

Performing Refugee's Body and Memory: Poetics of Diaspora in lê thi diem thúy's Autoperformance

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Abstract

Despite the fact that substantial scholarship in Asian diasporic and refugee narratives has been developed in the post-Cold War era, critical refugee studies related to autoperformance have yet to be examined. Within this context of addressing autoperformance as an aesthetic genre, this paper explores the poetics of Vietnamese refugeehood as mediated in lê thi diem thúy's *Red Fiery Summer* (1995) and *the bodies between us* (1996). While the former historicizes the Vietnam War from the diasporic perspective of a refugee, the latter articulates the counter master narratives by performing bodily memories of refugeehood. Informed by Marianne Hirsch's "post-memory", the paper demonstrates how body and memory could be inextricably and interdependently rendered as a poetics of diaspora in performance. This paper further argues that autoperforming these two aspects is critical to revisiting the history of the Vietnam War and calling the militarism of the U.S.A. into question.

Keywords: lê thi diem thúy, refugee, postmemory, poetics of diaspora, autoperformance

People often ask me, Do you have memories of Vietnam? You must not remember much about the war because wasn't it over by the time you were born? I grew up asking my mother... - lê thi diem thúy, *Mua He Do Lua/Red Fiery Summer* don't look for me here in front of this shiny car, thig big house, something is wrong. Look at my bones - lê thi diem thúy, *the bodies between us*

Introduction

In *The Displaced*, refugees, as Viet Thanh Nguyen notes, are likely unremembered because they are usually rendered "the voiceless". But many of these voiceless, he notices, are actually talking all the time

– "They are loud, if you get close enough to hear them, if you are capable of listening, if you are aware of what you cannot hear. The problem is that much of the world does not want to hear the voiceless or cannot hear them" (Nguyen, 2018, p. 22). And such habit of occluding the voiceless has been the key rationale to explore the refugee voice in relation to the indigenous histories and cultures of the Transpacific critique¹. Though there has been substantial scholarship established in Asian Diaspora and refugee narratives, critical refugee studies related to (auto)performance is yet to be examined. Particularly addressing the Vietnam War in what Yen Le Espiritu reconceptualizes a critical point that advances transpacific critique² (Espiritu, 2017, p. 483), this paper aims to explore the refugee autoperformance³ of lê

thi diem thúy as a cultural and aesthetic genre in (re)articulating the diasporic experience of the “voiceless” via staging the aspects of “militarized” body and memory. So, to follow Espiritu’s approach of critical refugee studies to investigate refugee not as an “object of rescue” but a “site of social and political critique that articulates the incomprehensible or heretofore unspeakable” (Espiritu, 2014, p. 3), this paper attempts to show how “refugee” has been approached, particularly via performing body and memory, to the domain of survival practice in everyday life as reflected in the refugee artwork such as autoperformance. In this way, the paper asks: what critical significance could possibly be rendered via the autoperformance of a refugee not seen as an object of rescue but a site of social and political critique? How shall we perceive the performance of body and memory in the context of critical refugee studies? How does theatre provide and function a heterotopic/alternative space to perform poetics of diaspora as a means of making transpacific critique on US militarism?

With these questions in mind, I will turn to lê thi diem thúy’s two significant autoperformances

– *Red Fiery Summer* (1995) and *the bodies between us* (1996). The two works, deploying the author’s own body and memory, re-narrates the Vietnamese War from the diasporic perspective of a refugee. Taking Marianne Hirsch’s “post-memory” as a touchstone for examining the “poetics of diaspora” in the two works, my analysis attempts to show the social and political significance of autoperformance in which the subject of refugee is able to render their voicelessness properly attended rather than hideously ignored. Also by contextualizing the two autoperformances in the heterotopic theatrical space, the paper demonstrates how body and memory could be inextricably and interdependently rendered as poetics of diaspora in performance, and further argues that autoperforming these two aspects is critical to revisiting the history of the Vietnam War and calling the U.S. militarism into question.

