsulates the elaborate process of not just learning about history and personal stories but learning what to take away from those stories and how to use that beauty and redemptive hope when reflecting on the past, present, and future. For Hương, these stories started out as a distraction from her reality and fears and eventually

transformed into a source of strength in nurturing her relationships with her mother and all of her loved ones surrounding her. Through remembering, Hương can always cherish these relationships, even if someone has left the physical world. As Hương eloquently explains, “I have stood far enough away to see the mountaintop, yet close enough to witness how Grandma became the tallest mountain herself: always there, always strong, always protecting us” (Nguyễn 2020, 339). By compiling all of the truths other people have shared with her, Hương can develop her own layered understanding of the mountain of history, both personal and societal, that roots her life and identity as a girl and woman in Vietnam during this time. And in writing those truths on paper, Hương introduces an alternative way of understanding and processing the violence and trauma that plagues victims of war and diaspora to this day.

People would want to be remembered for their beauty, their joy, and their love. This belief which Diệu Lan and her family trust in might seem naive in the face of so much pain, but I chose to write about this book amongst the plethora of other Vietnamese and Vietnamese American stories because that optimism and unwavering faith in celebrating life resonated with me. To only remember grudges and injustice seems to offer no real way of finding peace with immense pain, especially for disenfranchised and silenced subjects who most likely cannot achieve any sort of official retribution or reparation. Choosing to embrace a story, acknowledge the pain, and remember the beautiful moments as one moves forward at first might seem inconsiderate of those we have lost and those who have suffered, but would any of our loved ones truly want us to torment ourselves with regret and guilt? Just like Hương’s family, I choose to live believing that they wouldn’t, and in that belief, I carry the beauty of all those who have left before me with me into the future. I hope reading this book and my writing will persuade you to do so as well.



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