Performing “postmemory” as “poetics of diaspora”

Before turning into lê’s two performances, I would like to address two key concepts – “postmemory” and “poetics of diaspora”. In lucid account of the intergenerational legacy of the Holocaust, Marianne Hirsch argues that shared memories of traumatic events persist to mark the lives of children of survivors. She calls this memory of the “generation after” postmemory : “the experience of being separated in time and space from the war being remembered, yet of living the eyewitness memory” (1996, p. 659). The postwar generation, though separated in time and space from the destructive histories, “remembers” these powerful experiences by means of the fractured images, stories, behaviors, and affects transmitted within the culture at large. Not quite the same as memory, post-memory is “secondary [...] and imagines, projects, and creates the past” for it “approximates memory in its affective force” (Hirsch, 2008, pp. 107–109).

As for “poetics of diaspora”, I refer to Guy Beauregard’s reframing on Fred Wah’s “poetics” that it is “not in the theoretical sense of the study of or theory about literature, but in its practical and applied sense, as the tools designed or located by writers to initiate and change” (Wah, 2001, p. 51). This “poetics of diaspora”, as suggested by Beauregard, is significant to the extent that it “can initiate movement and change by enabling readers and critics to reflect upon what is potentially at stake in reading representations of diasporic histories and identities” (Beauregard, 2005, p. 135). By alluding Beauregard’s “poetics of diaspora” as a critical approach of reading the histories of migration and dislocation, this

paper also attempts to interpret lê's performances as representations of diasporic histories and identities in hope of directing our attention to actively feel the existence of diasporic voicelessness.

Similarly, endorsing Hirsch's postmemory, Espiritu highlights the critical role of history and memories in the sense of "generation after" that also helps us understand "refugee as social critique, articulating the incomprehensible or heretofore unspeakable" (Espiritu, 2014, p. 3). Also, as the physical body is at the center of the conceptual fuzziness surrounding the terms of ethnicity and race (Lee, 1997, p. 189), the body's "corporeal schema" is the interdependent agency while performing one's personal memories into the conscious existence of public history. And theatre, functioning what Meiling Cheng calls a "heterolocus"⁴⁷, is the generative site to perform "otherness" of the refugee stories.

Body and Memories in *Mua He Do Lua/Red Fiery Summer* and *the bodies between us*

Known as a Vietnamese American poet, novelist, and performer, lê's artistic interests seem to weigh more on her poetry, prose, and fictions rather than drama performance. Yet her two published works *Mua He Do Lua/Red Fiery Summer* and *the bodies between us* were well-received. Expressed in themes of displacement, trauma, memory, identity, and language, the two plays probe "a complex and unresolved conversation between fragmented geographies between Vietnam and the US" rather than celebrate, Roberta Uno calls, "the expected refugee story of triumph over adversity [with] resolution equated with arrival in America" (Uno, 2001, p. 327). Deploying autoperformance as a dramatic genre, lê, similar to other solo artists such as Denise Uyehara and Dan Kwong, is what Daniel Bacalzo suggests, "technologies of the self" which is a way for the author/performer to perform and examine one's life, actions, and identity (Bacalzo, 2004, pp. 12–14). Also by performing her body carried of "corporeal schema" in theater as an interstitial space, lê is able to seek "a necessary outlet" for articulating her diasporic consciousness that aims to connect to the audience.

As her debut autoperformance, *Red Fiery Summer* begins with an enquiry of the Vietnam War memory by relating to her absent mother. The absence of her mother, via postmemory, informs the presence of the author who came to know the meaning of "Mua He Do Lau – Red Fiery Summer" connoting her birth amid the "burning heart of war – a particular season of warfare" (lê, 2001, p. 388). Explicitly addressing the presence of her racial body, lê attempts to make a connection between personal memory and public history, rendering the "history of [that] phase in [her] life is off center, askew". Instead of imposing a subjective judgment about the war, lê gives "a collage perspective" luring the audience with a "seductive contrast" that puts the loss US innocence in Vietnam into a question of "how can we speak of innocence and genocide in one breath?" (lê, 2001, p. 388). The contrast is presented by juxtaposing an unofficial prayer of the Marines recited during the Vietnam War and an FOB family photo for her childhood recollection:

Prayer of the Marines

[...]

Now I lay me down to sleep

I pray the lord the WAR to keep

So MRINES can come and save the day
 And I can earn my goddamn pay
 FOB: family photo of T as a child It begins with a dream I had
 About a shoddy boat moving through water
 Heavy
 Fragile
 Something about the sun

God bless the United States

God bless the drill instructors

God bless the Marine Corps.

THIS PRAYER WILL BE MEMORIZED.

It gets so hot

So warm so

Longing for your touch

Water is to drown in

I cried all my tears away

It's all true story

It's a lie

It's a dream

(lê, 2001, pp. 388–
389)

Told in prose-poetry, the play is like an episodic memoir that is constructed in two contrasting halves – the first in Vietnam while the second in the United States. By contrasting the private memories against the public narratives, lê intends, via performing her militarized body to call the U.S. military heroism into question. Such American militarism, though ostensibly represented as a heroic act, is intervened by some private memory of recalling how a young Vietnamese girl was carried out of the officer's quarters on a naval ship – “she was carried high on the shoulder of one officer while another officer followed close behind, beaming a proud smile. She was expressionless like a statue [...] like a trophy” (lê, 2001, p. 389). By asking “what happened to that girl?”, lê's answer, as informed by her father, was simply a “sorry” filled with sorrow. It is how the unofficial narrative of private memory of war comes to echo the “poetics of diaspora” in which rape, violence, trauma, and dislocation are so inevitably taken place because, as lê reiterates, “what I remember matters!” (2001, p. 391). Despite the sharing of her family resettlement in Linda Vista, lê's FOB (Fresh Off the Boat) refugee experience is never recounted as celebratory. She subtly accentuates, in her speech, an ambivalent sensibility telling the audience that Linda Vista (despite its semblance of a little Vietnam by housing many refugees) “makes [them] hungry for Vietnam but is not Vietnam (2001, p. 391). Sharing the memoirs of home displacement and post-war trauma of her mother, lê (*holding “gift box” up*) reassures us the life of being a refugee could often be “hollow

inside". Rather than giving out dream like home visions such as "Town houses; Condominiums; Family houses", the play renders the performer's postmemory of the Vietnam War that is lingered with a diasporic consciousness alluded as "the whole world becomes two butterfly wings rubbing against [her] ears" (lê, 2001, p. 393).

While *Red Fiery Summer* challenges the public master narratives of the Vietnamese refugee being the FOB rescued by the American military heroism, *the bodies between us*, by further performing the body and memory, subverts such rescue as a politically correct gesture of capitalist democracy. As the artist/performer notes, *bodies* is interwoven by three strands of narratives – the first involves the diasporic journey of a man and this young daughter make from their home in Vietnam to a refugee camp in Singapore and finally to the Pacific Coast of the US; the second consists of a taped interview with American Scientist George Archibald discussing a joint effort between Vietnamese and American scientists to restore a sanctuary in southern Vietnam for the sarus cranes; the third consists of a taped English as a second language (ESL) interview with a young Vietnamese girl who has recently arrived in the U.S. (lê, 2002, p. 319).

Thematized into various dramatic symbols of "orange, earth, water, and sky", the first strand of narratives speak melancholically of the departure from Vietnam that is wrought with endless despair drifting in the ocean, the nightmarish sojourn at the refugee camp as well as the much effort of recalling the image of performer's lost mother. To conceive the piece as "a work anchored in voice of people", lê therefore renders it a "text-based performance re-written by the voice and the body" (lê, 2002, p. 319). Also by deploying the set as "another body on stage", the performer intends to structure a liminal space for the audience to imagine its possibilities in performance (lê, 2002, p. 319). Only when memories are translated in oral narratives via the performer's "corporal schema" onstage, there could be a possibility of initiating the "poetics of diaspora" that enables movement/changes for the viewers/readers to reflect upon what is potentially at stake in reading representations of diasporic histories and identities. And lê (as the solo performer) seems to know better the powerful poetics of such bodily performance in the ways in which she puts - "every moment of speech has an accompanying gesture, at times as overt as running, at other times, as subtle as a turn of the head or the hand or the shift of an eye" (320).

The power of performance derives from the symbiotic coordination between body and language. *The bodies between us*, as Una Chaudhuri notes, performs with the poetic language, matched by an equally powerful performative discourse, that amplifies, resonates against, and specifies the act of telling – as in telling stories, truth, details and even time (Chaudhuri, 2002, p. 337). In between the lines, the act of telling turns out to be one of its main subjects and reveals what Chaudhuri views "a body of language that speaks of the limits of telling, the inadequacy of language" (2002, p. 338). Deploying such techniques of story-telling, the play also enables a sense of "painful politics of place – geopathology" (Chaudhuri, 1995, p. 15) as mediated in the performer's fragmented childhood and traumatic memories which are unthinkably tragic, narrating the loss of a mother and a motherland. And these traumatic memories are war-inflicted and could be reflected through the major strand of narratives such as the "hungry mad men gobbling children, crunching small bones", the rejection of a woman's "blue-eyed lai- a mixed blood baby who wears the shame of the villager's suspicion", and the horrific "water" experience recalling how people "ate the ones who died, saving their bones in sacks made from their own shirt" (lê, 2002, p. 326). By representing these catastrophic experiences of diaspora through which humans have become the "floating bodies surrounded

by bones, gossiping, weeping” (lê, 2002, p. 327), the performance nonetheless attempts to disclose the “fact of never coming back” contemplating “can one be born again? Can a person start over in a new world?”(lê, 2002, p. 327).

Similarly, in her other novel – *The gangster we are all looking for*, lê thi diem thúy reminds us “not all Vietnamese came running through the door that the United States allegedly opened. Rather, many moved very slowly, with much confusion, ambivalence, and even misgivings, uncertain about what they were walking toward or what they were walking from” (Espiritu, 2014, p. 2). With similar intentions, the two autoperformances here attempt to show the alternative aspect of those refugees whose fight-two resettlement process can be highly precarious and full of detours. In most of the official public history, the post-war refugee resettlement has always been veiled by political correctness in celebration of the US capitalist democracy. But by performing the refugee body in theatre, it becomes possible and even visible that (post)memories and history are connected and negotiated as a part of the transpacific critique.

As Espiritu reminds, Vietnamese refugees, whose sufferings remain “unmentionable and unmourned in most U.S. public discussions of Vietnam, have ironically become the featured evidence of the appropriateness of U.S. actions in Vietnam” (Espiritu, 2014, p. 2). Therefore, by addressing the Vietnam War, the refugee’s racial body being deployed onstage is not simply to interrogate such militarism but also call its capitalist democracy into question. Such satirical act can be powerfully rendered at the description of a photograph sent back to her mother in Vietnam –

As you can see, we are well here.

I don’t argue with my father but there’s something in how I hold my shoulders for this picture which is meant as a signal to my mother. So that looking at this picture, she would begin to suspect something was not right. I hold my shoulders, as if to say, I am pinned to this picture. this setting. Don’t look for me here in front on this shiny car, this big house. Something is wrong. Look at my bones. (lê, 2002, p. 334).

Though taken in “sharp clothes standing in front of a shiny car parked in front of a big house in southern California”(2002, p. 334), the photo asks us to scrutinize behind the wellbeing of capitalist democracy that can only be unveiled by looking at “the bones” – the very corporeality that bridges memory and “difficult histories” (as Guy Beaugregard puts) of the Vietnam War, performing/initiating the very “poetics of diaspora”.

Endnotes

¹ Instead of conceiving the Vietnam War as a dyadic war between the U.S. and Vietnam, Yen Le Espiritu suggests to reconceptualize it to advance a transpacific critique that knits together “diverse memories of historical violence – settler colonialism, military expansion, and refugee displacement – into a layered story of US Empire in the Asia-Pacific region” (2017, p. 483).

² Also known as “self-performance” or “solo performance”, autoperformance, as Robert Vorlicky notes, is an artist-actor’s live performance of material drawn from his or her life. The primary material for autoperformance is autobiography (Vorlicky, 2004, p. 2).

³ Citing from Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Josephine Lee states that an individual's self-identity is indelibly marked with what Fanon describes as a fixed "corporeal schema – the implicit knowledge...that each of us possesses of the position of his or her body in relation to other physical objects...the image each of us has of him- or herself as a body located somewhere in physical space... an image that each of us ordinarily constructs and needs repeatedly to reconstruct as he or she moves about the world" (Lee, 1997, p. 190).

⁴ To elaborate Michel Foucault's "heterotopias" as a means of making an insightful reading of the theater as a contemporary cultural institution, Meiling Cheng broaches another concept – the heterolocus to move from the global to the local and specific, a more precise conceptual paradigm to define the particular social functions of a unique locale (namely Highways Performance Space as an alternative live art venue in L.A.) in which "otherness" could "recuperate from the anonymity, prevailing in the Foucauldian heterotopia two indispensable"

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